

HEADLINES

A Monthly Message from Chip Denton, Head of School



April 2019

“A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one important thing.”

Archilochus

Dear Trinity Community,

So the fox and the hedgehog were talking, and the fox boasted, “I have a hundred ways to escape from the hounds when they chase me. I have many tricks in my bag.” The hedgehog hung his head and murmured, “I have only one trick in my bag.” Just then the sound of the dogs startled them both, and the hedgehog did what the hedgehog does: he curled up in a prickly ball and lay as still as he could. The fox, however, in all his clever glory, darted this way and then that, pondering his move, weighing his options, outsmarting his enemies. And before he could settle on

one brilliant strategy, the dogs were upon him, running right past the little prickly ball just along the path. A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one important thing.

Schools also know many things, but Trinity School knows one important thing.

Schools have many tricks in their bags: how to get kids into good colleges, increase enrollment, support diverse learners, teach students to write a persuasive essay, score a 5 on the AP exam, build a résumé, win the championship, develop a summer program, compete with China, learn a career that cannot be outsourced, make the team, and make the grade. We schools are smart foxes, and Trinity School can be as foxy as the rest of them when we need to be.

But, honestly, I’ve always been drawn to the hedgehog. Or the cat, in Aesop’s story, or the frog in the Chinese version. **The one who knows one true thing that is most important.** And I think that Jim Collins is spot-on to push leaders to ask themselves about their organizations: “What is your hedgehog?”

How does an institution know what its main thing is? To be sure, its mission guides. But there’s always a difference between the mission stated and the mission received and experienced. That’s why I’ve been thankful for these last nine months, for the chance to meet with over a hundred Trinity families (parents, grandparents, alumni parents) to talk about the capital campaign, Trinity Forward. David Spence and the other Steering Committee members have gone with me, and we have listened to these stakeholders. We’ve asked, “Why Trinity?” And the answers have been a chorus of voices with strong common themes, and it goes like this: **Trinity School is a Gospel community of learners.** That is our essence, our secret sauce. That is what makes us tick and makes us sing. That is why we exist. **Durham and Chapel Hill don’t need another fox of a school that has a hundred tricks in its bag. We need a school that can do this one thing and do it well. Because if we don’t, who will?**

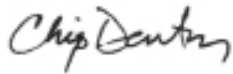
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Gospel. I think of an alumni family who asked, “Will the Trinity we came to and loved, the Trinity that helped shape our children and us parents as Christ followers—will that Trinity always be here?” Here was a family that credited their Trinity experience with an essential part of their Christian discipleship. They found the good news story of Jesus to be the heart and soul of the school. I told this family that with God’s help, **we leaders of Trinity will work to keep Trinity always unapologetically Christian.** We realize that some will think the Christian mission quaint, some will think it merely interesting, some will think it one of the objectionable things about Trinity they have to put up with to get the good stuff. But for us, this is the good stuff. All good stuff starts with this: the Good News of God in Jesus.

Community. One of our parents said, “We came here for our children—we researched and chose this school because of the education they would receive. But the big surprise, the great thing we didn’t expect was . . . the other parents. It’s the community.” **We are in this together: parents with other parents; parents and faculty together; faculty with each other; faculty and students.** Community is eroding in our culture. Most communities, including many schools, are thin; and thin communities simply do not have the power to shape character and form habits that are the rails on which we will run for the rest of our lives. Thick communities shape character. When another school head tells me how impressed he was with the way our Middle Schoolers comported themselves during a game they were dominating, I know that this comes from trying to live life in the pattern of Jesus as a thick community called a girls’ soccer team.

Learners. I think of a newer family who said something like this: “As soon as you get here, you sense that this is a place that is serious about learning but also enjoys learning. At our old school, students didn’t take learning seriously, but here it’s the expectation—of faculty, of other students.” **We expect students to leave Trinity knowing how to learn for themselves and wanting to keep on learning for the rest of their lives.** I’m so thankful that I don’t have to run a huge marketing campaign in favor of the life of the mind among the Trinity community—it’s something that our parents, faculty, and students take for granted. Trinity folk are curious. We find the world that God created to be an interesting place, and we think that even the hard work of learning leads to deep joy.

Trinity School is a Gospel community of learners. I like that about us. This is what makes me want to keep coming to school, working to build this place into an even stronger school. I like it that these are themes I have heard for years, and I like it that this last year of intense listening has echoed this message. **And I love that this hedgehog resonates deeply with our longer and carefully worded mission: it’s a sort of elevator speech for the mission.** Finally, I like that each of the three parts of this hedgehog reinforces the others. Our community and our learning are Gospel-centered; our Gospel and our learning are embodied in a community; and our Gospel and our community are focused on learning [about God, God’s world, and ourselves in God’s image]. Non nobis.



Chip Denton
Head of School