Dear Parents,

As we complete the final stages of the current school year, I want to provide an update on this year and the important work our faculty and administrators have undertaken to move the school forward at a strategic level in support of our students and in support of Our Vison for the Future that “In 2021 St. Andrew’s is a beacon of educational innovation, inclusivity, and wellness, empowering generations of Saints to impact the world.” This is an effort proceeding on many fronts, often behind the scenes, but in all respects requiring the concerted efforts of many. While you may not have children in each division of the school, I hope the information that follows will enable you to sense how all three divisions are working in tandem to ensure that your child’s educational journey is comprised of many interwoven threads. In this letter, I will focus my comments on innovation and wellness with more to come later in the summer on inclusivity.

**Innovation:** Our Learning Environments Taskforces have completed the first phase of their work and provided us with the information we need to create *three pilot classrooms*, one in each division of the school, in a way that will enable us to consider many possibilities regarding how we teach and learn. The faculty who make up these taskforces have voluntarily devoted countless hours over the course of the year to researching ideal learning environments, visiting schools across the country, and attending national conferences in support of this effort. Their work has left me ever more confident that they are and will continue to provide your children with an education of the highest caliber. Our goal for this process has been to ensure that we are constantly assessing the many aspects of teaching and learning. We also aim to ensure that we are providing our teachers and students with all the tools they might utilize in that process. To that end, our pilot classrooms will include a combination of features to optimize the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic aspects of learning.

Through these pilot classrooms, we will come to understand that which works best for a St. Andrew’s education. In doing so, we will create a roadmap for the future. We will also ensure that a St. Andrew’s education positions our graduates for success in a professional world that calls upon them not to sit passively, absorbing information, but instead requires them to utilize a wide variety of skills such as creativity, resilience, and collaboration. In short, they must be *active learners*. This movement is taking hold at leading schools and universities across the country and already exist in many ways here at St. Andrew’s as schools continually gain insights into how students learn and how to align learning with experiences to which students will be exposed in their professional lives.

For those who are interested, here are two videos that show how active learning is articulated at different levels of education at very different price points:

- [Active Learning in High School on a Robust Budget](#)
- [Active Learning in Elementary School on a Limited Budget](#)

Besides ensuring that our students and faculty have optimal environments in which teaching and learning can occur, the single most important effort we can undertake in support of your children is to ensure that our *faculty are supported in their never-ending efforts to grow as professionals*. With this
goal in mind, we have created two new administrative positions. The Associate Head of the Lower School for Teaching, Learning, and Innovation and the Associate Head of the Upper and Middle Schools for Teaching, Learning, and Innovation will report to the division heads and will work entirely in support of our faculty and their professional growth.

The Associate Heads will also be two members of a team that will come together in our newly formed **Innovation Incubators**. The Innovation Incubators will have physical locations on the North and South Campuses and will work in support of students and teachers on both campuses. Joining the Associate Heads in this new venture will be our new Chief Technology Officer, the Director of Information Services and Online Learning, the Technology Integrationist, several faculty members, and a select group of upper school students. While the daily routine of this group’s work is still to be defined, they will first and foremost work to think strategically about how a St. Andrew’s education can best prepare our students for a changing world. Within each of our three divisions, as detailed below, we continue to innovate so as to ensure that our program serves our students well.

**Lower School**

The new school year will bring changes to the lower school schedule to ensure that the developmental needs of our students are met throughout their school day. This includes a restructuring of our 4th grade so our students work with two core academic teachers as a team throughout the day as well as shifts to the timing of all co-curriculars to ensure students receive instruction when they are best equipped to learn.

Academically, we will be implementing a more comprehensive curriculum for our early literacy in pre-K4 through 2nd grade, ensuring that our students have a strong phonics foundation and deeper understanding of quality literature. We will also adopt the latest version of Math in Focus in grades K through 4 as part of our overall refinement of our math instruction at the lower school.

As we continue to live into our vision to help our students impact the world, we are hard at work restructuring our community service opportunities at the lower school to provide even our youngest Saints ways to begin to see how we can best help others in our greater community.

**Middle School**

The middle school’s new schedule, rolled out last year, has helped right-size the school experience for students at that age. It has enabled more time with advisors and in advisory, and the “long blocks” have ensured that classes have time each week to dig more deeply into project-based, hands-on work that puts the student as an active participant in making meaning. The new initiative, Free Choice Fridays, allows students to choose between things like guitar, knitting, woodworking, DIY, and more, which builds micro-communities and allows students to feel validated in their interests and to explore new ones.
Next year, the faculty will continue to expand time – by some 100 minutes a week – for students to work with their advisors in advisor-supervised study halls. Faculty are also exploring the idea of “capstones,” which will be larger and more cross-curricular and integrated projects that are rooted in the idea of an authentic experience. One of the initiatives middle school faculty will be working on this summer and next year will be an exploration of pushing more responsibility and ownership of community service down to the advisory level, which will promote student responsibility and engagement in this important element of the school’s mission.

**Upper School**

In the upper school we will expand our science curriculum with new offerings in robotics and engineering. In addition, we will be expanding our science research program which will create additional opportunities for students to engage in a range of long-term research projects. More information on this program will be coming in the fall.

Building upon the outstanding and growing student journalism programs that Mrs. Jennifer Gunn and her students have created, we will expand our Saints News Network broadcast program. As a result, our journalism programs will provide even more opportunities for our students to further develop the communication skills that will play an essential role in their lives after St. Andrew’s.

As part of our ongoing efforts to ensure that students are actively engaged in the shaping of school life, we will create more opportunities for members of student government to meet and develop programming in support of all students.

Finally, as we begin the second year of our new upper school schedule, we will undertake a process to assess how well it is meeting the educational needs of our students.

**Wellness:** Ensuring that our employees and our students are educated in and seek to embody wellness is one of the most important efforts we can make on their behalf. Children today face obstacles that were unheard of when I was a child and our efforts in this regard are more important than ever. In my first year I have been encouraged to see the many way our faculty have already built aspects of wellness into our curriculum through programs like Responsive Classroom in kindergarten through 8th grade. I also believe it is imperative for us to push forward in this regard as we seek to fulfill our vision of wellness.

With this in mind, our **Character Skills and Social Emotional Learning Taskforce** is currently evaluating the ways we can continue to grow in this area and will have recommendations by the end of the school year. This work is essential given the complexities of life for children today. It is also essential because of the overwhelming body of evidence which shows that adults who lead the most successful and fulfilling lives do so not only because of their traditional academic training, but also because of their ability to understand, embody, and utilize a variety of character skills developed through social emotional learning. For those parents interested in learning more about this area, there are many resources available. A few to consider might include:
Another important component to our wellness initiatives is our effort to ensure that a student’s academic commitments within any grade prepare them for the next step in their journey while also ensuring that our students have a balanced experience that respects their many commitments. To that end, we are in the process of surveying students regarding homework loads to ensure that students are being appropriately challenged, but not pushed to a degree that is unhealthy. The data from these surveys, collected periodically over the course of the term, will enable us to discuss this issue with faculty as we work to ensure that students are able to meet their academic obligations while also fully participating in other aspects of school life which are, in and of themselves, important learning experiences.

Julia Chadwick has been working to implement some new policies in the upper school next year which will enable us to more fully support our students in all aspects of their development. First among these will be a change in the number of classes in which students can enroll. This year, 14 students in the upper school are enrolled in seven classes, as opposed to the usual course load of six classes. While some students had well-developed reasons for wanting to enroll in seven classes, there is nothing in our graduation requirements that would make this necessary. In addition, the time a student must devote to a seventh class takes away from time they would be able to devote to their other classes, their ability or willingness to fully engage in other school activities, and in some cases the overall sense of wellness and balance that is essential to their development. An exception to this policy is our Malone online classes. Students may enroll in a Malone online class as their seventh class. These classes meet less frequently than traditional classes, introduce our students to a new form of learning, require more independence on the part of the student, and often cover areas of learning that go beyond what we offer at St. Andrew’s.

Mrs. Chadwick has also been working closely with students to help them determine the optimal level of challenge they might undertake when designing their schedules and determining the number of Advanced Placement classes in which they might enroll. By setting a limit of four AP classes per year, we are modeling for our students our desire to help them find balance in their lives while also, potentially, undertaking a course load that would be as demanding as they could find anywhere.

Another important component at any stage of a student’s journey related to wellness is the relationships they enjoy with their teachers. In fact, these relationships could be the single most important aspect of any child’s experience at St. Andrew’s. In the lower school, these relationships develop primarily within the classroom and my own observations this year have led me to believe that we are well positioned for continued success in this regard moving forward.
In the middle and upper schools, these relationships also extend into the advisory program. The middle school has already implemented many new initiatives to ensure that we have a robust advisory program. Additional enhancements to be implemented next year will ensure that students interact with their advisors 265 minutes per week. In the upper school, Julia Chadwick has undertaken an extensive review of our advisory program to ensure that it serves our students well. Beginning from a position of strength and with a goal of strengthening the program and our community, we will over the next two years implement a series of enhancements that:

1. create more formal time for students to meet with their advisors.
2. adjust advisory groups to include students from all grades with seniors trained to serve as leaders and role models.
3. provide greater opportunities for students to request their advisor, ensuring that the advisor is an adult with whom they have a strong relationship.

A final component to wellness comes in the area of support for student's learning needs. Our learning specialists and counselors have undertaken a year-long effort to assess the ways in which support is provided at St. Andrew’s. Among many other adjustments they have made will be the emergence of a Writing Center and a Math Center on the North Campus. The centers will be available for all students to receive guidance in writing or math free of charge. The centers will be staffed by older students with advanced skills in math or writing who will be selected through an application process and will begin to provide support only after completing an extensive training program led by Mrs. Jennifer Gunn and Mrs. Cathy Davis. The students who provide services in writing or math will also be eligible to earn community service hours.

As our journey to fulfill our vision continues, we will build upon these initiatives as we model for our students that a never-ending quest to assess, grow, and improve upon our current state is as important for a school as it is for a student. In doing so, I can now say with confidence at the conclusion of my first year that we do so from a position of strength. Thank you for all that you do to support our students and the entire Saints community.

Sincerely,

Tom Sheppard
Head of School
St. Andrew’s Episcopal School