

FRANCIS W. PARKER CHARTER ESSENTIAL SCHOOL
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Thoughts on Community

"The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members."

– Coretta Scott King

We hear the word “community” frequently at our school. Parker students and faculty routinely take part in all-school community gatherings, engage in community service, create school norms via the Community Congress, and adhere to the standards of a community handbook. We hear the familiar voice of one of our community members welcoming us to the day with, “Good morning, Parker family...” and as our school principal opens the front door for students each morning, we know we are in a place that strives for connection. We hope to create a place of learning and we hope to create a place of belonging. When we reflect on the larger community of parents, family members, alumni, and former teachers, we see how the Parker community spans decades and miles; we are part of something bigger than any one individual, and we feel that.

In communities where people grapple with differences, push themselves outside comfort zones and listen carefully to opposing opinions, there is disagreement, debate, and growth. Some of the time, that growth feels uncomfortable. As any parent will attest, when children go through different phases or learn new skills, we see that struggle plainly. Students themselves will say things like, “I didn’t want to do it that way, but I figured out that making this change made me more productive/more organized/less stressed.” Intellectual, emotional, and social growth does not always feel easy, but in the end, it almost always feels like triumph.

One of the hallmarks of Parker life is community conversations. These are structured conversations that support sharing of knowledge and opinions. During community conversations, we see intellectual, emotional, and social growth in real time. Sometimes, community conversations at Parker are about practical issues at school, such as a recent conversation about the school’s policy on tardiness. At other times, topics are ones that are highly challenging and sensitive. This week, advisory-based and community-based conversations on racism and recent events in America have been a way for students and faculty to come together to discuss, share and listen. Conversations are a first step. When we work to understand another person’s distress, recognize the burden felt by another without making it about ourselves, and then strive to alleviate pain or suffering, we are in a place to take compassionate action.

In fact, each year begins with mini-community conversations about the topics of civil rights and human rights. In advisories, we review the Parker P.A.C.T (Parker Alliance for Community Tolerance) at the start of each year. We discuss ideas like discrimination, harassment, and bullying. We discuss the role each of us has when we see actions that harm someone based on

that person's race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, ability, national origin, or socio-economic class. We explicitly reject the idea that bullying, and harassment, are a typical part of the school day. We request that no one turn a blind eye to situations that harm others. We ask one another to courageously step toward challenging moments, and to look out for every member of the community.

Our graduating seniors are saying their goodbyes, and next year's graduating class is already stepping forward to take the mantle of leadership. Gatewaying students are sharing their learning and recognizing their growth as they move from division to division. As we finish this school year, a year filled with unprecedented challenges, many of us are thinking about how our community can grow and change to meet the needs of all people within it. The school year is ending, but there is much work ahead. How will our community embrace all that is before us? Courageous conversations that provide perspective and create discomfort will be part of the process. Listening will have its place. And at Parker, the compassionate actions of students, faculty and others will, as ever, bind us together and move us forward.

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