



Dear Loomis Chaffee Alumni,

I hope that you are all well—although realistically I know that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many of your or your loved ones' lives. Please know that we are thinking of you, and as the late Howie Richmond of the great Class of 1935 would promise me, we are sending “good vibes” your way. Now more than ever, family and community are everything. *Ne Cede Malis!*

I am writing to you from my office in Founders Hall. Classes are underway; 363 of our students are actually coming to campus for in-person classes with the remaining 353 studying online. Those of us who are here on the Island are wearing face masks, observing the rules about social distancing and hand hygiene, and generally trying to stay safe. I doubt that we have had a more difficult or stranger beginning of the school year in our history.

In addition to the pandemic, we are facing one of the most divisive political situations in our nation's history, a climate emergency that seems to get worse by the minute, and a national fight for racial justice. As I told our students at this year's opening convocation, we cannot ignore these issues; former president of Dartmouth John Sloan Dickey used to tell his students in the 1930s, “The world's problems are our problems.” He also told them, “There are no problems that good human beings cannot solve.”

I have already written to you on a couple of occasions about the school's response to the fight for racial justice. I thank the many of you who wrote in applauding our efforts to become more inclusive. A few of you questioned one or two of the initiatives, but I don't think I heard from anyone who disagreed with our basic premise that we need to be a school that meets all of our students' needs. I won't take up more of your time on this issue for now, but I would like to share the decision-making that has gone into the opening of the school this fall.

The pandemic really started to have an impact on the school last March. We were heading into spring break following a most difficult flu season. Indeed, it was so bad that we considered closing the school a week early because so many of our faculty and students were sick. Ultimately, we made it to break just as the full impact of the COVID-19 virus was beginning to unfold. On the advice of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and public health officials, businesses and institutions began to close, offices began to work from home, state governments recommended closing the schools, and it became very clear that, at the very least, we would need to delay the beginning of the spring term. We did that only to decide just days

later that we would need to remain online for the whole term. I was so impressed with the quick turnaround by our faculty to put almost 400 classes online and to keep our students engaged and involved with their schoolwork. As you may know, we eventually had to postpone graduation and reunions and held our Summer Program online as well.

By early summer, our focus was on the fall. Would we be able to open? Would the virus dissipate with the warmer weather? Would the medical establishment develop a vaccine or new more effective treatments? Was the virus really something about which we needed to worry for our students? What about our faculty and staff? Should we bring back just our boarders? Or just the day students? What about our international students? Would they be able to get here? How do we quarantine those students coming from outside New England? How do we manage the multiple time zones of our students? Would we have interscholastic athletics? What are our peer schools doing? The questions and the challenges were immense, and new questions present themselves on a weekly basis. We are also very aware of the timing of our decisions. We have tried to make them in as timely a fashion as we can so parents, students, and faculty can do the planning that they need to do, while also giving the situation time to improve—which unfortunately it has not!

Starting last March, the Board of Trustees began to meet monthly as we all contemplated what was in the best interest of the school, always keeping the health and safety of our community members at the forefront of our decision-making. Several of the Trustees have children at the school or are past parents, some have medical experience, while others bring a host of other experiences and skills to our decision-making process. Loomis Chaffee is truly blessed to have such a dedicated and hardworking Board. While the Board has been meeting monthly, the administrative team has met almost daily to work out the plan for this year.

The earliest decisions that we made, and ones that have stood us in good stead, included changing our 2020-21 calendar, our term structure, and our daily schedule. If this sounds drastic—it was. Specifically, we decided to do the following:

- Break our three ten-week terms into six mini-terms of five weeks each;
- Change the daily schedule to accommodate both in-person and online students in multiple time zones;
- Require significant additional professional development for all teaching faculty over the summer for continued online instruction;
- Have students study intensely two to three subjects per mini-term rather than five or six per term;
- Increase the amount of asynchronous work for both students learning online and those learning in person;
- Move to a fully online school between Thanksgiving and January 2021 rather than have students return to school for a two-and-a-half-week session in December;
- Enhance advising for all students so that we are more aware of issues before they become problems;
- Provide an afternoon health and wellness set of programs for all students regardless of where they are;

- Implement physical changes to the campus, including installing plastic shields in classrooms, the dining hall, bathrooms, and elsewhere; spreading out desks to avoid overcrowding; renting four tents for the quadrangles to accommodate outdoor teaching and activities; installing touch-free automatic lights and flushable toilets; enhancing the air-vac systems throughout the campus; and making other improvements.

Around mid-August, with just weeks to go before the beginning of Fall Term 1 and despite all the preparations and precautions that we had undertaken, we decided that we would not have a residential component. The only students who could come to campus for in-person classes during Fall Term 1 were day students and those boarders who were willing and able to commute on a daily basis. This was very disappointing to us, but we simply did not have confidence that we could effectively test our students and get the results back quickly enough to monitor the health of our school community. As a result of that decision, as indicated earlier, we have approximately half of our students studying on campus, going to classes, and meeting in person with their faculty while the other half is online.

So school is ongoing. Classes are going well. Most have seven or fewer students facilitating the necessary social distancing for in-person classes while also allowing for a much greater level of interaction and personal attention for both in-person and online classes. All students are learning asynchronously as well as synchronously, so they are developing greater independence and are taking more responsibility for their education. While the Founders League canceled fall term interscholastic athletics competition, we do have a robust afternoon activities schedule for all students including training and practices for all our interscholastic athletes. Students and faculty meet weekly for Thursday Advisory Group meetings. One recent meeting centered on the [All School Read & Write](#). The combination of reading and writing with a focus on either the pandemic, racism, or social justice has been particularly successful. From what I hear from faculty, the students' reflections on these issues and how they intersect were thoughtful, challenging, and engaging. The previous evening students had participated in the faculty-led summer reading book chats. We had discussions of 22 different books from a wide range of genres, including the most popular books, Matt Haton's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Daniel James Brown's *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*, and Erica Dunbar Jones' *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*. I led a discussion on Colson Whitehead's *Nickel Boys*, which I thoroughly enjoyed and hope that the students did, too.

We also worry of course about our students' mental wellbeing. Nationwide, adolescent anxiety was already recognized as a major problem. This new global health catastrophe, combined with the isolation that comes with distance learning, adds another layer of concern for us all. Of course, advisors, teachers, and coaches become more important than ever, and we have expanded our programming to provide still more robust contact between the school and our students. We have also hired psychotherapist Lynn Lyons, an expert on adolescent anxiety, to work with the school this year.

We have just made the decision to invite back all of our boarding students for in-person learning for Fall Term 2 which begins on October 15. All students, both boarding and day, will be

required to provide a negative COVID-19 test result before coming to campus. Testing is a big part of our health and safety protocols this year. We have already tested our whole in-person population twice in Fall Term 1 and will do so again at the beginning of Fall Term 2. Thereafter, we will be testing 10 percent of our on-campus population—students, faculty, and staff—on a weekly basis. We will also continue to monitor the local situation with the virus and to follow all public health guidelines. None of us knows how long this situation will persist—but we are planning to offer a hybrid model — both online and in-person classes — at least through the end of this academic year. For that reason, we have to ensure that we do everything possible to make the education that we provide as strong as possible.

I will be hosting a State of the School webinar for alumni on Wednesday evening, October 7, at 7:00 p.m. and hope that you will be able to join me then. Please use the webinar link to [register for this event](#). I will provide you with some further updates on the school and answer your questions. In the meantime, I invite you to check out two powerful art exhibitions. The [Black Lives Matter Self Portraiture project](#), a collaboration between faculty in the Visual Arts Department and student leaders, celebrates our Black community through portraits. The second exhibition, in The Sue and Eugene Mercy Jr. Gallery and online, is *Suffrage 100*, a collection of work by 19 female artists of A.I.R. Gallery of Brooklyn, N.Y., marking the 100-year anniversary of ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which secured voting rights for women. Because the exhibition is not open to the public at this time, the Visual Arts Department created a wonderful website so anyone can view the exhibition: ["Suffrage 100" Honors Century of Voting Rights Activism](#).

I am proud of what we have done to be ready for this school year. The jury is out still as to whether we have met our own and our students' expectations, but I know that we have done our very best. We have an amazing faculty who care deeply about our students' wellbeing, and they are committed to continuing the fine tradition of an excellent Loomis Chaffee education. Thank you all for your support. I look forward to talking with you soon.

Warm regards,  
Sheila