



THE WHEELER SCHOOL

July 31, 2020

Dear Middle School Families:

In these last six months, for fun, I go for walks and listen to podcasts. I have a few options for walking routes: I can turn right out of my back gate, or I can turn left. I can go up the hill or I can go down. I have endless options for podcasts, and with all this walking time, I've expanded my library to some wonderful and far-reaching selections.

One podcast I've loved for a long time is *Hidden Brain*, and on a [recent episode](#) I learned about research that has proven that diverse groups of people come up with more creative contributions to art, science, and business than groups with similar backgrounds. I was particularly captivated by the tale of [Cristina Pato](#), a Galician bagpipe virtuoso, and how she collaborated with Yo Yo Ma's [Silkroad Ensemble](#), which brings together extraordinary musicians from many different cultures to see what radical musical magic can happen, as they say, "when strangers meet."

Through this pandemic, my world has simultaneously gotten much smaller and much broader. Like all of us, I have pulled in and stretched out. My dog and I walk the same tired paths around my neighborhood. But all those hours and hours of walking have opened my ears to stories from around the world that in my pre-COVID life, I might not have had time to hear. Everything feels so familiar right now: I know every crack in the sidewalk, every house on the block. But at the same time, things feel new and askew. I conduct work calls as I amble the neighborhood, because that's a more private system than a call in my dining room office. I smile with my eyes at my neighbors, because my mouth is covered by my mask. I seek out new stories to listen to, because I want to feel connected with the larger world.

Our students are going to feel the same push and pull of familiar and tilted this fall. School will be the same in many ways. In middle school we will prioritize relationships, curiosity, and support of the whole child just as we always have. We will continue to pursue the study of a broad range of subjects with zeal. But we will deftly adjust our approaches to commit to the health and safety of those in our community. I'm sure you've read lots of articles like [this](#)

[well-illustrated one](#) about how to picture back-to-school 2020. We are so lucky to have the technology, infrastructure, and staffing to help our kids navigate this new normal.

When we meet in September, there is going to be an element of feeling like strangers. Though some of us have been a part of this community for decades, and some of us will be brand-new to the school, none of us have been together for a long, long time. It is going to feel jarring to come together again, with our diverse experiences from the past six months, and our unique hopes and dreams for the next six months. But just like the Silkroad Ensemble, we will create beautiful and unexpected music together: inventing new ways to play while staying apart, finding new friends by bonding over quarantine doldrums, and diving into ideas while smiling over masks.

As the administration and faculty put finishing touches on the plans for September, I will update you with some specifics of your child's day: drop-off, lunch, athletics, and pickup. Please expect an email from me at the end of next week with these details, and feel free to reach out to me with any questions or concerns. I can't wait to smile at you with my eyes.

Warmly,

Vanessa O'Driscoll