



Convocation Address
Dr. Delvin Dinkins, Head of School

September 2, 2026

Good morning, everyone. Students, faculty and staff, trustees, parents, alumni, and friends: welcome. And to everyone beginning your first year at Gill St. Bernard's, a particularly warm welcome. We are very glad you are here.

Convocation is one of those rare moments when nearly all of us gather in one place: second graders and seniors, teachers and students, people who arrived only days ago and people whose connection to this school reaches back decades. Graduation marks a completion.

Convocation marks a beginning. Before the year picks up speed, we gather to remember who we are and imagine what might become possible in the year ahead.

Our students have already placed several important ideas before us this morning: the history of this school, our mission, our values, and, through Aideen's reading of Kobi Yamada, a beautiful question: *What Do You Do With an Idea?*

A mission is an idea. Values are ideas. Courage is an idea. Integrity is an idea. Excellence is an idea. A school itself begins as an idea. But an idea matters only when somebody makes it real. And that makes Yamada's question a particularly good one for the beginning of a school year: What do you do with an idea?

An idea may begin as something small, strange, even impossible. But if it matters enough, you give it attention. You test it. You let others challenge it. And sometimes, an idea becomes something real.

Look around you. This school was once an idea. You have already heard some of its history this morning. In 1900, Reverend Thomas Conover had an idea about an education that connected learning with doing. In 1934, Miss Elisabeth Gill had an idea about an education that challenged young women while recognizing the value of the individual, the power of close relationships, and what she called a "rich school experience."

Two founders. Two schools. Two distinctive visions. And yet, across the decades, we can recognize ideas that still animate Gill St. Bernard's today: learning connected to life; young people challenged to grow; relationships that matter; and an education that prepares students not simply for school, but for a meaningful life.

Those two schools became one in 1972. Conover and Gill imagined boldly, but even they could not have known where their ideas would lead: the thousands of students who would pass through this place, the lives their ideas would touch, or all of us gathered here this morning.

They could not have known us. Yet here we are. We are their wildest ideas made visible. And maybe that is one of the remarkable things about an idea. Once you put a worthy idea into the world, you don't get to know exactly where it will lead.

A school can appear permanent, with its buildings, traditions, schedules, and ceremonies. But underneath all of those things is an idea: about what young people are capable of, what is worth knowing, how we should treat one another, and what kind of people we hope to become.

Even *The World is Our Classroom* is an idea: that education should not be confined by four walls, but should prepare us to encounter, investigate, understand, and perhaps even change the world.

But ideas alone aren't enough. They have to be made real. This summer, our faculty and staff read Ron Berger's *An Ethic of Excellence*. Berger writes about students producing extraordinary work, not because they were simply told to "be excellent," but because they learned what excellent work looked like and were given opportunities to move toward it. They studied examples, made drafts, received feedback, revised, and tried again.

Berger writes a great deal about craftsmanship. A craftsperson cares about the work, looks closely, notices what others might overlook, welcomes another set of eyes, and takes pride not simply in finishing, but in making something worthy of the effort. What if we brought that same spirit to learning, to the way we write, solve, perform, compete, lead, and build community?

You heard our students speak about excellence just a few minutes ago. Berger helps us understand something important about that value: excellence is not something you are. It is something you practice. Great work is rarely great the first time. It becomes great.

And perhaps that is true of schools too. Gill St. Bernard's has never been a finished product. Reverend Conover and Miss Gill began something. Others carried it forward. Two schools became one. Generations have asked what should endure and what needed to change.

In that sense, GSB has always been an idea under construction. None of us owns that idea; for a time, it is ours to care for. We inherit something worthy, preserve what is excellent, improve what can be better, add something of our own, and entrust it to those who come after us.

The same is true of you. Sometimes school can tempt us into thinking our job is to prove how good we already are: get the answer right, earn the grade, make the team, get the part. Those things can matter. But they aren't the deepest purpose of an education.

The purpose of school is not simply to prove what you can already do. It is to enlarge what you are capable of doing. Achievement asks: *What did I accomplish?* Capacity asks: *What can I now understand, create, navigate, or undertake that I could not before?* And perhaps there is an even larger question: *Who am I becoming?* A great education should answer all three.

Because you are not a finished product. Not in second grade. Not in seventh grade. Not as a senior. And, I assure you, not as an adult. You are still becoming. So am I. So are your teachers. And so is GSB.

There will be moments this year when you encounter something you cannot yet do, when your work needs another draft, when your answer is wrong, or when something you try doesn't go as you hoped. Good. Education should bring us to the edge of what we can already do, and then help us take another step.

That is an ethic of excellence. Not perfection. Not endless pressure. Not being better than everybody else. It is care, craftsmanship, attention, and courage: the willingness to keep working at something worthy of you, and the humility to let other people help you make it better.

And there is a word I hope describes how we live those values and approach our work this year: *Wholeheartedly*. To do something wholeheartedly doesn't mean you will always succeed, or that you have to fill every minute of your day. It means giving yourself fully to things worth doing: being present and curious, caring about the quality of what you contribute, having the courage to try, and staying with something long enough to discover what might be possible.

It happens when you stay with a problem because you want to understand why, run the scene one more time, revise a sentence because the right words matter, notice someone sitting alone and make room, or simply say, "I'll help." Those moments may never appear on a transcript. But they are how people grow. They are how ideas become culture.

This year marks an important chapter for Gill St. Bernard's. We are beginning to bring to life a new strategic framework called *Depth, Purpose, and Possibility*. I won't explain a strategic framework to the second graders this morning. Or, for that matter, to the seniors. But I will tell all of you what sits at its center: you do.

Nearly a century ago, Miss Gill called it a "rich school experience." Today, we speak about creating a distinctive student experience. The language has changed. The idea underneath it has not. What happens to you here should enlarge you.

The words *Depth, Purpose, and Possibility* tell us something about the education we seek: depth in how we learn and engage; purpose in understanding why our learning and contributions matter; and possibility in discovering what the world, this school, and each of us might yet become.

We should be seriously ambitious about what young people can become and deeply human in how we help them get there. At GSB, those are not competing ideas. We challenge you because we believe in your capacity, and we know that meaningful challenge flourishes when you are known, supported, encouraged, and increasingly trusted with responsibility for your own growth.

Increasingly, we want you not merely to succeed at challenges adults choose for you, but to develop the judgment, curiosity, courage, and independence to choose worthy challenges for yourselves. To encounter something difficult and worthwhile and think: *I don't know whether I can do that yet. I want to try*. There is tremendous power in that little word: *yet*. It leaves room for growth. It leaves room for revision. It leaves room for possibility. And possibility is where every idea begins.

So as we begin this year, I have a challenge for you: have ideas. Ask questions whose answers you do not already know. Make something that did not exist before you made it. Notice things other people overlook. Imagine how something might be different. Then have the patience and discipline to work on those ideas. Seek feedback. Look closely. Revise. Care about what you put into the world.

And make room for other people's ideas too. Someone sitting near you this morning sees the world differently than you do. That's an opportunity. Listen. Ask questions. Challenge one another thoughtfully. Help someone else's idea grow. None of us becomes our best entirely by ourselves. Neither does a school.

Reverend Conover had an idea. Miss Gill had an idea. The people who brought their schools together had an idea. Generations of teachers, students, families, alumni, staff members, and trustees have added their ideas to theirs.

And now it is our turn. Someday, years from now, students we will never meet will gather for a Convocation at Gill St. Bernard's. They will inherit the school we leave them. What will they find? What will

be stronger because we were here? What will exist because somebody sitting in this room imagined it?

Those questions belong to the adults gathered here. But they belong just as much to you, our students. Because you are not simply attending Gill St. Bernard's. You are making Gill St. Bernard's, every day. This school began as an idea. This school is sustained by ideas. And this school exists, in part, to enlarge what you believe is possible.

So perhaps that is our answer to Kobi Yamada's question. What do you do with an idea? You notice it. You question it. You work on it. You let others help you improve it. And when it is worthy, you have the courage to make it real. More than a century ago, someone imagined this school. Today, we get to live inside that idea. We are their wildest ideas made visible. And now it is our turn to imagine what comes next. Welcome to the 2026–27 school year. Let's make it a year of depth, purpose, possibility, and beautiful work. Thank you.