

Dear Watershed Community,

Welcome to the 2023-2024 school year! As many of you know, I often send out notes on Thursdays to reflect on what's happening at Watershed and beyond, to share ideas about learning and teaching, and sometimes just to share updates.

I love the beginning of school. It is a time of energy and excitement, of new ideas, and of a bit of (healthy) nervousness. One of the great pleasures of working in education is that we get to begin again every year. We get to reflect on the past year, thinking about what to continue and what to improve. The cyclical nature of schools is truly a gift.

This year there is a lot to reflect on and a lot to celebrate. For this note, I will just mention a few things that I will likely dig into more in future notes. As noted above, these fall into three general categories: Current happenings at Watershed, broader thoughts about education, and recent updates.

Current happenings at Watershed

- Belonging: We've started the year with a big focus on belonging. Watershed is a community where we want everyone to feel they belong. Our seniors have done a wonderful job setting the tone for the school, and our 8th graders are spending orientation learning about leadership. I am excited about how the year has started!
- High-quality work: We believe that in too many schools, students spend a lot of time on small tasks and worksheets, and not enough time doing high-quality work – work they are truly proud of. We will continue our focus on helping students produce high quality work, with our educators taking time this year to think together (and with students) about how we can best achieve this goal.
- Orientation travel: High school backpacking trips left today! What an amazing experience for these students and educators. Eight days backpacking, eight days learning to support one another in community, eight days without our cell phones! And middle schoolers are heading out camping on Sunday. I am excited to join the 8th grade on Monday night and Tuesday – to learn together with them!
- Partnering with parents: We know that a strong partnership between parents and the school is essential for the best student learning and growth. We are leaning into this even more this year, including the in-person meetings with advisors last week (I appreciate parents and educators making the time for this!), the Watershed Parent Association organizing advisory potlucks, and an upcoming education series in partnership with the Association of Colorado Independent Schools (more info to come, but here is a [teaser of the programs in store!](#)). We plan to host in-person watch parties around these webinars.

Broader thoughts about education

- Educating for hope and well-being: I'm sure it's not news to anyone reading this that there is growing concern about the well-being of young people. They are wrestling with what it means to enter a world with many challenges (e.g., social, environmental, political), they are struggling with how to navigate adolescence with new challenges (e.g., social media), and schools across the country are seeing a rise in adolescent anxiety. And schools are thinking about how traditional learning structures might (inadvertently) be contributing to the challenges that

adolescents now face. At Watershed, as we look to the future, we are exploring how we educate for hope, how we educate for well-being. We are asking the question: What if school not only prepared students for college, but also really focused on human flourishing? Watershed is well positioned for this. More to come about this.

- Artificial Intelligence: So much of the discourse in education circles since the release of CHatGPT last November has been about how it can be used to cheat. This is certainly a valid concern, but I think it's a distraction. Recently, the conversation seems to be moving toward a recognition that this is yet another powerful (and yes imperfect) tool for us to use. Indeed, the questions we should be asking are, "How might AI allow our students to explore questions more deeply? How might AI help students do work that makes a real contribution to our broader community?" Currently, the large language models are good (mostly!) at answering questions we already know the answer to. At Watershed, we want students to explore real questions: questions we don't know the answer to. How can we leverage the capabilities of AI to help us with that?

Recent (BIG) Update

- We are excited to share that we have completed the purchase of 5405 Spine Road, Boulder! This building is directly across Spine Road from our other new building 5400 Spine Road. Our next task is renovating the buildings to give our students and educators the campus they deserve – a campus that is embedded in the broader community, a campus that sparks awe and wonder, and cultivates inquiry and community. Just today, our 8th graders came to the new campus to tour the buildings – getting a sense of the future of Watershed! I was thrilled to see their excitement about the potential of this new campus – and it was wonderful to see students begin to inhabit these spaces! More information to come as we move toward renovations – with the goal of occupying our new campus in the fall of 2024!

All for now. Sorry for the long note!

Hope you are all well, and that the year is off to a wonderful start for you!

Warmly,

Tim