

SEVEN QUESTIONS WITH....

SUSAN KEARNEY, HEAD OF SCHOOL, HARFORD DAY SCHOOL



Why did you decide on a career in education?

I began my career in IT and came to work in an independent school by chance. Over the years, I developed a love of and passion for education. This was in large part due to the incredibly dedicated and committed teachers I encountered both as a colleague and a parent. I saw that they had such a profound impact on students' lives. I wanted to become a part of that commitment to others. This led me to pursue and earn my Master's Degree in Education and to alter my career path to tap into the academic side of the school.

What experiences and preparation helped you become a head of school?

In 24 years at St. Paul's School, I learned so much from so many. I observed the finest teaching and teachers who knew and cared so much about their students' lives and well-being. I learned to love and appreciate and value teachers. I had the opportunity to teach and interact with students of all ages. Loving kids is at the essence of being a head of school, and I absolutely love kids.

I learned about the business side of independent schools - technology, budgeting, fundraising, admissions - all by working side by side with talented professionals. That experience helped me understand and appreciate the complexities of running a non-profit organization. Serving as a trustee on two non-profit Boards helped me to understand what effective governance looks like.

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Finally, my role as a mother, spouse, sister, daughter, and friend has prepared me to become a head of school. Love, patience, hard work, respect, kindness, selflessness, determination - the list goes on and on - are qualities that are at the heart of good relationships and at the heart of the Head's role. Being a good head of school is like being a good parent, friend or caregiver: service to others is more important than service to self.

Who was your best teacher?

Mrs. Marcia Henshaw taught me Geometry and Trigonometry. She had very high expectations and pushed me and my classmates to the boundaries of our own perceived abilities. I walked into her class with an ambivalent attitude (bordering on negative) after a mediocre Algebra experience. I walked out with a confidence that I felt I had earned. It sounds cliche to say something 'clicked' that first year, but it did, and I owe it to a teacher who expected nothing but the best and who treated all of her students with equal respect. Mrs. Henshaw taught me that you can be tough and demanding and you can be kind and respectful at the same time.

What experiences as a school head brought you the most joy?

So far? Everything. Meeting and greeting students. Receiving and delighting in hugs and artwork from our littlest students. Observing the incredible growth that occurs everyday in our lives - physical, behavioral, intellectual - at all ages, 3 year olds through 8th grade and all ages of adults. Knowing and appreciating our teachers and staff. Understanding and connecting with our parents in partnership for their children. Caring for and becoming a part of a thriving, compassionate community brings me joy every day.



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How has the work of heading a school changed in your time?

The Head's job is more complex than it once was when academic leadership was the primary need in thriving independent schools. Challenges are magnified in 2019 compared to what they appeared to be when I started my career in independent education. Financial challenges require more of the head's attention and focus: tuition growth not keeping pace with inflation, increased demand for financial aid, enrollment pressures due to declining population and financial constraints on millennial parents. Add to that growing concerns around safety and security, civility and a divisive national climate and it makes for a challenging and complex role. All of these complexities need to be balanced against the essentially human side of leading a school. In the end, caring for the community is as critical as managing the business side. Both are essential in sustaining and growing a successful school.

What lessons have you learned about leadership?

I've learned that it is essential to model what you want and expect from others. If you want others to work hard; work hard. If you want others to respect each other; respect others. If you want kindness and compassion to be at the heart of your school; show kindness and compassion to those in your school. And, most importantly - listen, listen, listen. If you weren't serving as a Head of School, what would you be doing instead, or what would your life be like? I did not set out to be a Head of School in my career, nor did I plan to start a career in technology right out of college. As a political science major, I thought I wanted to work on Capitol Hill or be a lawyer. I am so grateful neither of those plans came to fruition. Frankly, I cannot imagine a life outside of education. I cannot think of a more gratifying life that working in a school community surrounded by children and people who love children.



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