



Convocation

A celebration the 92nd school year opening

Friday, August 25, 2017

Keeler Theater with grades 5-12

This morning, by the authority granted to me by the Cincinnati Country Day School Board of Trustees, I would like to grant you permission. Permission to change.

Strange thing for me to grant to you, the students. After all, each day, you're growing and developing in many ways. The novels you're reading in fifth grade will take on complexity as you approach your senior year. The number of verbs you can conjugate will increase with daily practice, and the quantity of scientific and mathematical equations will mushroom. Your ability to sing, dance, perform, and create art will blossom, and your capabilities on the fields and courts will explode as you get bigger. When you leave CCDS, you will not be done. Our brains are not fully developed until about 25 years old.

So, if you're already in a dynamic state in middle and upper school, why the permission to change? This is permission to change your identity. When we're younger, our parents make decisions about how our identity is formed – How we dress, what TV we watch, what we eat, and even, at times, how to think about our world around us. It is in Middle School, however, when we begin to make decisions about what we believe in and what we stand for. And just as your brain still growing, so too is your identity. The journey of self-discovery is not always easy but it's your own and always should be.

A school like ours is a safe and secure environment with engaging adults who are introducing new and divergent ideas. A veritable hothouse of opportunity to define who you are. The challenge, of course, is that with a relatively small number of students in each grade, you're all in the same classes, teams, clubs, performances, and you spend a great deal of time together in these different settings. A lot of time.

In such a situation, it becomes easy for others to place an identity on you. She's the jock. He's the brain. She can't keep quiet. He can't carry a tune.

If you define yourself based on what others believe about you, however, you can stunt your own development. Yes, it's important to want to fit in and feel included, but if this comes at the cost of limiting your own growth by forgoing new and interesting opportunities and friendships, is it worth it?

I therefore grant you permission to change. To adopt what Carol Dweck defines as a "growth mindset" and to try new and perhaps "uncharacteristic" opportunities.

But if you're going to change this year, then we, the collective need to give you the space and encouragement to do so. Therefore, by the power vested in me by the Cincinnati Country Day School Board of Trustees, I hereby grant permission to our school to change as well.

Can a school have an identity? Absolutely. In fact, when I think about change to our school, I think about changes to its mind, body and soul – the three hallmarks of a classical "whole person" education.

Let's start with the mind – your learning experience. Last year, the teachers spent an entire year focusing on how you learn. We used our professional development program to think about ways to make learning "stick" for you. I shadowed an 11th grader in my first year as the head of school, and I vividly remember her describing one of her favorite classes because she said, "the learning 'hooked' me and I found it very interesting." Last year, we were in search of the elusive "hook" for each of you.

This year, your teachers will be trying to adapt what they learned by trying some new ways of teaching. These will unlikely by a huge overhaul of their courses, and the changes may even be experimental in nature. Something like teaching yourself or assessing your understanding in a method other than a test, quiz, or project. The goal is to improve your learning with a variety of approaches.

When the teachers do try something new, please dive in and give it a go. It may not feel like a usual learning activity and may even seem confusing. At the end though, it's an attempt to find your "hook."

Second, let's focus on the "body" of our school - our wonderful 62+ acre campus and the buildings on it. How lucky and blessed we are to have this campus and teams of individuals who care for it, clean it, and have it ready to go every morning. This year, I hope we will think about the campus and buildings as a key part of our school's identity and care for it with pride and gratitude.

This begins with a simple stewardship. Cleaning our spaces in the dining terrace, sports fields, parking lots, classrooms, and yes, lockers. More than that, it's greeting guests to campus with a

hello and good eye contact. It's an expression of what we believe in by the way we keep our home and welcome people to it.

And finally, we need to think about the soul of the school – the character of our community. We have a guide here at Country Day when we think about how to conduct ourselves – our character virtues of compassion, courage, respect, responsibility, and integrity. This has been a difficult month in our country as a debate has been raging between the protection of free speech and the promotion of hate speech. It's important that students, faculty, and staff can express themselves freely here. Our country and our school are made stronger by a variety of voices and multitude of viewpoints. There are areas, however, that the school cannot condone such as racism, hatred, and bigotry. These are words and actions that demean the dignity of each human being.

How do we balance open and civil discourse which respects differences but holds our core virtues to heart? A clear test is the golden rule: treat others as you would like to be treated by them. Moreover, I'm hopeful that a continued focus on the soul of our school will come full circle and embolden each of you to try those new endeavors this year.

And so, students, faculty, staff, and trustees, let us begin this year with the permission to change. Students, the permission to set your own identity. Country Day, the permission to grow the mind, body, and soul of our school into an inclusive, welcoming institution where every person is "known and nurtured."

Have a great year, let's build community, and make it a great day!