

# in SIGHTS

2021-2022



**WELCOME *our new***  
**HEAD OF SCHOOL**



Fall 2022

Dear Friends,

I'm writing this note after my first couple of months here at Whitfield, energized and inspired by the school Helena and I now call home. Along with dressing up for Spirit Week, attending games and performances, and enjoying the kindness and energy of morning assembly, I've spent a lot of my time this fall listening and learning, talking to students and staff, parents and alumni to understand Whitfield and what makes it special. I'm not done yet, but one theme has emerged in all of my conversations: the power of community, of being known and valued—and giving children the chance to discover their best and true selves. While this publication celebrates the achievements of last year, I am inspired by our school's future.



I'm enormously grateful for the opportunity to be joining this extraordinary community at this moment of transformation and growth. I look forward to working with all of you to realize the Whitfield of our highest aspirations.

While reaccreditation is a requirement for independent schools, it actually offers us the opportunity to look critically at ourselves, to reflect on who we are, what we do, and why we do it—and then to take action for growth. Over the next seven years, we will be working with the Independent School Association of the Central States (ISACS) on this important institutional reflection. This first year starts with a community survey, the results of which will serve as a starting point for an in-depth self-study next year. We'll also be looking critically at our mission statement to assure that it captures who we are and gives us the direction we need to develop a new strategic plan, a roadmap for where we want Whitfield to go in the years to come. Look for updates and information and opportunities to participate in the years ahead.

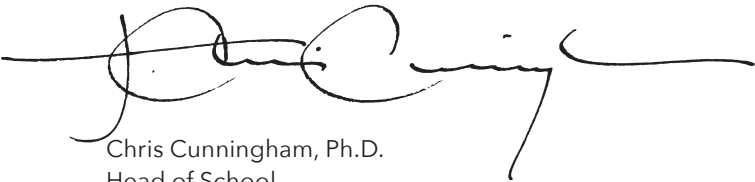
One of our strategic priorities will be to realize the vision of the campus master facilities plan described in last year's *Insights*. We completed the work on Koman Commons this summer and have been inspired by its transformation of "Stonehenge" and the Humanities Wing into a vibrant, light-filled student space (see the story in this issue).

Completing the Koman Commons has brought new energy and momentum to the STEAM Wing project, which imagines similarly transformative updates and additions, including important improvements to studio, classroom, and lab spaces and an interdisciplinary makerspace. This makerspace will be a creative hub for students inside and outside of the classroom, bringing together arts and engineering, traditional hands-on shop work, coding, and digital design and fabrication.

And there are other, equally inspiring projects on the horizon, from updating our student dining experience to a completely reimagined Woods Hall. Fixed seating, lights and sound equipment, and a new stage would make Woods Hall a fully functional theater—but would also make it the center of community life, a venue for morning assembly, visiting speakers, and symposia for parents and the broader St. Louis community.

We are looking forward to our annual Green & White Gala at the Four Seasons on April 1, when we will honor the long service and legacy of Director of Communications & Marketing Becky Marsh, who is retiring this year after 29 years. We will also celebrate the inspired teaching of the George A. Newton Outstanding Teacher of the Year Michał Kwiecień. The gala provides an annual opportunity to gather as a community and celebrate the school we love.

Sincerely,

  
Chris Cunningham, Ph.D.  
Head of School

## MISSION

Whitfield School cultivates ethical, confident, successful students in a community of innovation, collaboration, and trust.

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Questions or comments should be addressed to: Becky Marsh, director of communications and marketing,  
becky.marsh@whitfieldschool.org

Whitfield School  
175 South Mason Road  
St. Louis, Missouri 63141  
314-434-5141

Visit Whitfield's web site:  
whitfieldschool.org

*Whitfield School is an independent, coeducational, college-preparatory day school for grades 6-12. Whitfield seeks to maintain a student body diverse in geographic, economic, racial and religious backgrounds. It does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion or color in administering its academic policies, admissions policies, athletic policies, financial aid program or other school activities.*

# contents

## 2 IN THE WORDS

Head of School's Letter

## 4-9 IN FOCUS

Whitfield's New Head of School Dr. Chris Cunningham

## 10-13 IN THE STUDY

Sophomores Engage in 'This I Believe' Project  
Finding the Formula to Make Art  
Roving Robots  
National Merit Scholarship Honorees  
Connecting with Culture  
National Latin Exam Award Recipients

## 14-17 INSPIRED

"They Eat Sunshine Not Zebras"  
"Clue"  
"Camp Nightmare"  
Students Hit All the Right Notes  
Student Work Accepted to St. Louis' Artist Guild Showcase  
Publications Earn National Design Recognition  
'Cardboard Cuisine'

## 18-25 IN THE LIFE

Homecoming 2021  
Celebrating Chinese New Year  
A Tradition of Service  
Recognizing Black History Month  
Recognizing Women's History Month  
Esports Program Launched  
Junior Celebration Day  
Whitfield Pride  
Spring Awards Assembly  
Congratulations Class of 2022  
College Choices for 2022 Graduates

## 26-33 IN STEP

Future College Athletes Celebration  
Varsity Athletics Honors & Awards  
Welcome New Coaches

## 32-47 IN SUPPORT

Philanthropy Report  
Green & White Gala  
Koman Commons and Courtyard

## 48-59 IN TOUCH

Alumni News





*A Conversation with* **DR. CHRIS CUNNINGHAM**

The 2022-2023 school year marks Head of School Chris Cunningham’s first year at Whitfield. After stepping into the role of Head of School on July 1, 2022 Chris has quickly immersed himself in the Whitfield community.

A graduate of Stanford and Duke universities, Dr. Cunningham brings more than 25 years of experience in independent school education to Whitfield. Receiving a bachelor’s degree in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University in 1989, Chris graduated Phi Beta Kappa with Distinction and Honors. He went on to complete a Ph.D. in English from Duke University in 1996. Beginning his independent school teaching career as a 9th and 11th grade English teacher at Montclair Kimberley Academy, Chris later taught at Stuart Country Day School of the Sacred Heart and Princeton Day School before joining the faculty at The Lawrenceville School in Lawrenceville, NJ, where during his 19 year-tenure, he served as English teacher, Head of House, Advisor, and Varsity Coach before being named Assistant Head of School and Dean of Faculty. The Lawrenceville School, founded more than 200 years ago, is ranked among the top boarding and day schools in the country with an enrollment of 817 boys and girls in grades 9-12, including postgraduates.

**ON THE COVER:** Seniors cheer new Head of School Chris Cunningham into the building on the first day of school.

*What attracted you to Whitfield?*

I was looking to be part of a school that shared my core values and beliefs about education.

First, I wanted to join a school that had a strong sense of community, where students and staff, parents and trustees and alumni were united in common purpose. I was also looking for a school where teachers were committed to student-centered, hands-on, collaborative learning. I was looking for a diverse, inclusive community where students—and the adults who work with them every day—felt confident to be their best and true selves. Finally, I wanted to find a school that challenges students, in developmen-

tally appropriate ways, of course, but asking them to grapple with the complexities they will confront in their adult lives. By doing all these things, we give our children not just the skills and understandings they’ll need to succeed, but the opportunity to learn about themselves, and to become the independent, confident people we want them to be.

It was clear from the first of my conversations that Whitfield shared my vision of what a school should do and be. I saw that my experiences as a teacher and school leader would be valued here, that I would have the chance to work with an outstanding group of committed educators, and that this was a place where my wife, Helena, and I could make a home.



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– Chris Cunningham, head of school

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*What are some of your goals or priorities in the first year?*

First, I want to immerse myself in the community—to get to know the people and their stories, to understand Whitfield’s culture and curriculum and history. I joked recently that come June, I would love for someone who had just met me to say, “I can’t believe you’ve only been at Whitfield for one year!”

To the same end, I very much want to get to know our students and meet as many parents as I can—and to get out into the Whitfield alumni community, and connect with them and perhaps reconnect with those we’ve lost touch with. I love talking to parents and alumni about Whitfield and hearing their stories. From athletics to life-long friendships to that one teacher who changed the course of your life—these kinds of individual stories are the lifeblood of a school.

Of course, I’m also looking ahead. So, as I talk to people in the Whitfield community, from new 6th graders to devoted alumni/ae, I’ll be listening hard to understand what they want for Whitfield—what their hopes and dreams are for this place. One of my jobs is to take those aspirations and begin to shape them into a clear and compelling vision of Whitfield’s future. We’ve already got some projects in the works that I’m really excited about, including a new STEAM Wing that is going to be amazing—but that’s just a start. Whitfield has a solid foundation and endless potential for opportunity looking forward, and I’m proud to be part of that future.



*Talk about Whitfield’s academic program.*

Whitfield offers a traditional liberal arts education, but one reimagined in a forward-thinking way. As a college prep school, we ask our students to do challenging academic coursework and we equip them with the foundational understandings and critical skills they need to thrive in college and beyond. But the half-life of knowledge gets shorter as society innovates, so traditional preparation isn’t enough. We teach our students how to learn, fostering the 21st-century skills—creativity and collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication—they will need to confront unforeseen challenges, to explore fields of study that are only now in their infancy, and to succeed in careers that don’t yet exist.

We also know that academic challenge must be balanced with support—that a child learns best in the context of a supportive relationship with a caring and trusted adult. We challenge our students to try new things, to take risks and make mistakes, to grapple with difficult ideas—to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. For students to persist and succeed

in the face of their own uncertainty and confusion, they need appropriate scaffolding and support.

*What differentiates Whitfield from other schools in the area?*

Our intentional school size is an important differentiator. We provide our students myriad opportunities while still being small enough that each of them can feel known. Whitfield is St. Louis’ premier small school experience.

Additionally, I’ve believed for years that schools cannot be reactive about students’ stress and mental health. You can’t design a school that is not going to be free of stress and anxiety just as you cannot design a life that is going to be free of stress and anxiety. At Whitfield, we give students the tools that they need to respond to the inevitable stress and anxiety in healthy and positive ways. We incorporate cutting edge psychology and neuroscience in our Advisory curriculum to address so-called non-cognitive mindsets that are the foundation for student success.



When we talk about mindfulness, one of our Habits of Mind & Heart, what we are talking about is innovative social-emotional health for kids. We put our athletes in the weight room to build muscles so they can become better athletes. We can do the same thing with muscles of attention, of resilience and reflection so that when students do encounter stress at Whitfield—and they will because we are a college prep school—they know how to slow their heartbeat, how to relax their mind, and how to push through obstacles and challenges. We are way ahead of other schools in this area.

What did you think about your first Spirit Week?

I have been hearing about Spirit Week and the grade level lip sync competition since I started interviewing for this job. It sounded fun but I wasn't at all prepared for what it really is. This week-long crazy experience creates community both within each grade level and across the entire school. Students come together and share these really powerful bonding experiences. The cheering and the good-natured competition at each Morning Assembly is about celebrating our community. The 'love cheers' back and forth across the student body ('hey 9th grade...hey what? We love you...we love you, too!') is really amazing. At most schools, homecoming spirit weeks are designed around a rivalry, a common 'enemy'—we don't have that here. What brings us together is being together.

DRESSING THE PART FOR SPIRIT WEEK



Chef Cunningham opened the week for the Class Choice Spirit Week attire.



Professor Dumbledore, Hogwarts magical headmaster from the Harry Potter series, on Fictional Character Day.



Middle School Director Matt DiGiulio, Upper School Director Sara Ringe join Chris Cunningham on the Assembly floor for Bikers vs. Surfers day.



Sporting a Whitfield letter jacket and waving the spirit stick on Decade Day.

favorites

FOOD: I love literally all kinds of food—Indian, French, Korean, Mexican, etc.

BOOK: I'm an English teacher and a life-long reader, so picking a favorite book is impossible!

MUSIC: I went to high school and college in the 80s, so my musical tastes tend to span from the mid-60s through the early 90s. As I've gotten older, I've also gotten into jazz and blues, and I really enjoy classical music.

ART: My father is an artist, and my mother was the director of one of the largest art festival companies in California. So, I grew up surrounded by art. When I'm in a museum, I tend to gravitate towards 19th-century painting.

HOBBIES: Reading, writing (I wrote and published poetry for about ten years in the early 2000s), drawing, guitar, hiking and backpacking, travel, skiing and scuba when I have the opportunity. Helena and I like to cook together. And I bake bread in the winter.

Q&A WITH HELENA CUNNINGHAM

Share your work history.

I started working at The Lawrenceville School just a couple of months after graduating from Middlebury College in the late 1980s. One of the things I loved about my job was that I was able to do lots of different kinds of things and to work with students, both in and out of the classroom. In the 34 years I was at Lawrenceville, I taught all levels of French, lived in the dormitories for 15 years; earned an M.A. in French Language and Literature and an M.Ed. in ESL; coached a range of interscholastic sports (JV girls ice hockey, varsity track and cross country); and created and led our Costume Shop, where I worked with students to design and create costumes for all of the school's theatrical productions. I also served as the Language Department Chair for seven years, and the Senior Class Dean for four years.

In what ways do you look forward to engaging with the Whitfield community?

I'm just delighted to get to know this community! Everyone has been very welcoming and kind and I hope to attend as many school events with Chris as possible. We are also looking forward to hosting events for the greater school community in our home. I'm thrilled to be costuming the Upper School fall play "Almost, Maine".

What are you looking forward to as a new resident of the Midwest? St. Louis?

We have already enjoyed exploring some museums, the Zoo, the Missouri Botanical Gardens, a little bit of Forest Park and Queeny park, the Loop, St. Charles, and many of the amazing restaurants. We are looking forward to exploring more of the outdoors as the weather cools down a little, some theater, some jazz, a Cardinals game or two, perhaps some kayaking, learning about some volunteer opportunities (youth, gardening, animals), and just getting to know St. Louis and all it has to offer.



Helena & Chris Cunningham begin the school year at the Back to School Bash on August 9, 2022.



Helena Cunningham does a final costume fitting for one of the actors in "Almost, Maine."

favorites

FOOD: I have too many food favorites to list them here - pretty much all food except broccoli!

MUSIC: Anything written and/or performed by my son and godson (their band Ojahara, now has two songs on Spotify)

HOBBIES: Gardening, walking/hiking, sewing, costume design, reading, attending theater performances, visiting museums, entertaining, spending time with family and friends.