

From the desk of **Shane Kidwell**



12 September 2022

Dear Parents and broader St Alban's Community

It has been a privilege to take some time off for reflection, to read, to spend time with my family and to contemplate the state of education in our country. In this time, I have been overwhelmed and shocked by the sense of dread and the pessimism that permeates our collective lives. I have realized, on reflection, that I have never experienced such negativity and moaning throughout my short life. There is a real sense that we as a community and as a society need to wake up to our poor behaviour. We need to confront the scourge of polarization and we need to be awake to the intentional and direct attack on decency, independence and wellbeing. We cannot sit back and accept that a minority of lazy thinkers can speak into the lives of most citizens in this country in a way which divides, destroys values and morals, and seeks to sow hate and division. We need to be awake to the reality that we have a duty to our sons (and daughters) to create an environment which is diverse, robust, positive and filled with hope. We need to be strong in our intention to encourage critical thinking and we need to be awake to those who seek to exhaust our ability to think rationally and critically as we allow our sons to grow into the young men we have always hoped and prayed they could become. Over the eons of time, it has always been easier to take the low road or the path of least resistance, but it is our duty to ourselves and to our children to seek out truth, to remain true to ourselves and to our Christian values and to find the high road - the road that encourages hope, optimism, opportunity and the realization that hard-work, resilience and determined effort create incremental traction which will hold us in good stead in the future. Abraham Lincoln, in his annual address to congress in 1862 said: *"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."*

The occasion is piled high with difficulty in the education arena, around the globe. There is an international shortage of teachers which, if not recognized, will result in a global crisis and this is exacerbated by several significant factors which need to be noted.

Firstly, COVID-19 has disrupted the education landscape and teachers are considering their options. Secondly, emigration amongst teachers has skyrocketed. The UK has an education crisis and a teacher shortage and this economy, as well as the Australian and New Zealand economies, is drawing educators overseas. FNB Senior Economist, Siphamandla Mkhwanazi, told the annual Tax Indaba, that one in five house sales are related to emigration, and 71% of those selling is aged between 35 and 44, and often individuals at the peak of their careers. Thirdly, the average age of a teacher in South Africa is around 52 years of age and we are fast approaching a critical teacher shortage which will exacerbate this problem. Teachers who are excellent in the areas of Mathematics, Science, English, Accounting and IT are becoming scarcer and scarcer. Fourthly, teachers who are committed to staying in South Africa are moving out of Gauteng to the Cape. There are several reasons for this semigration which are well documented. Lastly, the emergence of the so-called jackhammer parent, has been a cause for concern. Much has been written about helicopter parents and they were followed by lawnmower parents, but more and more we are seeing the emergence of jackhammer parents. In an article in the Washington post, veteran Educator, Kelly Treleaven, writes about her experience with the advent of what she calls "jackhammer parents" at a time of egregious political polarization in education — and why they could drive educators out of the profession. Read the article here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/08/01/meet-the-jackhammer-parent/>





Not everyone has the privilege of stepping out of their normal routines for a period of time to contemplate, to read and to consider the challenges which lie ahead for their professions. I have been afforded this privilege and I am grateful for the time, the head-space as well as the ability to rejuvenate my soul and I would like to thank the Council for affording me this time. St Alban's College is a special place and as we contemplate celebrating our 60th year in 2023, we will certainly be focussing on building community, driving academic excellence and developing and implementing ways for young men to grow into strong, principled and value-driven adults who will make a difference for good in society at large.

I look forward to engaging with you as we head into the final term of the year. We are looking forward to many important rites of passage this term: House Dinners, Valediction, Speech Day, Final Assembly and, of course, the Form 3 Journey which has established itself in our calendar for over two decades. This term is a time to celebrate, it is a time for resilience and hard work and, most of all, it is a time to reflect on our personal and collective performances both in and out of the classroom context. Perhaps your son has not lived up to your or his expectations. Perhaps he has found himself in some precarious situations. Perhaps he is working to his potential and finds himself in a confident and positive position as we head into the final examinations. Whatever his circumstance, we need to be there for him, we need to hold him accountable and we need him to take responsibility for his actions or inaction. Protecting your son from the truth and the reality he is facing will not do him any favours and I would encourage you to work alongside us, and him, as we seek to enable him to be prepared for a brighter future.

There are three key things that boys will need for the future – the ability to cope and interact with change, the capacity to take accountability for their actions (or lack thereof), be resilient, courageous and develop grit and determination and, most importantly, the ability to figure out the truth and to stand up for what is right and to make decisions based on sound values and principles. The boys' school market is also keenly competitive and I am pleased to inform you that we continue to hold on firmly to our values. We do not try to compare ourselves with other schools but we ensure that we hold on boldly to our key differentiators:

1. We are a **small school** which is family orientated and there is no doubt that you get a sincere sense of belonging and connection when you walk onto our campus and interact with staff and boys. We will be implementing a number of opportunities for parents (and boys) to interact seamlessly with staff should they feel the need. We would like to improve our communication around specific personal issues and **I will be working in the Tom Hamilton Wellness Centre on Wednesday mornings from 07h30 – 10h30 and 11h30 – 12h30. Please feel free to pop in and engage me in conversation should you want to raise an issue, discuss a problem or interact about your son.**
2. We are a school that remains **connected to our humble roots** – entitlement, arrogance and one-upmanship have no place here and we will be actively encouraging boys to be grateful for the sacrifices of their parents and to be focused on making a difference in the world at large. We will also be insisting that parents deal with issues in a professional and collegial manner. There is no room for 'jackhammer' parents at St Alban's and I know I can rely on all parents to interact with us in a manner which reflects decency and respect, and in a manner which will help and encourage their sons.

Please may I reiterate that parents should use the well-established communication channels provided by the College, starting with your House Director or your son's tutor. The same applies for your son's teacher in a specific subject in the academic arena.

Furthermore, we will be instituting an academic helpline which will assist parents and boys with academic queries with a 24-hour turnaround time. The email address academicsupport@stalbanscollege.com will be used for this purpose. I will personally be monitoring this account and the queries as we seek to centralise communication with teachers around a myriad of issues. We are hoping that this will be a more efficient and personable way of resolving issues.

3. We are a **high-purpose environment** and we encourage boys to continually reach higher and to believe in their potential. We continue to focus all our efforts on your sons' academic progress and, as such, we continue to recruit top quality academic staff members who will enable them to fly. We welcome the following full-time academic staff this term: Karien van Schoor – Science Teacher with significant IEB experience, and Hattingh Davel – Director of Music.
4. We are **process-driven** rather than results-driven. We ensure that our boys develop the skills which will hold them in good stead for life by understanding struggle, hard work and resilience. Boys need to learn from their mistakes,





take accountability for their actions and develop the skills which will hold them in good stead at university and beyond. We always appreciate parents' support as we encourage boys to take responsibility for their actions, or lack thereof.

5. We also remain a leader in **innovation**. Our partnerships with the University of Pretoria and recently our conversations with the University of St Andrews in Edinburgh as well as our connections via the International Boys' Schools Coalition help us to base our decision making on sound research. Furthermore, we want to establish opportunities for boys to become involved in projects which will allow them to experience and explore their interests and passions.

It is wonderful to be able to report that the positive culture which has long been established at the College continues to thrive and grow and develop. This culture has its roots in creating a space which encourages and invites ALL boys to feel like they belong and to feel that they can make mistakes, be vulnerable and develop a sense of trust and understanding with each other. And finally, this culture gives us purpose and allows us to prepare young men for the future world – for life. This culture fosters seeing around differences, whether the differences be race, gender, academic ability or sporting prowess. This culture thrives on lively debate in a learning environment that encourages critical thinking and learning to agree to disagree. **This culture does not encourage victimhood or dabble in the polarisation of identity politics. This culture encourages authenticity and the ability to allow yourself to have vulnerable and complex conversations. This culture is rooted in our Christian values.**

Socrates said: *“Education is the kindling of a flame not the filling of a vessel.”*

St Alban's is not just about filling the vessel, or purely about academics, **it is about allowing young men to make sense around the fringes of life. About having a peripheral vision which will allow them not to be blindsided in the future.** We need to arm our children with the skills and capacity to see through misinformation. Parents, never be too despondent about what happens in the school of hard knocks because, more often than not, there are ways of ameliorating the impact of the blows.

So, as we move through the final term of the year, we look forward to partnering with you as your young man engages with the curriculum and life beyond the borders of the classroom. We look forward to engaging you in conversation. We look forward to solving problems with you and we look forward to seeing your young man thrive and grow and develop into the young man we all know he can become.

I would again like to raise the issue of vaping at school. Unfortunately, this is on the rise in South Africa and around the world. As indicated previously, we have a zero tolerance for this at St Alban's and I would like to inform you that should your son be caught vaping at school, or be present when others are vaping, he will immediately be suspended from school for a period of a week. I would appreciate your support of this as we seek to eradicate this scourge and protect our boys as we move into the end of the year.

Lastly, and once again, I am appreciative of the time given to me to reflect during my recent sabbatical and I think we underestimate the effects of the pandemic on our psyche. We have collectively experienced a trauma and in doing so have developed a sense of anxiety, frustration and anger and it is important that we take note of our own emotions as we interact, partner and seek to guide the next generation into the future.

I would like to encourage parents to use the communication channels provided to ensure that we connect more often in a time of deep and complex change. Please contact your House Director or a Deputy Head or my office should you want to discuss something, or please take me up on my offer to connect with me at the Wellness Centre on a Wednesday morning.

Every blessing as we move towards the end of the year.

Sincerely

Shane Kidwell
HEADMASTER

