June 18, 2018

Dear Potomac Community,

I hope that your summer is well underway, and that you will enjoy some much-needed rest and relaxation in the weeks ahead.

We had a successful academic year at Potomac, wrapping things up with a spirited Closing Assembly and a very meaningful and memorable Commencement. I congratulate all of our students for their accomplishments throughout the year, and I particularly want to recognize the Class of 2018 – a group of outstanding young women and men of whom I am extremely proud.

At Potomac, we continually invest in our students and are always looking for ways to provide them with a deeper, richer educational experience. I write now to share an important, and very exciting, curriculum development that reflects this commitment. Over the past two years, we have engaged in an examination of Potomac’s Advanced Placement offerings, with the goal of assessing how well they serve our students and support our mission. After extensive research and discussion, we have determined that Potomac will phase out AP courses over the next five years and focus on developing rigorous offerings that more closely align with our educational philosophy and address our students’ needs. We see this as an unprecedented opportunity to enhance our curriculum and ensure that Potomac students benefit from courses that fuel their intellectual curiosity, foster their love of learning, and develop critical skills for their future success.

The work that led to this decision progressed along two parallel tracks. A task force of Potomac faculty and administrators was appointed to conduct research and move the discussion forward internally. In addition, we took part in a multi-school conversation with several DC-area peer institutions – Georgetown Day, Holton-Arms, Landon, Maret, National Cathedral, St. Albans, and Sidwell Friends – all of whom are now announcing their intention to move beyond the AP.

This is consistent with a national trend among leading independent schools, a significant number of which have already left the AP behind in favor of developing their own advanced curricula. By their very nature, AP courses often compel faculty to “teach to the test,” condensing a significant amount of content into a short period of time. In-depth exploration of issues and thoughtful discussion may be sacrificed to get through all the material expected to be on the exam. Such courses can limit teachers’ and students’ ability to fully explore complex subject matter; worse, they may encourage students to view performing well on a standardized test as the ultimate goal of the academic endeavor. It is also important to point out that this type of course is not analogous to – or especially effective preparation for – college-level coursework, which generally demands in-depth analysis and demonstration of original thinking. Schools that have made the decision to move beyond the AP recognize their potential – and responsibility – to forgo courses that are designed largely to prepare students for a standardized test, in favor of developing offerings that achieve more significant academic ends.

Potomac is committed to moving beyond the AP in a thoughtful, strategic manner. Over the next five years, we will phase out our AP offerings and introduce equally (or more) rigorous courses designed to achieve key academic goals. In some cases, these courses will not be entirely new; rather, they will be adaptations of our current AP offerings. For example, we anticipate that our advanced courses in Calculus and Physics will probably not look much different from the AP versions. Other courses, in areas like U.S. History or Comparative Government and Politics, may also be similar to their AP predecessors but will be redesigned to allow teachers and students to take a deeper dive in key areas. In still other cases, our faculty will embrace the challenge of
creating entirely new advanced courses that offer opportunities for independent research, interdisciplinary perspectives, and in-depth exploration. While we will be eliminating AP courses, we will continue to offer Potomac students the opportunity to take AP examinations if they choose to do so.

An important question that has arisen, for Potomac and other schools that have gone through this process, is how the absence of AP-designated courses from the transcript will affect graduates' college-admission prospects. To answer this, we conducted our own research, speaking with admission officers at a number of top colleges and universities, and looked at research done by other schools. We can say with confidence that no negative impact has been reported, and none is expected. The admission officers with whom we spoke consistently indicated that their focus is on whether a student has taken – and excelled in – his or her high school's most rigorous courses; the AP designation itself is far less relevant. Moreover, given the large number of high school students nationwide now taking AP courses, the designation no longer carries the academic distinction that it once did. The college admission officers with whom we spoke were well aware that many of the best independent schools are moving away from APs, and they expressed confidence in our ability to define and deliver rigorous academic offerings. In fact, one – at the University of Pennsylvania – remarked, "Not having APs is never a disadvantage. I would say that half of all our admitted students come from schools that either do not have APs or offer a limited number of them. We really trust how independent schools define rigor." Another, from Cornell, noted, "We actually prefer non-cookie cutter curriculums. We love to see evidence of research that students are doing on their own. AP is not that important at a school like Potomac."

We have begun developing an implementation timeline that will address how and when AP courses will be phased out and new advanced offerings will be developed, vetted, and introduced. Please know that all current Upper School students, including those entering the ninth grade in fall 2018, will continue to have a full array of AP offerings to choose from during their time at Potomac. We will host an information session for parents this fall to share more details about our plans; I hope that you will be able to join us for that conversation.

Going forward, we have much exciting, important work to do. But equally significant work has already been done, to ensure that this decision was grounded in accurate information and guided by Potomac's mission, philosophy, and goals for student learning and growth. I want to thank everyone who has taken part in this effort — and most especially our AP Task Force, co-chaired by K-12 Director of Teaching and Learning Tricia Crowley and Upper School Head Doug McLane. In addition, I want to thank our Board of Trustees for their thoughtful input and their support of this initiative.

As we begin the summer break, I also thank you for your continued involvement with our school and the generosity of spirit that you so consistently display. We are grateful for all that you do for Potomac and for the students that we serve. Please accept my best wishes for a very restful and enjoyable summer.

Sincerely,

John Kowalik
Head of School