

Rising Above the Rancor: A Letter to Students at an Historic Moment

Dear Students,

Over the last eight months, your world has utterly changed. You are living through a moment in history that may well prove pivotal to the future of our world, our nation, and our city. You are bearing witness to an unprecedented set of interlocking and cascading crises, and many of you are telling us that you have lost trust in some of our leaders—locally, nationally, and globally. There is no getting around it: you are coming of age in an extraordinarily turbulent moment in history.

Yet as educators, we are in the business of developing deeply optimistic futures. Your futures. To be sure, there is difficult work ahead. But nothing truly worthwhile comes easily. As the Nobel Peace Prize winning South African theologian Desmond Tutu said: “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.” Practicing hope allows us to harness the energy of hardships and tragedies and transform them into generative possibilities for the future. Our world needs you to care deeply, engage wholeheartedly, and commit to action fueled with hope in order to build a better future. We want to do all we can to make this happen for you—not after you graduate, but right now.

In a year marked by intense political rancor, we write to you to remind you of a simple truism: hope in the face of adversity spurs collective action. Democracy only works when we all commit ourselves to it. Think about how high those stakes are. Since your education hinges on your ability to trust the adults in school, you deserve to hear from us about a few of the things in which we all believe:

We believe that schools must demonstrate that they are not partisan—not “red” schools or “blue” schools, but rather safe and brave schools where you learn to engage in reasoned, respectful debate, critical thinking, and a free exchange of ideas (even half-formed ideas), without fear of judgment or reproach.

We believe that schools must give you the skills and habits of mind to debate the issues at stake in our city, country, and world, but also to learn that there are clear guardrails and certain issues around which there is no debate. For example, we believe it is important to unequivocally condemn and reject white supremacy and bigotry in all its forms.

We believe that schools must stand for these ideals and model them for you every day. We also believe it is important to unequivocally condemn and reject violence in all forms. You should expect to hear this from leaders.

We believe that schools must create environments built on kindness, equity, honesty, inclusion, and respect for those whose opinions differ from your own.

We believe that schools must promote the act of voting in democratic, free, open elections and the peaceful transfer of power.

We believe that schools must espouse truth, facts, science, and reasoned debate.

We believe that schools must proactively support your hope-fueled activism and create opportunities for you to give voice to your values and practice courage in the face of adversity and wrongdoing.

We believe that schools must be communities that expose you to ideals that you fall in love with so much that you will not only work towards them but also cherish and protect them.

Finally, we believe that our city, our country, and our world will emerge wiser and healthier. We believe this to be true because we believe in you, and in our individual and collective ability to rise above the rancor and, no matter what the outcome of the presidential election, live our lives in a way that is aligned with our values.

Sincerely,

Doug Knecht, Interim Head of School

Bank Street School for Children

Rebecca Skinner, Interim Head of School

Blue School

Crissy Cáceres, Head of School

Brooklyn Friends School

Tim Madigan, Head of School

Churchill School

Robert (Bo) Lauder, Principal

Friends Seminary

Laurie Gruhn, Head of School

The Gateway School

George P. Davison, Head of School

Grace Church School

Diana Schlesinger, Head of School	Greene Hill School
Tara Christie Kinsey, Head of School	The Hewitt School
Carla Jantos MacMullen, Head of School	The Kew-Forest School
Maria Castelluccio, Head of School	Léman Manhattan Preparatory School
Phil Kassen, Director	Little Red School House & Elisabeth Irwin High School
Debbie Zlotowitz, Head of School	Mary McDowell Friends School
Mark W. Lauria, Executive Director	New York State Association of Independent Schools
Leslie Thorne & Albina Miller, Co-Heads of School	The Parkside School
Audrius Barzdukas, Head of School	Poly Prep Country Day School
James Dawson, Head of School	Professional Children's School
Daniel K. Lahart, SJ, President	Regis High School
Chris Ongaro, Head of School	Robert Louis Stevenson School
Danny Karpf, Head of School	Rodeph Sholom School
Evan Moraitis, Interim Head of School	St Bernard's School
Bart Baldwin, Head of School	St. Luke's School
Scott Gaynor, Head of School	Stephen Gaynor School
Douglas Brophy, Head of School	The Town School
Scott R. Reisinger, Head of School	Trevor Day School
Carrie Catapano, Head of School	West End Day School
Ronald P. Stewart, Headmaster	York Preparatory School