

# GORDON SCHOOL

November 2014



## A Columbus Day invitation

BEFORE SAYING "I KNOW", REMEMBERING TO SAY "I'M NOT SURE"

by Head of School Ralph L. Wales

A day after the Columbus Day holiday, I received an email from Gordon's seventh and eighth grade math and science teacher Blake Fisher.

*Hi Mr. Wales,*

*Hope you had a nice long weekend! Just wanted to let you know that my advisory wrote you a letter and it is in your mailbox. Thanks!*

Succinct and pleasant, the message belied the power of what lay in my mailbox.

When I first saw the letter, two things were clear right away. First, it contained a lot of material; the envelope quite literally bulged. Second, this was the work of children and not an adult. The seal was slightly off kilter and the envelope had a distinctly rumpled look. Whoever had stuffed the envelope was not concerned about appearance.

This group of young adolescents was asking me to reconsider Gordon's position on Columbus Day. Their letter offered some suggestions, and included three pieces of additional source material (noted in their letter as *Attachments #1, #2, and #3*) that effectively presented the many different perspectives that wrap this discussion.

Their request, and their research, left me no obvious choice. This was not a yes-or-no question. It was an invitation to engage.

No, these thinkers were only doing what they've been told to at Gordon: be curious, always wonder why things are the way they are, and before you come to say, "I know," stay attached to the much more rigorous (and stimulating) position of "I'm not sure." And continue your research.

And so, here's what was on my plate:

*What we are proposing is that we continue to have Columbus Day off of school but modify the name and focus of the day.*



Notably, they included a variety of points of view, including ones that are diametrically opposed to one another. Among other things, I now have a document that deplores politically correct thinking. I have an historic reflection that reveals that opposition to the holiday in the United States originated in the 19th century when anti-immigrant groups deplored its association with Catholicism. I am also now aware of how the day is noted in Venezuela, other countries in Latin America, North Dakota and Hawaii. (All very differently, by the way.)

And rather than dictating a solution, their letter concluded by suggesting three possible paths the school could take when reconsidering Columbus Day. Each one reflected a different lean in the underlying positions on the topic, but they all maintain the consensus of the group: something has to be done with the current situation.

I have begun to think things through. My first step was to meet with the eight students who authored the letter. At that meeting, each student explained a part of their research or

a portion of their position. Ownership of this effort clearly rests in each student. No one is just along for the ride.

Out of that meeting, I told the students that my next step was to write this piece. I told the students that, to match the quality of their research and thinking, I needed to get my own intellectual feet under me.

I have that footing now. I know fully where the students' position comes from. I have had to recognize that if I am serious about our school's pedagogic approach and mission, then now is a time I must engage thoughtfully and substantively. I know that I must, with the help of these students and other adults, minimally state the school's position on something that, to this point, Gordon has, in some ways, just taken for granted.

My stance on this issue has been, thus far, a non-position, an unacceptable conclusion for an institution deeply invested in critical inquiry.

Expect to hear from me later in the year.



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