May 8, 2023

Note: This week’s leadership letter has a different format. Instead of the two traditional letters we normally send every two weeks or so, we have provided a transcript of a conversation we recently had about the 2023 Countdown to Commencement Dinner. We were both so inspired by the students and their teachers we couldn’t wait to talk about what we witnessed. Here are some excerpts from our conversation.

Dr. Frome: Hello Lisa. You know, it's been about a week since we've had the senior dinner at my house and I've been thinking a lot about it.

Mrs. Conrad: Many of us left feeling very emotional, very happy.

Dr. Frome: I think that the dinner really exemplified the heart of Park and I've been trying to get my mind around what it was about that dinner that captured the core of the Park experience. I had a very interesting conversation with a past Park parent today. He said that 20 years ago the senior class asked him to give the graduation speech so he gathered them together, and each student stood up and told him about their Park experience. Each one said that Park made them feel like they belonged somewhere for the first time and the school helped them come to know who they were in a very deep way. He said it was the most emotional experience he's ever had. His speech evolved into a recitation of the senior's descriptions and to this day, people, 20 years later, remember that speech because it was so authentic. I told him about the senior dinner that we just experienced and how the exact same thing happened! So, there must be something to this dinner and to the way these seniors feel about this school that embodies the Park esprit and I wanted to ask you how you explain this as the head of the school.

Mrs. Conrad: Remember, about two months ago, you asked me why I love Park and why I'm so dedicated to doing the work I do. You asked me to say the first thing that comes to my mind when I think of the Park School. I told you a story about my old school and a time when someone in my favorite class, and it was a small class of only 18 students, was absent, and someone in the class said, It was that kid over there who's absent. And, I said, You don't know that person's name? We've been with each other all year and you don't know your classmate's name? They sit behind you! What's going on here? I told you that would never happen at Park. That is why I stay here. Because, I believe that students see each other here, students do respect one another, students come from all different backgrounds, and they see each other. And I think that was verified last week.

Dr. Frome: Why don't we back up and talk about what goes on at the senior dinner.

Mrs. Conrad: It is exactly what it’s titled: a countdown to the last 50 days before commencement. We start by acknowledging that we are 50 days away from graduation and we want to spend some time with every senior and we want them to spend some time with each other. We play a video that shows each senior over their time at Park, and then we invite the students to volunteer to explain what has mattered most to them – whether it’s teachers, each other, certain events...

Dr. Frome: Yes, this is what I witnessed and what amazed me. All the seniors gathered in my living room – they sat on the floor and the chairs and the couches - and everyone volunteered to talk. And every single one spoke extemporaneously. It was one of the most diverse groups of students that I’ve ever seen at any campus, at any level. Everyone made a little speech, everyone cried, and everyone told the same basic story, which is that they felt that they belonged, they felt that the senior class was their family, and they felt that they came to know themselves in a deep and authentic way because of Park.

Mrs. Conrad: Right.
Dr. Frome: I have to say, it was one of the most moving educational experiences that I’ve had in my career. I’ve really never seen anything like that in such a cohesive and spontaneous way.

Mrs. Conrad: I’m so glad you saw that. I do appreciate that the dinner is now at your house because it does offer a more homey and intimate feel. But, what we saw last week happens at every Countdown to Commencement Dinner even when it’s in the dining hall. Last week’s dinner was especially emotional because of what this class has been through with Covid, being separated from each other in cohorts for a whole year.

Dr. Frome: I’ve never seen this at any other school. How does this happen? You’ve been here much longer than me. What’s the secret sauce? What are the ingredients? If I wanted to replicate it at some other school, what would I have to do?

Mrs. Conrad: Well, number one, you’re not going to replicate it because you don’t have the people that we have here. But if you tried to recreate our culture somewhere else you would have to start by assembling a team of teachers who believe in the school’s historic mission of students respecting one another, and staying true to their values and the values of the school and expressing empathy and compassion while also focusing on their studies and finding their true selves and not being afraid to ask questions in class, or wanting to lead something at school. This kind of culture has happened for a long time at Park; you can’t really transplant it easily.

Dr. Frome: You know, it’s not like this group of students never experienced conflict with each other, and it wasn’t like they’ve been happy all the time.

Mrs. Conrad: No. They talked about that. Right? They talked about times when it wasn’t so perfect.

Dr. Frome: They did. Right. But, there seems to be a way… maybe this is part of the secret sauce here… that conflict is inevitable, that misunderstandings are inevitable in school, and maybe it’s the way that Park handles this that results in a kind of connectedness and belonging.

Mrs. Conrad: Well, I would say, first, we just don’t address conflict with punitive punishment. Because we are a smaller environment and we do have teachers who are able to talk with students about why this conflict can be hurtful to this person, or why you are feeling hurt by a situation. Or, if you don’t really feel comfortable talking one-on-one, let us help you, let us mediate the conversation, because we do have to communicate here. We can’t just ignore one another, we can’t just write each other off. We’re too small, and we don’t want that to even be part of our culture.

Dr. Frome: Every student said that they felt known and accepted for who they were.

Mrs. Conrad: I think that also has to do with our size. We don’t have a class of 400 kids; we have a class of maximum, what, 40 per class? That allows for moments where students do talk with every single person in their class. You would never ever hear that someone at Park does not know someone’s name, does not recognize their parents, does not know their siblings. This just would not happen at Park because of the culture.

Dr. Frome: One of the students said: I’m grateful for the experience to be in a school where people are kind. And I know that kindness is very important to you, Lisa, and this is part of your vision for the school. What is the difference between being nice and being kind? You hear a lot of educators say, Can’t we just be nice? You say, No, let’s be kind. I think kind is a deeper mode of engagement.

Mrs. Conrad: There was a student on crutches today because he suffered an injury yesterday at a practice. Nice would be maybe… someone holding a door. But kind is the Park student who, in the morning, recognized that student was on crutches, and even before we were able to talk to that student, offered to carry the student’s backpack to classes all day. That’s kindness.

Dr. Frome: Right. Kindness is thinking at a deeper level about what the deeper needs are of another person. Another senior at the dinner said: Since I’ve been at Park, you guys have opened up different parts of myself that I didn’t even know existed. I love that!

Mrs. Conrad: Wow!

Dr. Frome: Parts of myself that I didn’t even know existed. How does that happen at Park?
Mrs. Conrad: We don’t allow students to just sit and not participate. We do call on them and invite them to be part of a discussion even when they may be a little apprehensive to do so. So when you insist on participation, the student realizes, I know more about this than I thought I did, or I’m more confident about myself when speaking about this than I thought I was. But if that person never even called on me or invited me to do that, then I would have sat here, silent.

Dr. Frome: Interesting you say that because one of the seniors said, Thank you for pushing me and helping me strive for greatness. One thing that I love about Park is that everyone is connected. There are three components to that note of appreciation. One is pushing. So, Park does not coddle or accept the status quo. There’s a stretching element to it. There’s a vision of you’re good now, but you can be even better. And, there’s this theme of constant striving and growth. And last, this student understood that somehow that occurs through connection.

Mrs. Conrad: I think it occurs because we have teachers who teach across divisions. So, if you had a teacher whom you particularly connected with in seventh grade, you probably are going to have them in upper school too, because they teach upper school electives. The same goes with members of your student body. You’re not always with members of this small class, you are mixing with classmates in different grade levels, so you are able to connect with them more than just a half of a semester for a year.

Dr. Frome: I loved another quotation from the dinner because it acknowledges that when students leave Park, they are not fully baked but primed for more growth. One student said, I’m not sure what I want to be, and I’m not sure who I’m going to be. But, at Park, I know I can be me. I never had that confidence before I came to Park, and I'm never going to forget my years here. And, I love that linking of uncertainty and confidence. Just because you’re confident doesn’t mean you’re certain, but you have the confidence to explore your uncertainty.

Mrs. Conrad: Because I think, here, we assist with giving the students confidence, because they make mistakes, but we help them through those mistakes. And I don’t know if students in other settings get the help with working through those mistakes as we give students here. So when they are ready to leave here, if they make a mistake, which inevitably they will, they will be more prepared to manage that.

Dr. Frome: The confidence to make mistakes. And that is really one of the founding insights of the progressive education movement - that we learn more from our mistakes and our errors than we do from just passing through, or having unmitigated success.

Mrs. Conrad: You got it.

Dr. Frome: Well, it was a wonderful evening. It's going to stay with me for the rest of my career, my life. My only regret is that I wish more people could have witnessed it. But I noticed the very next morning that the faculty who were there started talking to the faculty who weren’t able to come, and the faculty who weren’t able to come (so, they weren’t the eye witnesses), were all abuzz. So, the word seems to have gotten out about what an extraordinary evening we had. Thanks for leading us, Lisa.

Mrs. Conrad: Well thank you, and thank you for being here and believing in Park.