

Mission

Summer 2022

Schools do not exist in order to have mission statements, but schools without a clear expression of their purpose, direction, and *raison d'être* either flounder or find themselves coming to resemble, to greater or lesser degrees, every other school whose broad institutional characteristics they share. Even schools that begin with a distinctive impulse—like many schools that describe themselves as progressive—can find that distinguishing themselves from one another beyond their unique origin stories becomes harder with time.

Such is not our fate. While we may choose not to stake a claim to being unique, I am confident in asserting that we are unusual, rare, and distinctive in many of our guiding truths. And so when, at the start of the 2021-2022 school year, I asked a group of intrepid and thoughtful colleagues to take up the task of reviewing and revising the mission statement that has guided us for the past decade, they and I understood it to be a significant undertaking. While not quite as momentous as when John Winthrop cautioned his fellow passengers on their way to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony that “we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us,” this project had something of that solemnity within the Saint Ann’s community.

The context for this work is the once-a-decade self-study that we’ve been engaged in this past year, mandated as part of our accreditation through the New York State Association of Independent Schools. With the aim of making this an inclusive process we invited students, faculty and staff, and trustees to participate last fall in a set of workshops in which our existing mission statement was reviewed and critiqued and participants were asked to identify the traits, values, commitments and experiences that defined Saint Ann’s for them.

Saint Ann’s exists to nurture the wonder of children. Unfettered by grades, teachers and students embark on journeys of discovery in which the arts are central. Through an ambitious curriculum and a culture of inquiry, we question the world. We invite each other to take risks, pursue knowledge for its own sake, and celebrate growth. We seek to create a community rooted in trust and equity. Here, every subject is an art and every child is an artist.

Saint Ann’s School
Mission Statement
May 2022

More than 250 faculty and staff and 300 middle and high school students participated. Certain widely shared themes emerged from these conversations: our focus on students and on the centrality of the student-teacher relationship; nurturing individual voices in the context of creating community; the essential role of the arts to our vision of education, with students as active creators rather than passive consumers of knowledge or information; the coexistence of joy and an ambitious curriculum; the need to articulate and fulfill our commitments to diversity, equity and trust; and the strong sense that the word “gifted” no longer served the purpose it once did in defining the kinds of students we seek as we assemble a community of learners who can thrive at our school.

From this iterative process emerged the mission statement you see here, unanimously approved by the Board of Trustees at its May meeting. I am delighted to share it with the full Saint Ann’s community, for I believe that it eloquently distills into seventy-eight words our essence. It is descriptive—for instance, making clear our long-standing commitment to teaching without the use of formal grades. And it is aspirational: the statement that “we seek to create a community rooted in trust and equity” is both a reflection of attributes we have long sought to embody, and a frank recognition that this work is and must be ongoing. It speaks to our resistance to orthodoxies and our desire to inculcate the habits of questioning, probing, digging—the habits of the scholar and the artist, and of the responsible citizen. We undertake journeys of discovery in which the journey, and those we are on it with, are as important as what is ultimately discovered, because that is true learning, leaving ample room for taking risks and making mistakes. When it is the journey that matters one avoids the idea that the most significant thing about what we are doing in the moment—with the fresh canvas, the blank page, the empty beaker—is at its heart preparation for some distant end. The end has never been what we conceive to be central to a Saint Ann’s education, even as we have proven that what students discover here will have meaning throughout their lives.

We emphasize trust as a vital companion to equity because we seek to create a culture in which we have the confidence to talk with one another, to engage rather than cancel, to hew to a model of discourse that is less about proving oneself right than about mutual growth and understanding as the means to creating a community where everyone feels a sense of belonging and empowerment.

This new statement connects us to our improbable beginnings and invites us to move forward, to keep experimenting, opening our hearts and minds to that which is new, and those who are new, as much as to things long cherished. And it appropriately places our double helix—the arts entwined with a deep and rich academic curriculum—in the middle of it all. The culture of inquiry we create is a constant enticement to our students to deepen their skills, their artistry, their command of each subject that they encounter, and their understanding of each other and the world around them.

Our mission statement imposes no explicit future burden or expectation upon our students (unlike, for example, my alma mater, which enjoins its alumni to lead lives of “usefulness and reputation”). What our graduates do with what they have learned and experienced here is rightly up to them, whatever hopes or aspirations we may harbor on their behalf, whatever difference we hope they will make in the world.

As our school looks ahead to a year of leadership transition and to the coming decade, this statement will serve us well as guide and inspiration. For we can truly say that we always have and always will exist “to nurture the wonder of children.” There are few higher callings than that.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School

Reflection

Winter 2021–22

What do we mean by reflection, one of those deliciously versatile English words with multiple and seemingly contradictory meanings, whose roots stretch back to Latin and French and Middle English? We might be referring to sound or light bouncing off rather than penetrating a *reflective* surface. Or, quite the opposite, an idea or thought we form through meditation or consideration, which requires piercing the surface and the superficial in a quest for deeper meaning or purpose, looking not only at what is, but at what has been and what is to come.

When we talk of the place of “mirrors” and “windows” in education, aren’t we calling out how vital both kinds of reflection are to learning? We do sometimes ask questions that dwell largely in the present, like a person gazing on their own mirrored visage: What am I learning? Why is this experiment failing? Is the lesson I am teaching today effectively conveying the skill or knowledge I want my students to understand? We also summon the image of the mirror to reflect critically on a crucial element of our praxis: am I creating in the texts and topics I choose, and the manner in which I teach them, opportunities for students across many different backgrounds to see themselves represented, to be able to relate in some way to an author or character, a work of art, a pioneer of science or mathematics, an historical subject through some aspect of shared identity? The window is equally indispensable, for through it one sees wider vistas, unknown terrain beyond our lived experience, peoples or cultures or ideas the apprehension of which requires imagination, empathy, self-questioning, and new ways of seeing the world.

To be well-educated in the liberal tradition requires all of this and more. At Saint Ann’s we see exploration and questioning as essential to our purpose and essential to living. This is the path—a deepening knowledge of one’s self and of the world—down which transformative education awaits. Leo Tolstoy more than a century ago wrote that, “There can be only one permanent revolution—a moral one; the regeneration of the inner man. How is this revolution to take place? Nobody knows how it will take place in humanity, but every man feels it clearly in himself. And yet in our world everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself.” That, to me, is what we are after here.

This is a year of reflection at Saint Ann’s in ways beyond the ordinary. In spite of the pandemic requiring a near-constant focus on the present and the immediate future—Are our health and safety protocols working? What among the things we cherish doing together can we safely sustain? Will we have enough teachers and staff to keep school open this week?—we have embarked on a year-long, mission-centered exploration that is at its heart and at its best a deep reflection on what we believe education ought to be, what defines the essence of our community, and what we wish Saint Ann’s to become in the decade ahead. While the impetus for this work is a required decennial reaccreditation, we are deliberately and consciously investing it with deeper meaning and purpose. Hundreds of students, teachers and staff have participated in the early stages of this work, gathering in small groups, in person, in a pre-Omicron moment, to ponder these questions and to reflect on who we are, who we have been, where we have triumphed and where we have fallen short, and how we might change ourselves, the better to do the work that called each of us here.

The enduring paradox of Saint Ann’s is the constancy with which we have pursued commitments there at our founding while acknowledging that staying in the vanguard of a countercultural revolution in education—and meeting our students where they are—invites us to embrace changes both subtle and systemic, to be curious and open-minded, to be introspective about our school and its place in the world. We ask this of our students every day in service of their growth, and in this moment we are asking nothing less of ourselves, in the service of our own regeneration.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School

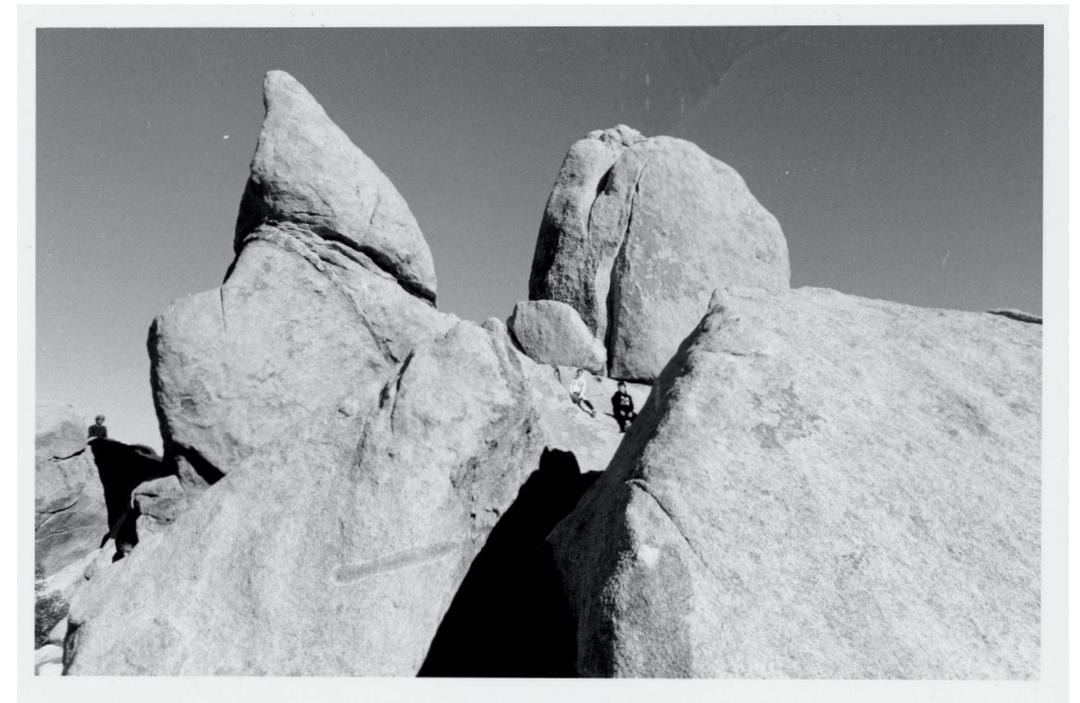


Photo by Ruby Motz, 12th grade

Portal

Summer 2021

In April of 2020, the novelist Arundhati Roy published an essay in the *Financial Times* entitled “The Pandemic is a Portal.” Written at a moment when the global pandemic was still in its infancy, many months before her native India or even the U.S. had endured the worst of Covid’s ravages, Roy nevertheless saw the suffering and disruption that lay ahead as a pivot point:

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality,” trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality... Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next... We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Reading this essay now, with the experience of the pandemic and its conjoined crisis of racial justice in our school and in our country in view, I am at once painfully aware of the staggering suffering and loss that has been endured these past sixteen months—and that continues to be endured around the world—and captivated by the possibilities that ‘pandemic as portal’ offers to us at Saint Ann’s. We too have experienced ruptures large and small: illness and loss; the fragmenting of community; the disruption of patterns, habits, and skills that we had relied on for decades; the necessary embrace of teaching technologies for remote learning that had until last year been mostly foreign to us. We are a school in which the words handwritten on a page, the lines of a play uttered to a live audience, the quick glance from an experienced teacher that can bring a raucous classroom to order were everything. The very idea of “social distancing” seemed anathema; our prevailing ethos was an abhorrence of unused space and an eagerness always to be creating together.

In the face of all this the impulse to look to the future as an opportunity simply to restore what had been *ex ante* is powerfully alluring, and to achieve some semblance of that lost normality would seem in and of itself to be a triumph. But the world has changed, and so our notions of how we can best serve the students of today and tomorrow require a critical reexamination. Without question the collective, school-wide “fierce pursuit of knowledge, skill and artistry” remains at our core, as does an ambition defined not by besting someone else in competition but by discovering the deepest capacities within ourselves and each other for discovery, mastery, expression, and creation. Our curriculum, we declare, “is a realm of possibilities where we meet our students. It is a substantive and dynamic means to engage every child.”

The curriculum, therefore, is by its very nature a portal, a doorway from a child’s own direct experience of the world into the world as revealed by every discipline we teach and each skill that we impart. It is the means by which traditions are shared and the critical capacity

to question—and even overthrow—those traditions is cultivated. And so the curriculum was one of several places we turned last fall—in every academic and arts department in the school—in our pursuit of creating a school that is deliberately, intentionally, independently, and determinedly more equitable, inclusive, and anti-racist.

The questions I asked every department to ponder, deliberate, and discuss over the course of the year were purposefully open-ended: what equity-related skills did they want every student studying in their discipline to acquire? And what pathway and plan did they intend to create for students to get there? These questions led to many others as department chairs and teachers set themselves to this task: why have we chosen certain texts or topics over others? Whose story, whose narrative, whose traditions dominate? What differences if any are manifest in the trajectories of students into advanced work? What internal and external structures, biases, and incentives may be creating roadblocks for some students and implied golden tickets for others?

Sacrificing nothing in terms of rigor or excellence—indeed, critically examining what those words rightfully mean in the twenty-first century—the first fruits of this work emerged in late spring. They confirmed that the will, imagination, and intelligence of our faculty—when encouraged with an institutional imperative as wind in their sails—are more than ample to the task of imagining a reinvigorated and more equitable Saint Ann’s education. In each department, deep and penetrating questions about curriculum and pedagogy, about unexamined habits and patterns, about choices made long ago, emerged from collegial conversations, aided in many cases by professional development opportunities made available to teachers and administrators. Teachers across the school trained a critical lens on their practice, shared readings, expertise, and experience with their colleagues, and collectively accomplished a shift in mindset that holds the promise of turning our longstanding commitment to teaching critical thinking skills toward a deepening capacity of students to pursue a more equitable school and society.

When students and teachers return this fall the first fruits of this effort will be in practice in more places than I have space here to describe. But some specific examples demonstrate the scope and range of this work throughout the many disciplines we teach:

In Math, colleagues discussed and focused on ways to disrupt both the obvious and more subtle signalling mechanisms that can lead to gender or racial discrepancies in advanced classes (including making a conscious effort to ensure that the “Problem of the Week” featured the work of female and BIPOC mathematicians), and are developing curricula aimed to ensure that our students are keen and capable critics of data in which biases of various kinds may be embedded.

In Science, a similar scrutiny was brought to bear on the trajectory of students through the department’s offerings, on the ways in which implicit bias can impact pedagogy and student advising, on the opportunities in fields from biology to environmental science to examine how science can contribute to dismantling systemic racism and other forms of discrimination.

In History, the department described its approach as “not simply adding or subtracting from various years or units but instead taking on the exciting and creative work of thinking critically and reflectively about the way that we teach our sequence of fourth through tenth grade courses. This means that everything is up for examination and discussion.” While the department sees this as a multi-year process, our fifth graders will experience an entirely new curriculum for their study of U.S. History this year, and the two required high school courses—World History in ninth grade and U.S. History in tenth—have been redefined to explicitly decenter whiteness, complicate Eurocentric narratives and explanations of historical change, and commit to presenting an inclusive picture of the past.

In English, conversations last summer meant that ninth graders this past year took “Global Perspectives” rather than “Western Literature and the Essay.” New texts by women and authors of color are being introduced in every grade level, and the department is equipping students “to read from a critically empowered point of view, which is to say we want them to learn how to recognize how language can be used as a tool of oppression and, underlining pencil in hand, to identify where it is used to manipulate.”

Similarly, in Romance Languages and in Classics and Asian Languages teachers critically examined choices of texts and topics and the fundamental role of language as an expression of and tool within cultures. Romance Languages wants our students “to understand the dual character of language—as both a means of communication and a carrier of culture—and to be able to think critically about language usage and the ways in which it may not only sustain biases and injustice, but also creatively subvert them.” And Classics considers it essential that students can understand “how language produces or reifies a perception, how culture is produced and reflected, and how power is distributed.”

In the arts—Theater, Music, and Visual Art—the probing and depth of changes initiated and contemplated are just as profound. What does equity of participation and experience truly look like? Whose narratives or creative works are being centered in our curricular choices and repertoire? How do we make choices on stage and what impact do those choices have on the audience? Theater articulated a goal that I believe all three departments share: “We aim to incorporate the celebration of our students’ individual voices and collective joy in each of our classes and productions at Saint Ann’s.”

These are just a few of the ways in which Saint Ann’s is stepping lightly through the portal—in Preschool, Kindergarten, and Lower School; in Library, Health, Recreational Arts, Computer, as well as in the departments from which I’ve drawn specific examples. The same subtlety, skill, and child-centeredness that have defined us are being deployed in new exciting ways so that the experience of all students at Saint Ann’s is one in which their full creative self is nurtured, their identity is embraced, and our collective quest for human excellence—boldly proclaimed in our motto, *altiora peto*—is pursued with equity among its ends and means.

Vincent Tompkins
Head of School



Artwork by AC M., 12th grade

Retrospective

Winter 2020–2021

On the afternoon of Monday March 9, 2020 we held an urgent, mandatory meeting for all faculty and staff to share the contingency plans we were shaping at Saint Ann’s to respond to the growing concerns about a novel coronavirus. I do not remember everything that was said or asked at that meeting, but I do recall explaining that there was an imminent possibility that we might have to close school and prepare ourselves to offer remote instruction to our students. Many other schools in the city were in their last week before spring break (ours was still several weeks away), and with each passing hour many of those were beginning to announce early closures. Colleges and universities were starting to close as well. As yet we had had no known cases among students or staff at Saint Ann’s, but it was becoming clear, as I wrote to parents and staff at the start of that week, that it was a matter of if, not when, our doors would close.

Days later, on March 12th I announced that the following Monday we would shift to distance learning (a phrase that in the history of Saint Ann’s up to that point would have been regarded as nothing other than oxymoronic). While no announcement would be made about public schools closing until the following Sunday, the Mayor had begun urging employers to allow employees to telecommute so that they could avoid crowded subways. That day he declared a state of emergency for the City of New York. The Governor had banned gatherings over 500 and shuttered Broadway. Public health officials at every level had been urging institutions to consider ways in which they could help to slow the transmission of the virus and prevent our hospitals and healthcare workers from being overwhelmed.

It was time for us to take our daily magic show into the ether, to bring Saint Ann’s to life online.

The horrific weeks that followed in New York City were both dystopian and all too real. Our buildings were shuttered—the theater and lobby dark, classrooms and laboratories vacant, playgrounds eerily silent. Some left the city, others reported the swelling and near-constant sound of sirens in their neighborhoods, shared news of friends, relatives, acquaintances who had fallen ill. Days became weeks became months, and the early hopes that somehow by May or June we might resume some semblance of normal school, might see each other in person, proved futile, to be replaced by the ever-deepening realization of how profound and long-lasting the crisis would be. Words in the wings of our lexicon moved to center stage: remote, virtual, online, asynchronous and synchronous, surveillance testing, health screening, positivity, morbidity. Pandemic. Those words are still on our lips every day.

What has been learned, a year into a global crisis that has claimed the lives of over 400,000 Americans and two million worldwide? We’ve learned that competence matters. We’ve learned, again, that infectious diseases track socio-economic and racial inequities with almost laser precision, even as they can strike those in power who all too casually disregard science and public health. We saw how fear and anxiety can overtake science, data, and experience, warping the ability to make sound individual and collective judgments. We’ve seen how one crisis cascades into the next—economic collapse, police violence in Black and brown communities, an assault on the fundamental norms and truths on which democracy depends. “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,” said Yeats. Too many days when poetry felt like prophecy.

And yet. And yet here is our school, perhaps a mere speck in a whirlwind of global disruption, but *our* speck, *our* school. A school where, as children returned in person in the fall (or appeared on screen on their distance-learning days), they emanated childhood’s eternal spark of hope, of curiosity, of resilience. Three- and four-year-olds universally (almost) wore their masks, and universally refused to mask their joy in being together. Trumpeteres, oboists, and singers migrated onto nearby steps and sidewalks; dancers appeared on Love Lane and in Cadman Plaza; Shakespearians mastered monologues and found an audience on Zoom. Rec Arts students discovered the joy of juggling with socks; chemistry experiments turned when necessary to ordinary kitchen-cupboard ingredients; middle and high school students went to class in the lunchroom, the gym, the faculty lounge—finding any place where we could socially distance and still ignite the spark of learning together. We created a home for our third graders on the 8th floor of the Bosworth Building so that in-person days could be expanded and social distancing requirements sustained in the Farber Building, and in no time at all they had made it their own.

So, we have learned our own lessons. Teachers long accustomed to the freedom to invent and create have risen to the occasion in person and online. Students long empowered as divergent thinkers have been partners in our constant reinvention of a Saint Ann’s education. A school where we care for one another, buoyed by the deep and enduring commitments that we share, is finding new ways to come together in community—to celebrate accomplishments, to confront injustices and inequities, to pull together. And, with each stroke, to bring a once far shore—the other side of this crisis—ever closer.

Our center holds.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School



Confronting Racism at Saint Ann's: Our Commitments for 2020–2021 and Beyond

The letter below was sent to current parents, high school students, faculty, staff and all alumni on June 23 and posted on our website. We reprint it here for our full extended community.

Dear Faculty, Staff, Students, Parents and Alumni,

Racism is systemic. It is endemic. It is pervasive, and it exists at Saint Ann's School. It is perpetuated by unequal distribution of power and privilege along racial lines in ways that uphold white supremacy. Anti-Black racism in the United States manifests itself—as it has for four hundred years—in ways too numerous to count, most grievously in centuries of enslavement, physical violence, murder and brutality systematically targeting Black people in our country. It exists in and has been perpetuated by corporations, colleges and universities, civic and judicial institutions, churches, and schools. Including this one. Over the past several weeks I have heard from many of our alumni who care deeply about our school but who experienced racism in many forms that we must acknowledge and confront as the first step towards immediate and lasting change to benefit all current and future Saint Ann's students.

We believe that Black Lives Matter. What will we do at Saint Ann's to face the history and reality of anti-Black racism and protect today's Saint Ann's students from it? How can I and our faculty and staff make changes and decisions right now that will ensure that all students, from our preschoolers to our seniors, will experience a different school in September 2020? First, I acknowledge that racism exists and has been sustained within our walls. It has caused and is causing pain and trauma to our students, teachers, and staff of color. Second, we must make clear commitments whose ultimate aim—however hard it may be to achieve or however long it may take—is to dismantle racism by understanding and overturning the systematic ways in which it has persisted in our school. To do so requires clearly stated commitments from me and everyone else in positions of leadership at Saint Ann's in every facet of what we do, as well as action born of those commitments. Third, to our Black alumni, students, faculty and staff in particular I apologize that I have not more swiftly, transparently and directly addressed racism and acts of bias on the part of members of our community. Acknowledging that we failed you, that I failed you, is for me an important step towards meaningful change. Your voices, raised in the hope that today's Saint Ann's students will not experience what you did, will make a difference.

I am outlining here a first set of commitments and actions that we will undertake now and throughout the 2020-21 school year. What ties them all together is the recognition that if we are to fulfill one of Saint Ann's most basic and solemn commitments—to see every child flourish—then we must enact change across every dimension of the school, and we must keep the experience of every student at the center of our vision and decision-making. The past several weeks have revealed broad enthusiasm from teachers, administrators and staff across all of our divisions and departments for undertaking this work, and the Board of Trustees has reaffirmed its commitment as the school's governing body to support these

efforts. Communication, transparency, and accountability through periodic progress reports, the school website, and other means will be central to every step I describe below. In one way or another everyone who cares about Saint Ann's, everyone who has joined me in celebrating what is powerfully good about our school, must and should participate in making our school more just, inclusive and equitable so that our students can learn in an environment that embodies these fundamental values of our community.

Culture and Community

- Create designated time in our schedule for regular workshops and facilitated conversations around race and racism in which every middle and high school student will participate. (Those who are interested will find information about what is already underway at Saint Ann's here: <https://saintannsny.org/diversity>. School-year specific information on these pages will be updated over the summer to reflect the 2020–21 school year.)
- With the goal of eliminating peer-to-peer bias incidents, ensure that every student has engaged in anti-bias work that is age and developmentally appropriate in grades K-12.
- Review and where necessary revise student disciplinary policies to ensure that pathways for reporting bias incidents are clear and train administrators in implementing restorative justice practices when incidents of racialized community or individual harm occur.

Curriculum and Faculty

- To further the school's goal of fostering a racially diverse faculty and staff we will require open, advertised searches for all teaching and staff positions so that hires are made from the broadest and most diverse pools of candidates.
- Undertake department- and division-wide curriculum reviews in 2020–21 to ensure that curricula reflect a robust diversity of texts, perspectives, topics, and authors, to critically examine ways in which whiteness can be decentered and openly discussed, and to ensure that every student develops fluency, knowledge, and deep understanding of the role of race in American society.
- To continue to support faculty efforts to create new curricula and respond appropriately to bias incidents, and to ensure an equitable learning environment for every student we will undertake ongoing professional development opportunities and training in which all teachers will engage, including workshops in curriculum redesign, culturally responsive pedagogy, decentering whiteness, mandatory anti-bias training and others.
- Beginning in 2021–22, after school-wide professional development and training opportunities have been provided in 2020–21, teacher evaluations will include assessment of each teacher's ability to address bias incidents when they occur and their effectiveness in creating equitable classroom environments.
- Undertake review of *Faculty and Staff Handbook* to ensure that equitable and explicit policies are in place and consistently followed to provide mentoring and to address incidents of bias on the part of faculty and staff.

Resources

- Increase funding for diversity and equity work (workshops, training, professional development, etc.) by \$100,000 in the 2020–21 school year.
- Sustain the school’s commitment to need-based financial aid (more than \$9 million in 2020-21) in the face of financial constraints related to COVID-19. In addition to this, the school has already allocated more than \$800,000 in emergency financial aid for the coming year to Saint Ann’s families impacted by the current financial crisis.
- Sustain and if possible expand on the school’s current commitment (\$250,000 annually) to non-tuition scholarship support in order to promote equitable access to all of the school’s academic and extracurricular programs, academic and student support services, and an equitable college application process.
- Continue recruitment and outreach efforts in admissions to build on the progress already made in achieving greater racial diversity in all major admissions-entry grades.
- Compensate faculty and staff who serve as ongoing facilitators of equity work with colleagues and students, recognizing that this burden and others often fall disproportionately on faculty and staff of color.

Reconciliation and Dialogue

- Through the recently created Alumni Advisory Committee, facilitate dialogue with and solicit ongoing advice from graduates of Saint Ann’s on behalf of the school administration and Board of Trustees.
- Organize conversations among Black alumni, trustees, faculty and administrators as an affinity space for Black people affiliated with Saint Ann’s to build community with each other and to carve out space for healing, reflection, dialogue and support.
- Through Monday Symposium, White Anti-Racist Educators, racial affinity spaces for faculty and staff, and other external and internal programming continue to support school-wide dialogue on race, identity, and equity and deepen faculty-wide familiarity with anti-racist practices.
- Develop workshops for parents to provide information and resources that will enable all parents to support the equity work of the school.

Leadership and Governance

- Review and revise our Mission Statement and Statement of Purposes and Objectives to explicitly embed principles of diversity, equity and inclusion in these guiding documents.
- Create designated young alumni seats on the Board of Trustees to ensure that the perspectives, and votes, of young alumni are included in the school’s governing body.
- In the criteria used by the Nominating and Governance Committee of the Board of Trustees, include experience in diversity practices among the skills sought in identifying and recruiting new members of the Board.
- Ensure that the composition of the Board of Trustees reflects the increasing racial diversity of our school community; currently five of nineteen trustees are people of color, four of whom are Black.
- Strengthen Board training on diversity, equity and inclusion work in schools.

- Continued training and professional development for all Core administrators, department chairs and others in positions of leadership in effective strategies to dismantle racism in schools, bias-incident response protocols, implicit bias and culturally responsive curricula.
- Continue to make racial diversity a central consideration in any searches to fill leadership positions at Saint Ann’s.

Because systemic racism is pervasive and deeply rooted, it will not be eliminated from our school in the year ahead, and indeed can never fully be extirpated so long as it thrives in the society around us and in the structures and practices of our institutions. It is my hope that these initial steps, and others to be developed this fall, will set our feet upon a path we must follow, and follow urgently. The journey towards equity will not be over soon, and we will make mistakes along the way. We will take up this challenge with characteristic passion and creativity; with unswerving attention to the voices of all of our students; with our belief in the power of deep, meaningful and respectful relationships between teachers and students; and with a recognition that the problems we face may be universal but the way is open for us to overcome them that embodies the best of Saint Ann’s traditions, values and beliefs. The enthusiasm and commitment demonstrated by hundreds of faculty and staff in the past several weeks gives me confidence that our school can and will fulfill its obligation to see every child flourish, to make every family a true partner in our work, and to be a place where every teacher and staff is a full and equal member of the community.

Love,



Vincent Tompkins
Head of School

Reading

Winter 2019-2020

Books have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Being at the young end of a large family meant that books my siblings had read for school or pleasure were all over the house, and a library card was one of my proudest possessions. When the oldest of my siblings had entered the workforce after college they'd often arrive for a visit home with the gift of children's books which I'd eagerly devour. Among my earliest childhood memories are a well-worn copy of an illustrated *Mother Goose*, *Tim to the Lighthouse*, *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Wait for William*, and a growing shelf of other titles.

I cannot claim in spite of this to have always been the most avid of readers, or to have been any less susceptible than my peers to the distractions of childhood. Our house had a single small black and white television, and I felt its powerful pull on weekday afternoons and Saturday mornings. For the longest time my siblings and I believed that our house was curiously susceptible to electrical blackouts that seemed to occur with mysterious consistency, until we realized that my mother's method for limiting our TV consumption was to sneak to the basement and unscrew the fuse for the television outlet. But to this day when I'm asked about the best job I've ever had, a top contender is my job in the summer of 1976. I was an attendant at a beach parking lot that would fill up by 10:00am or so. From that moment until the end of the day, I could simply hang the chain across the entrance and sit and read, virtually uninterrupted. It was blissful.



The pleasure of falling into a book is unlike anything else. I've read novels that altered if not physical reality itself then certainly my perception of it. I recently described to a colleague a memory of being home alone one night when I was twelve or thirteen, deep into Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. An actual pack of wolves howling at the window could not have provoked any deeper sense of dread than what I felt that night, sitting perfectly safe in a familiar place with no literal dangers to be found. Reading can provoke or inspire the widest imaginable range of responses—joy, exhilaration, disgust, pathos, empathy. It stretches the world far beyond the limitations of our own experience, simultaneously feeding and drawing upon our powers of imagination and discovery.

Reading is miraculous in another sense, or at least accidental. The human brain did not evolve specific neural networks to derive from symbols on a stone tablet or a papyrus or a page a shared interpretation or meaning. Instead, as Maryanne Wolf explains in *Reader, Come Home*, the “reading brain” deploys capacities that evolved for other purposes—including vision and language—relying on the human brain's remarkable plasticity to work in novel ways. Wolf writes, “the ability to form newly recycled circuits permits us to learn all manner of genetically unplanned-for activities—from making the first wheel, to learning the

alphabet, to surfing the net while listening to Coldplay and sending tweets. None of these activities is hardwired or has genes specifically dedicated to its development; they are cultural inventions that involve cortical takeovers.”

Culture, and within culture the role of technology, is a concern to a growing number of people who care about reading, myself included. I have found over the past decade that my own ability to sit quietly with a book for an hour or two has been eroded. For all of its magical properties reading rarely provides what one former Facebook employee called “the short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created.” Count yourself lucky if you have not experienced the impulsive, sometimes irresistible desire mid-sentence to reach for your smartphone (is it, really?) under the pretext of looking something up, or checking your news feed, or because (like Pavlov's dog) your attention has been summoned by a ping, a bell, a chirp. One senses that the very nature of reading has changed, that the focus and concentration and critical thinking that deep reading requires are at war inside our skulls with new and different impulses, pleasures, distractions and habits for which the antidote is not the simple unscrewing of a fuse.

So what? Must our laptops, phones, tablets, and watches go onto the trash heap (I ask while typing this essay on my laptop)? Or is this worry simply the whining of hidebound traditionalists like myself, with graying hair and cranky knees who haven't truly grasped the positive potential of these new technologies? It is true that we have heard variations on this concern for a very long time. No sooner had literacy become widespread in the United States than you had intellectuals like the now-obscure poet Vachel Lindsay proclaiming, more than a century ago, that “American civilization grows more hieroglyphic every day.” Lindsay bemoaned a culture whose literacy was threatened by the advertising billboard, the commercial photograph, the moving picture. If reading prospered and adapted amidst those challenges, why worry now?

I worry because the young readers we cultivate at Saint Ann's will only in rare instances have the experience of reading free of interruption and distraction. And that worries me because reading is a path to treasures of enormous value and importance, among them the ability to think critically about the world we inhabit and steward and the expansion of our horizons beyond the confines of clan and community. How hard will they have to fight to report the same sensation of books that Zadie Smith wrote of recently: “I lived in them and felt them live in me. I felt I was Jane Eyre and Celie and Mr. Biswas and David Copperfield”? Can the instantaneous access we now enjoy to vast storehouses of knowledge with the swipe of a screen develop the same ability to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from lie, empathy from enmity that deep reading cultivates?





I do not know, nor do I mean to condemn the tools of modern life. But I know I feel at home in a school in which the art of reading closely, deeply, and attentively is nurtured like a tender shoot by teachers across our departments and divisions—and not simply in precincts like English, History, Theater, and languages that have the most obvious stake in a culture of reading. And I do know that when I am asked for my thoughts on how Saint Ann’s equips its graduates with “twenty-first century skills,” I think of reading and all that can follow from it as one of the keystones of what it means to be an educated person, a citizen, a life-long learner, an artist or scientist or humanist. Those are skills fit for any century.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School

