



July 2, 2020

Dear Parents, Faculty, and Friends of Westminster,

There was a developmental psychology experiment known as “The Visual Cliff” which was first performed with babies sixty years ago. The visual cliff consisted of a sheet of plexiglass covering a cloth with a high-contrast checkerboard pattern. On one side, the cloth was placed immediately beneath the plexiglass, and on the other, it was dropped about four feet below. Because the plexiglass could support the infant, this was a visual rather than an actual cliff. The majority of babies who had begun to crawl refused to venture onto the seemingly unsupported surface, even when their mothers encouraged them from the other side. This experiment showed that most infants can discriminate depth as soon as they can crawl.

What is of more interest to us today, however, is a follow up experiment several decades later. In this experiment, mothers were trained to show joyful and fearful faces. The experimenters wanted to see if the mother’s facial expression would affect the baby’s willingness to venture into perceived danger. When the mother’s face evidenced joy, 74% of the babies ignored the danger and crawled to their mothers; on the other hand, when the mother’s face evidenced fear, none dared to crawl across the visual cliff.

One of the most important things we can do as parents is to give our children the confidence to take risks. To do this, we have to be willing to set aside the belief that we can always keep them safe. Take Covid-19. Since there is no vaccine to prevent it, nothing we can do to guarantee that our kids won’t get it, and no cure if they do, it is a myth that we can keep our children safe from the virus. I’m certainly not suggesting that we throw caution to the winds and stop social distancing, wearing masks, and staying closer to home. I am saying that we have to understand that safety is not the only consideration when caring for our children. Social-emotional growth, academic learning, and physical activity are all essential for our children to thrive. But I’m not the only one saying that. So, too, is the American Academy of Pediatrics which published this bolded statement on June 25, 2020. **[“The AAP strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school.”](#)**

As school draws nearer to reopening on August 10, I hope you will begin to prepare your children—with a joyful face—for their return to Westminster by talking to them

about what they can expect. To that end, I want to update you on our operational plans for this fall. At Westminster, we always try to plan backwards from essential questions to assessments to activities, and that is as true for Covid-19 protocols as it is for my history class. The essential question is: How do we provide the best program possible for Westminster's students while keeping them safe?

As I explained in my May letter, we devised three scenarios. The first and most hopeful scenario was to return to school, just as we have for the last 57 years, with joy and excitement and anticipation. The second scenario involved implementing pod groupings to cut down exposure and risk while allowing children to remain at school with their friends and teachers. The third scenario was to teach remotely as we did last spring.

As I write this in early July, our plan remains to open in Scenario I. In Scenario I, we will ask children to wear masks into the building each morning, but they will not normally be required to wear masks during classes or at recess. Children and teachers who wish to wear masks or face shields are certainly free to do so. Primary and middle school students will enter through the front doors, but lower school will assign entry doors to students by grades. Social distancing and good hygiene will be emphasized, and we have made changes to our buildings including HVAC adjustments to bring in more fresh air, removing extra furniture, and changing the focus and frequency of cleaning. Our goal is to make Westminster School as healthy as we can for everyone in our community this fall.

Though we will begin in Scenario I with children mixing freely at school, there will be necessary concessions to Covid-19. Generally, we will try to avoid large group, indoor gatherings. For example, though it is called different things in different divisions, our student orientation day on August 7 will be more tightly scheduled and less crowded. Parent orientations will be Zoomed. The Carnival and our Grandparents' and Special Friends' Day are on hold. Parents will be asked not to enter the buildings except for scheduled appointments and to help monitor illness by keeping sick kids home, letting us know if your family has been exposed, and quarantining if necessary. In the event a student or teacher tests positive for Covid-19, the school will notify families according to the protocol in Attachment One.

If things deteriorate as we move through the fall, we will move to Scenario II. Scenario II actually includes three progressively more segregated pods. This scenario is outlined in the attachments to this letter. Generally, Scenario IIA divides the school into pods by grades. Pods under Scenario IIB are reduced to half of each grade. Scenario IIC separates preschool and grades one to three into circles or homerooms on campus while fourth through eighth graders are taught remotely. Finally, as explained in my May letter, Scenario III envisions everyone moving to remote learning and is summarized in Attachment III.

I hope this letter and its attachments will answer most of your questions, but we certainly don't have all the answers. We do not know, for example, what will prompt

movement from one scenario to another, but there are many things we do know. We do know that being relaxed and positive will help our children—no matter how old they are—to relax and be positive. We do know that we have to enter this year with trust and generosity for each other and believe that other families in our community are behaving responsibly and following our Covid-19 protocols. We do know that things will change over the next few months and that we will make mistakes, but as we emphasize to our students, we will learn and be wiser because of them. Finally, we do know that the education we provide, regardless of its location, will be grounded in essential questions and backwards design, and it will encourage our children to work hard, think well, and work well—even at some distance—with others.

I look forward to seeing you at Westminster School on August 7.

Sincerely,

Bob Vernon