

Headmaster's Council on Education

Jean Garnett, Jan 31 2010

More than 40 St. Andrew's alumni who have pursued careers in education convened on campus this weekend for the Headmasters' Council on Education, a chance for current and former St. Andreans to develop vital conversations about teaching and guiding young people in America today. The event began in the O'Brien Arts Center on Friday evening, where alumni and St. Andrew's teachers gathered for a reception and dinner. Tad Roach stood up at the end of dinner to invite every one to his and Elizabeth's house for discussion after the meal. To spark this discussion, Tad asked every one in the room to "Imagine that you are starting a school in America or in the world today. What are you going to teach the students at your school?" This thought experiment set the tone for the conversations of the following day, where the group of educators articulated their own visions of the work of today's teachers and administrators.

Alumni visited first period classes on Saturday morning and then convened around the big table in the Gahagan Room at 9 am. Academic Dean John Austin moderated a group discussion; he asked every one sitting at the table to reflect on the challenges facing their schools, and to take a moment to "dream a little bit and think about where you want your school to be in 10 or 15 years from now." "We are living through a period of innovation, creativity and experience that the country hasn't seen since the 1840s, when the public school movement first began," said John. "Our challenge is to make sense of all the incredible changes that are taking place, to identify which innovations are most promising and to bring them into our schools so that our kids can benefit from them."

The alumni at the table represented a rich diversity of paths in education: Some have pursued careers in the independent school world, like Joe Freeman '96 at the Taft School, Ashton Richards '78 at Westminster, Will and Taylor Porter '96 at St. Mark's School, and Pete Washburn '68 at Phillips Academy Andover. Others are working in the public and charter school world. Anna Hickman '02 is a pre-school teacher at a public charter school in Washington, D.C. Hen Kennedy '03, also in Washington, works for KIPP DC, a network of college-preparatory charter schools that serve the city's poor communities. Searcy Milam '02 works in New York City at Uncommon Schools, a non-profit organization that starts up and manages charter schools around the city. One of the recurring themes of the day was the question of how individuals in the private and public schools worlds can interact and help one another.

Mid-morning, the council split up into smaller groups to discuss their work in specific disciplines. Assistant Headmaster Peter Caldwell led a session for administrators, mathematics and chemistry teacher Eric Kemer led a session for teachers of math and science, and John Austin led a session for teachers of the humanities. These meetings lasted until noon, when the group reconvened for lunch and final remarks from Tad.

"What you are doing in your lives quite literally gives St. Andrew's meaning," he said. He added that this meeting "is something we want to do regularly and cultivate." Hopefully, this weekend will mark the first of many alumni forums on education at St. Andrew's.