

The Future of Education: Q & A with Head of School Palfrey and Riley of Lawrence High School

On Wednesday afternoon, nine current and former members of *The Phillipian* traveled to Lawrence High School to attend and participate in a round table discussion on the future of education between Head of School John Palfrey and Jeffrey Riley, Receiver of Lawrence High School.

The Phillipian worked in collaboration with journalism students from Lawrence High School to write and ask the questions that steered the discussion. The discussion served as a continuation of the “Cross Campus” program, through which LHS students have written and published articles with *The Phillipian*. The discussion was filmed in the Lawrence High School video studio and will be available for viewing on the LHS YouTube channel and *The Phillipian* website later this week.

What is your favorite experience since starting your tenure at your current job?

Riley: I think one of my favorite experiences was last June when we had a record number of high school students graduated. Lawrence has a reputation of having only half of the kids graduate within four years, but last year, we had a tremendous number of students —well over 700 — graduated, and our graduation rate is now highest it has ever been in the city.

Palfrey: I’ve been at this job for only two years, and actually my favorite moments have been ones where I have been directly teaching students within Phillips Academy. It is wonderful to be the Head of School, but I also really love the chance to be directly in a classroom. I’ve been allowed to be part of hands-on teaching at school, and that’s been a really wonderful experience.

Seeing that the cost is around \$70,000 for a year of Andover education and \$13,000 for a year of Lawrence public school education system, how does one relate the benefits of certain types of education to the cost?

Riley: I would like to say that irrespective of the cost, you could get a good education in many places in the country. A part of my philosophy when I came into Lawrence under this leadership was that there are different ways to skin the cat and, regardless of how it gets done, we want good schools. Parents don’t care about those things; they just want good schools for their kids. I was a product of a public school, but I’ve also seen great charter schools and private schools. And on the question of finances, as a district, we are one of the more underfinanced districts in the country, so we work really hard to seize grants and try to raise money with foundations to make sure that our kids can get a good education.

Palfrey: I don't think there is much of a correlation to the core of your question between the cost and the outcomes of the education. I think one of the distinctions between cost of Andover education in the sense of Phillips Academy and the average public school costs in high school is residential expense. We spend money on a lot of things that other schools don't, like dormitories and meals. We also have an art museum and archeology museum, so I think the kind of things private schools are trying to accomplish is different. That makes the cost structure different. But I think the key point is that teaching is primarily about the connection between kids and one another and between kids and teachers, so the emotional connection is something that's not about how much money you are spending but about interchange of ideas and experiences. So while I think there are certainly benefits to having more funds, it is certainly not a one-to-one correlation that you need to go a school that spends the most money on the kid. The other thing I would note just to be clear is that nobody pays \$70,000 a year to go to Andover. In fact, it would be helpful to us if some people did. But we are first of all a need-blind school on the basis of merit and then the families end up paying what they can based on a complex spectrum. And even then, everybody is being subsidized by the endowment.

What are ways that the two schools can interact without feeling like charity work by one or the other? In other words, what types of interactions can we promote that will yield benefits from both schools?

Riley: I think there is a lot of opportunity for service learning. There is so much community service work that needs to be done, both in Andover and in Lawrence. If folks from both sides come together to help people, I don't think it is considered "charity" for either side; it's about service to your community.

Palfrey: I think one thing that is a really good example of that bi-directionality is a Spanish language class that some of our students are involved. Kids spend one day a week in the Lawrence community, where we are having a very effective learning experience in a collaborative fashion. I think there is no question that the interaction is something that is leading to educational outcomes for kids regardless of which school they come from. I do think that as we think about more educational models in addition to what we call experiential model, we might think about ways to share teaching materials and promote hybrid learning experiences with technology. I think there are really attractive things we can do together that would certainly be bidirectional in that way.

How will you as leaders make improvements in your school? Mr. Riley, some of the students said that standards for some classes are too low. Is it possible to raise the standards, and if so, do you fear that some students might have difficulties? Mr. Palfrey, what does improvement look like at Andover?

Riley: When I came two years ago, I did an assessment of the school district and found that among many things, we were actually not teaching the right standards. In many cases, we were not teaching at a high enough rigor level — that is, we weren't challenging our students. So I think while we did some major restructuring for the first 18 months — changing some principles, cutting down the size of central office, looking closely at some teachers we had concerns about — I think the real work is about increasing the rigor and what we are asking kids to do on a daily

basis. And that doesn't mean that that is going to be out of the realm; if a kid is struggling in school, it doesn't mean that added rigor is going to be impossible for him. What we want to do is engage kids. Too often in education we see just worksheets or simple tasks, when what we really need to do is engage kids and let them be critical thinkers and be kinesthetically involved in their learning, because then it becomes more meaningful.

Palfrey: I think that the kind of challenges that a school like Phillips Academy faces are different from those in other contexts, in the sense that I don't think raising standards is our primarily challenge. Most of the kids that come to Phillips Academy have such incredible inner drive that sometimes I would like to actually ask them to take some time off and do some things other than homework, and this is an unusual thing to say, but we really need to teach students wellness and balance. We also have to make sure that the kinds of stresses these kids bring and the psychological costs that come with those are some of the things that we have to be able to address and help students accomplish a better sense of wellness. That actually might line up exactly with what Mr. Riley was talking about with athletics and sports — there are a lot of ways we can get kids to perform very well and not have the same level of stress [as they do now]. So that's certainly one that I would like to see us address.

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