

Our First Test
January 24, 2020

On Wednesday at around 5pm I went outside and sat at a table to mark Reasoning homework. A few students were sitting around me studying. Others were playing chess. It was beautiful day, with deep sky and calm late afternoon sunlight. A few meters away, the a capela group was practicing. It was exactly the scene I had imagined when I first started thinking about the USAP Community School with Mai Mano and Colence. A community of students who were relaxed, yet serious about what they were doing, who believed in hard work and excellence in everything they did, yet could enjoy themselves while doing it.

I was hoping to write more about that vision this week, but it feels like the Zimsec results have sucked the air out of the school these last two days. There will be other times like this in the future - SAT scores and college admissions decisions will be similar. Each time, some will be thrilled and some will be disappointed.

And there are still results coming, so we'll have to be strong together this weekend and next week as well, as others find out their results. So in this letter I have a few things to say about these exams.

The first thing to know is that our results as a school are overall excellent. We haven't received all of them yet, but we're very proud of the ones that we have received, and you should be too. You should know that you are among an exceptional group of people here - talented and focused. The reason we have no prize-giving or prefect blazers or anything like this is because there is no need for competition here. No one's success is about being better than anyone else - it's about setting high standards for yourself and then putting in the work to meet them. It's about measuring yourself against what you are capable of.

That is one of the reasons why we wanted the value of Equality for our school. We want you to know that you can all succeed together. In fact, the surest way for each of you to accomplish your individual dreams is for all of us to build a community that encourages each other to find the best in ourselves each day. And the only way to do that is to do it together, as equals.

On Sunday evening, you all signed an Honor Code with a value of Equality which says that "we understand that each member of our community depends on one another, so that both successes and hardships are shared." This is more than simply celebrating a success or helping someone else through a tough moment. It means recognizing that our fates are now tied together, that we need each other in order to be successful. It means encouraging your roommate to come to that extra hour of prep, even though she is tired; or helping explain a math problem to someone when who doesn't understand; or picking up your friend's tablet and giving it to him when he has forgotten it in a room; or reminding someone that they have cleaning duty in the morning. These are the little ways that we can support each other, that will bring us together as a community.

As I said before, Zimsec results are not the only time that we will have this kind of experience as a community. But they are the first time, and so these few days are the first real test of the strength of our community - a test made more difficult by the fact that it comes to us in our first week together.

The test is this: Can we celebrate the people who did well while still being sensitive to those who are disappointed? Can we understand the importance of these results while keeping them in perspective? Can we recognize that any results - good or bad - are not a final judgment of someone's character, that there is so much more to each of you? Can we find lessons in these results, whether we are happy with them or not? Can we appreciate all of the things that make us unique and that bring our community to life, which have nothing to do with these exams?

This is the real test. I look forward to seeing us succeed on it together.