



April 30, 2018

A Letter to the High Meadows Community from the Board of Trustees  
(Statement read at the HMS Community Forum)

We are all here for one reason: we love High Meadows. And that goes for everyone you see: High Meadows alumni, parents, faculty, camp staff, administrators and board members. Take a look around. No matter who you see, they come to this forum for the purpose of preserving what is special about the school we love and setting it on a proper course for the future. Let's all remember that as we begin our discussion.

We, the members of the High Meadows board of trustees, have, like all of you, our own very special relationship with this rare and magical place. In most cases, we are parents of children formed by the culture and values of High Meadows; in all cases, we believe in the High Meadows mission. What makes us a little different is that we have all agreed to work on a volunteer basis to oversee the school's administration, represent the interests of its parents and students, and to make sure the future is sustainable and financially secure. This doesn't make us immune to criticism. And when members of the High Meadows community express concern about the direction of our school, we not only have to listen to them; we have to learn from them. Because that is the High Meadows way.

Over the past few weeks, we have all heard from many of the people in this room, in emails, phone calls and personal meetings. We have heard messages of support and messages of criticism. We have heard from those who champion the cause of tradition and those who champion the cause of change; we have heard from those who grieve the trees cut down for the Campus Plan and we have heard from those who mourn the sense of cooperation and common purpose that has always been at the heart of our school. We have even heard of members of the community taking sides, when in fact we are all on same side, and are motivated by the same desire to honor the school's past and to protect its future.

We are as grateful for your criticism as we are for your support, because they both serve as a reaffirmation of our community's passionate belief in High Meadows and unshakeable faith in its purpose. We are especially grateful for your questions, because they have provided High Meadows trustees with an opportunity to question ourselves, both for what we have done and haven't done. There is no member of this board who hasn't been spurred by the past few challenging weeks to engage in self-assessment, and no member of this board who isn't the better for it.

And so, in an effort to keep moving forward, we'd like to offer you some assurances and provide you with some answers. First, be assured that we have not just heard from you; we hear you.

We have read, we have listened, we have engaged, and your sentiments and ideas are with us as we sit down for meetings and work to improve as a board and help heal our community.

We also want to take responsibility. Much of the criticism that we've read and heard has not only been about the Campus Plan; it has been about our head of school, Jay Underwood, some of it extremely personal in nature. We believe that this is unfortunate. Jay, like everyone in positions of leadership, has made mistakes; he has also made many difficult decisions crucial to our mission as a beacon of progressive education and has made them with courage and integrity. By the bylaws of our school, he is also our employee, and he is to a large degree doing what we've asked him to do. He is following the course we've set for him and carrying out the priorities we prescribed. Jay is human; so are we. As we proceed forward, we will be counting on your help as we work to correct the mistakes we all have made. We will also be counting on you to treat Jay with the same sense of respect and forgiveness you owe all members of our community. Because that, too, is what makes us High Meadows.

And, finally, now that we've heard so many of you, we want to make sure that we keep hearing from you and that your voices remain integral to our work. We are presently working to bring parent, faculty, camp, alumni and student participation to the board, not simply by holding the occasional open meeting but by creating permanent task forces and advisory committees. Most importantly, we are beseeching you: keep talking to us. Keep writing us. Keep calling us. As difficult as the current situation has sometimes been, it has given us an immeasurable gift: a true dialogue between members of the community and members of the board.

We all love High Meadows. We all are here because we love High Meadows. And since, like all communities, High Meadows represents promises made and promises kept, we promise to continually earn your trust, as trustees; to supervise school administration with renewed vigor; and to always be open to your voices, even when your voices carry a difficult message.

But we'd like to ask you something in return. You are the High Meadows community. We ask you to remember that community means tolerance and cooperation. You want to preserve the school. We ask you not to tear down the school, especially on social media. You want to protect the school's values. We ask you not to attack people personally when and if you criticize their policies. We write this in the faith that acting in good faith — and believing that others act in good faith — will carry us through. We have an opportunity now to make High Meadows better than it has been, with a degree of openness and transparency that you have helped make happen. For years, the school has had a slogan: High Meadows, the way school should be. We ask you now to help us determine the way High Meadows should be.