

HEAD LINES

A message from Chip Denton, Head of School



“Education is a life. That life is sustained on ideas. Ideas are of spiritual origin, and God has made us so that we get them chiefly as we convey them to one another, whether by word of mouth, written page, Scripture word, musical symphony; but we must sustain a child’s inner life with ideas as we sustain his body with food.”

Charlotte Mason, *Philosophy of Education*



September, 2021

Dear Trinity Community,

Welcome to Trinity School’s 27th year! There is much to celebrate, even at a time when we are all still struggling with the pandemic and its impact. I am especially grateful for the many new families who have joined Team Trinity this year, and the bonds we feel with our veteran and returning families are all the stronger for what we have endured together over the last 18 months.

We decided to read Susan Schaeffer Macaulay’s *For the Children’s Sake* this summer as a way to invite new families into the distinctive mission of the school. This book goes back to the beginning of the school, being one of the seminal works that led us in our early efforts to craft our mission. It reminds us why Trinity exists and what we are working for. Macaulay’s work is a helpful introduction to the philosophy of education and the pedagogy of Charlotte Mason, a late 19th and early 20th century British educator whose work has shaped Trinity School.

The job of a school is to attend carefully to the minds of its students. Those minds are not disembodied—they are part of the whole person. And like the body, the mind needs sustenance. It is neither self-existing nor self-supporting. It can flourish, and it can atrophy. At Trinity School we are committed to an education that forms healthy and strong young minds.

One antidote to mental atrophy is a strong dose of good ideas. Judith Shapiro, the former president of Barnard College, said, “You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life.” What makes that inner life interesting is ideas. Barbara Goldsmith’s biography of Marie Curie tells the tale of a woman whose life of the mind was keen and sharp. “Like the parched earth, she soaked up education as a life-giving force. In what was to become an enduring pattern, when she studied, the world around her vanished. She seemed to live on air.” And ideas: one reviewer of this biography remarked about Curie, “She had radium in her soul.”

Charlotte Mason believed that an idea was “a live thing of the mind” and something “spiritual”—by which she meant invisible, leaving traces in the world without being seen directly. Like Marie Curie’s “radium of the soul,” this invisible dawning of an idea is challenging to measure. But even if we cannot see the thing itself,

we can see traces of it and know that it is real. Educators have always known this. Frank Prescott, the iconic, aging headmaster in *The Rector of Justin* says, “The older I get, the more I realize that all a teacher has to go on is the spark in a boy’s eye.” I don’t suppose that Trinity parents would be very happy if our report cards came home with only a comment, “We’ve seen a spark in Charlie’s eye.” We have to do more to measure progress and achievement. But at the end of the day, it is true, as Andrew DelBanco says, that “education, like faith, is evidence of things not seen.”

“Mind must come in contact with mind through the medium of ideas,” said Mason. This is most likely to happen when students come into direct contact with books and things. The teacher’s job in this work is wonderful but humble: We create atmospheres where learning can flourish; we select materials rich in ideas, worthy of students’ attention; we design learning experiences that bring our students into direct contact with these ideas and allow the students to do the hard work of learning; and we assess this learning in various ways that shape our future teaching of these students and others. Good teachers know what Emerson meant when he said, “It is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.”

What does all this mean for teachers and parents? I will mention two things.

First, we should read to our children. This is a simple action that pays immense dividends. Read aloud to them. Check out the list of books that Macaulay mentions on pp. 33–34 of her book. TPO leaders Meg Lybrand and Emily Merryweather talk about reading aloud in one of our summer Trinity Reads podcasts. Look for time-tested books that have been a source of inspiration for generations of students. Our family has fed on *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Hobbit*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and the works of E. B. White. This summer on a trip to Maine I discovered Eric Kelly’s *The Trumpeter of Krakow*, and I can’t wait to read that to my grandchildren.

Second, play with ideas. Play is the work of children, the way in which they come to understand God’s world. In 1995 Hart and Risley published a groundbreaking study showing that children’s academic success at ages 9 and 10 is attributable to the amount of rich talk they hear in their early years. These psychologists used the term “language dancing” to describe a sort of playful talk: Not the business talk of “Let’s get your pajamas on” or “What do you want for a snack?” but talk that asks “What if...?” or says, “I wonder...” This playful way with language is face to face, open ended, creative. Screens cannot supply this kind of interaction. But parents and grandparents can, with a good book, or a game, or an hour in a creek.

God has made us and the world so that ideas are inherently interesting—they don’t need any special hot sauce to go down well. But as a Christian school, we also know that no idea can ever satisfy the souls of these students. Only Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the firstborn over all creation in whom all things hold together, can do that. So we set before our students a rich feast of learning, and we hope that they see that there is no true, good, or beautiful idea that coheres in their minds apart from Jesus Christ. As Gerard Manley Hopkins said, “Christ plays in ten thousand places.” I’m grateful that some of those will be at Trinity School this year.

Non Nobis,



Chip Denton
Head of School