Good afternoon and welcome to the start of a new school year. In addition to starting the year by focusing on the honor code, one of our most important institutional values, I have a few thoughts I’d like to share with you.

Some of you may have glanced at the program for today’s convocation, seen the title of this speech, and wondered to yourselves, “There is no way anything that Mr. Sheppard thinks is cool is, in fact, cool.

After all, I’m 49-year-old, balding guy who usually walks around in a suit, with a pen sticking out of his pocket. I’m asleep by 9:00 PM each night, even on Fridays, and I get up at 4:00 AM to do yoga and meditate. My favorite part of the weekend is doing three hours of yardwork each Saturday morning, treating it as a combat sport and my favorite kind of music is most popular among some of your grandparents. My own children think I was put on this earth to embarrass them and would tell you I am incapable of mastering even the most rudimentary of outdated of dance moves like the WHOA.

Yup, I wouldn’t blame you for one second if you looked at the program and thought that there is no way Mr. Sheppard would have any idea what is cool.

I can’t throw darts with remarkable accuracy, inspire you to see the magic of coding, or teach math, but Mr. Lowe can, probably doing them all at the same time, and many of you get to experience his passions as part of your time in the middle school. That’s pretty cool.

I’m still waiting to discover my inner musical talents which might enable me to sing in tune or play even one instrument, let alone inspire a group of students to produce beautiful music in an orchestra or choir like Mr. Sexton, Ms. Kyser, Mrs. Bernhardt, and Dr. Cranford. You, on the other hand, can join a music program that appreciates those with well-developed talent ANS those who are just curious and getting started. That’s pretty cool.

Even though I used to teach American history, I can’t turn a lesson on the founding of Jamestown into an interactive classroom experience that includes hiding under desks, playing dead, and building forts, but Ms. Michael can and many of you get to experience that and many other magical moments in her class. That’s pretty cool.
I never made the varsity basketball team in high school and I can’t dunk a basketball like Mr. Rugley, but I do get to spend my fall afternoons, filming games, carrying water bottles, helping the players get their pads on, and doing anything else Mr. Rugley needs me to do for the 5/6 football team. All the while I get to watch how Mr. Rugley’s enthusiasm for your success rubs off on many of you and strengthens your bonds. That’s pretty cool.

I haven’t given 32 years of my life to St. Andrew’s students like Mrs. Marshall or 35 years like Mrs. King. Even with all of that experience and wisdom they never stop thinking of you and how we can be better as a school every day. That’s pretty cool.

*I’ll tell you what else I think is cool…*

I think it’s pretty cool when you see a new face on campus and you extend a hand of welcome like many middle school students did for my daughter last year, leaving her no doubt that she had come to a school where kindness matters and that we are all Saints who can find common ground while learning from others who may see the world through a very different lens.

I think it’s pretty cool when so many of you dedicate weeks of your lives to creating a theatrical production like Lion King Junior that was so well done, all the while learning valuable lessons about creativity, collaboration, and dedication from Mrs. Taylor and many others.

I think it’s pretty cool that you go to a school where a group of your teachers would spend a year researching, learning, and visiting other schools to consider how they can take what is already a very good classroom experience and make it even better, doing it all for you. This fall you’ll begin to see their work unfold through “i2: Inspire and Innovate” and along the way you’ll be providing feedback and offering your own ideas about how we can innovate in ways that are right for St. Andrew’s.

I think it’s pretty cool when my job includes an opportunity to celebrate so many of you who earn your place in the National Junior Honor Society, a recognition of your commitment to your education.

I think it’s pretty cool when I see 8th graders modeling the way for younger students, reminding us all that here at St. Andrew’s we value kindness and gratitude, and honor, appreciating each other’s talents which serve as an essential thread in the fabric of our community.
And I think it's pretty cool that we would officially commence the new school year by coming together to sign the Honor Code and, in doing so, reflect upon an essential element of our community that has given us strength since it was created by students and teachers in the early 1980's.

That's what a 49-year-old balding guy who practices yoga, meditates, goes to bed at 9:00 PM and can't master the WHOA thinks is cool. As your year unfolds, let me know what you think is cool. Until then, don't forget to take a moment to look around and remind yourself how fortunate we all are to have come together in this place at this time in our lives.