

TPS Headlines

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From Amy Purcell Vorenberg
Head of School

Thirty-seven Days

It's hard for me to believe that we've already been in school for 37 days.

On one level, it's gone by incredibly fast. And on another level, it feels as if I've been with you all for far more than 37 school days.

Many people have asked, "How's it going?" "How do you like Philadelphia?" "How do you like The Philadelphia School?" Things are going well, I love Philadelphia, and the school is amazing have been my consistent answers. I am happy and have no regrets. Not one.

But the next question that comes has surprised me: "What changes are you going to make?" I did not arrive in Philadelphia with a big agenda for change. I came to TPS because I found a community that was doing many wonderful things. I did not perceive the need for changes at TPS. Thirty-seven days into the job, I realize that was a bit naïve. For just by being me, I bring change to TPS.

For 23 years, my predecessor, Sandy Dean, was an incredible principal. She led TPS as it grew from a small, young school to a large, impressive institution. She hired great people - dedicated teachers, creative collaborators, hard workers, and skilled administrators. Together, she and they tinkered and tweaked to refine curriculum, to add program, and to develop schedules and systems as they built a fine progressive school. After such a long and successful tenure, it's natural to wonder how the school will evolve with a new Head of School.

Certain changes have happened by instinct. When I experienced my first busy morning drop-off on 25th Street, I couldn't believe my eyes! I had never before seen so many parents get out of their cars and walk around to open a trunk to pull out lunch boxes and school supplies. At my former school, located on a dead-end street, traffic would have come to a standstill without a rapid turnaround during morning drop-off. When I acted upon my instinct at TPS to open a car door, to reach for a backpack, and to welcome a child from the backseat, I seem to have surprised the TPS community, to say the least. I opened a car door - and according to the reports of some Middle Schoolers, I brought revolution to the neighborhood! The clash of cultures in just this small moment is one marker of the change that I bring.

Other changes have come about because of simple questions. After watching a fire drill one morning, I wondered aloud to a gathering of concerned administrators, "Could we benefit from having the entire school group together during a drill, instead of around the building?" The ensuing discussion led to decisions that include a new fire drill procedure that allows for every member of the TPS community to be accounted for in one place. Another shift came when I asked if teachers had a chance to visit each other's classrooms. The wisdom of the administrative team led to a change in venues for faculty meetings: We now meet regularly in different classrooms, a rotation that will allow every teacher to get to know more about each unit in the school. There have been dozens of other little shifts and tiny changes that I myself don't perceive; yet the community notices.

Looking ahead, there are broader changes to consider. I have ideas about diversity, professional development, and teacher evaluation. As I consider how to better understand the complexities of The Philadelphia School program, I am eager to learn more about the ways that technology might support and enhance our work. I see opportunities in every unit of the school, from the Preschool to the Middle School. I wonder about communication, student assessment, and reporting. There are many things for me to learn, to fully understand. And there are many more questions to ask, all in the spirit of moving TPS ahead in support of its mission.

In Sandy's final letter to the TPS community, she concluded with an acknowledgment of the privilege she felt as the leader of this impressive community. Like Sandy, I feel the same sense of privilege and honor. I also feel a responsibility to hold tight to the tradition of innovation that allows TPS to continue to grow towards greater heights every day. With a change in leadership, with the change that is embodied in me, I embrace the journey that's ahead. To be with you at TPS, what a lucky leader I am!

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