Wednesday, May 13, 2020

Dear Athenian Parents:

I am writing to update you on our focus and planning efforts for next fall at Athenian. I want you to understand that our hope and expectation is to have Athenian up and running with face-to-face education in August at the start of school. Our plan is to have kids here with us on campus as close to full time as we can safely permit. We know we will need to adjust programs, alter our schedule, and eliminate or postpone gatherings that are important to us. School will not look the same next fall, but I hope a safe Athenian School, with increased medical and hygiene support, can be in operation.

Please click here to view my video message:

Our planning for next fall began in earnest three weeks ago with the creation of the Safe Athenian School Task Force. As a group we understand that until a COVID-19 vaccine is available and widely used or until an effective prophylactic
treatment is discovered, physical distancing, viral testing, isolation, quarantine, and contact tracing are our best strategies to maintain safety.

Our Task Force, which is composed of a dozen administrators, is in consultation with four medical doctors, local officials, and other independent schools. The group has been hard at work thinking through the myriad decisions we will need to consider regarding next fall. The medical professionals, who are also Athenian parents, are deeply connected to the research world and medical communities, and have been invaluable in helping us frame the issues and our response.

Athenian has some great advantages as we think through our options. We are a small school with very small average class sizes (approximately 15) to begin with. We also have large classrooms, 75 acres of property, countless outdoor teaching spaces, and the promise of warm and dry weather in the fall. We will use those factors to our greatest advantage. We will spend additional resources on teachers, facilities, and hygiene measures to bring our kids safely back to school.

In addition to leveraging these institutional and physical advantages, we will lean heavily on our strong school and parent partnership in the fall. We will need a clear “social contract” with all Athenian families. You will be asked to take your child(ren)’s daily temperature, keep them home if they are sick, and maintain social distancing guidelines at home. All together, these will allow us to be safer than many other school environments.

As of this week, here are some of many things we are doing or thinking about:

- We have mapped our classrooms and toured the campus to look at outdoor and other classroom options. We are exploring the rental of additional modular classroom space.
We are researching our options around COVID-19 testing and contact tracing.

We are researching how many students we can safely have in each classroom and dorm room, on a bus, in a car, in the Main Hall, and in every other space. We are asking how the wearing of masks might change those distancing calculations for the better.

We are discussing whether placing students in cohorts, with teachers moving between classes of the same student cohort, is practical (possibly more so in the Middle School).

We are researching how best to feed students, and how to safely involve them in athletic and artistic endeavors.

We have placed orders for masks, hand sanitizers, and various hygiene stations around campus.

We are imagining that some teachers and students will not be able to come to campus even if we are open, and how we will bring education in (from off-campus educators) or out (to students) to those individuals.

We are thinking how best to support the social and emotional health of our students. This quarantine has been difficult on them, as will be an altered school landscape next fall.

You are likely wondering when we will announce the exact plan for next fall. Not yet. We don’t yet have the official guidance we need, and it is difficult to predict in May what school will look like in August. The earlier we are asked to “put a stake in the ground,” the more conservative we will be forced to be. We don’t want to be conservative and we don’t want to just take the easiest path forward; we want to marshall our resources and our time to get our kids safely back here next fall.

Finally, I wanted to briefly discuss school finances. Athenian is currently in a good financial position with full enrollment. Doing what we believe is our ethical duty, we have kept all our people employed during these last few months. We
have reached out to parents to offer financial aid and other support as a “bridge” out of this crisis and to more normal times. Yet, like other schools, we also have our worries for the unpredictable days ahead. If we lose a significant number of families for financial or other reasons, our current outlook may change. We have a boarding program, which is very important to our mission and finances, that depends on safe and open travel next fall.

For now, we are staying the course and have not made significant budget cuts. In fact, we are prepared to make investments for next fall if it helps to ensure school in person and the safety of our students and employees. While we haven't made cuts to our programs or staffing, we are streamlining and preparing for continued tough economic times ahead. As you know, we gave our teachers a much-needed salary increase for next year and want to keep that promise. Given the work they have done this spring, and will need to do for next fall, that compensation appears only more fair. I promise, as has been our way, to transparently keep you updated in the days ahead.

None of us can predict what the future will hold. Accordingly, we are deliberately overpreparing so that we can then loosen if things are better than we imagine. Our promise to you is that we will approach each of those moments with a calm, optimistic spirit focused squarely on the needs of our students and our families.

With great respect and gratitude for our community,

Eric F. Niles
Head of School
The Athenian School