



# ANNA JULIA COOPER

## EPISCOPAL SCHOOL

FAITH · KNOWLEDGE · PRIDE

October 12, 2021

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Michael Maruca  
*Head of School*

To Whom It May Concern:

Year twelve and the beginning of year thirteen have been eventful ones for AJC. I am proud to report that we did not miss one day of in-person instruction beginning with our four-week summer school in July of 2020. However, like all schools, we learned how to pivot and improvise. For about half the '20 – '21 school year we alternated between girls and boys in the building in order to meet the Covid spacing guidelines. Eventually we were able to have almost all the students in school in-person.

All but three of our 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduates matriculated to independent schools, a sizable portion of them going to Cristo Rey Richmond. Along with that, our connection with and placement of students at a number of the better-known area independent schools like the Saints, Trinity, Collegiate, and Steward, is stronger than ever. Eleven of our high school graduates began as freshman in college this fall. Our total number of graduates stands at 218 and we remain in touch with about 95% of them. In August, we hosted a very successful first alumni reunion with about 45 in attendance and look forward to several more this year alone. Continuing to work with and remain in contact with our graduates remains a core strength of the School.

As always, there are some grads who are struggling, some significantly so, and we remain committed to trying to help them as much as those who are thriving in college or the workforce. Two graduates are now on staff here, and another will be a long-term sub beginning in November when a teacher goes out on maternity leave. This is a wonderful and welcome development in the life of AJC.

Several months ago, we completed our \$16M Capital Campaign in received donations and pledges. Approximately half of that is for our new gymnasium and middle school building; the other half is slated to be divided between a bridge for programmatic expenses as our annual budget grows in the next several years and the establishment of an endowment. The gymnasium is completed and currently (and enthusiastically) in use every day. As I write this, we are awaiting the CO for the middle school pending a couple of final inspections. And for the fourth year in a row, we were forward-funded as the fiscal year began on July 1. Our supporters continue to be extraordinarily generous to us.

With the beginning of summer school in July, we opened a 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for the first time, with plans to open Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> next school year. In those two grades, along with our 4<sup>th</sup> grade entering class, we are seeing firsthand the collateral damage and consequent challenges of working with students who had not been inside a school building for almost a year-and-a-half. The academic, social and emotional toll is hard to overstate. Meeting their needs ranges from challenging to overwhelming and teachers and staff are feeling it.

Speaking of which, like everyone else AJC has carried the weight of Covid and all of its complications. Seemingly all systems and activities became, and remain, harder. What used to be simple processes, e.g. lunch and athletics, now look entirely different or are on pause. Nor are we working with a population which is eager to be vaccinated. No staff member has been immune from the personal, familial, and workplace challenges of the virus. Cracks can become fissures and all of us have ridden the waves of anxieties and uncertainty about the future with still no end in sight. Throughout all of that, we have made every effort to balance those obstacles with the compelling need to be here and to be open for our students.

About six months ago, our Board made the unanimous decision to change our name, removing the word “Episcopal” from the title. This was not done lightly, and followed a more than two-year deliberation with all staff and board members, as well as many volunteers and donors. We also consulted with Bishop Goff who with great encouragement and freedom urged us to do what we believed was best for the School and its mission. She said that with or without the word “Episcopal,” our relationship with the Diocese would not change.

That lengthy deliberation can be summarized around two main points: 1) Since the School’s founding, *and because of its name*, many potential and actual donors have assumed AJC is funded all or in large part by the Diocese. While this may be a natural assumption, it is not true, and because we depend entirely on an increasing number of donors who are willing to bet on us, that misconception could be costly. 2) We also felt that, taken as a whole, and a deep connection to the Episcopal community notwithstanding, the word ‘Episcopal’ does not accurately reflect our practical and *de facto* religious and Christian identity. To name only one factor, you could count on less than one hand the staff and students here who identify as Episcopalians.

All of that said, our staff and our Board are emphatic about retaining our religious practices of daily prayer, scheduled and spontaneous, religious symbols and language, our acknowledgement of Christ as the center of our faith and identity, and the continuation of weekly chapel whose form is primarily that of the Episcopal tradition.

In about a month we will have our five-year interim accreditation visit from VAIS. I feel that we are more than ready for it. From our curriculum to our audit, risk management to personnel policies and practices, the quality of our programs and of our board, and the overall strength of our ‘community of affection,’ we are as ready as we can be for the next five years.

What are our concerns? Funding is always a concern. We have grown in thirteen years from 25 students and a budget of roughly \$325,000 to 147 students and a budget of nearly \$3M, a significant amount of which supports our graduates. However, that is not our primary concern. The primary and overarching concern is whether we can sustain the quality of all that we are

doing every single day in a way that has a significant enough impact on our students to fulfill our mission and merit the extraordinary and generous support we receive. The margin for error always feels thin. Our students come to us with vast gaps in areas others take for granted and for which there is no remedy but time, excellence and love. Only the accumulation of days and classes that are transformative will be sufficient to ‘change the trajectory of their lives.’ As we continue to commit to serving at least three-quarters of our population from four of Richmond’s neighboring public housing communities, the environments out of which they come do them no favors. Maintaining our extraordinary staff and ensuring that they feel content and energized, doing the hard but necessary work every day (when every day is precious), and keeping at it when failure is part of our daily bread—this is our greatest concern.

In that regard, I guess things haven’t really changed much in thirteen years! We’ll check back in a year and see where we are.

Sincerely,

Michael Maruca  
Head of School