

George Stevens Academy
Blue Hill, Maine
September 22, 2011

Open Board Meeting Presentation

Paul B. Perkinson
Head of School

Good evening. My name is Paul Perkinson and I have the honor to serve as Headmaster George Stevens School. I would like to accomplish three things this evening. First, I would like to share with you the presentation I gave to students on Monday at our Convocation as I have been advised that many present were not on campus on Monday. Second, I would like to reflect on our self-study and accreditation process of last year that resulted in our reaccreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. And third, I would like to listen to parents think out loud in briefly answering the questions GSA students discussed on Monday. I will warn you that when I use the word 'You'...I am addressing your children, our students.

It was an honor to be offered the headship at George Stevens Academy last December. As Marion Morris would attest, I was not remotely coy or shy about my willingness to accept the post. I think Marion may have been surprised by my listing of initiatives and possibilities that George Stevens might consider in the same conversation wherein she offered the job. My excitement has not diminished since that cool December evening in Charlottesville, Virginia till this fine, beautiful day in Maine.

I am deeply grateful to the Board of Trustees for their faith in me. George Stevens Academy is beloved by many and not least by the trustees. Their work, the vast majority of which is slow, arduous, undramatic, and unheralded, is key to the continued success of our school. Earlier Rob outlined the many successes the board had this last year. Through vision and diligence, they made for a productive year last year. Indeed, they have a burdensome charge. They are the legal guardians of the school. They are duty bound to protect its financial health. And they have the responsibility to hire just one single employee: that would be me.

My job, delegated to me by the Board as head of school, is to serve as the educational leader of the school as well as manage the day-to-day, week-to-week, and year-to-year affairs of the school. The most important task of the headmaster is to hire, evaluate, support, and develop the very best teaching faculty and staff that the English-speaking world might offer.

The heart of the school, the element of a school that differentiates the good schools from the great schools is its faculty and staff. That this statement might seem trite to some does not make it any less truthful.

The individual and collective charge of each faculty member is to further each student for whom they are responsible. They are to teach in such a way that each student gains, retains, develops, and refines his or her passionate curiosity, disciplined intellect, internal moral bearings, efficient organization, powerful creativity, and steady, resilient confidence. That task is tremendous both in terms of complexity and importance. Great teaching may be one of the most complex activities of human endeavors, on a par with but not quite equal to great parenting. Researchers continue to debate, as they have for thousands of years, the question “How does learning occur? and how do teachers facilitate student learning?” Great teaching is crucial because it is in this richly complex dynamic between teacher and student that the very best wisdoms, teachings, sympathies, inventions, experiences, and aspirations of human civilization are passed on to our students. As grandiose as that might sound, it is nonetheless true.

I am about to say something really important and I wanted to warn you so you do not miss it.

You, the students gathered today and those that will join us next year and for many years to come are the only reason why we are here. Indeed, you are the only reason why we gather every day...why faculty and trustees have late, long meetings...why teachers grade a stack of papers on Sunday, why grounds crew members paint the Academy building, why groundskeepers mow the grass, why dorm staff members drive buses to Boston, why coaches coach a baseball game, why a director directs a jazz concert, why a teacher prepares lessons and lectures and labs, why a development office team member raise money, why a chef cooks lunch, and a staff member rings bells.

Students, you have a job...just like the trustees do, just like the headmaster does, and just like the faculty and staff have their responsibilities. Your job is to commit to your education and take responsibility for that education. Your job is to take an ever-increasing role in designing your future...in creating your life. Your job is to explore and discover. Your job is to learn and create. Your job is to work and to play. Your job is to become both an effective follower and a fine leader.

I want you to continue to be tremendously ambitious about whatever and wherever you want to lead...we want you each to become leaders in ways that might scare some but will inspire most. We want you to become leaders because, in doing so, you become more intentional, less passive, more creative, more productive, and, in the end, more generous.

This brief sketch of how schools work and what are the responsibilities of its important constituents is important to me. In doing this explanatory exercise, you gain insight as to how I think and how I will serve the school as head. More importantly, you will know that I believe that schooling is about people and not about buildings or the ratio of computers to students or the numbers of databases subscribed to the library, or acres of campus or numbers of smart boards. The people of the school and their commitment to student success are the heart, the oxygen of a school.

The best schools are profoundly and humanely interdependent. That is, the various constituents within the school, the trustees, the headmaster, the teachers, the students, the

parents, and the alumni all know they need each other...that they benefit from each other...and they know that their school thrives most when they commit to each other in demonstrable, deep, and uncommon ways.

Today is about that kind of deep commitment. In our in-service in August, the staff and faculty reviewed and discussed our “Manifesto For Student Success.” In doing so, we recommitted to its affirmative sentiments for all GSA students to succeed. We then signed it and had it framed. Here it is. The manifesto will hang prominently in the front office with Mrs. Davis as a yearly testament to the ways and means we are committed to ensuring the success of each and every one of you.

Another way to commit to each other is to do what all community schools do. They talk with each about shared experiences and shared values. We consider the current needs of our students and faculty and staff and parents. We talk about what will be needed in the future to meet the changing conditions of our area, our state, our nation and our world...and not always in that order. We should ask ourselves what will our students need in their working lives where technology demands are accelerating, where teaching environmental and financial sustainability is crucial, where become a citizen of the world is unquestionably important, where learning to think critically and creatively and imaginatively is more important than it ever was, where learning to hear thru the noise and chatter and data dumps and advertisements...learn to hear what is essential to human beings and to being human.

Today is about that conversation...one that has already started and one that will continue for quite a while I hope.

I encourage all members of George Stevens Academy to participate a conversation of the future of education on this peninsula. While we are part of a group of New England town academies, and while we are part of a large state of Maine school system, and while we are part of an even larger national group of independent schools, we will continue to operate independent of all of those groups.

That is of course our strength. Let us use it. This community is filled to the brim with bright, engaging, ambitious, thoughtful people who care greatly for our school. Let us take time away from the normal academic school day and consider, dream, chart, plan, suggest, brainstorm, and share ideas, reflections, and hopes for our school.

To this end, in a minute we will dismiss and go to advisories to consider three questions. The questions are guidelines for further inquiry. They are open ended but do not feel a prisoner of them. If your group has a better question or line of discussion, go for it. The questions are handily printed on the program. They are...

1. For the purposes of serving the students we have today, what are the best elements and opportunities of a GSA education?
2. What programs (and supporting facilities) will be most worth having in order to become a highly successful 21st century school?
3. Assuming we cannot do everything at once, what one or two innovations to program and

facilities would you most strongly recommend?

George Stevens Academy is a member in good standing of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges because every ten years we commit to a self-study process that involves close to a year of internal investigation and inquiry that culminates in a five day visit of educators from other schools in New England. The entire process is about two related and important tasks ...One—serving the needs of our students and Two—improving our school. The next visit of an accreditation team will bring Spring of 2021. In the meantime, I will be required to submit a report in two years outlining interim changes, developments, and plans.

We have begun the work that will result in that Two Year report.

There were 72 recommendations that were returned to us with the re-accreditation. These recommendations are actions, programs, policies they suggest we explore. Of those 72 recommendations, 70 of them were in the school's self study and the visiting committee simply affirmed our self-critique. This is important to keep in mind largely because the VAST majority of the work involved in the reaccreditation process is done internally in the self-study. We have Marie Epply, Liffey Thorpe and committee chairs to thank for their good work.

The visiting committee grouped those recommendations into six broad categories. Those groups were roughly recommendations for a review process.

(1) School Mission (2) Strategic Planning (3) Public Relations, Imagining, and School Aesthetics (4) Accountability and Responsibilities of Administrators (5) Financial Sustainability (6) Safety Protocols

While we have already begun to address a number of these issues over the summer and in the first three weeks of school, I guarantee you that in the coming months we address all of them in such a way so as to ensure improvement in the learning experience of all of our students.

It is interesting to note that each of these major recommendations are related if not inextricably connected to each other. That is, there is a direct connection between responsible administrators (major rec 4 and strategic planning rec 2) as there is the same connection between Strategic Planning and Financial Sustainability.

Allow me to briefly state and consider each of the major recommendations.

To be a mission driven school is a sure way to direct our future rather than to be directed by outside forces. Our mission should lie at the center of everything we do. It is a litmus test for programs, personal, and policies. I am not a big fan of constantly tweaking mission statements. In my previous school, I co-chaired a committee that reaffirmed our mission and in doing so took a mission statement with 193 words and shortened it to 23 words. In doing so, we make the mission more accessible, more definite, more determined, and more useful. I do not foresee a significant or even moderate change to our mission but it is worth

the discussion that they suggest.

I completely agree. We need to begin a planning process that is profoundly inclusive and involves every constituent group of our community. The adage “Failure to plan is planning to fail” is harsh, brutal and true. I look forward to working with the board’s Strategic Planning Steering Committee. This is a very strong committee. I always want to caution everyone that we are doing Strategic Planning and not devising a Strategic Plan. One is the ongoing cycle of plan, action, assessment, plan... and the other is a static document that is in danger of collecting dust on a shelf or becoming irrelevant with the unexpected changes that we cannot foresee.

We have significant deferred maintenance issues. We have put off for years work that should have been done years ago. Remember that the state funds that we receive for each student as a Town Academy are not to be used for plant management. That puts us at a deficit vis a vis other public schools who are given additional funds we are not allowed. I am not complaining it is just a fact. In spite of that, our trustees and our crew members have worked steadfastly to do what MUST be done and thus not being about to get to what could be done.

Accountability at every level in a school is key. Accountability amongst students, amongst kitchen staff, amongst teachers, dorm staff is important. But it is key that administrators know what their jobs are, are regularly given feedback and evaluations, and held accountability the same way a 9th grader in David Stearns class would be. Through no one’s fault, we need to define and publish administrative roles. This is especially the case because we eliminated one role and created a different one...namely Director of Admissions. This work is fully underway.

Our school is challenged financially. Because of two major unforeseen plant expenditures (a boiler and an oven and the fact we did not hit our International Student goal, we are currently working at a deficit.) Thus, our development office works tirelessly to close the gap between our tuition income and the actual cost of doing school. It is important to remember that the school subsidizes every student and that subsidy is created by the good works of our development office. We need to do what our nation needs to do...even more tightly manage our resources, increase revenue streams that right now we do not have, AND invest in what we do really well...those things that separate us from other schools...those things that will draw students to our school who might otherwise go elsewhere.

School safety has always been important but the events of Columbine reminded us in a tragic way that we must have strong protocols and procedures for events we hope and wish we will never have to use. We began the school in-service practicing one such drill and we have assessed the results and we do it again.

I encourage everyone here to talk about these issues and share experiences and thoughts. We are a smart community and we can solve our problems with a lot of hard work, keen insight, profound generosity, and a boatload of goodness.

###