



# Q&A: Peter A. Kraft

Following an extensive national search, the Board of Trustees has named Peter Kraft the new Head of School at Saint Stephen's. He will officially take on the role July 1, 2023, after a one-year leadership transition period.

With more than 25 years experience as a teacher and administrator, Peter comes to Saint Stephen's from Oregon Episcopal School in Portland, where he has served as Associate Head of School since 2017. After beginning his career in New England, Peter moved to Peddie School in Hightstown, N.J. in 1995 as a history teacher and coach. He left Peddie as Academic Dean in 2011 to become Associate Head of Academic Affairs at Park Tudor School in Indianapolis, Ind. He also served as Interim Head of School at Park Tudor in 2016-17.

A native of Pittsburgh, Penn., Peter earned a bachelor's degree in history from The College of William and Mary, a master's in U.S. history from the University of Virginia, and a master's in private school leadership from Columbia University Teachers College.

He becomes the sixth Head of School at Saint Stephen's and succeeds Dr. Janet Pullen, who has been an administrator at SSES since 1988 and has served as its leader since 2003.



**Q: What was it that first attracted you to the position?**

**A:** More than anything, it was Saint Stephen's culture and values. SSES is clearly a school that "walks the talk" – students are truly "known and valued," and it's clear that young people come first. That is incredibly important to me. I also appreciate Saint Stephen's academic rigor combined with its commitment to the arts and athletics. Good schools understand that these areas work together; that they are critical to helping to produce happy, healthy, well-rounded young people. Lastly, I was drawn to Saint Stephen's history of strong, stable leadership. People clearly love the school. And, like Dr. Pullen, whom I find incredibly impressive and inspirational, they stay. That is a huge draw for our family.

**Q: What were your impressions of the school community when you spent time on campus during the interview process?**

**A:** What stood out to both Kim (my wife) and me was that Saint Stephen's is a happy school. The students and adults love it here. They are proud of SSES and they care enough to have high standards and high aspirations for themselves and the community. You know, when I visit any school I always spend a few minutes at the beginning of the day walking around and saying hello to people. I watch for certain things: do students smile at you? Do they stop to chat or ask if they can help? Do adults seem rushed, or do they slow down to connect? What I saw at Saint Stephen's was a deeply relational school - one where people come first. That is what great schools are all about: building community and ensuring that connections are created and maintained. I was really excited to see that.

**Q: Did you learn anything that surprised you at that time?**

**A:** I think what surprised me the most was how beautiful the school is. Driving by it on Manatee Avenue, you really don't get a full sense of the campus. I was so impressed with the physical spaces: the Marine Science building, the impressive athletic complex, the open and inviting learning spaces. Of course, none of that means anything without adults who are dedicated to students and young people who care about one another. But when you have all of these things, magic happens.

**Q: How would you describe SSES at this point in its history?**

**A:** To me, it's like a healthy teenager. It is full of life; it is willing to struggle with important things. But it has a long life ahead of it, and it is still open to possibilities. I am a historian, so I love to find inspiration in the past. (I also chatted with Bernie Yanelli when I was on campus and he told me that I could be part of the Hamilton-Jefferson Society. I can't wait!) So let me draw another analogy. After the Revolutionary War, the U.S. was still a fledgling nation and Alexander Hamilton was charged with selling newly-issued bonds throughout Europe. When skeptical investors asked why they should give money to a newly-independent nation, Hamilton described America as a "Hercules in the cradle." While Saint Stephen's is certainly beyond that stage of its history, there is so much promise ahead. SSES is really important to the greater Bradenton-Sarasota community, too. We have an obligation to help make our region and state an even better place to live. Building on what Dr. Pullen and her team have already done in this regard is a blessing.

**Q: How have your experiences prepared you for this opportunity?**

**A:** Being a Head of School is challenging. But I am fortunate to have been a Head before. So I have done many of the critical things that Heads do: work with boards, raise money, develop programs, hire faculty and staff, and serve as a spokesperson for the school. I have also been fortunate to have had great mentors in each of the schools in which I have worked. I'm lucky to have had Heads who cared about my development and who gave me opportunities to lead. I have run a strategic planning process, chaired an accreditation committee, secured seven-figure gifts for important capital campaigns and led schools through daunting times.

I also really enjoy having the public platform to say "thank you" to all of the extraordinary people who make schools like SSES run. Your parents, for example, do so much: they volunteer for lunch duty, they support the teams and clubs, they organize golf outings. It is so wonderful to be able to honor them for jobs well done. So for me, being a Head is a dream job.

**Q: What excites you most about the chance to lead this school?**

**A:** I think it is the opportunity to take an already great school and help it achieve even greater heights. I appreciate that Saint Stephen's cherishes its traditions but also embraces innovation. Great schools need to do both. They need to have traditions that make them special and give them a ballast, to use a nautical metaphor. But they also need to push themselves to stay relevant as education changes. Put differently, SSES knows who it is - and it is ambitious enough to know how to evolve without losing its culture and values. That's very compelling to me.

**Q: How would you describe yourself and your leadership style?**

**A:** For me, leadership starts with old-fashioned hard work. Part and parcel of that is making sure you get out into the community to see what folks are working on, what is important to them, and what the "pulse" of the school is. I always tease that I go through multiple pairs of shoes a year walking around school and greeting students, families, and employees. Doing this allows you to really understand your school and its people.

Beyond the relational piece, though, I believe that leadership is about getting the information that you and your teams need to make informed decisions. This starts by surfacing assumptions, doing the required research, getting key data, etc. Then, you explore different aspects of the issue – including making sure that the question you are working on is the right one. It's amazing how frequently folks work on something, only to discover that the crux of the matter is something else entirely. This is why I am a huge proponent of design thinking and user-centered decision-making. When one starts with the end-user – which, in schools, is your students – and works backwards from there, you tend to reveal opportunities and challenges that would otherwise have been missed.

The other thing that I take a lot of pride in is that I am both a listener and someone who understands that as a leader you need to make timely and often difficult decisions. People know that I take their ideas seriously, and they recognize that while I may not always agree with those ideas, I will respect them. But they also know that I will get things done. Schools are good at creating committees. These certainly have their place, but you can "committee" things to death. What people need in leaders is to be heard and respected, but also to have someone who helps create a shared vision that makes it clear where the school is headed.

I think school should be rigorous, but also joyful. I love to laugh, hang out with students and colleagues, and make learning fun. We are doing important work educating young people. But it needs to be enjoyable. I felt this sense of joy at SSES. I look forward to being part of that.

**Q: You won't officially take on the role until July 2023, so what does the next year look like for you?**

**A:** I still have a lot of important work left to do at Oregon Episcopal School. This work matters to me, and my job is to leave things in better shape than I found them.

In terms of Saint Stephen's, my first goal is to help honor Dr. Pullen and to support her fully, which includes ensuring that the focus remains on her and her leadership of the school. She's given most of her adult life to SSES. It's important to celebrate her remarkable tenure.

I will be visiting SSES multiple times over the next 12 months – at first to listen and to get to know the community and then, little by little, to work with the Board and Dr. Pullen to get up to speed so that I can hit the ground running in July 2023. But I will start by listening and learning from folks who know far more about Saint Stephen's than I do, but who share my commitment to ensuring that it prospers.

**Q: How is your family feeling about this new challenge?**

**A:** We are excited. Plus, my parents live about 90 minutes away in Celebration, Fla. Portland has been a good home for us, but we can't wait to be closer to family and to enjoy what makes Florida so special. We look forward to finding a house near school, joining Christ Church, and becoming a part of Saint Stephen's and the larger community!