

James Newman, Ph.D., Head of School

September 2011

Dear Academy Families and Friends,

These are challenging times for schools in the midstate but although obstacles abound, these are also exciting times.

Among many challenges, school leaders must plan how best to prepare their students effectively for the challenges of the 21st century. Given that our global society is changing at an unprecedented speed, this is a significant task. Answers to questions about what students need to know, how they learn best, and how to assess student competence are critical.

Many national and worldwide organizations have identified what they believe are the most important learning competencies for 21st century learners. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, to name just two eminent groups of educators and national business leaders, have identified skills that promote critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. To say the least, there is a clear consensus that today's students must master a different set of learning competencies and tasks than you and I did.

The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), to which this country's 1400 independent schools belong, recently published its own insightful guidelines to help independent school communities, such as Harrisburg Academy, prepare their students to confront the challenges of the 21st century – to become "schools of the future." The NAIS list is extensive and does not sacrifice commitment to what many would consider "the basics." As one would expect, mastery of higher-level mathematics, using knowledge and creativity to solve complex "real-world" problems, and the ability to understand and express ideas in two or more languages are on the NAIS list. But so are helping students to become adaptable, to initiate, to possess integrity and make ethical decisions. One of my favorites is "working effectively in a climate of ambiguity and changing priorities" because it aligns with the global changes facing all students of the 21st century.

Our schools must offer learning opportunities that encourage creativity and innovation, and enable students to see the "big picture." In addition, the NAIS recommends that schools help students "learn from, and work collaboratively with, individuals from diverse cultures, religions, and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue."

As school communities, we must aspire to create opportunities that help students learn how to identify the unique talents of people and develop opportunities for interaction among people that lead to a positive good.

Challenging our students in an environment that nurtures and inspires.

In the last editorial prior to his retirement, Ronald Wohl, the highly-regarded former editor of *Education Week*, called for increased personalization in American education. Wohl argued that among other things, schools should be of “human scale, because students and teachers need to know each other well.” He claimed that education in America needs more personalization and less standardization. It was an ardent call from a long-time observer of American education, who, after decades of evaluating our national system of education, is worried about the future of our students.

Small schools communities are uniquely capable of providing “human scale” and helping their students master learning competencies for the future. They can make sure that a premium is placed on the quality of the contact between teachers and the aggregate number of students they teach and mentor. They can create the “village-effect” which allows them to focus on the “whole child” and sustain a curriculum that validates students need for the arts. This is a critical factor for helping students master an ambitious set of competencies.

These are challenging, but exciting times. At Harrisburg Academy, where I am proud to serve as Head of School, we believe in the power of these 21st century competencies and are committed to incorporating them in our curriculum and instruction. The review, planning, and commitment to the “whole child” are ongoing; as is our intent to be a “school of the future.” By successfully identifying the necessary 21st century learning competencies and remaining committed to educating the “whole child,” we will equip our students with the tools they need to solve problems in our complex global society, collaborate successful with people from around the world, and nurture our natural resources. Their success awaits.

Best wishes to all administrators, faculty and staff members, and especially students for a very successful school year!

With Warm Regards,
Jim

**This letter was printed originally in the Sept. 1, 2011 Harrisburg Patriot-News as an “As I See It” editorial. We felt Dr. Newman’s message was an equally important and timely message to be shared with Academy families.*