



State of the School

Thursday, January 24, 2019
Head of School, Bart Baldwin

I am going to begin my part of the presentation with a gift to you. I am going to leave my notes — well, almost all of my notes — behind. You see, I began writing this presentation over the three-day weekend, and by Tuesday, I had five single-spaced typed pages, plus two pages of supporting documents, and I was only two-thirds of the way done! Writing those notes was not fun for me, and listening to them was not going to be fun for you!

So I took a break and started reading some poems by Mary Oliver, the amazing American poet who died over the weekend. I came upon this one in particular, from a collection called “Don’t Hesitate”:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don’t hesitate.
Give into it.
There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be.
We are not wise, and not very often kind.
And much can never be redeemed.
Still, life has some possibility left.
Perhaps this is its way of fighting back,
that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world.
It could be anything,
but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins.
Anyway, that’s often the case.
Anyway, whatever it is, don’t be afraid of its plenty.
Joy is not made to be a crumb.

The problem with my writing, other than the fact that it was long, and tedious, and perhaps a bit pretentious, was that I had turned the joy of St. Luke’s into crumbs — broken the magic or our whole school into itty bitty parts — and was writing about each part but not the whole confection. And that’s not how we live and learn St. Luke’s, and that’s not how I want to talk about it. So I am walking away from the podium and leaving my script behind — well, most of it — and will speak from the heart.

You’re welcome.

I think there are three stances that launch a successful life:

CURIOSITY – which is the engine of achievement and the core of how we learn at St. Luke’s.

COMMUNITY – which connects us to a greater good, a greater purpose, and a greater understanding of our place in the world, and is the core of how we live at St. Luke’s.

CREATIVITY – which is the genesis of resilience since it allows you to imagine obstacles as opportunities and design solutions when faced with problems.

And all of this, by the way, becomes LEADERSHIP, for where is leadership found if not at the intersection of curiosity, community, and creativity.

And at St. Luke's School, these three characteristics are intertwined, much like the genetic material in a DNA molecule. They interact and intersect and twist and turn and become the very genetic material that fosters our growth.

So that led to one guiding question for us: How can we better live, learn, and lead with curiosity, community, and creativity?

These are a few of the ways we have been answering that question.

Will a greater emphasis on mathematical reasoning and design thinking lead to a stronger connection between the tasks our students master and their understanding of the world?

We have established the position of Dean of Curricular and Instructional Innovation to support engaged learning. So far this year, Nora Krulwich, our Dean, has been in every classroom to both observe and coach teachers as they transform mastering mathematical concepts, which is something we have always done, to better fostering mathematical thinking. This means that we have expanded our conversations around economics in our primary grades. We have applied the principles of scientific inquiry (ask a question, research, develop a hypothesis, test, analyze results) to problem solving.

Lauren Thomas and Rachel Zelechow have developed a STEM curriculum for Grade 6 that culminates the work we have done in all grades around design thinking and having students connect science, technology, engineering, and math. Daniel Deepak has formalized and implemented a rigorous coding curriculum. "It's really hard," a student shared with Lauren Mazzari at the end of the first session. "I want to sign up for it again!"

In Grade 7, students learned that Manhattan tilts from east to west, meaning that when it rains, the run-off gains speed as it reaches the Hudson. They studied our school grounds, also by a Hudson, and discovered that our school also tilts from east to west, so that when it rains, all the mulch runs off to the sidewalk.

But the innovation is not just limited to math and science. Caroline Muro and Alicia Howard have been having conversations about the connections between their literature and social studies courses for years. They began as professional collaboration among gifted teachers. Over the past several years, this has developed form and structure as it evolved into a humanities curriculum in which reading and writing personal narratives are intrinsic to understanding our human story. These connections are more easily made in elementary classrooms where classroom teachers inspire their students' growth in all subjects.

This year, our middle school schedule has humanities periods in which both the language arts and history teachers are available to work with one class of students to foster a sense of exploration, to support students in their questioning, and to be certain that history is seen as an understanding of human strengths and foibles, and not just a memorization of our dates.

The gift of education at St. Luke's School is that it has required us to define an accelerated curriculum through the lens of all the schools we feed. So, our curriculum is designed to prepare students to master the Regents test required in our best public schools, to write and argue papers and opinions based on their own premises and research so they can thrive in our most

competitive progressive high schools, and to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate data so they can compete in more traditional college preparatory programs.

That is why we start mathematical thinking in Junior Kindergarten, have Grade 2 students apply economic thinking when they solve a scientific problem about keeping birds from flying into reflective glass, ask Grade 6 students to understand the impact of geography and climate on history when they investigate new cultures, and require Grade 8 students to deeply research and wrestle with real social, justice, and equity issues in our city and country before they leave our grounds.

It is also why we are deeply looking at and launching a redesigned teaching and learning resource program. It is a given that children are different. I mean, most everyone in this room has at least one child. Some have more than one child. Chances are that on a good day when you are not stressed and distracted by the challenges of life, you have no difficulty telling your children apart.

If we understand that children live differently, can we better honor the fact that they also learn differently and rethink how we deliver learning support services?

If we recognize that children live differently, then we have to recognize that they learn differently. Now let me be clear. We are not a school for children with specific, more significant, and specialized learning needs. We don't have the curriculum, staff, or expertise to serve those children. That being said, we recognized, and our parents and teachers told us, that we could do a better child individualizing instruction to match some of our more divergent learners. So what have we done?

We have established a common teaching period across each grade in Kindergarten to Grade 4 that allows us to deploy all classroom and learning resource teachers to the children in a grade according to their learning needs. We moved from a "pull-out" model for learning specialists, where all instruction took place out of the classroom and in the learning resource rooms, to a mixed model where some instruction takes place in specialized spaces, some in the classroom with direct instruction, and some in the classroom with coaching. Students have the opportunity to learn in small group for mentoring and paired learning for coaching, rather than being pulled aside and isolated in learning. In short, we now use our teaching and learning resource teachers as mentors, stimulators, provokers, and engagers.

Finally, we just launched the search for a Director of Learning Resources to join us next year as the coordinator and point person for our learning program at St. Luke's School. We will maintain our commitment to having the primary relationship be between parent and teacher, and to having division directors build deep bonds with parents, but we will also have a point person assigned to oversee the assessment, instruction, and communication of learning differences at St. Luke's School. We have also accelerated our strategic staffing plan and will increase the hours of our learning specialists so that next year, including the new director, we will have three learning specialists at school and in the classrooms five days a week. This will dramatically improve our ability to support and communicate about learning differences at St. Luke's School.

All of the changes mentioned above support our goal to design an educational program that best supports learning and engagement in the near term to achieve our ultimate goal of working with parents to give students the skills, attitudes, and behaviors to support lifelong learning and meaningful achievement.

And I want to talk about one more question we have been trying to answer: How can we better grow leaders? Upon graduation, every child will see themselves as leaders and will know when it is important and effective to lead by standing in front, necessary to lead by standing beside, and best to lead by standing behind in support. Every child will have the skills, attitudes, and behaviors to effect change and advocate for themselves.

To achieve this, we have appointed a Dean of Student Leadership. Alicia Howard has looked at the best leadership programs in JK – Grade 8 schools as well as attended workshops and gotten up to date on current research and practices. In each case, the most effective programs are tied to service and real issues facing the world. Lisa Miller reinforced this in her talk when she noted that students who felt connected to faith or service organizations were statistically less likely to make risky and unhealthy decisions when it comes to behavior, sex, and alcohol and drugs.

So, Alicia has met and worked with each teacher in the school to identify programs they have in their classrooms that connect children to the greater world. Kindergarten will be organizing a school-wide food drive, Grade 1 will advocate on behalf of animals as an extension of their curriculum, Grade 6 is learning about the role of advocacy as a catalyst for social change and identifying ways they can become advocates in support of issues that matter to them.

In each of these examples, teachers are working with children to apply knowledge they learn to issues they face. We intentionally ask children to apply what they have learned and defend their position. When Grade 2 completed their unit on birds with a brief study on why birds fly into windows, they researched what architects and engineers were doing to mitigate that problem. They identified the pros and cons of each solution they studied and came up with an estimated cost. They presented each idea to me and worked together to identify three for us to beta test in the school. They then created a small business to raise the money to fund the beta tests, which will happen this spring. We will pilot a solution or two in their third grade classrooms next year so that we can reinforce their learning and support their understanding of themselves as change agents who can effect positive change in their communities.

Lorna Woodham, our Director of Diversity and Church-School initiatives is working with our teachers and parents to implement a curriculum in which students can both celebrate their unique identities and learn how to build upon their pride and understanding of themselves to create alliances with others. When Grade 3 studied Natives Americans and when they will study immigrations, when Grade 6 studied cultural shifts including civil actions, when Grades 7 and 8 have had discussions about issues of equity and justice facing our world today, their teachers intentionally examine the roles of leadership of people directly impacted by injustice and the partnership they create with leaders who share their concerns and support their principles.

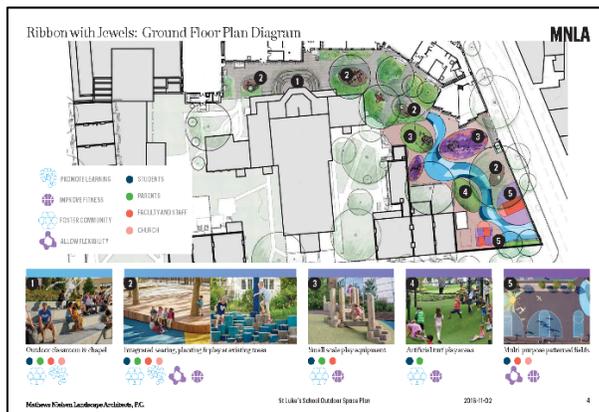
In a world that reinforces silos of information and celebrates those who see different ideas as threats to be conquered rather than opportunities to understand, we must be intentional in showing our children that the only successful innovation in history has occurred when people have worked collaboratively to understand and move forward together. Beyond that, we must give them the opportunity to do that themselves. This has been the work of our social-emotional curriculum, which is intimately tied to our academic curriculum and culminates with a Grade 8 citizenship project in which students identify an issue the world faces and work with each other but more importantly mentors in the community to learn and research, assess and evaluate, and ultimately present a way to have an immediate impact on the issue.

There is so much more we could share about the magic of the classrooms. I mean, this is the joy of St. Luke's School, and it is not made to be a crumb. Rather, each innovation, each new idea, each existing program is designed to or evaluated by how well it inspires curiosity, builds community, and fosters creativity, and that includes our grounds, our playgrounds, our shared grounds with the church, and grounds that might be developed on our rooftop.

Let's talk about what we envision.



Have you ever noticed that the shape our school building is like open arms? Every day when I enter the grounds, I imagine that I am walking into an embrace. That will not change. We want to increase opportunities for seating, but also maximize interactions with nature...



So our first task was to think about the school area in its entirety. Now when you enter the playground, you and your children have to walk through kickballs and basketballs and racing children to get to the play structure. It's as though you are living a video game. We want to create an intentional path that moves from our most active play, to structured play, to community space.. We will have intentional play areas with structures for ages 2-5 and 5-12, but we will still have the active ball play for basketball and kickball closer to Hudson Street. Of course, we will also rethink the height of the fence, and our neighbors will thank us.



While we haven't chosen the equipment, our children, faculty, and parents told us a few things to look for. Small pieces to avoid the sense of a raceway. Pieces that spoke to all ages. Areas where little ones can hide behind or under. Pieces that address the need to be able to put your hands in the dirt and create faerie lands of the imagination.



We want to maximize the shared space between the church and school to build community through casual gathering, formal presentation, and constant wondering... This amphitheater could seat 90 students or up to 45 adults, and ideas are swirling around like having the children design and build an outdoor altar that makes the space truly theirs.



And then we get up to the roof. Walk into an open area for congregating and perhaps a play/climbing/socializing structure of our older children. Lots for gardens and gardening, including cold frames, for wandering and wondering, for watching and learning, and maybe even space for a turtle or two.



Enter a playfield, while not regulation size, it will be as big as our current gym and will give us the biggest rooftop playfield of any downtown school. Our athletics team envisions using this space for lacrosse drills or soccer practice, allowing us to grow our sports program. The benches to the right are not only a great place for our students to congregate, but they will magically cover the HVAC ducts that feed air conditioning into our gym.

Please note that we are still in the process of approvals from the FDNY to be grandfathered out of some of their newer regulations, and while we are approved for a play cage around a part of the roof, we are “swinging for the fences” to extend the space from one side of the roof to the other, requiring Landmarks approval on the staff level. We are confident that our requests are reasonable, and that this completed project is well within our reach.



On our way from one side of the rooftop to the other, there is an extraordinary view of Christopher Street on which we will have a viewing station for our students. What a better way to open up conversations in the classroom about movement of water, dependence of economy on shipping, or just to pause for a moment to observe the activity on the Hudson.



One of the requests from our Upper School students is that they want a place to spend time with their friends. A destination space for all children, but a special space for our middle school students to hang out. We heard them, and we have thought, why not let them choose the equipment? We look forward to involving them in our final selections.



So how do we get there? Altogether, this is a \$5,000,000 project. To achieve this, we need to raise \$2.5 million this year and \$2.5 million dollars next year. If we are able to meet those audacious goals, we will be able to walk onto our newly redesigned playground this fall, September 2019.

If we are able to meet those audacious goals, we can walk into our community shared space next fall, September 2020.

And if we are able to meet those audacious goals, we will walk onto our rooftop garden and playfield the following fall, September 2021.

I am beyond thrilled to announce that because of the generosity of a few lead donors, we have raised over \$1,000,000 and are able to launch the playground project. In order to keep on track for the rest of the project, we need to raise the remaining amount by the end of this school year.

Many thanks to Michael Rourke’s team, Hudson Media, for producing this video to give us some more perspective on the project.

We invite everyone in our community to join in on the conversation on how we might get this project done. I now welcome Holly Fogle, Chair Elect of the Board starting on July 1, to talk about next steps in the fundraising process. We thank you in advance for being a part of the joy that we experience in our community together.