

Returning to a Place We've Never Been

This column by Head of School Tim Seeley was published in The Weekly Packet on Oct. 22, 2020.

It was a different kind of summer at George Stevens Academy this year. Typically, the pace relaxes during the summer as faculty and staff enjoy periods of much-needed reflection and recharging. There is always work to be done, certainly, as we prepare to welcome back students, but it's familiar work, tried-and-true, whether updating syllabuses and lesson plans, waxing floors and repainting walls, or preparing back-to-school handbooks and paperwork.

This summer the work was different—relentless, stressful, and plagued by worries as we made and remade plans and developed protocols for a school none of us had ever experienced. Literally every aspect had to be rethought: how to teach students while maintaining physical distance on campus and adhering to protocols for keeping everyone as safe as possible. It meant rethinking how to teach longer periods, two days in-person and three days online; how to build in mask breaks; how to do symptom checks for everyone who comes to campus; how to control hallway traffic, provide lunches in small groups, excuse students for bathroom breaks, and outfit every room with hand sanitizers, plexiglass barriers, and air purifiers.

As the first day of school drew closer, our apprehension increased. Would our plans work? (And what if they didn't?) Could we pull it off? (And what if we couldn't?)

And then something familiar and reassuring happened. We opened school and rediscovered what we have rediscovered every September, every year: that learning can be joyous, both for students and for teachers. Yes, even in a pandemic. Despite all the different—even uncomfortable—ways of teaching and learning, the pleasure and excitement students and teachers feel when discovering new ideas and developing new skills appeared just as they have always appeared.

Every day we see evidence that the delights of teaching and learning are complementary. We help students grow intellectually and thrive as persons, and they in turn reward us with immense gratifications that lift us up and carry us forward. Every day we see students who are glad to be in school, despite the annoying new rules. We have seen Student Council members step forward to help prepare the hallways and classrooms, students on their own initiative prepare and serve breakfast for faculty and staff, and last week, four seniors made a video welcoming and offering advice to our new freshmen. ([Click here to watch that video.](#))

Depending on how Hancock County fares during these difficult times, we may need to make adjustments to our new rules and protocols, but we've learned now that we can do it without extinguishing the most important element of the experience of school—students embracing the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to become the people they are meant to be, to live thriving, productive lives. That is a joyous endeavor, and the pandemic has not dampened that joy.