

HEADLINES

A Monthly Message from Chip Denton, Head of School



September 21, 2018

Dear Trinity Community,

It was very early in my tenure at Trinity that I heard one of the most respected school psychologists in the business warn school heads not to use the word partnership to describe the relationship between parents and the school. And every time I forsake his advice and embrace the term at Trinity, I hear his voice telling me that the school knows best. But honestly, I think that the parents know some things best, and the school knows some other things best. What parents know best is their own love for their child, and their child from within the family and across their lifetime. What the school knows best is the way students learn and the child

outside the context of the family. Children are best formed when these twin perspectives are joined. This is why Trinity's Expanded Mission Statement speaks of parents as partners.

Being partners means that we respect each other. Parents want the school to acknowledge and respect their love for and their personal knowledge of their children. School psychologist Michael Thompson (not the one I referenced above) tells the story of his learning-challenged daughter and the teacher who "claimed" her with this comment: "I like to think of Joanna as being like a butterfly. She alights on one thing, and then another, and another, and another. My job as her teacher is to persuade her that it is going to be all right; she can stay with something and finish it" (Understanding Independent School Parents, 24). With these three sentences this teacher had done what other teachers had not been able to do: accurately describe this child's learning style and challenge, name the primary learning goal she had for this student, and say what her job as her teacher was. This way of knowing and loving the child means the world to parents, and it is what good partner schools do.

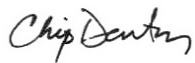
On the other side of the partnership, schools want parents to acknowledge that teachers have learned much from broad experience and study, and that they have a meaningful wider context in which to interpret the story of an individual child. At Trinity, teachers have put in their 10,000 hours mastering how children learn to read, what a twelve-year-old is like, and whether a particular paper deserves a B. Teaching is an art and not (primarily) a science, but there are best practices and practical wisdom that guide us. Ultimately, respect means admitting, on both sides, that we have limitations: The school may not "get" the child in their particularity, or might make assumptions that turn out to be wrong, and parents may be blind to important aspects of their own child that are manifested in school.

Partnership also means shared goals. Partners are not independent contractors working side by side just trying not to bump into each other. Partners share a purpose. For example, at Trinity, we espouse the principle of Non Nobis: "I am third" (God is first, others second, I am third). If parents buy into this fundamental core value, then the partnership between school and home is a powerful thing. But if parents want something different—like an emphasis on personal accolades—then they will be frustrated with

the school, and the school with them. Or if the parent wants an unblemished academic résumé and the school encourages learning through failure (and we do), there is sure to be frustration. Over time I have learned to ask more questions about goals and drivers, both for the school and for the family. Because I want to be as clear as possible about our goals as a school, I am enclosing a hard copy of Trinity's Expanded Mission Statement with this letter. I hope that many of you will read it.

Partnership means that both sides have "skin in the game." This is at the heart of the New Testament word for partnership, *koinonia*, which appears especially in Paul's letters to express the deep, shared purpose of Jesus' followers (like the "partnership in the gospel" that launches Paul into a prayer of thanksgiving at the beginning of his letter to the Philippians). In Paul's world, *koinonia* referred to a kind of business relationship, such as a financial partnership, in which both sides had something to lose and something to gain. Is there a better word to describe what we share when it comes to educating young people? Parents surely have skin in this game—arguably much more skin than the school does. You are bringing us what you love the most in this world. (This is, by the way, one of the reasons that conflicts at school, whether over grades or discipline or hot lunches or weather calls, so easily escalate to an extreme level that baffles all involved.) But the school has skin in this game, too. I wish parents could see the pain of disappointment on the faces of teachers when a student really messes up and, conversely, their joy and pride when their student triumphs over a real obstacle. This we share, and some of my most profoundly moving moments have come in hard situations when parents and teachers realize that they are in this together, side by side, for the sake of the students and the glory of Christ.

Non nobis,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chip Denton".

Chip Denton
Head of School

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