

**Kathleen C. Giles**  
*Head of School*

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Dear Parents,

While it is not unusual for the media to focus on school stories as September approaches, it has been very sad for many of us to watch the coverage of the trial of a former student at St. Paul's School on sexual assault and other serious charges. There is often special media interest in prep schools as traditionally elite institutions associated with wealth and privilege, and those elements are certainly present in much of the coverage of this case. There are also significant questions of school culture, as well as deleted Facebook messages and texts thought (as always) to be inviolate that ended up being read in court and copied in print. The language that appears in the teenagers' testimony is, unfortunately, the language that the popular culture of "hooking up" invites teenagers and particularly young men to try out, and the concept of pursuit and celebration of sexual conquest is, as numerous commentators have pointed out, age-old. There are no new ingredients in what is a tragically bad story here, one made even worse by the age of the victim which, by law, meant that her "consent" to the encounter was irrelevant in terms of the absolute definition, by law, of statutory rape. The verdicts were confusing and brought no resolution.

These issues are adult in their context and demand maturity that often even the smartest and most talented young people lack. These events happen everywhere, not just at boarding schools, but in libraries, gyms, movie theaters, everywhere young people are together – whether in person or online via social media. It's an important part of growing up to learn how to develop a respect for one's self and for others that is stronger than whatever thrill beckons by whatever means, to learn how to build relationships that are based on respect and moral values and not on notoriety or popularity. However much supervision parents or other adults provide – and supervision and support are very important but ultimately do not control adolescents' decision-making – young people need to grow into these understandings themselves and hold themselves responsible to make choices and to act in ways they know to be right.

So how do we help and provide the environment for that growth? We have been working on those practices and policies for years. Middlesex needs to be a safe and comfortable environment for all of our students. Safety requires agreements to live by our rules, clearly spelled out in our [Handbook](#), and the adult supervision to make those expectations real. A decade ago we changed campus evening hours in recognition of the various levels of student maturity on campus; we instituted security guards and faculty "roamers;" we locked doors and spaces (changing keys periodically), instituted a swipe-card access system, and responded through both the counseling and the discipline systems to *anything* we heard, through any means, of conduct or activity not in keeping with our expectations. One of the benefits of being a small community with close faculty student relationships is that we hear a lot, and our adults know that they are expected to act on what they hear or see or on what simply seems not quite right. We have also made it clear to everyone that we take our responsibility as "mandatory reporters" under Massachusetts state law very seriously, and I have personally made calls to the Department of Children and Families on this basis. If and when necessary, we also work closely with public safety officials. Linked to this letter you will find our ["Safety and Well-Being"](#) and ["Life in the Middlesex School Community"](#) brochures which should be old news to all of our families but might bear a review at this time.

Probably more importantly, we have worked steadily on educating our students on how to make those good choices and be moral, ethical decision-makers and choice-makers. “Make good choices” is the mantra that surfaces in many conversations and even at assemblies, both from the faculty and from student leaders, and we understand that our students, who range in age from 13-19, need different kinds of conversations and education to make that mantra their reality. In our Choices program for freshmen and our Connections program for sophomores, we explicitly address sexual relationships and role-play the good choice – e.g., do not send these kinds of messages, and if someone you don’t know sends you a text invitation, don’t respond. In community life work with juniors and seniors, we work with organizations such as Campus Outreach Services to bring in speakers who address relationships (and online complexities) and coach students not only on making good choices for themselves, but also on helping friends who might be compromised. We work on acceptable use and on the challenges instant-access technology introduces into the emotional lives of adolescents (e.g., Snap Chat, Yik Yak). We try to vary the messenger but not the message in our community life work, whether in the bi-monthly senior leadership meetings or in dorm meetings or in all school speakers, because every year we have a new crop of 15 year olds entering adolescence and 18 year olds looking beyond high school to young adulthood and college. It is always new news to someone.

As a boarding school, we place a high priority on supervision responsibilities, and many of you have heard and will hear your students complain about restrictions on visiting friends, or required check-in times, or Deans’ meetings for a “joke” or something that happened online, or faculty members appearing around campus unexpectedly in the afternoon or evening interrupting what might be “private moment.” Life in a boarding school offers young people extraordinary opportunities and advantages, in terms of their growth and development; however, the great benefits of living and working with friends from around the world do indeed come with responsibilities and commitments that might be greater than what feels culturally comfortable to coming-of-age teenagers, both in terms of constant messaging and actual steps we take to support those good choices that students everywhere need to learn to make, whether they are at home and out with friends or on campus at the end of a busy school day. Getting into that decision-making space between impulse and action is, in the long run, the key to success, and the benefit of our students’ having parents and faculty advisors and mentors to do that work is enormous. But everyone here knows that making the Middlesex environment conducive to making good choices is a critical part of the School’s responsibility. So when you hear those complaints, as you inevitably will, about supervision and adult presence – some of you will remember the outcry few years ago against the “grinding” prohibition at dances -- please know that it’s not that we don’t trust our students, and it’s not that we want them to feel babysat, but it’s that we know enough about adolescence to know that it takes both education and structure to make any school, including ours, a safe and comfortable place for everyone. That work is constant and on-going.

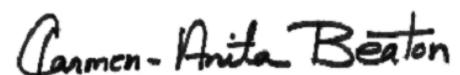
We do this work in partnership with you, and there is no question that parents’ voices are critically important. We encourage you to make your thoughts and your expectations clear to your student. One of our parents sent along this article from the *Concord Monitor* that raises good questions for parents:

<http://www.concordmonitor.com/photos/18346334-95/ray-duckler-this-rape-trial-makes-you-wonder-where-did-we-go-wrong#.Vd9dFshFzDU.email>.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns.



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Carmen-Anita Beaton  
Dean of Students