

State of the School Address
by Deborah Kay Betts, Head of School
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I sometimes think about these lines from Lewis Carroll's *Alice In Wonderland*, "There's no use trying," Alice said. "One can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Thank you, Michael, for your remarks. I'd also like to thank Episcopal's Board of Trustees. Because of the Board's tireless work, its confidence in me, and its belief in the School, EHS is on a trajectory which, three years ago, would have been thought impossible. Because of the Board's bold vision, the School has new Strategic and Campus Master Plans. As a part of those, we have goals that manage to be both fiscally responsible and far-sighted. With the Board's commitment to Episcopal's mission, we have embraced sustainability initiatives, including energy conservation, environmental stewardship, and health objectives for our students. Because of the Board's leadership, the School is well on its way to accomplishing "impossible" things.

And on behalf of everyone here at Episcopal, I thank you, our parents. The foundations for our success are your trust in the mission of the school and the knowledge that your children will thrive here. If the Board of Trustees is the vanguard, looking towards the far horizon, you, the parents, secure our present. Because of your faith in us, Episcopal has accomplished "impossible" things already. Because of you, most of our classrooms have been equipped with Smart Boards and other state of the art technology; because of your gifts and others, the School will launch a new web-site this summer; and because of you, our Annual Fund has almost doubled in the last three years. Every day, in more ways than I could possibly list, you help us accomplish "impossible" things.

Thank you, too, to Episcopal's faculty and staff and to my administrative team. In rain or in shine, they travel to Woodland Ridge Boulevard, from as far away as Slidell, and they come here not to do a job, they come to practice a vocation. To be an educator is to have a strong desire to do a particular kind of work and to make a particular kind of difference in this world. To be an educator is to spend each day with young people who are full of energy and full of demands. Whether on the playground with Kindergarteners who are trying to figure out their limits, or in the cafeteria with Middle Schoolers who are often prone to doing unusual things with food, or on the playing field with Upper School students who may be frustrated when desire exceeds ability, if you are an educator, you must believe in six impossible things before breakfast and believe in at least sixty before going to sleep at night.

According to Norman A. Colb in the NAIS publication, *A Survival Guide for the Teacher Shortage*,

“Schools throughout the United States are in the early stages of a serious, deepening teacher shortage, the result of three major forces quietly working their way across the nation. First, a generation of experienced teachers is approaching retirement age. Second, many younger teachers, tired of poor pay and difficult working conditions, are leaving the profession well before retirement. And third, the status of the teaching profession is so low that new recruits are not being attracted in nearly the numbers required to replace those who are leaving. In short, the need for teachers, projected to reach a total of more than two million by 2010, is beginning to increase dramatically.

What does this mean for schools? For many, simply finding enough teachers to cover classes is going to be a challenge; for even the most robust schools, the competition for outstanding teachers is likely to be fierce. And yet, while the next few years are sure to be difficult. . . this impending shortage (has) the potential for a positive outcome (in) some schools -- those that define teaching as a profession and treat teachers respectfully.”

Excellent teachers, the kind Episcopal demands for your children, are going to be more and more difficult to find. Another challenge, definitely categorized as “impossible”.

This has been on my mind a lot lately, because spring is the season for hiring new faculty and issuing contracts to our current teachers. At this time, four teachers have announced plans to move on next year. After 28 years here teaching in our art department, Ethel Manno is retiring and, in a statistic that is truly remarkable, after 38 years at Episcopal, Cynthia Walters will step down as a full—time faculty member. Cynthia will continue, however, to use her gifts as a story-teller in the Lower School. Two English teachers, Meg Martens and Brittany Goodwin, are following their hearts to other parts of the country. Meg plans to get married this summer and begin graduate work. Brittany’s husband has been transferred away from Baton Rouge. We’re always sorry to lose talented faculty. Returning to Colb’s predictions for the future, I pray that both Meg and Brittany are not leaving the teaching profession. I do know that Ethel and Cynthia are among the generation of teachers who are retiring.

Episcopal plans to meet the looming teacher shortage head-on with innovative programs and increased budgets for faculty salaries and professional development. Episcopal has always treated teachers with respect. During the last three years, we have established strategic initiatives which acknowledge teaching as a serious profession and our teachers as examples of excellence. Through deliberate efforts on the School’s part, Episcopal now boasts eleven nationally certified teachers, more than any other private school in Louisiana. And there are five additional teachers seeking this prestigious credential.

Advancing our program as an example of teaching excellence, EHS will inaugurate an exciting program for new college graduates, The Episcopal Fellowship in Early Childhood Education. In 2008-2009, each Kindergarten classroom will be served by two educators—one a Mentor Teacher and one an Episcopal Fellow in Early Childhood. Because next year will be our pilot year, I'm sure there will be changes as the idea meets the implementation. Currently, we anticipate that the fellowship appointments will be for one year. We hope to attract recent college graduates from around the south who are interested in our profession, but who have no prior teaching experience. At a job fair last week I interviewed two energetic and talented young women who I hope will apply—one will graduate from Sewanee and one will graduate from Spelman. But there were about 50 other independent schools in the room interviewing, so keep your fingers crossed.

I anticipate that Episcopal's Fellowship in Early Childhood Education will have an impact throughout our School community, an impact far beyond the three kindergarten classrooms. Already the Kindergarten teachers are reimagining themselves as Mentor Teachers, and considering the practice of their vocation from a different perspective. Already, I'm thinking about how the fellows could have contact, through extra-curricular activities and through the Kindergarten Buddy Program, with our Upper School students, thereby expanding everyone's perspectives. And already, I know we are one step closer to becoming a resource center for teachers from around our region, an effort that began two years ago when Episcopal was selected by the College Board as the site for Advanced Placement Summer Institutes. We want teachers, both our teachers and teachers from other places, to come to Episcopal and learn to accomplish "impossible things" with their students.

In the cycle of school life, we are also in the weeks devoted to admissions, re-enrollment and financial aid. This year's enrollment is 1033 students, from 679 families. We have projected that our enrollment will remain stable and steady. While there are no plans to "grow" the School, some of our classes, particularly in the Upper School, could accept a hand-full of new students. For other grade levels, primarily in Lower School, we anticipate full enrollment and will establish wait pools. Three years ago, being fully enrolled would have seemed impossible.

Episcopal follows "best practice" as recommended by the National Association of Independent Schools for our financial aid policies. In 2008-2009, we will award approximately 1.5 million dollars in financial assistance. While we are able to award some endowed academic scholarships, 99% of our aid is need-based. Our financial assistance applies only towards tuition, everyone is responsible for the fees. Approximately 20% of Episcopal students receive aid, with a full range of awards (from 1% to 100%, depending on demonstrated need. Most receive less than 80%. Please do not make assumptions about who might be receiving financial assistance. Need is all around us.

In the next few months we will continue to make adjustments as we gear up for the new schedule. Our current schedule, which has been modified for all three divisions, rededicates Episcopal to an increased level of excellence. It places child development

and student achievement as its core academic values; by endorsing it, all of our teachers have embraced a model that enables them to dedicate more time in the classroom, particularly in the Upper School.

In addition to the scheduling work, Episcopal has been engaged in the study and enhancement of the curriculum. This fall, we began a hard look at assessment, its relationship to student outcomes, and their integration with academic standards. Guided by Peg Meyers, a curriculum consultant, the faculty is assessing the curriculum in every discipline and in each division to insure vertical and horizontal alignment. Because Episcopal's analysis of curriculum is designed to be both systematic and comprehensive, this will be a multi-year process for our teachers.

Because of events in the last week, I wanted to assure you that Episcopal's emergency preparedness and response plans have been well- thought out and that we constantly review them to make sure they continue to meet our needs. Episcopal is an exceptionally safe environment. At the same time, it is our responsibility to be prepared for the unexpected. Please know that the safety of our students is a priority and we take any threat to their security very, very seriously.

Episcopal has been doing things well for a long time. But in some ways, paralleling the Gospel parable, we buried our talents. We held them close. I don't know why. Appropriately, our alums carried the Episcopal experience out into the broader community, but we didn't invite that community in. Now, through the Cornerstones program, we are doing both. Our students, our faculty and staff, and our parents are out in the community, doing service in ways too numerous to recount. In addition, we are making deliberate efforts, as structured in the Strategic Plan, to invite people in, to welcome the community to our campus. I have mentioned our Summer Institute for Teachers, however, our plans are more ambitious than that.

We are currently collaborating with Hilltop Arboretum (LSU), the East Baton Rouge Parish Planning Commission, and the Department of Environmental Quality to construct rain gardens and cisterns for stormwater management in the quad between the Middle School and the Gym, specifically, the dust bowl in front of the Lower School entrance that faces the quad. Episcopal will provide the site and the labor, Hilltop will arrange for the garden design and the expertise, and the Planning Commission and the DEQ anticipate using the site for on-going professional, community-based, education. If you have ever been on our campus in a rainstorm, you will know that to solve the stormwater problem is a miracle in itself. To do it in a way that benefits not only our school but also our parish is truly an "impossible" thing.

At the beginning of this address, I thanked Episcopal's Board of Trustees, I thanked our parents, and I thanked our faculty and staff. As I close, I'd like to thank our students. Not because they have created Episcopal's unique culture—that was done long ago by our founders and continues through the traditions embraced by our alumni. No, I want to thank our students for the light in their eyes. As I've been interviewing the candidates we hope to hire, I have found myself trying to figure out what it is I'm looking for—what

it is beyond the resume. And I've decided that the best applicants have a passion for excellence and a core of character that radiates from them. And then I realized that I'm looking for teachers who can match the light coming from our students—the curiosity, the energy, the life-force. There's something bright inside them -- our students, your children--something bright that's burning with a clear flame. It's a good thing. When I look at them, I know that nothing is impossible.