What's the value of the morning handshake?
As head of the Lower School, I can't control how everyone's day will go, but I can control how the day will start for anyone who shakes my hand in the morning. With the handshake, I can communicate, “It’s great to see you. We want to have you here. Yeah, I know you didn’t get much sleep last night. Yes, I know about the math test later today. Yes, I saw you get crushed at wrestling. But I am glad you are here.” With a handshake, I can make sure each boy or faculty member feels welcome each day.

What were your own Lower School days like?
I grew up in a small town called Newark, between Rochester and Syracuse, N.Y. I confess I didn’t do school really well when I was young, but I loved going to school. School gave me access to sports, friends, and other activities.

I liked being with my teachers—especially the ones who coached or ran clubs. I liked the teachers who got involved in the other things because I thought that meant they really cared about me as a person.

That’s still how I see schools operating best: it is relational work with young people. For a teacher to reach a student, a bridge must first be crossed, a connection made. That link—of trust or good will or even a shred of shared interest—allows for learning to catch fire.

When did you become a more serious student?
I had a great middle school experience, and I really liked high school, but I didn’t shine academically until I went to college, at St. Bonaventure, about an hour south of Buffalo, N.Y. In college I felt like I was ready to get serious, and I got serious. In college, too, I figured out how to navigate to teachers who really cared about me. I had really close relationships with them. That relational piece is vital.

What did you major in?
I initially was a journalism major, but I found that I liked my English, history, philosophy, and Latin classes, and I decided that I would try not to specialize. I took as many humanities classes as I could, minored in philosophy and Latin, and majored in English, which was the place where I felt most at home. My interest in English dates back to ninth or tenth grade, when we read *The Lord of the Flies*. That was the first time a book flowered for me and I became interested in metaphor and symbolism and the deeper purpose and joy of literature.

You could say reading *The Lord of the Flies* eventually led you to teaching?
It all sort of makes sense!
Jim Kelly, at that time the significant quarterback in the Buffalo Bills franchise, used to host a summer football camp at St. Bonaventure. I was working on campus one summer, and they needed help in the dorms during the camp. I ended up living in the dorm and getting pretty close to these seventh- and eighth-grade boys. We’d have lunch and dinner together in the dining hall, and I discovered that I really liked the energy
of these young people, who were curious and interested and interesting.

When I think about why I ended up teaching, I think back to those summer days. Seeing that I could affect a group of middle-school-aged boys was powerful to me. While I didn’t have an inkling that someday I’d teach, I did know that I liked the push-and-pull of working with young people. All from counseling at a football camp!

Did you begin teaching right after college?
No. I went straight from college to graduate school at Villanova, where I did my master’s in English in two years. In hindsight, I was more burnt out than I thought. I got a lot out of Villanova, but I would have been hungrier for it a year or two or three later.

The spring I graduated with my master’s, I had a sort of existential moment of crisis. I didn’t know what I was going to do. I was working at a golf course and thought about doing some landscaping, which I liked well enough, but I knew that wasn’t the long-term goal for me. I happened to run into someone who was on the board of a very, very small independent school in Virginia. Through that contact, I got an interview, and the fall after I graduated from Villanova I started teaching at Wakefield Country Day School in Huntly, Va. It was just by accident really.

How was your first semester teaching?
I loved it, but it was rough. I was teaching American literature and American history plus similar courses to international students in an ESL program, world religions as a senior elective, and fifth-grade science. And I coached cross-country, basketball, and lacrosse. I was worked to the bone, but I was energized every day. I figured, wow, I’m getting a lot of experience, and I’m excited. I started to think maybe this was something I should do long-term, but it was trial by fire. I was fortunate to have some good teachers around me to help me.

What kind of advice did they give you?
I made some typical mistakes. I thought I was the smartest—and by some measure the cleverest and most urbane—person in the classroom, and I felt that would carry the weight of the day, but it didn’t. It was detrimental to my teaching. The other teachers reminded me to pay attention to the students—to pay attention to what they were telling me even when they weren’t necessarily saying anything.

I started asking students, How did today’s lesson go? What could I have done differently? If I noticed that a student seemed a
little bit off, I’d decide not to call on her or him and then find out later what was going on. I learned how to listen.

After three years teaching, you landed a job at STA? Yes. I was getting married at the end of my third year of teaching. My wife-to-be, Jennifer, was in D.C. I was interviewing at schools in Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, when I got a call from St. Albans. I had previously been introduced to [teacher and coach] Malcolm Lester by a contact who knew of our shared enthusiasm for English and lacrosse. Malcolm introduced me to St. Albans and to Paul Herman and [Dean of Faculty] Paul Barrett. He had lobbied hard for Paul Herman to coach for Malcolm Lester. Jim Ehrenhaft ’83 had a contact who knew of our shared enthusiasm for English and lacrosse. Malcolm introduced me to St. Albans and to Paul Herman and [Dean of Faculty] Paul Barrett. He had lobbied hard for Paul Herman to meet with me a year earlier. There wasn’t an opening then, but now there was.

I received an offer from St. Albans, but I was still interviewing for teaching jobs at a NAIS [National Association of Independent Schools] conference at a hotel in Dupont Circle. Mark Mullin, who was then headmaster, passed me in the hallway and said, “Fred, you and I need to talk.” And he sat me down for half an hour and told me why I should come to St. Albans School. He had no business spending that much time with me. I wasn’t some superstar with eight years of experience and a Ph.D.; I was low hanging fruit. But that meeting was powerful. It sealed the deal for me.

What did you teach? Form II English.

Did you also coach? I did C and B sports, coached Lower School lacrosse, and was an assistant varsity lacrosse coach for Malcolm Lester. Jim Ehrenhaft ’83 then needed help with Lower School cross-country, so I assisted with that.

And you lived in the dorm? Yes. Our son Graham spent his first six months in the dorm.

I got lucky. There was a good group of teachers living in the dorm: [history teachers] Ben Labaree and Sam Schaffer, [Form A teacher] John Zahnke, and [Form B teacher] Mark Wilkerson. I loved the boys, but it was hard. My wife liked it much more than I did because she’d come home from work and have dinner with the boys and be completely amused. By that point in the day, I was less than amused!

It was hard, but I learned a lot because each day I was seeing fourth graders through seniors. It helped me develop my tool box for understanding young people. It helped me be patient and listen—all of those things you have to double down on when working with children.

Who were your mentors in the Lower School? I learned a lot from Paul Herman, [Lower School Director of Studies] Ann Wolcott, [math teacher] Linda DeBord, [math teacher] Kevin McShane, [environmental science teacher] Dean Westcoat. There was also a great crop of young teachers; the Lower School was a sort of incubator, with [history teacher and Lower School Dean of Students] Henry Smyth, [history teacher and Admissions Director] Andy Rodin, [Form A teacher] PJ. McCloskey. Again, I got lucky.

How did you become a better teacher? During my first year, Paul Herman met with me to tell me that while I was challenging the boys and demanding much of them, they didn’t find much joy in my class or in me. That was hard to hear. He asked me to pay attention not just to what I was teaching, but to what the experience was like for the boys in the class. I recall he enlisted Dean Westcoat to push and prod on this gap in my teaching. I relaxed a bit. I developed a teaching persona, a doppelganger of sorts that allowed me to have a quirky, eccentric mien in class. That change transformed my class. It made me enjoy teaching and my students more, too. I needed permission and a mandate to revisit my teaching, and Paul was good enough to help me along.

You felt lucky to be here, but in 2007 you left to become middle school at head St. Anne’s-Belfield School in Charlottesville? Why did you choose to go away?

It was weird. I was totally in love with St. Albans and was sad to leave, but Paul Herman and [Headmaster] Vance Wilson both said I should go. That was powerful to me. They said, “Fred, you aren’t going to get chances to see something new, to branch off, unless you leave. You will be better for leaving.” Two people I really respected who had years of experience were telling me that the best thing I could do was to leave a place that I loved. My family was ripe to embrace a change; the kids were at a good age to move. So we left.

While at St. Anne’s-Belfield, I stayed in touch with Vance and Paul, [Lower School teachers] Hart Roper and Kelly Castellanos Evans, and [Upper School Chaplain] Brooks Hundley. Eventually Vance started to say, Paul Herman is going to be retiring some time. Would you ever consider...? And I said, sure, I would consider...

Market constraints and enrollment pressures had caused St. Anne’s-Belfield to morph in my nine years there. The school was doing everything it needed to do, and it grew in energizing ways, but I felt out of alignment with the mission and the trajectory of the school. When I was asked to return to St. Albans, I knew I would be coming back.
to a place I loved, where I would have a fresh challenge at a school driven by a mission I totally believe in. Our kids were, again, at a good age to move. I felt the stars aligned powerfully for me to come back.

Coming back offered me a chance to take the foundation I learned here, plus what I had learned in a completely different milieu (St. Anne’s-Belfield is a large, rural, non-denominational, coed school, with preschool through grade 12), to see what I could do to help the Lower School grow more.

Had St. Albans changed in your absence?

St. Albans had definitely changed and powerfully so.

There are more women teaching today, particularly in Form II, which was almost all-male when I was first here. Thirteen- to fourteen-year-old boys need to see strong women. We have great icons of intellectual force in Form II, and the women teachers are vital to that culture. Boys today feel their energy and force.

The smartphone wasn’t here when I left, and it was pervasive when I returned. You cannot underestimate how that has changed young people and how it has placed new demands upon teachers.

The new schedule is a change. The rotation and variety is healthy for boys and teachers, with classes shifting from morning to afternoon throughout the week. Longer class periods allow for greater depth and substance. I do miss the end-of-day study hall, and I miss the predictability of the old schedule. For logistical purposes, the rotating schedule makes things really complicated.

But the most important parts of the school haven’t changed. The mission is still simple and powerful and complex and compelling.

What is the school’s mission?

We try to challenge, stretch, grow, care for, and love boys as they develop into young men who care about the life of the intellect and of the spirit and of aesthetics and of fitness and of care. We ask a lot of the boys, not just in terms of the rigor of the day, but also in terms of how they relate to one another, how we ask them to set aside individual wants for a collective awesomeness.

We accomplish all this within the structure of a church school. People say that the school functions at its best as a parish, and I find it does operate in many ways like a parish.

What kind of transformation do you want to see from fourth grader to eighth grader?

Of course, I want them to learn more and more. I also want them to develop friendships and relationships throughout their days.

But I think the thing that I want most in those five years is to cultivate in boys a capacity for radical self-advocacy. I want boys to problem solve, to speak their needs, to ask for things. Self-advocacy is not just a survival skill; it’s what I call a thrival skill.

I think we do this well as a school. One of the greatest aspects of the Upper School is that boys who ask, get. They might ask for extra help or for clarification about something in class. They might challenge a teacher: “I disagree with a point you made in class.” “I’m not comfortable with what you said at the lunch table. Can you tell me why you said that?” Or they might ask a teacher for more. “I want to try this. Can you help me?” Our strongest boys—and I’m not referring just to our best academic boys but our strongest boys in every possible way—are sort of forced to navigate by asking, by advocating for themselves.

As a parent, I’ve never intervened on behalf of my own son or daughter at school even though I have been working at the school and could easily have said “not that homeroom teacher,” or “not that advisor,” or “you should really fix this problem.” Instead, when my children complain to me about this or that, I try to think about how they could solve the problem in a way that will be most meaningful for them down the road.

This approach invites messiness. But if we think of our C Former as a Form II guy, as a junior, as a summer intern during college, we want them to learn more than just a quick fix. Often the quick fix might satisfy the adults involved, but the student doesn’t learn a lasting lesson. Sifting and living through an issue patiently and thoughtfully yields great growth. The end result is worth the mess.

How has being a parent shaped the way you teach and lead the Lower School?

Right before our son was born, we were given lots of parenting books, including one that Ann Wolcott gave us by the British child development expert Penelope Leach. In the introduction to Your Baby and Child, she states, “Proceed as you mean to go.” That really didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me at the time; as a new parent, it’s all this kind of guessing game right out of the gates. But over the years, I think when I’ve been my best at parenting, I’ve been cognizant and intentional about following that mantra: “proceed as you mean to go.” If you think about what you truly want at the end, it helps you make decisions along the way. Sometimes that manifests itself by me biting my tongue, or refraining from selfishly asserting my power, or not behaving in a way that makes me feel better, but no one else.

When operating a Lower School division made up of roughly three hundred humans, the dynamic is, of course, very different; an institution is not a family. But I still do think a lot about “proceed as you mean to go” as a teacher and as a leader. In moments of complexity or stress or uncertainty, I try to figure out where I want to go, or where...
we want to go, or where we want a boy or a family to go. Then we can figure out the steps needed to get there. It can help eliminate some of the noise along the way.

What’s your favorite time of day?
Mornings, selfishly: coffee and reading time before I swim. I usually catch up on either the New York Times or the New Yorker although I also like comic books like Captain America.

I love the handshake in the morning. I also love the excitement during the transition to sports, the silence in the refectory during the thanksgiving, and the cuisine combat of lunch.

Have you always been such a colorful dresser?
No, I used to dress much more conservatively. [Former Lower School teacher] Wayne Williams ’83 was my sartorial North Star. I was also always impressed by [C-B-A science teacher] Alex Haslam’s suits, which I guess dated back to the late fifties.

When I got to Charlottesville, I figured I would start new. I was commuting by bike and cared less about what I wore. So I started just by happening to be mismatched.

One day a seventh-grade girl told me: “Mr. Chandler, what you should do is mismatch your socks. I think that would be a good look for you.” Ever since then, I’ve mismatched my socks.

“There is an unusual intimacy in a single-gender environment. In a classroom of boys, a level of vulnerability exists, as does an authenticity. Conversations are much more direct, and a closeness ensues.”

What challenges do boys face today?
That’s some list, particularly given today’s culture.

In our culture, the birth of acceptable humor is wider now—much wider, and the internet and smartphones have made such humor nearly vernacular. Crass thoughts more easily become words and slip out of boys’ mouths. The boys hear more “jokes” involving race, and understandings of women are on the same slippery slope. The internet and smartphones have normalized behaviors and language that we would never have thought of as funny before. Even if our boys believe that these ideas and behaviors are truly wrong, they still find some of it compelling, and presented to them at a certain volume and tone, they can even find aspects of it funny. I worry about where that humor can go.

Certain kinds of humor and screen time chip away at empathy, which is another concern. One way to get at empathy is through service, and our schedule is not set up in a way that allows us to go at service in meaningful ways. Service could be a real difference maker for our boys.

I’d also like to find ways to increase coordinate programming in the Lower School. There are things other than our swim team and the Middle School plays we can do with NCS that can enhance coordination without taking away from our foundational mission as a boys school or theirs as a girls school.

What challenges does the school face?
I predict that recruitment of teachers will increasingly be a challenge. Looking down the road, I see a rotation of people who come into the teaching profession for three to seven years and then leave. Young people are increasingly wired to want to move around. I don’t fault them for that, but the type of work we’re doing and we will need to do is demanding, messy, awesome, and frustrating. We may now and then have an Alex Haslam or a Paul Herman, Piazza, or Barrett, but I fear that model is disappearing.

What is the value of a boys school?
Many of my formative moments have been in all-male circumstances. I think back to my cohort of friends in middle school, the teams I played on, the part-time summer job that I had from eighth grade into college at a garden and nursery, the Jim Kelly football camp. There is an unusual intimacy in a single-gender environment. In a classroom of boys, a level of vulnerability exists, as does an authenticity. Conversations are much more direct, and a closeness ensues.

I think that coed schools are not set up ideally for boys. The boys don’t quite get what the girls get in a coed environment. The boys are often misunderstood, and a certain level of frustration can emerge among them. We talk a lot about how boys need to move around. We don’t talk as much about the emotional depth of boys, which can be lost in a coed environment. Boys are too easily dismissed as monolithic in their simple needs and simple desires. Nuance is forgotten. I’ve always felt that boys deserve to be cared for and treated with nuance.