
July 12, 2021

Dear Columbus Academy Families and Friends,

I hope these summer months are offering you some rest from the very taxing year we have all experienced and are giving each of our students an opportunity for renewal and growth the way only summer can provide. Let us all hold the sweetness of these moments dear, even as we consider the spotlight of concern focused on our school right now.

I am writing to you because in recent weeks Columbus Academy has been the subject of intense media coverage, which could be creating stress and confusion in our community. As a result, I feel you should hear from the school about what is being said about us, just as you did this past spring when similar situations arose. Let me assure you that our school, and our commitments to our mission, to our students, and to each other, have never been stronger.

As parents, you know that Columbus Academy is a unique school of choice. It attracts and retains families who believe in our mission and values. In order to thrive as a community we must have a relationship of trust and truth, in which we resolve differences and challenges by working together and not undermining one another. You should also know that our school tries to avoid public discussion of the details of individual family matters within our community. Thus, if a family leaves the school, whether by choice or otherwise, to the extent that we can do so, we try not to comment publicly about it.

By now you have probably seen or heard one of the many media accounts of the school's recent decision to deny re-enrollment to two families. In this instance, these two families have themselves chosen to widely publicize the school's decision. While we intend to continue exercising restraint in our public comments, it is important to note that if any parent or other family member of a student were to choose to launch a public campaign against our school, including false and misleading statements made on multiple national media programs, that parent or family member would be in violation of both our enrollment agreement and the basic trust relationship we all need to have with one another. Simply put, just as we expect our students to behave respectfully, we assume no less of the adults in our community.

Despite the fact that they are no longer part of our school community, these parents launched a renewed media blitz earlier this month, resulting in a deluge of false and derogatory reports about our school in general and certain individual leaders in particular. These incendiary claims have – predictably – triggered a vicious response from people all over the country who have no connection to the school. In the last week, multiple school employees and trustees have received hundreds of vulgar, racist, anti-Semitic, misogynistic and threatening email and voicemail messages, had their home addresses published online, and even had threats made against their family members. We have reported these threats to law enforcement.

The version of Columbus Academy being portrayed by many of the recent media reports is not much like the school you and your children have come to know. In fact, much of the recent media spotlight on our school is not really about Columbus Academy at all. Instead, it is part of a contentious national political debate around a concept called "Critical Race Theory" (sometimes referred to as CRT). CRT is a term used to refer – not always accurately – to a wide range of concepts and theories about the role of race in American life and the teaching of race-related concepts in both public and private schools. While we certainly do

engage students in conversations about current and historical matters including race and related issues, we do not “teach CRT.” As the school noted in a publication on this subject last May, “While students may learn about concepts related to critical race theory as one among many topics in current political and social discourse, they are not being ‘taught’ critical race theory any more than they are ‘taught’ fascism or socialism when studying European history, or ‘taught’ progressivism when studying Teddy Roosevelt.”

For this reason and others, the attacks against us by certain individuals, and in turn the media, are built on a fundamental misunderstanding of our curriculum and the most basic aspects of how we engage with students.

These are complex issues, and conversations about them can be difficult, sensitive and messy. However, because these are important conversations and topics, we deal with them. We embrace the truth – a concept John Exline '64, who will begin his 54th year of teaching and coaching at Academy next month, so eloquently underscored in his 2018 commencement address ([watch clip here](#)) – guided by our core values and mission. We have never proposed to teach any other way.

In early May the school summarized its curricular philosophy on cultural competence and other issues in a letter to our community ([available here](#)). It is a long piece (about 10 pages), but well worth the read if you would like to know more about how the school approaches these and other nuanced and complex topics. I was glad to see one reporter describe this summary as “...worth reading, as a model of how reasonable, sensible, temperate people try to balance competing concerns in providing a strong education and how best to respond to criticisms that distort or only partially represent the truth.”

We value the relationships we have built with each of you, and the unique perspectives you bring to Columbus Academy, even and especially because they may be different. Please continue to bring to the school's attention any concerns and questions you have about your children's experience of the education we are providing through our teachers and our staff. In the meantime, while we are certainly excited to see all of you again in the coming 2021-22 school year, please be sure to enjoy and to make the most of what remains of summer.

Sincerely,

Melissa Soderberg
Head of School