

SEVEN QUESTIONS WITH....

JEN DANISH, HEAD OF SCHOOL, GRACE EPISCOPAL SCHOOL

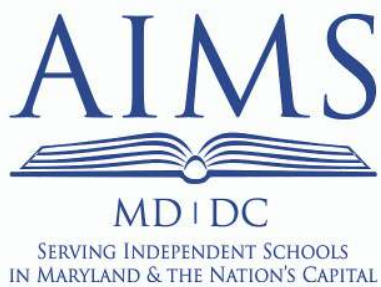


1. Why did you decide on a career in education?

I am finishing only my second year as a Head of School, but this is also my 23rd year in education. I knew in college that I wanted to be a teacher and I was lucky to graduate from college and go right into the classroom as an English teacher at Cheshire Academy in CT. In my many years in schools and before becoming a head, I've had the good fortune to teach English and coach field hockey and lacrosse, run a dorm of 30 girls, be an athletic director, a lower school head, and play handbells with a faculty handbell group! It's been such a varied and exciting career and now as a head, I find myself equally exhilarated by the daily variety that is my job each day at Grace.

2. What experiences and preparation helped you become a head of school?

For the bulk of my career, 10 years, I was a Director of Admission and Financial Aid at St. Patrick's Episcopal Day School. In that time, I really saw the changing landscape of admission in the DC market unfold and the rise of competition from better public and new charter school programs in our area. The rise in tuition in our schools has impacted our ability to continue to attract and retain families in the ways we did 10 years ago. My arrival at Grace came at a time when the Board was open to some new thinking about how we might shift our position as a small school. We are just finishing our first year of unveiling a Variable Tuition Program that makes it possible for us to further advance our commitment to affordability and accessibility at Grace.



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3. What sustained and/or inspired you as a school head?

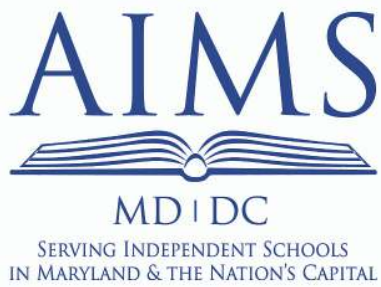
Having begun my career as a teacher, I always come back to the importance of the student experience in schools. As a Head, you are charged with a lot of tasks that may seem far away from that truth. To see the impact that our faculty have on our students is extraordinary, and so the moments when I can lean in to see this growth and joy are what inspire me daily. Pat Bassett, former President of NAIS, used to say that “schools are in the ‘life-changing’ business,” and I have seen and experienced that over many years. Now that is inspiring work to be in!

4. How has the work of heading a school changed in your time?

There is no question that the business side of running a school has become more of a focus and pressure in our work. Back in 1990, when I first joined a school as a teacher, my head was more of an educator administrator. Over time, I have learned from mentors in the work that considering the budget and how to attract alternative revenue is critical to long term survival.

5. What do you think is the most important innovation that independent schools must adopt?

The challenge of continuing to advance the value of our schools in a competitive landscape when parents feel the pressure of their own student loans and rising costs of living will be with us for a long time to come. At Grace, we are focusing on maintaining our commitment to being a school that is inclusive and accessible to a broad representation of families. It has required us to consider big long-term initiatives that will ensure our sustainability and our commitment to our mission. Variable Tuition is one of the ways we hope to accomplish these goals.



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6. If you weren't serving as a Head of School, what would you be doing instead, or what would your life be like?

I'm not sure I really could see myself in another industry or career. I do wonder what my life would be like if I weren't living in a major city. I grew up on 200 acres in VT, so I have fantasies of living in the country again surrounded by rescue cows and my dog; but I am sure I would be working with students too!