



HEAD LINES

A Monthly Message from Chip Denton, Head of School



November 2019

Though it is not a state-sponsored school, Trinity School of Durham and Chapel Hill will seek to be a “public” school in the best sense of that word, by becoming a school for the community of which it is a part.

Trinity School’s bylaws, established in 1995

Dear Trinity Community,

This year, as we celebrate 25 years of God’s faithfulness to our school, many of our leaders have gone back to our founding documents, like our bylaws, to remember the original impulses that set this school in motion. **One of these impulses, articulated in the sentence above, is that Trinity would be a school in, with, and for the community of Durham and Chapel Hill.**

I am thankful that the school codified this goal back in 1995. It was a different time then, and few people were asking about the public purpose of a private school. I remember early in our life as a school our deciding to distance ourselves from a certain organization that insisted on calling public schools “government schools”—a derogatory term that I found problematic. I have always felt, and I still do, that any school worth its mission salt should be able to say why its local community is a better place for *everyone* because of its presence. If next Monday morning we drove up to 4011 Pickett Road and Trinity School were gone, who would care? If the answer to that question is confined to the people reading this issue of *Headlines*, then we have not succeeded in establishing our public purpose. **What good is Trinity School to our larger community?**

The publicness of any education is a growing concern among many parents today. The most recent issue of *Durham* magazine has the expected fall section on education, but what might be surprising to some of us is the weight that the issue gives to our local public options. The 21 parents interviewed and cited in the article (“School of Thought”) represent 11 traditional public schools, 3 charters, 2 magnets, 1 micro-school, 1 homeschool, 2 Catholic schools, and 1 independent school. The distribution captures fairly well the percentage of students in our area educated by these various models, but it represents a shift in the conversation. Five years ago, certainly ten years ago, a magazine like this would have featured interviews with parents across most of the independent school options in the area. **Today, the conversation is led by parents who are strong public school proponents and who raise important questions about the civic obligations we all have to educate all children to become leaders and citizens of the world.**

If you want to engage with the strongest case that I know of for putting your children in the local public school, listen to Nikole Hannah-Jones’s 2016 interview with Terry Gross on “Fresh Air,” or read her lengthy piece in the *New York Times*. Her argument that “true integration, true equality, requires a surrendering of advantage” has a double appeal to millennial Christian parents: it resonates with that generation’s altruistic passion for social justice, and it has the self-sacrificing shape of the cross about it.

Please turn over...

So what do we say today to these millennial parents about the public purpose of Trinity School? Why might a decision to enroll our children at Trinity be as strong a move for the common good as the decision to attend the zoned public school?

Our public life needs the kind of robust, thick communities that schools like Trinity embody, for it is in such communities that the virtues our public life requires are best cultivated.

No culture can long thrive without virtue, and virtue (good moral habits) needs communities with particular narratives in order to be formed and nurtured. One of the ironies of a liberal democracy such as ours is that (because of the antiestablishment clause of the constitution) it cannot itself create or promote *directly* the very virtues it requires, or the communities that sustain such virtues. This is patently obvious if you believe, as we do, that all virtue has God as its source. But it is true also for anyone who believes that virtue needs any sort of grounding in objective truth—the way things really are, deep down at the core. Increasingly, our public discourse frames questions in such a way that matters like virtue and ethics are merely private and personal. ***But what if virtue, like science and math, is about something real?***

Schools can be powerful communities—in fact, they may be some of the most powerful communities that we still have in our culture, especially with the decline of the institutional church. But most schools in our liberal democracy are not able to be the thickly textured communities in which a shared vision of the Good inspires and nurtures habits. Such habits come from common stories, but increasingly in our culture we struggle to find a narrative that can unite us. **At Trinity, we have One Story that guides us and shapes us: the story of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus calls us to lives of wisdom, self-control, justice, courage, faith, hope, and love. These are habits which serve a democracy well; in fact, one could argue that without the first four (the cardinal virtues), no society can long survive.** Those on both sides of the political spectrum who raise concerns about the current political climate are asking a common question: How long can our democracy survive if our body politic does not practice, model, and inspire these virtues?

Trinity is a small school. We'd like to grow a little, but we never intend to be large. The public purpose of Trinity cannot be measured by counting the heads of our graduates. **But we can weigh the inordinate impact of a Trinity education by watching our graduates as they engage with the culture: working for social justice, practicing the civic virtues in volunteer associations, serving in nonprofits whose mission seeks justice for all, teaching in charter schools zoned for low SES Zip Codes, resettling refugees, working for clean water across the globe, promoting adoption, and pursuing medical careers among underserved populations.** Thus we will seek to be a school with and for our community and the world at large, all for the glory of God.

Non Nobis,



Chip Denton
Head of School

TRINITY SCHOOL OF DURHAM AND CHAPEL HILL

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