

NORTH *Opening minds and possibilities* COUNTRY SCHOOL

2009 THANKSGIVING TOWN MEETING

Every Wednesday, we have a Town Meeting in the Dining Room. This weekly meeting is an extended version of the councils, house gatherings, and morning meetings that organize our days and bring us together as a community.

These meetings allow us to swap information, solve problems, and share our dreams and aspirations. And while we are an active community of “doers,” we are an amazingly reflective group as well. My hope is that for the next 30 to 40 minutes this afternoon, we can replicate some of that same communal atmosphere here, and model an NCS Town Meeting with you.

Our gatherings tend to have a concrete as well as an abstract component. There are four concrete pieces of business I need us to attend to before we tackle the abstract question of the day.

First, I hope all NCS parents will join me in thanking our tremendous faculty. A good portion of the magic of this place stems from the fact that we have, and have always had, an eclectic mix of Renaissance adults.

Second, we have three trustees in the audience. Every independent school continues to exist, prosper, and fulfill its mission through the often unseen work of its board of trustees. I would ask Sandy Nowicki, Roger Loud, and current NCS parent Barkley Stuart to stand. Please join me in applauding them and the other 21 trustees for their vision, commitment, and tireless energy on behalf of the institution.

Third, the lifeblood of every school is its Annual Fund, and I will thank you in advance for your continued support. Contributing to the Annual Fund is both a vote of confidence for the faculty and a way to enhance the program for your child today. Please join me in thanking Delio Fernandez, who is heading up the 12-person team of volunteers working so hard to help us reach our goal of 100 percent parent participation.

Fourth, and finally, let me say that we have an awful lot of capital work going on, and that this is just the tip of the iceberg. The coming decade will be a transformative one for the institution, with more capital projects being undertaken than at any prior time except possibly our first decade. Our goal is a comprehensive greening and renewal of our campus. We hope to optimize our teaching, learning, and living spaces to match the beauty of our surroundings and the talent of our teachers and students. This year – among other things – will see the construction of a new student and staff residence, a barn and

Senior Camp Dining Room renovation, and the beginning of a multi-year, many phased renovation of all 32,000 square feet of this Main Building. When you return for graduation, the new residence will be nearing completion; some of your children will be living there next year.

Now for the question of the day ... I know that at a time when for some of you – like me – a siesta seems more in order than Socratic dialogue, I would ask you to rise to the occasion (as your children do) and help me think about this important question. What kinds of challenges will your children face 30 years hence? What do you hope they will take away from NCS to meet those challenges?

I offer this question for a couple of reasons. First, because I am reminded of how we as parents and faculty are often focused on the here and now, on circumscribed tasks and goals. How can I get him to clean up his room? What questions should be on the chapter test? Why is it so hard to remember the quadratic formula? When can we do less grammar and more literature? Second, because today “we” may be wrestling with local, national, and global problems, but it is “they,” our children down the hall, who will run the schools, companies, non-profits, governments, and households of tomorrow.

To address our question, we’ll use a technique called “think-pair-share.” I’ll ask you to spend 30 seconds thinking about a response, another three minutes to discuss it with someone seated near you, and then we’ll take several more minutes in full group sharing.

What kind of challenges will your child face 30 years hence, and what do you hope they will take from NCS to meet them?

My crystal ball grows dim. I really do not know nor can I promise what your individual child will take away. Nor can I predict the nature of the leadership they will offer. All I can share are some of the stories that I always hear this time of year. In recent days I have received numerous emails, letters, and calls from alumni, including our most recent graduates, filling me in on their lives.

However, two alumni stories from the past couple of weeks have particular bearing on today’s question. One is the story of a middle-aged man who is one of the country’s foremost philanthropists. The other is that of a young entrepreneur not yet 30. The latter, Gabe, was a cognitively brilliant fourth grader, who when he arrived, had much to learn about social competence. (I seem to recall that when he didn’t approve of his roommate’s musical taste, he tossed the offending boom box out a Bramwell House window.) Emailing me last week, Gabe is now thinking about Treetops for his seven-year-old son. He then proceeded to talk about the company he started in China three years ago; it now has 500 employees and is one of the largest producers of molded wind

turbine blades in the country. As an engineering student, Gabe had gravitated toward that field in part because of the conversations around sustainability and alternative energy that he had while at NCS in the early '90s.

Meanwhile, the middle-aged alumnus attended school in the early '60s, when arguably the crucial global challenge was nuclear proliferation. Our founders Walter and Leo Clark were very clear in their speeches and writings that part of their work at NCS was to help “children acquire the understanding, strength, and faith needed to meet these global challenges.”

Last week, as I was having dinner with Richard, he fondly recalled his memories of living with Walter and Leo in Glass House and of taking the sleeper train from Manhattan up to NCS. He also talked about one aspect of his foundation's ongoing work: bringing sub-cabinet level people together from Iran and the United States over the past 15 years to continue a dialogue about nuclear non-proliferation even as our high-ranking public officials were unwilling to sit down with each other. I believe our founders would be very proud to know that their work is paying off so well.

Enjoy the day, and the rest of this Thanksgiving respite, and know that although the future is unclear, the paths our graduates walk is not. Thirty years hence, your children will be doing important work in business, science, politics, and the arts, as well as in their homes and communities. Many thanks for sharing your children with us.