



THE WHEELER SCHOOL

August, 2020

Dear Families,

I'll admit that I have delayed writing this letter because it has been hard to know exactly how to welcome everyone back to the 2020-2021 school year. I'll start, though, with a heartfelt welcome. As you know, we have worked hard to make it possible for an in-person return to school in a few short weeks, and I am truly delighted at the prospect of seeing students and faculty again in September.

A couple of years ago, I welcomed the Upper School students to school by sharing a bit about the education I received growing up in Lexington, Virginia in the late 1970's and early 1980's. It was an education that included "facts" that were wrong. It was an education that made it possible for me to unwittingly perpetuate a version of history that simply wasn't accurate. It was an education that exposed me to lots of memorization and not much application. Odd bits of things I learned in the classroom have stuck with me over time, but much of the reason for learning them is lost. I remember drawing vectors in my physics class, but I don't remember why. Years later, I have learned more about vectors and why they matter by playing competitive games of mini golf with my nieces and nephews.

As I anticipate the beginning of this school year, I find myself once again reflecting on my own education and on some of the promises I made and hopes I expressed to the Upper School students during those opening remarks. I promised we would help them develop their skills as critical thinkers, that we would provide the tools they will need to support belief with facts. I shared the hope that they would learn to ask and answer probing questions, that they would have the opportunity to engage in challenging and respectful conversations with classmates and teachers. It was (and is) my hope that as a community we would be kind and appreciate and learn from each other. In those remarks, I promised the kids that we would be vigilant about intolerance, celebrate compassion, embrace moments of joy and laughter, and forgive each other for our mistakes.

All of these promises and hopes continue to hold true, and our determination to uphold them over the course of this school year will be important. For all of us, the experience of school last spring was different, and probably highly variable. I saw it in my own family. My highly organized and not wildly social 11-year old niece loved distance learning; my highly social and not wildly organized 16-year old nephew found it more challenging. At Wheeler, we worked hard to advance learning and maintain connection. We learned new things about teaching, about

ourselves, and about how central relationships are to the learning process. We learned other things too. We were reminded of how interconnected we are and the extent to which the choices we make as individuals have an influence on our entire community. This understanding will inform many of our practices when we return to school. We will all need to wear masks, we will all need to adhere to physical distancing guidelines, we will need to help out by cleaning our spaces, by resisting the temptation to share food and supplies. It may be challenging, but it is definitely doable.

Finally, I find myself wondering how we will reflect on all that we have learned and are continuing to learn a year from now. It's my hope we will tell the story of a period of time when we thought deeply in and out of the classroom, and that we will remember how kindly we treated each other, how we rallied as a community, how we showed empathy for ourselves and for each other. I hope we will look back on meaningful projects we completed, on questions we pursued. I hope we will tell a story of a time when we responded to long-existing inequities in our healthcare and educational systems. My hope is that we will look back on a time when we committed to learning why those inequities exist and on what we started to do about them. My hope is that we will look back on a year when we continued the fight toward racial justice.

I am so excited to welcome you all back to the 2020-2021 school year. I would like to offer a special welcome to the brand new members of our community. It's my hope that you will soon discover what a special place you have joined. More details about how we will return and more specifics about your child's daily experience will come at the end of next week.

As always, please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Neeltje Henneman
Head of the Upper School