



# The Taft School

June 22, 2020

Dear Returning and New Parents:

As I shared several weeks ago, we plan on having three communications this summer which speak to the start of the 2020-2021 academic year. In this, our first, we will share several important pieces of information about two topics: the opening of Taft on campus in September, and the summary of our review of our recent spring term remote learning.

## ***School Opening***

For the past two months, through our School Opening Task Force led by Assistant Headmaster Jeremy LaCasse, we have worked closely with local health experts, Governor Ned Lamont's ReOpen CT Sub-Committee on PreK-12 Education, The Association of Boarding Schools (TABS), the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) and peer schools. Based on what we know now, we are optimistic that we will welcome students to campus in September. Our final decision and related details will come next month and be based on the most up-to-date information. We will put the health and safety of all community members first and foremost in our decision-making, which will be informed by local and state guidelines, availability of testing, pandemic reporting, and travel restrictions. Against this backdrop, we are committed to meeting our mission of the education of the whole student, our motto of service, and our work in shaping a welcoming and inclusive community.

To be clear, we all know that the COVID-19 landscape is a very dynamic and unstable one, and things may change. However, as of today, signs from the state of Connecticut and health experts suggest that we will indeed open campus this fall, and this is terrific news. We are hopeful that our afternoon program—including interscholastic and intramural athletics—will be offered, but no determination has been made by the state, the Founders League, or the New England Prep School Athletic Council (NEPSAC). NEPSAC has indicated that if interscholastic athletics were not possible in the fall, the policy preventing coaches from training athletes in the off-season would be waived: out of season workouts would be permitted consistent with applicable health guidelines. We are committed to our interscholastic, intramural, volunteer and arts programs and see them as central to the experience of students.

While there are many details that we have been working on and will continue to work on this summer around the actual function and schedule of campus life, there are a few important things you should know:

i) Calendar: We are planning to repopulate campus during the week of September 3rd. At this point, we will need to remain flexible on the exact process of welcoming students, as we will need to work with up-to-date health guidelines. Students will go home on Tuesday, November 24. We will begin repopulating campus for the winter term on Monday, January 4.

ii) Academic Day Schedule: The basic academic day schedule will remain intact, with classes, afternoon program, and evening study hall. We anticipate modifications—to School Assembly, for instance—but we envision a Taft experience consistent with the educational goals we have always had.

iii) Family Testing: We will ask families to be responsible for testing their child prior to coming to campus so that we can be assured all students are healthy. The test would need to be conducted within four days of return to campus and families would need to provide documentation of the testing and results. Faculty and staff will also be required to have testing. Our goal is obvious: to assure that everyone returning to campus is healthy.

iv) Safety and Health Expectations: We anticipate mask-wearing, social distancing, hand hygiene, campus cleaning and health monitoring as central to life at Taft, and these details and frequently asked questions we will speak to in our future communications.

v) Hybrid Learning: We recognize that we may have a small number of students who temporarily may not be on campus, perhaps due to travel restrictions. We are confident we will be able to offer them a strong remote learning experience, and we are investing significant resources to outfit classrooms so that students will be able to participate both synchronously and asynchronously. All community events will be streamed and recorded, there will be attendance policies and numeric grades, and engagement in co-curricular activities will be expected.

vi) Parent/Legal Guardian Responsibility: For a student to come to campus, a parent—or guardian of the parent’s arranging—must be able to take custody of the student within 48 hours of the school notifying the parents that the child must leave campus. This is necessary if a student becomes ill, needs to be quarantined, or in the event the school is required to close. We recognize this may be a real challenge for some families, and if you have questions, please contact Jeremy LaCasse ([jlacasse@taftschool.org](mailto:jlacasse@taftschool.org)).

Life on campus will look different, and we have much work to do in the following two months to prepare. This is a powerful, and challenging historic moment for Taft. We know that each student will enter having experienced a time of extraordinary challenge and stress; and we will need to attend to their physical, emotional and mental health. Our commitment to a caring, welcoming, and inclusive community will be more important than ever. And our daily lives will include health and safety practices the school has never known. The challenges will be many and profound, but we remain optimistic, knowing that Taft has met tough times before, it is filled with passionate and strong people, and our tradition of working together will serve us well.

At our next communication, we will provide more detail around the specifics of campus life, including details around testing, dining, classrooms, dormitories, etc.

### **Remote Learning Review (RLR) and The Way Forward**

You will recall that we committed to a comprehensive review of our spring term remote learning, and this effort was led by Dean of Faculty Edie Traina and Dean of Academic Affairs Jen

Kenerson. The work included significant surveying, careful analysis of the data (which included the help of nearly twenty faculty members), drafting of a report, and recommendations going forward. Our goal was to determine what lessons we learned and how we could improve, and we promised to share what we learned.

### *Committee Charge*

The RLR was given the following charge: What changes if any to our current model would we wish to implement to be even more successful in student and faculty education, engagement, and well-being?

### *Data Collection*

Taft's students, faculty, and parents/guardians were formally surveyed during the final two weeks of May 2020 to gather quantifiable data and anecdotal narrative reflection. Completion Rates: Students: 321 responses; Faculty: 105 responses; Parents/Guardians: 366 responses.

### *Student Experience*

Overall, students had a neutral-to-positive experience. Students expressed real appreciation for the organization, compassion, commitment and feedback from teachers—including advisors. They indicated that they made expected progress towards educational goals and adjusted to the demands and challenges of distance learning. Key lessons learned from the student survey include the need for consistency in the daily schedule (especially start time), communication, assignment due dates, workload, and the use of a learning management system. Interest in additional student-to-student contact and co-curricular engagement was also desired. Students expressed mixed experiences in motivation and organization: many were challenged without the structure they knew at Taft. Overall, students made the best of spring 2020, but all shared the real preference to be on campus. Put simply, they missed being at Taft.

### *Parent/Guardian Experience*

The parent/guardian survey results skewed more neutral-to-negative. The perception among members of the parent body was that Taft could have provided more synchronous time for academic courses, advisor meetings, and co-curricular activities. Additionally, a subset of the parent/guardian body felt that the schedule and the program requirements worked against their student's learning. Many expressed the desire for numeric grades, the hope for even more consistency across all platforms, and more required attendance at School Meetings and engagement with co-curricular activities. The mixed feedback from parents included requests for more homework and less, as well as more and less rigor. "Direct Contact" was a common phrase, often relating to one-on-one communication with advisors, class deans, and teachers. Parents wanted clear communication but also appreciated the bi-weekly feedback, the individual efforts of faculty, and the school's openness to feedback.

### *Faculty Experience*

Similar to the student experience, faculty had a neutral-to-positive experience. Some key takeaways from the faculty survey are that they remain concerned about equity of access for students and how to manage the grading workload and expectations of feedback. The lessons learned from the faculty survey include the need for ongoing professional development specific to remote teaching and learning, the balance of synchronous and independent work vis-a-vis the daily schedule, and the development of best practices for remote feedback and grading. The faculty had mixed feedback about the functionality of the school's learning management system (LMS), the structure of the academic schedule, the preservation of scholarly rigor in a remote environment, and the resources the school was able to provide to support the execution of remote learning. Taft's faculty was appreciative of the responsiveness of the IT department, the availability of the administration and department heads, campus safety protocols, and the partnership of their students and colleagues as they adapted to remote teaching.

Importantly, the reflection process affirmed the school's need to focus on the following areas for the entire Taft community: equity and inclusion; support systems for mental health and well-being; clear and concise communication; and rigor and workload of program.

### *Remote Program Adjustments*

Moving forward, if Taft was to function as a remote school, the following adjustments would be made:

- The class day would run Monday through Friday, approximately from 9:00 AM to 12:30 (ET) and with the possibility of evening engagement from approximately 7:00-9:00.
- Required classes would meet three times each week per block;
- Students will be given Taft achievement grades (i.e. not Pass/Fail);
- The Academic Habits Rubric will be rewritten for remote learning;
- Assignment due dates will align with class block meetings;
- Attendance policies will be set for student engagement (e.g. School Meeting).

We also plan on creating time for advisor/advisee meetings, supporting the co-curricular program, and facilitating student-to-student contact. Required events will not be held on the weekends.

[A more detailed summary of the RLR can be found here.](#)

[Details about tuition, enrollment and deadlines can be found here.](#)

### *Conclusion*

I hope this information is helpful, and I remain optimistic that September will see students, faculty and staff on campus. Even as I recognize that at this point we have more questions than

answers, this I know: Taft's mission of the education of the whole student is urgently relevant, and our work in creating a caring, inclusive and welcoming community is more than ever needed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W.R. MacMullen", followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

William R. MacMullen '78  
Headmaster