



# At Commonwealth

## Extending the Franchise

WILLIAM D. WHARTON

**W**HOSE SCHOOL is Commonwealth, anyway? Last year, we embarked on a project of comprehensive planning, which brought this question to the forefront. We realized that it would be healthy to draw on the impressive array of talent in our broader community for some fresh thinking. So we invited parents, alumni/ae, and past parents to help us examine every aspect of Commonwealth School—from curriculum to governance. We asked them to serve on task forces or to answer detailed surveys. Early in the process, many of us grew a bit uneasy, for we didn't want to lose the school we know and love. Strange scenarios danced in our

heads: of transformation into a joyless credential factory or, by contrast, into a program where feel-good exercises supplanted academic rigor and substance gave way to style. (Maybe they'll want to start a hockey team?)

Commonwealth has long existed as a closely held enterprise. For nearly twenty-five years it was unquestionably Mr. Merrill's school, shaped by his convictions and personality and sustained by his generosity (with the Trustees, as Casie de Rham likes to say, ready to dissuade him from reckless schemes). Since his departure, the Head and faculty have, for the most part, run the place. When I interviewed for a teaching position in 1985, one teacher likened governance here to that of medieval France, where the faculty, like barons, ruled, protected, or expanded their territory, and the king intervened when things threatened to get messy. Parents, I was told, were kept politely at arms' length.

During the decade of her tenure, Judith Keenan both extended the school's outreach to parents, alumni/ae, and the larger community and reinvigorated the school's core intellectual and social commitments. The development of our fundraising and admissions offices, the City of Boston course, and the community service requirement and the strengthening of Project Week/Project Month took place under her leadership. Still, initiative came largely from within.

Last year things began to change. Throughout the fall and winter, committees came into the school and poked around. Yet the good will of all participants soon made us feel, as Kate Bluestein put it, that this planning effort would be a blessing for the school (even though occasional jargon from various professions—"optimize," "triage," "data sources"—had us furrowing our brows).

Alumni/ae and parents answered our extensive surveys thoughtfully. Their responses contained a few surprises but largely reflected strong and

deep support. When the task forces reported preliminary findings and recommendations last winter, all gave Commonwealth a ringing endorsement as a small, intellectually oriented school strongly committed to the arts, to the city, and to social justice. Plenty of good ideas were proposed: some are already being instituted; others require further development (you will hear more about planning in the coming months).

This year-long effort marks an exciting and important step in opening the school up to its diverse constituencies. All of you—alumni/ae, parents, and past parents—made us proud that our mission had been understood. Your work during this past year, which is part of your growing support on so many fronts, shows the real answer to the question, "Whose school is this?" It's yours. ▣

ERNIE WHARTON



May 25, 1996 — June 5, 2003



Ernie at Winona, May 17, 2003



Suzanne  
Hatfield '05

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