



## **State of GRACE**

**April 1, 2019**

### **Who We Are**

#### *Mission*

*GRACE Christian School is a loving community that spiritually and academically equips, challenges, and inspires students to impact their world for Christ.*

Parent surveys consistently reveal that the first element of our mission statement, our loving community, is what is cited as one of our most distinctive and valuable attributes. This was the common theme this year in both the Capital Development survey and the internal one completed by our families in March. There are times during the school year when the community is tangibly visible, such as the Homecoming football game, Celebrate GRACE, or Play4Kay, where our families come together to cheer on our teams or support an important cause. However, more frequently, the loving community is evident in ways that are not as noticeable - when an older student mentors a younger one, when a teacher comes early or stays late to help a student, when families rally in support of one another in times of loss or illness, when student or parent groups gather together to pray or study scripture, and when parents coordinate carpools to help one another deal with the challenges of off-site practices. These bonds are a natural outgrowth of a common commitment to spiritual and academic growth for our children, and a shared desire to see our students thrive in both areas.

#### *Vision*

*Students at GRACE Christian School will be grounded in God's Word and challenged to achieve academic excellence as they prepare to use their gifts and abilities effectively to follow God's plan for their lives.*

The vision statement is our prayer for every student. We recognize and value the individual gifts and abilities of each student, and our goal is to help them develop those traits to their fullest in order to bring glory to God.

## Motto

### *Equipping Students for Life*

When the leadership team adopted *Equipping Students for Life* as our school motto, our goal was to develop a brief statement that could capture our mission and vision, while also providing the utility to connect the diverse aspects of GRACE. We are fundamentally an academic institution committed to providing an excellent education with a Christian foundation for each student, but our mission and vision statements call for us to be so much more. When we say we are *Equipping Students for Life* it means that we will partner with families to develop students who are grounded in their faith and equipped with the academic, social, and emotional skills to flourish beyond their time at GRACE. In a culture defined by anxiety, dependent on social media for information, and lacking in belief of foundational truth, we seek to be counter-cultural by developing students who find their joy and identity in Christ, think deeply about important issues, and possess the intellectual and social wherewithal to represent themselves well in the public forum. Creators, instead of consumers. Catalysts, instead of cattle. Contributors, instead of critics. This is how they will impact their world for Christ. This is what it means to be equipped.

To learn more about “Who We Are,” I encourage you to visit the [Mission Section](#) of our school website and review the Statement of Faith, Philosophy of Education, Core Values, and Student Outcomes.

## Where We Are

### *The Challenge Facing our Students*

In the book, *Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing our Kids for the Innovation Era*, authors Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith describe the challenge facing today’s schools:

*But in today’s world, there is no longer a competitive advantage in knowing more than the person next to you because knowledge has become a commodity available to all with the swipe of a finger. Now, adults need to be able to ask great questions, critically analyze information, form independent opinions, collaborate, and communicate effectively. These are the skills essential for both career and citizenship.*

### *How GRACE is Meeting the Challenge*

The academic program at GRACE rises to meet this challenge. Building upon a biblical Truth, our students will possess the ability to problem-solve and think critically, the curiosity to delve deeply into areas of interest, and the fortitude to overcome challenges. The curriculum, from transitional kindergarten through the senior year, is designed to blend a strong grasp of

core competencies with practical application that will enable students to develop the skills needed to stand out in the world described by Wagner and Dintersmith where “what matters most ... is not what you know, but *what you can do* with what you know.” Institutionally, GRACE has taken several steps in the past few years to make this vision a reality.

## Curriculum

In 2017, Julia Taylor assumed the role of Academic Dean to oversee the implementation of the overall school curriculum, to promote consistency in programming and assessment, and to assist the teachers with professional development and the implementation of best instructional practices.

- GRACE has expanded the academic opportunities for our students including the addition of several classes:
  - New Advanced Placement® classes in math, science, and computer science for high school
  - New STEM and computer science electives for middle school
  - New STEM and character education instruction in elementary school
  - Modified science instruction in the elementary school that provides a weekly lab experience for all third, fourth, and fifth grade students
- The GRACE academic leadership and teachers review curriculum for each subject area on a five-year rotation.
  - Last year, after much evaluative research of our own program and industry best practices, we elected to adopt the Math in Focus-Singapore curriculum, with the goal of helping our students develop greater analytical and problem-solving skills. We are pleased with how our students have adapted to the new program and are already seeing them demonstrate stronger skills in these areas.
  - This year, we are reviewing the TK-12 Bible curriculum. Understanding that a knowledge of scripture is the greatest gift we can provide our students, we are placing an emphasis on developing curriculum that is both relevant and meaningful to students at every grade level while increasing instruction in apologetics and worldview, as well as improving the instructional resources provided for the teachers.
- The upper campus Writing Center opened in the fall of 2018 with the mission “to mentor students in the craft of writing and equip them to write more effectively across all subject areas.” In our age of social media and tweets, the ability to communicate effectively is one of the greatest differentiators our students can possess as they enter college and compete in the job market. Additionally, the student mentors, under the direction of English teacher Marcia Wingerd, are paired with the younger students in the center, providing a great experience for these students as well.

## Technology

Because the world is changing rapidly and we are preparing students for jobs that have not yet been created, a primary goal of GRACE's classroom integration of technology is to create lifelong learners who know how to research, analyze, and synthesize new information and present it professionally. Students need to be problem-solvers for both local and global issues. As they develop solutions, students must have the ability to clearly communicate ideas in both digital and physical mediums.

Technology facilitates student access to information, mentors, and audiences to help them develop these skills. It also allows for increased student inquiry and differentiation, enabling each student to be challenged at the correct level.

- On the lower campus, students receive an introduction to programming and design thinking as early as transitional kindergarten. From third through sixth grades, students participate in a formal program that provides an introduction to coding, training in digital citizenship, and instruction in the use of multimedia tools.
- Upper campus STEM course offerings now include multiple computer programming language courses, Advanced Placement® offerings, and hands-on classes that enable students to construct drones and computers.
  - This year, we added an introductory STEM elective course for seventh graders that has been very well received.
  - The \$60,000 grant from the MacLellan Foundation and the Christian Education Charitable Trust GRACE received in 2018 catalyzed the program by enabling renovations of the technology lab and providing supplies for multiple STEM courses.
  - The instructional technology team coordinated several on-campus presentations by professionals within the industry throughout the school year.

## Character Education

One of the most visible and well-received initiatives at GRACE is the renewed emphasis of character education on both campuses.

- On the Lower Campus, this program includes school-wide themes, such as kindness, respect, and gratitude, taught in chapels, classrooms, and morning announcements.
  - Salt and Light Awards acknowledge students who have consistently gone above and beyond to demonstrate these attributes.
  - The weekly “Eagle of the Week” award goes to students who demonstrate outstanding character in and out of the classroom.
  - WOW Wednesdays celebrate students who have demonstrated acts of kindness and modeled servant leadership.
- On the Upper Campus, this year's chapel themes emphasize the character of God as demonstrated through the Sermon on the Mount.

- The “Positive Office Referral” program, where students are “written up” for demonstrating Christ-like character, grit, resilience, and servant attitude, began in January.

## **Professional Development**

Appreciating the importance of providing excellent training for our teachers in order to reach our aspirations for our students, our leadership team has developed a comprehensive professional development plan that has focused on a number of important topics, including Biblical worldview integration, cultivation of a growth mindset, and tools to facilitate differentiated instruction.

In 2018, GRACE moved our standardized assessment test to the fall so our teachers can more effectively utilize the feedback from the assessment to impact their instruction and work with the students throughout the current academic year.

## **College Counseling**

Our high school students receive fantastic guidance and support through our college counseling program. Our Junior and Senior Seminar courses assist students in the college application process, as well as helping to prepare them for the challenges of life after graduation. In coordination with these courses, admissions personnel from fifty-three universities have visited our campus and met with our students since the start of the school year. The fifty-nine students in the class of 2019 have submitted over 300 applications to colleges and universities throughout the nation.

# *How GRACE is Positioned for the Future*

## **Academics**

As we look to the future of our academic program, it is important to note that our commitment to developing students who will impact their world for Christ will not waiver. As culture changes and trends come and go, our dual commitment to spiritual and academic excellence will continue. We will continue to evaluate curriculum on an annual basis, seeking opportunities to enhance, alter, and adapt as necessary. We will continue to support students' unique learning styles and challenges with our Learning Enrichment and Achievement Program. We will continue to emphasize professional development and the implementation of best instructional practices for our teachers. Looking ahead, there are two great opportunities for GRACE that will influence our academic culture -- the growth of STEM-related programs and a commitment to educating the whole child through an emphasis on their social and emotional well-being.

## **Technology**

Since 2011, when GRACE became the first Christian school in the area to support a 1:1 laptop program, the school has been a leader in integrating technology with education. Our students are comfortable working in the digital space, having been instructed from early ages on digital

citizenship, and are well equipped with experience in multiple software and hardware platforms when they graduate. GRACE desires to continue this trend by positioning itself for the future by being the pre-eminent provider of STEM instruction in a Christian school environment, resulting in greater opportunities for our graduates to enroll in top-tier college and universities nationwide, as well as preparing them for the challenges of the modern workplace.

In the coming years, we will continue to add STEM-related options to the curriculum, as well as refine our instructional approaches to prepare all students, in every subject area, for a technology-rich environment. We desire to take advantage of our geographical setting in the heart of the Research Triangle through increased affiliations with local businesses, universities, and other strategic partners. On the evening of April 8, GRACE will host a Technology Expo, featuring a panel of leaders from three technology companies, as well as exhibits and presentations from our students.

### **Social Well-Being**

In addition to the ongoing development of our academic programs, GRACE is committed to protecting and cultivating the social and emotional well-being of our students. The character education program and the creation of the guidance counselor position are two important aspects of this commitment. GRACE teachers cultivate strong relationships with students, knowing them as individuals and encouraging them to pursue their unique identity in Christ.

In light of an anxious world, our commitment to know, value and love your student is more important than ever. At GRACE, we have the incredible opportunity of being able to speak Biblical truth into the lives of our students, helping them claim the truth of Ephesians 3:10, that they “are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” Our teachers continue to integrate new ways of developing a growth mindset among our students, encouraging them to develop grit and overcome obstacles.

On the Lower Campus, we will continue to develop the character education programming that began this year. We will also seize opportunities to grow this program on the upper campus. Moving forward, we will increase the number of parent education opportunities concerning topics facing our children. Most importantly, we will continue to be counter-cultural to our self-focused society by emphasizing to our children that they can find their true identity and joy through their relationship with Jesus Christ.

### **Christian Life**

Helping students grow socially and emotionally is part of our larger commitment to equip your child for life. A key component of that commitment is the development of our Christian life program, which seeks to help students grow in their faith beyond the classroom. In 2017, Isaiah Whelpley stepped into the role of Christian Life Director for GRACE. In this capacity, Mr. Whelpley oversees chapels and service opportunities, teaches Bible classes on the Upper Campus, and participates in the evaluation of Bible curriculum. Over the past two years, we have developed a thematic approach to chapels on both campuses, providing an intentional focus on topics across the community.

- Mr. Whelpley is also the architect of Ignite, our overnight high school retreat, an annual highlight among our students.
- Additionally, in the past two years, GRACE seniors attended the Passion Conference in Washington, D.C., an annual conference committed to encouraging students to make an impact for Christ in their communities and beyond.
- Furthermore, through serving schools in Costa Rica, supporting families in downtrodden regions of Appalachia, and working with hurricane victims, our students receive first hand opportunities to develop as servant leaders.
- On the Lower Campus, the GRACE Worship Team (GWT), March Mission Madness, Operation Christmas Child, and other initiatives provide students with the opportunity to assist in leading worship and participating in service opportunities.

### Co-Curricular Activities

Since 2016, approximately 80% of our middle and high school students have participated in co-curricular athletic or arts offerings, enabling GRACE to compete at the highest level in both athletic and artistic competitions. As a result, our athletic teams have won multiple state, conference, and regional championships, and our fine arts students have won awards at both the local and state levels.

- In our athletic program, Athletic Director Devin Terris works closely with coaches to implement the “3D” coaching protocol, a program that addresses the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspect of athletics by emphasizing character development, sportsmanship, and the pursuit of excellence.
  - This spring, we launched the inaugural girls’ middle school lacrosse team.
  - Thanks to contributions to the annual fund, we have made several improvements to the gymnasium, including repairs to the flooring, new paint and a new logo on the court, and a new sound system for both sporting events and chapel services.
  - This summer, we plan to build a practice field on our property adjacent to the football/soccer field.

Our arts program continues to serve as the cornerstone for important GRACE community events, such as Grandparents Day, winter and spring concerts, and theatrical performances.

- The drama department’s fall presentation of *Women and War* and the spring musical performance of *75 Years of Broadway* demonstrate the great range of our program.
- Our students involved in the visual arts and music programs continue to garner accolades at competitions throughout the state.

Whether it is in athletics or the arts, we emphasize the importance of enabling students to develop gifts and talents that go beyond the traditional classroom setting.

## Budget

Any review of “Where We Are” must include a discussion of school budget and enrollment. Some of the following information was shared earlier in the re-enrollment announcement in the fall, but it is worth including here as part of the State of GRACE.

The GRACE Standing Board Policies mandate that the school operates “within a balanced cash flow budget” which means what we receive as revenue must approximate what we spend. Suggested best practice in independent school education is to fund the budget through tuition, endowment, and other revenue streams, such as summer camps and facility rentals.

- Our sources of revenue beyond tuition only provide a small percentage of our annual income (lunch program, aftercare/before care, summer camps, facility rentals) and are less consistent and predictable than tuition revenue. In each of these programs, we keep the cost to families as low as possible.
- The current endowment does not provide additional supplemental revenue.

We are not dependent on donations/development dollars to run our operations each year, but our budget does not allow for excess margin. Our budgetary structure is part of the reason we emphasize the importance of the Annual Fund, which provides a means to make improvements to programs and facilities without impacting our general budget.

- The new flooring, the renovation of the bathrooms, the renovation of the Kathie Thompson Library, and the overhaul of the HVAC system on the Lower Campus have all been done without impacting the general budget.
- Security improvements, such as the increased number of fob-accessed doors and cameras, the Raptor system, and the new phone system on the Lower Campus, are all a result of Annual Fund donations.

These are all things that needed to be done regardless of the existence of the Annual Fund, but the generous donations of our community through the Annual Fund provide for these improvements without having to allocate funding used to support other aspects of the school, such as employee salaries, benefits, training, and recruitment. The fall Annual Fund campaign resulted in a 50% increase in total donations compared to the 2017 fall campaign. The totals from Celebrate GRACE, which is our biggest source of Annual Fund commitments and donations, are still being calculated due to the rescheduling of the event.

## Enrollment

In an independent school environment, enrollment and budget discussions go hand-in-hand. Our current enrollment is approximately 765 students. As of now, we forecast next year’s enrollment to be approximately 740 students. The downturn in enrollment is a concern. Statistically, the causes stem from a combination of multiple years of decreased enrollment in early grades and a decrease in the number of new applications received this year on the Upper Campus.

There are external reasons for our decrease in enrollment, such as the highly competitive market place and national trends towards increased enrollment in home school and online options. To this end, we continue to share our message, mission, and vision through multiple online and social media tools.

## Parent Survey Results

As we continue to address the external market place, we know that the most important aspect of maintaining and growing enrollment comes from our partnership with current GRACE families. We use several indicators to gauge satisfaction, including re-enrollment percentages, survey responses, and daily interactions and feedback. Since 2015, the re-enrollment number has consistently ranged from 88.2% to 89.6%. Our current re-enrollment rate is 91%, which is a strong number, but our goal is to get to a point where re-enrollment consistently measures at 93% or above.

Feedback from our most recent parent survey also provides a great deal of insight into parent perspectives of our overall program. Three years ago, we incorporated the Net Promoter Score (NPS) into our annual parent surveys. The NPS is calculated from the response to the following question, “How likely is it that you would recommend GRACE Christian School to a friend or colleague?” In the surveys, our overall NPS was above 50, which is considered an excellent score. While the NPS creates a nice data reference point, the most revealing information, both positive and negative, comes from the comments shared when respondents are asked to explain their score. The comments are overwhelmingly positive, which one would expect in light of the overall NPS.

There have been questions in the past about what is done with the surveys.

- Each year, the administrative leadership team reviews the feedback. From there, administrators address issues specific to their campus.
- Principals respond to feedback relating to individual teachers or programs, both positive and negative.
- In other areas, some of these changes are apparent to our GRACE families, but not always immediately.
  - For instance, the addition of a school nurse, guidance counselor, and character education are due in part to the feedback received from families asking for additional support for students concerning social development and overall well-being.
  - This year, there were several references for a desire of greater opportunities for parents to learn and connect, including one request for a monthly “Donuts for Moms” meeting.

Each year, we receive hundreds of comments covering the gamut of school experiences; however, there is one constant that comes to the fore. The responses, both positive and negative are almost always connected to one thing -- relationships. The relationships can be between students and teachers, parents and staff members, parents and other parents, or students and fellow students. The quality of these relationships supersedes almost every other aspect of the community experience.

- The positive comments testify to a loving community where the student is known, valued, and loved. It is extremely rare for a “promoter” (the term for someone who shares a score of 9 or 10) to not reference this sense of community.

- However, on the contrary, almost every “detractor” (the term for individuals who share a score of 0-6) shares that either the respondent or their child has experienced some type of relational difficulty, either with other students or a teacher.

It is an ongoing goal of our staff to make sure that every child feels known, valued, and loved, something that we emphasize in professional development and in our overall approach to education. The survey data confirms what we already know to be true -- when it comes to education, it begins and ends with relationships.

## Where We Are Going

Economic uncertainties, a challenging marketplace, and shifting cultural values serve as legitimate concerns for the future. GRACE is wonderfully positioned to thrive despite these realities. Furthermore, our commitment to Christian education, “Equipping Students for Life,” appropriate and effective use of technology, and cultivating community uniquely empowers GRACE to answer the challenges and opportunities of this moment.

## Capital Development Feasibility Study

The annual parent survey was not the only research conducted this academic year. In the fall of 2018, the Board of Trustees contracted Capital Development Services (CapDev) to conduct a capital campaign feasibility study. Over the course of four months, CapDev worked with the GRACE leadership team to develop a Case Study, conducted 29 confidential interviews with 47 individuals affiliated with GRACE, and distributed an e-survey to over 1000 families. The Case Study proposed the construction on the Upper Campus that would include additional instructional space, multiple science labs, and a gymnasium.

CapDev provided a detailed report to the Board of Trustees that included the following summative statements:

- *“The Feasibility Study reveals that GRACE Christian School, its staff, and leadership is trusted and held in high esteem by participants. They have a passion for the school, its future, and the campaign initiative, with a majority of respondents supporting the campaign. However, GRACE will need to identify and engage many more potential donors before campaign implementation, and thoroughly prepare and communicate the vision to the broader school community.”*
- *“Capital Development Services further recommends that GRACE Christian School take one year to inform the school community of the vision and need for Upper Campus expansion, and actively identify, educate and engage top major donors and prospects as well as increase overall support for the expansion and campaign.”*
- *“Capital Development Services encourages school leaders to make every effort to educate the whole school community about its vision and plans for the future.”*
- *“In its history, GRACE has achieved many successes and parents clearly appreciate the Christian environment and nurturing emotional and academic support it provides students. The school is at a crossroads, with the opportunity to expand the Upper Campus if significant preparation is done in the coming months, and if the*

*board and staff are ready to incorporate philanthropy best practices in the years ahead.”*

As a result of the feedback provided, GRACE will not undertake a capital campaign in the 2019-2020 school year. Instead, the Board of Trustees and school leadership will focus on developing a long term strategic plan that captures a united vision for the future, while also maximizing the utility of the school’s current properties.

## *Continual Improvement*

GRACE will continue to build upon our commitment to equip each child for life. Following our Core Values, we will equip students with the ability to thrive intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually for life beyond GRACE. By doing so, we provide a platform from which students will flourish over the long term.

At GRACE, this begins with a continual cycle of reviewing our programs, researching best practices, applying changes where they are needed, assessing the effectiveness of implementation, and beginning the cycle anew. This process applies to every area of our school: academics, athletics, arts, business practices, governance, student well-being, and Christian life.

This document describes many examples of programs that are the result of this approach. In the immediate future, we will increase hands-on learning opportunities on both campuses, emphasizing the role of students as active, participatory learners. We will build on the character education programs as we seek to help students understand the importance of defining their value and self-worth through the lens of Christ, thereby providing a bulwark against our current anxiety ridden age, as well as helping them to understand the importance of loving one another as God has loved us.

## *Christian Worldview*

GRACE will continue the commitment to keep Christ at the foundation of all that we do. Our mission is to cultivate students who will impact their world for Christ. We build world changers. To this end, we will emphasize the implementation of Christian life curriculum that is appropriately accessible and applicable in the lives of our students. We will seek opportunities for our students to serve the community and grow in their understanding of what it means to live a life committed to impacting the culture for Christ. As a non-covenantal school, we have several students who may not be followers of Christ. Our ultimate goal is that every student who graduates from GRACE will know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This will not change.

## *Technology*

As described earlier, GRACE will continue to build upon the use of instructional technology and the development of STEM programs across both campuses, ensuring our students are prepared for the challenge of the ever-changing technological landscape. Furthermore, we

will continue to build our partnerships with local businesses and universities, providing students with opportunities to learn from leaders and innovators who are helping to shape their futures. Our goal in the coming years is to develop pathways to internships and certifications before our students graduate from GRACE. We also strive to ensure that all of our students, whether they pursuing a career in a technology related field or not, will graduate GRACE with the confidence and competence to understand and utilize the different technologies they will face in the academic and professional worlds.

## *Parent Education*

As a school community, we understand that the connections among our school families are an important part of the overall school experience. GRACE will further strengthen the bonds within our community through increased parent education sessions (“Equipping Parents for Life”) and a more proactive approach to helping new families connect to the GRACE community, both areas of opportunity brought further to light through the parent surveys.

## **In Conclusion**

Over the past thirty-five years, God has blessed GRACE beyond anything anyone could have ever hoped or imagined. As the Head of School, I have the unique opportunity to see these blessings each day, whether in the simple joy shown in the smile of a first-grader as she asks me about my socks or in the excitement of watching a middle school basketball game or in awe-inspiring fascination as I listen to a one of our seniors lead a chapel service.

The purpose of this document was to try to capture a glimpse into what makes GRACE great, as well as the ways God has blessed our community. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this document or participate in a follow-up conversation, we have scheduled a series of small group meetings to enable you to do so. If you are interested in participating, [please follow this link](#) and register for one of the scheduled meetings.

Thank you for the opportunity to partner with your family.

*Blessings,*

*Eric Bradley*

*Head of School*