March 12, 2020

Dear Saint Ann’s Families, Faculty and Staff,

I am writing to announce that beginning on Monday, March 16, we are implementing a distance learning model in all divisions and departments at Saint Ann’s School that we intend to continue at least through Friday, March 27. After consulting with the Board of Trustees last night, assessing the readiness of our school to provide various forms of synchronous and asynchronous learning, and carefully weighing my responsibility for the health and safety of the Saint Ann’s community and our school’s broader social obligation in the face of a confirmed global pandemic, I have decided that this is the best course of action.

As you may be aware, many educational institutions across both New York State and the country have decided to close either in response to specific concerns within their communities or in order to enact best public health practices to help curb the spread of the virus. At last count, almost 100 New York State independent schools in the city and beyond have announced closures of varying lengths, and many will be closed over the coming two weeks for their scheduled spring vacations. The CUNY and SUNY public university systems will move to remote classes beginning on March 19. In addition, the Mayor has been urging employers to allow employees to telecommute or to work flexible schedules so that they can avoid crowded subways and other places where the virus can be more easily transmitted. Just today, he declared a state of emergency for the City of New York. The Governor has banned gatherings over 500 and shuttered Broadway. The Archdiocese of New York has announced the closure of all of its elementary schools in the city. While to date the city has stated an intention not to close public schools, public health officials at every level have been urging institutions to consider ways in which they can help to slow the transmission of the virus and thus prevent our health system and healthcare workers from being overwhelmed.

I want to underscore that at this time there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 among teachers, staff, or students at Saint Ann’s. The first employee I mentioned in my March 10 email has since tested negative for COVID-19. Therefore there is no risk that that employee could have transmitted it to anyone else at the school.
Over the past two days, our teachers and staff have gathered to engage in professional development in preparation for this new reality. A sense of shared purpose and determination has characterized this time, as faculty and staff came together to learn new tools, prepare class materials, run trial online classrooms, and collaborate and support one another.

With every fiber of our being we want to be here with our students. That is what defines us as a school. We are doing our best to translate that longing into the energy required to embark on a learning experiment that we have never before attempted. That said, we know that remote learning cannot replicate the experience of being in a Saint Ann’s classroom, nor can we expect of either teachers or students that in these early days these new ways of interacting will feel natural. In all of our discussions with faculty our goal has been clarity about our expectations while also emphasizing that there will be room for flexibility, adjustments, and the same creativity that have always defined a Saint Ann’s education.

Each division office and our technology team will be communicating clear information to parents and/or students shortly about how remote learning will work in each division and what our expectations of faculty, students and parents are in this new educational landscape. All in-person rehearsals and all performances scheduled for the next two weeks have been postponed. Similarly, athletic practices, games and meets have been suspended until further notice.

We know that serious challenges abound for working parents, for teachers, for students who want desperately to see everyday routines sustained. We have made every effort to identify students who needed to borrow devices or needed help getting access to the internet. We have taken steps to address the concerns of our hourly employees who might otherwise have faced a drop in income. We are planning to keep some or all of our buildings open (so long as doing so does not create a health risk) so that teachers and division offices can have access to supplies, classrooms, photocopiers etc., and so that middle and high school teachers can teach classes from school rather than home if they wish to. Access to the building by students or parents will be restricted and must be arranged in advance through division offices (for example, to retrieve musical instruments or other essential items). Administrative offices are each making plans to carry out essential tasks and to be accessible as we maximize flexibility around working remotely and as we prepare for the possibility of ever-stronger mandates curtailing travel. Our school psychologists and learning support specialists are coordinating carefully with teachers and division offices so that we can address students’ anxiety and need for continued support.
I know how much we all wish for certainty; the ability to plan for the future is critical. Our plan is to be teaching remotely for the next two weeks. I think it is highly likely that with continued adaptations and adjustments this will be our mode until our April break begins on April 6th. We will continue to assess how we can best carry out our mission as a school, and I will continue to keep everyone informed as the situation evolves.

I am grateful in this confusing and complicated moment to be a member of such an extraordinary community, and I am confident that we will do all we can to support one another in the weeks ahead.

Love,

Vince