Dear Parents,

As our students prepare to depart for winter vacation, I find myself reflecting upon my experiences during my first term at St. Andrew’s, the totality of which leaves me grateful to those who brought my family here and confident that the future of our Saints community is filled with promise. The warm days of early August, which marked the dawn of a new school year, are still fresh in my mind and yet the weeks since have provided me with countless examples of how supportive parents, well intentioned students, and committed teachers and administrators each contribute to the life of the school in important ways. As the year continues an endless array of new experiences awaits. At the same time, I have been listening, observing, and learning for many months. I now want to share the first in a series of communications with my thoughts on the current year as well as plans for our future.

Some of what I have experienced to date is ingrained in our daily routines and yet for me the emotional impact of these events never wanes. The wide smiles or sleepy eyes that greet me during my frequent visits to morning carpool on the South Campus never cease to be an ideal start to the day. Attending weekly chapel services along with many of you serves as a constant reminder that our students’ growth occurs on many levels. Visiting classes on both campuses reinforces the many ways by which learning is ever-present and yet always evolving. Seeing and participating in an endless array of practices and rehearsals make clear how much focus and dedication precedes the performances and contests that follow.

From time to time over the past five months these routines gave way to important events that have marked the culmination of our collective efforts. Witnessing remarkable theatrical performances such as American Voices and Peter and The Star Catcher along with our winter musical concerts confirm for me the essential role the arts play at St. Andrew’s. Serving as a judge for the Saints Classic debate tournament reveals to me the ways in which speech and debate programs develop skills that will be powerful tools in adulthood. Participating in celebrations of our cultural heritage such as Diwali and Hispanic Heritage Month remind me that our community draws strength from many places. Hearing stories from our trips abroad to India, Peru, and Italy make clear to me that critical learning at St. Andrew’s continues far beyond the walls of our classrooms. Cheering from the sidelines as our fall term athletes learn from their successes and setbacks reminds me that athletics is in and of itself an educational experience unlike any other.

Your role in our journey and my St. Andrew’s education to date cannot be understated. During our visioning sessions you shared with me countless insights that furthered my understanding of St. Andrew’s and the ways in which we can grow. Despite the hectic pace of your own lives, you always found time to volunteer in any number of ways that left our students feeling supported. You eagerly joined us for back to school nights where your mere presence spoke volumes to your children about how much you care. And, yes, when possible, you have supported our efforts financially. In doing so
you ensured that we are able to fulfill our mission on behalf of the students. For all of this I am indebted.

Where we go from here will unfold in the months ahead both through our daily routines and through important institutional events including our St. Andrew’s Visioning Day on January 26 that will mark the culmination of our visioning process. By spring, pending the Board’s approval, we will move forward guided by our Vision for the Future. We will do so in a spirit that allows us to both honor our past and imagine our future. Like any of us as individuals, St. Andrew’s must evolve, grow, and innovate to remain vibrant and to ensure our programs continue to be of the highest caliber.

Already this fall we have planted the first seeds in this effort within each division by creating The Task Forces on Learning Environments. Comprised of teachers and administrators, each task force has undertaken a months-long research process to imagine how we might optimize the classroom experience in terms of lighting, acoustics, furniture, and technology, ensuring that our teachers have at their disposal all the tools they might choose to utilize as they use their immense talents to lead your children on an educational journey.

Other seeds will be planted this winter as our division heads begin a series of conversations about the ways we can integrate the development of essential character skills such as grit, resilience, creativity, determination, empathy, and collaboration into our curriculum and our advisory programs. As organizational psychologist Adam Grant recently reminded us in an op-ed piece for the New York Times, these skills play a leading role in one’s success as an adult. Therefore, it seems to me that within a St. Andrew’s education, they should be a point of institutional focus.

This winter the division heads and I will begin conversations about how we can make certain that the Honor Code continues to be a vibrant and important part of the St. Andrew’s experience. Ensuring that this is the case will be a collaborative effort between parents and the school, reminding us all that we move forward in partnership. To me, this seems like a worthy effort as we seek to send your children into the world guided by a strong moral compass that will direct them long after they move beyond the care and guidance you have given them.

Through all these efforts and many more to come, we know that our success as a school would not be possible without you. I very much look forward to our shared journey, knowing that our students will be the beneficiaries of all that we undertake together.

With best wishes for a restful holiday,

Tom Sheppard
Head of School