

OUR (RE)FOUNDATIONAL MOMENT

DURING THE PAST TWO MONTHS I have had the pleasure to engage students, faculty, staff, parents, and alumni in a series of conversations about who we are as an institution. We have talked at length about our collective achievements and aspirations, and how I can best assist the school in reaching our shared goals. I admire the energetic participation that characterized the meetings and thank the hundreds of individuals who took the time to contribute to our dialogue. I have learned a lot. No doubt whatsoever, ours is a passionate, thoughtful, and generous community. We are diverse and forward-thinking, always committed to doing what is best for our children, the school, and the world around us.

DON ROCKHEAD



I have received bountiful advice during our conversations. (Our community is not shy.) Middle schoolers told me that the key to my success as head of school is less homework, more ice cream (no promises were made). Seniors expressed a desire to get to know the head

of school during their final year at ECF (to which I replied, “be careful what you wish for,” but I intend to make their wish come true). I have heard loud and clear from families and faculty that we must recommit to making our ideals real and rethink what excellence in progressive education means in the 21st century.

In all my encounters, I have been touched by the depth of love for ECF. I have listened to stories of success about many facets of the school: from curricula well-grounded in our history to innovative versions of progressive pedagogy in action; from a democratic culture of philanthropy to smart integration of technology in teacher-driven learning; from athletic programs that foster teamwork to increasing commitment to environmental sustainability; from our longstanding commitment to the arts to fresher ways to teach math in the lower school. Indeed, we have much to be proud of, and yet there is much to envision and recalibrate. I have paid attention to the concerns raised and, regardless of how sensitive some might be, we must address them together.

I have heard loud and clear the expectation that we embrace excellence in and outside the classroom – to challenge as well as support all our children to do well and be good. But, how do we define and put into practice what excellence means for us? While I have found a steadfast commitment to our school and its mission, I also have heard competing versions of what our future should look like, and some harbor lingering questions as to how we live

our values in small ways as well as large ones. To do so, many expressed the hope that we secure steady leadership who will help steer the institution in the right direction.

Today we find ourselves at a juncture, well poised for institutional renewal. We are in the midst of a self-study and in the earliest stages of developing a strategic plan. We have welcomed a new principal at Fieldston Middle this fall. Searches for two principals (at Ethical Culture and Fieldston Upper) are underway, and I am beginning what I hope will be a long and productive tenure as head of school. These factors in tandem lead me to conclude that ECF is at a (re)foundational moment.

Students, faculty, staff, alumni, and parents all express the desire for the school to recommit to its core ideals, to embrace, deepen, articulate, and communicate its progressive mission of ethical learning, experiential education, inclusion, and public purpose to educate the moral leaders of tomorrow. (Re)foundation entails revisiting our past, reviewing what we do best, deciding what we must improve and prioritize, understanding what is relevant, making choices (sometimes tough ones), and explaining our vision to ourselves as well as to the outside world. An institutional soul-searching process is called for, and the time is right. After years of leadership transition, as the new head of school, I am committed to facilitating this process as we embark on our strategic planning process.

At this moment of (re)foundation, key questions must be posed and answered: What is excellence in progressive education in the 21st century? How do we keep our best practices attuned and relevant to the changes in the world? In specific, what skills, resources, and knowledge do our students need? How do we enable students to become deliberate, ethical leaders? What do we expect the adult members of our community to model? How do we attract and retain the best progressive educators and administrators? How do we foster continuing professional development for all, including me? How will we define our collective meaning, identity, and success? These questions must be grounded in our historical mission and answered as a community; every other issue we will encounter should be filtered by the conclusions we reach.

The overarching opportunity for us at this (re)foundational moment is to express with clarity and conviction our sense of purpose about what kind of school we want to be in the years to come and how we intend to make it real. I welcome and appreciate your support in this process of (re)foundation.

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