



The Branch School

October 2021

Dear Branch Community,

I write this letter with a heavy heart, and one full of gratitude for Emily Smith's contributions to our dear school over the past 16 years as Head. Her grace and grit through challenging times have inspired me and many others to bring our best selves to the work. When she unexpectedly found herself Head that July of 2006, after expecting to be Assistant Head for at least a year, she forged through personal and school difficulties, earned the respect of parents and staff, and began identifying what would provide TBS with stability and success. She found a Principal certification program at Antioch University New England that she could attend summers and remotely during the year to learn the skills required to run an independent school. She completed the program with flying colors, applying her learnings to much benefit to the school.

Emily's strategic thinking has moved Branch to an academically challenging, project-based, collaboration-inspiring curriculum that attracts and nurtures excellent students. She found the budget to support our STEAM dreams with sound curriculum, using our academic testing to identify weaknesses and their solutions. The outstanding academic achievements of our students today are the fruits of her labors. When we were accepted into ISAS five years ago, she deserved the credit for the vision and management that made it happen.

Her willingness to step into the unknown has helped the Board with decisions that have proved foundational to Branch success. Her relationship with parents identified their interest in a middle school, and she led the planning that helped both the classes and then the portable buildings unfold. She has been part of about every project committee on our new building, and I will be sure she remembers her stated commitment to keep working until it's open for classes.

Emily's excellent networking skills have provided many useful insights and connected us to generous donors. Her work on the Tenacre Foundation Board, the ISAS Standards Committee, and local Heads of School networks bring our school to the attention of the donor community in general and introduce TBS to potential feeder schools and sources of insights on how to meet Houston independent school challenges.

As a result of her work (pretty much constant), willingness to experiment, and strategic insights (many), our school:

- Has more than tripled enrollment
- Has more than doubled campus acreage
- Has increased student body diversity
- Has improved student academic achievement to compete with top NAIS schools
- Has been invited to join ISAS, and 5 years later won praise from Standards Committee for our program
- Has remained fiscally sound
- Has undertaken a three-phase expansion project to upgrade our facilities to meet students' needs

In choosing her successor, we know we will be starting over in a new environment with a new individual. Comparisons are odious, and we will work to avoid them. But we want her to please keep in touch! We will always want to hear her ideas about the next cohort of challenges that show up for us.

The challenge before us now is to search for Emily's successor. The Board of Trustees has formed a committee of our community members for this purpose, and we can assure everyone that Branch will continue to be led and governed in the same outstanding manner as in the years before.



Ann Hightower
Chair, Board of Trustees