

Promoting Positive Campus Culture

The following is the text of a letter addressed to parents of GSA students and sent to them and others in our school community on March 21, 2019.

Two recent letters to the editor in *The Weekly Packet* cited concerns about our community, and while, all-in-all, I still believe GSA is a great place to go to school, welcoming and tolerant and safe, I have spoken before about concerns I have had this year regarding how some students treat each other and the sorts of things some students are saying. I want to share all the steps we are taking and will take to create and maintain the kind of community we wish to be. There is no more important element to our work than making our school community as safe, welcoming, respectful, and conducive to learning as possible.

- I have surveyed all faculty and staff, and all students, about how often they have heard inappropriate comments, the sorts of comments they have heard, and how often they have observed students being kind to one another. I am still going through the results, but I can say at this point we certainly have more inappropriate comments and talk than we want (ranging from general obscenity to hurtful speech). We also have a lot of students being kind to one another. I am very happy at how seriously the students are taking this issue.
- Bill Case is a very experienced educator who does a lot of work around politics in one of his courses. He and I met with four students, two who identify as conservative politically, and two who identify as liberal, to talk about ways we can encourage civil conversation. The students were most enthusiastic about this and had several very concrete ideas, ranging from ways to get students in different groups to know each other better to ways we can model how to have constructive conversations about emotion-laden topics. I was very pleased and encouraged by how seriously they took the need to do this.
- I convened the faculty three times in the last six weeks specifically to address these issues and discuss steps we can take to foster a positive atmosphere for all students, every day.
- Today, Michael J. Chase, an author from Maine who specializes in how to foster kindness, gave a powerful speech at a special all-school assembly and then spent the rest of the school day meeting with groups of students. A few quotes from his speech: “Know each other’s stories,” “We are born kind,” and “The importance of a single act of kindness.”
- We plan to bring someone from the Attorney General’s Office who does civil rights training to campus to work extensively with our faculty and staff to start next year.
- We plan to start a Civil Rights team again, a student-led organization that will work to foster respect on campus.
- We will send some faculty and administrators to workshops this summer related to fostering positive campus culture.
- Our orientations in the past have focused on getting to know new classmates, our campus, and their teachers, but not explicitly on school culture. Starting next fall, we will have

student programming on campus culture to start the year, especially with our incoming students, to educate them about the community we want to be.

- We are reviewing our anti-bullying policies to be sure we have everything in place we need and want.

I do not want you to take away from this letter that GSA is in crisis, because we are not. What I hope you take away is that we hold our obligation to provide a good learning atmosphere very seriously, and that we are responding vigorously on many fronts to the erosion of school culture we have seen this year. We are committed to restoring the consistently respectful and welcoming learning environment for which GSA has long been known. At a time when our country as a whole struggles to be civil and respectful, we can do no greater service to our students than to give them a campus where this is so.

As always, if you have any questions on this, or anything else, please reach out to me.

Timothy J. Seeley
Head of School