Fall Family Weekend

Remarks from Head of School
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FRIDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2021 / HESS CENTER / LARGE AUDITORIUM

Good morning and welcome, everyone—especially to our new families and especially to our international families who have travelled such a long distance to be with us. I am delighted that you are, finally, here in the Hess Center for Deerfield's Fall Family Weekend. We have a great two days of programming ahead of us, including parent receptions, visits with faculty and advisors, arts and athletics, and more.

I am grateful to my many colleagues who have worked to plan and organize this weekend for you. They share my excitement in bringing you to campus and showing you a bit what your children have been experiencing this Fall.

I want to share a few thoughts on the Fall Term, followed by some reflections on the roles of schools, school leaders, and teachers in political and social affairs. I have been thinking about this a lot, and I have a lot to say: It's been two years since I have had the chance to address you in person! So, hold on.

We have had an incredibly successful opening of school. Since the beginning of the pandemic, and in the face of the many restrictions it has imposed upon Deerfield—and all schools—we have been committed to providing students with an authentic and meaningful experience in keeping with our mission and core values. In each of the five terms over which this pandemic has stretched, we have moved closer and closer to that goal—even as we sought to keep everyone safe and healthy. As a school, we are now a good way down the "Covid off-ramp."

We have returned to community rituals such as sit-down meals and School Meeting. Athletics and arts are in full swing. Spirits are high. Energy is positive. And because of high levels of vaccination among our community and in the surrounding towns and counties, we have, with few exceptions, been mask-optional, both indoors and outdoors, since our return to campus. We have been uniquely fortunate in being able to open school on a pre-Covid footing, and I am deeply grateful to you and to our staff and faculty for making that happen.

I could not be more proud of this community—our students, our staff, and our faculty. I hope you will thank faculty and staff as you see them this weekend. Students have been simply extraordinary: engaged, ready to lead, and always there to support, cheer, and lift one another. I say this knowing that these past months have not always been easy for them, but I believe that our students will look back on these years with a feeling of accomplishment and pride: in their resiliency, in their friends and peers, and, I hope, in the Academy. I was asked recently what has been the most important lesson of the past 18 months; it's this: that we are stronger together. I hope our students will take with them a sense of the power, strength, and exhilaration that comes when a community unites around shared sense of purpose—and sacrifice—to face down adversity.

In our recent update on inclusion and community life, I outlined two broad goals, which I'll repeat now:

The first is to sustain and deepen a climate where all Deerfield students can thrive and flourish in a community of respect and care for one another.

The second is to intentionally support a learning culture that honors the disparate beliefs of a diverse and dynamic student body drawn from across the United States and around the globe. This includes a commitment to free and open inquiry, and to expressive freedom—a freedom that includes ideas and opinions that some may consider disagreeable, unwelcome, or unpopular.

What we call inclusion—the art of creating a powerful sense of community that recognizes and honors each student's individuality and imparts to them a full and equal sense of belonging—is the foundation of Deerfield's work as a school—and it's a collective undertaking. Inclusion is not an office. It's not a five point plan. And it's not a series of "trainings" (something that should never be confused with education and learning).

Fundamentally, inclusion is about the kinds of relationships we create as adults with students, and the kinds of relationships our students forge—across race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and socio-economics—with one another: in our dorms, on our fields and performance stages, and in—and outside of—our classrooms. It's about the quality of our advising, mentoring, coaching, and teaching—the quality of the relationships we create each day with students in all of our interactions with them. A thoughtful commentator wrote: "What teachers really teach is themselves. Children learn from people they love, and that love (in this context) means willing the good of another and offering active care for the whole person."

Deerfield—and our faculty—have long recognized that learning is social, relational, holistic. Building relationships of trust, support, and challenge with young people is the essence of what we do as teachers, coaches, and advisors—it's reflected in our core values and informs all of our practices: everything from our commitment to a school size where every student is known and seen, to regular sit-down meals, to an insistence on a friendly, heads-up culture that is free, as much as possible, from the distractions of our phones. That is the "invisible essence" of Deerfield that John McPhee identified and celebrated in his portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Boyden.

The fact that we were on campus last year with every member of the faculty teaching and advising in person, with minimal disruption to our traditional school calendar, reflects Deerfield's historic commitment to that invisible essence, and to forging powerful relationships between students and adults. Nothing is more important to me, as head of school, than the quality of the relationships we foster and cultivate between students and teachers.

Last year represented an enormous challenge to these commitments. Across the country, schools saw increasing levels of conflict and strife on their campuses. It seems that there's scarcely any aspect of schooling that has not become the subject of furious controversy over the last 18 months. The lack of human contact that came with social distancing, the movement of conversations to

screens, and the distrust that permeates our public life have all undoubtedly worked as an accelerants to fire and intensify these conflicts.

The journalist Amanda Ripley has suggested that schools—much like the country—face a "super-storm" of what she calls "high conflict"—a special category of conflict akin to war: high-stakes, winner take all, zero-sum. We see this in our politics and public life. Even our metaphors reflect the landscape Ripley describes: We speak of "culture wars," the "weaponization" of words, and some educators imagine our relationships to students as "allyship"—a term intended to signal support and solidarity with underrepresented groups on campus, but which nonetheless carries with it the unfortunate suggestion that there are some people in schools— some adult members of the community—who are not allies of these same children. Language, and everyday speech, is increasingly equated with violence and aggression. Trauma, a word that we once reserved for war and other extreme calamities, and which once possessed, I am told, a precise, clinical definition, has become a commonplace term to describe student experience.

According to Ripley, high conflict represents a serious threat to the integrity of schools, their cultures, and, most importantly, the children they serve. High conflict pits parents, faculty, boards, and schools leaders against one another in ways that drain and deplete us of energy, destroy norms of respect and civility, consume invaluable time and resources, and distract us from our most important, defining, and sacred obligation: the care of students.

It is telling that the last eighteen months, according to many studies, have witnessed a precipitous decline in the health and wellbeing of children across this country. The reasons for this are complex, but it should not surprise us: Children tend not to thrive when the adults are at war with one another, and many simply want to keep their heads down.

A recent poll from the Knight Foundation found that more than two thirds of college students reported that their campus climate precluded them from expressing their views and opinions. Other polls report similar levels of self-censorship. That represents a challenge for any school or college whose mission is fundamentally about learning and inquiry.

The president of one liberal arts college captures the dilemma facing students quite well. This president writes:

"Students from historically disempowered groups feel that their voices have been chronically absent from our classrooms and conversations. They have pushed [appropriately, I would add] for their voices to be included . . . Conservative students feel marginalized and stigmatized by what they perceive to be left leaning faculty and administrators who welcome voices on the left but ignore the right. Many students who are in the middle or perhaps not sure where they fall say nothing, for fear of saying something wrong."

What does a great academic program—a great school—seek to do in a moment of high cultural conflict, political polarization, and coarsened public discourse?

In 1967, at a similar moment of national conflict, a committee at the University of Chicago drafted, at the request of its president, a report on the role of colleges and universities with reference to political and social issues.

"The Kalven Report" remains one of the most important statements describing the purpose and mission of universities, and by implication, all institutions committed to learning. And it has, I believe, tremendous relevance to Deerfield and, more broadly, to independent schools—at least those committed to the liberal arts.

It advances an argument for what the drafting committee called "neutrality" in political and social action. In order to protect mission—the "discovery, improvement, and dissemination of knowledge" —educational institutions, the committee concluded, "must maintain independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures." Schools and universities are not, in other words, political organizations or political actors; they are places of learning, inquiry, and question-asking.

In this way the university stands apart from the world, even as it remains, in its commitment to inquiry, in vital relationship to it. On the one hand, the institution, as a corporate entity, seeks to remain neutral, recusing itself from political engagement. On the other hand, it imagines itself as a space of open and robust civic inquiry, especially for students. It claims for itself the widest possible scope for discussion and debate.

This has implications for how Deerfield thinks of itself, and how we think about teaching and learning on campus.

Over my relatively short time as head of school, I've been asked to speak on many national and global events: The El Paso shooting, the so called Muslim ban, protests against police violence, racist incidents at other schools and colleges, anti Asian hatred, the election of 2020, and the storming of the Capitol on January 6, among others.

With a very small number of exceptions, I have refrained from comment. When I have spoken, I have tried to do so in way that affirms our school's most important values: civility, human dignity, responsibility to others in the community, kindness, and respect. I recognize that each and every one of the events I just mentioned—and many, many others not catalogued—touch the lives of our students, that they are deeply important to them, and that they may be disappointed that their head of school has recused himself from comment or condemnation.

I don't like disappointing students. But in disappointing them, I hope I am empowering them; encouraging their independence of thought; honoring and protecting their civic and intellectual agency; and creating a space where they can express that agency.

In the end, it's not my voice that matters, it's theirs. My voice, in fact, can inhibit and constrain their agency. This, then, is my view: School leaders should speak with modesty and restraint on matters of public concern, recognizing that our public communications can inadvertently chill expression and narrow the range of conversation here on campus.

I believe that schools can affirm and uphold the values that support a kind, caring, and inclusive community—a community free from attitudinal racism, bullying, harassment, and discrimination—without endorsing a particular political program or philosophy. There is no conflict between making good people and able citizens while also remaining agnostic on political and ideological questions.

These assumptions should inform our practice as teachers, as well. As teachers, we, too, should strive for pedagogical neutrality—again, so that we can cultivate intellectual agency among students and encourage independent thought.

The idea of neutrality, impartiality, and non-partisanship is well-established across a range of professions. Journalism offers an interesting parallel for teachers. Journalists, like teachers, work at the intersection where public service and political commitment collide, and they have adopted professional standards, including reasonable limits on expressive freedom, to navigate this tension, retain the trust of their readers, and advance public knowledge. A few examples:

- The first principle of the International Fact Checking Network, a nonprofit of the Poynter Institute dedicated to accuracy in the news, is "a commitment to nonpartisanship."
- *The New York Times* "Ethical Journalism" standards require "strict neutrality" on the part of its reporters, and places limits on their extra-curricular speech. It forbids its reporters from wearing campaign buttons or displaying other signs of political partisanship, and campaigning for or endorsing political candidates.
- National Public Radio asks its reporters to comport themselves "in ways that honor our professional impartiality." It requires reporters to refrain from advocating for political or other polarizing issues online, and goes so far as to put off limits bumper stickers, the signing of political petitions, and participation in political marches. Its code of conduct concludes, "Don't sign. Don't advocate. Don't donate."

Organizations that work with young people have adopted similar standards, warning against bias, advocacy, and the imposition of personal values:

- The Code of Ethics for the American Counseling Association states: "Counselors are aware of—and avoid imposing—their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors."
- The American Historical Association's Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct notes that the "practice of history requires awareness of one's own biases;" "Political, social and religious beliefs of history teachers necessarily inform their work but the right of the teacher to hold and express such convictions can never justify . . . the persistent intrusion of material unrelated to the subject of the course."
- The code of conduct of the American Council for Social Studies speaks of the "responsibility to accept and practice the democratic commitment to open inquiry and to approach controversial issues in a spirit of inquiry rather than advocacy."

Educators and schools should seek to act and teach in that spirit. This does not mean that teachers forfeit their rights as citizens, but it does mean putting the agency, interests, and voices of students first.

In the end, our vocation as teachers is educational and civic, not political, even—and this is critically important—as we embrace controversy and debate. Just as we strive for pedagogical neutrality, so too should we actively and positively embrace what I call "argument-inclusiveness," both as an instructional practice and principle of curricular design.

The case for argument-inclusiveness in teaching and learning has a long history. It finds expression in the Greek idea that we learn best through discussion and argument and in the ideas developed by John Stuart Mill in "On Liberty," who wrote: "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that." And in Robert Maynard Hutchins' celebration of "The Great Conversation:" the idea that classic and contemporary works of literature, philosophy, and social science exist as parts of an ongoing dialogue, with each work revising, contesting, and refining the other.

Much more recently, Emily Robertson and her co-author Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor of education and history at the University of Pennsylvania, have challenged high school teachers to embrace, rather than suppress, controversy in the classroom. Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University, has made the case for "affirmative action for the study of conservative, libertarian, and religious ideas." Professors have organized in support of open inquiry and viewpoint diversity; students have come together to create forums for open, robust, and civic-minded debate.

The last decades have seen exciting advances in scholarship: new fields of inquiry, new disciplines, and new debates within disciplines about method and emphasis have emerged. The literary canon has been diversified, neglected works rediscovered, the Great Conversation—, once confined to classic works—expanded to include a broad range of contemporary thinkers and novelists.

These are important conversations, and we need to bring them to our students. Most importantly, we need to bring them to our students as conversations, avoiding, as much as possible, the danger of simplistic curricular stories. This, I believe, is one of the great strengths of our faculty: They understand the dynamic tensions at work in their fields of study, and they know how to bring those to students in ways that are balanced, exciting, and engaging.

What practices support argument-inclusiveness in the classroom? Here are a few:

Include Rival Thinkers: The scholar and critic Wayne Booth in an essay entitled "Pluralism in the Classroom" describes what he calls a "rival thinker's" approach. He advises teachers to include texts and positions that rival or reject their own particular perspective: in short, to include debate in the very design of courses and curricula so students can see how scholars, philosophers, and public intellectuals disagree with one another and why. Similarly, Gerald Graff has encouraged teachers to "teach the conflicts" as way of improving argument literacy.

Remove Bias: Over the last decades, cognitive psychologists have increased our awareness of the many forms of bias—confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, in-group/out-group favoritism—that imprison thinking and judgment. Building on this work, teachers and educational researchers have developed strategies to combat bias in how we teach and think about curriculum. Just as journalists have developed safeguards to "de bias" their reporting, such as fact checking and verification, the use of multiple sources, ethical standards for balance, non-partisanship, and neutrality, so too have educators identified effective instructional practices to support open, pluralistic classrooms: how to "debate-ify" static curriculum and thoughtfully include controversy; how to sort live questions from settled ones and thereby avoid the trap of "false balance" and "both-siderism:" and when, if ever, it is appropriate for teachers to share with students their own political views. (Answer? Sometimes, but rarely, and only when it supports student agency and voice.)

Teach and Model Norms of Civility: In an age when so much public argument is ugly, toxic, and disparaging, we need to cultivate standards of discussion that elevate classroom conversation beyond the sloganizing of social media and the 280 character limit of Twitter. To that end we should seek to establish—as Deerfield's History, English, and Philosophy and Religion Departments have done so well—norms for civility and discussion. Our classroom norms should be countercultural—embracing civility, rigor, complexity of thought, and intellectual humility. The Deerfield Forum, the first of which we will hold this spring, intends to model for students respectful, rigorous, responsible dialogue and exhibit the idea that scholars, public intellectuals, and educators of good faith can engage in debate without shouting one another down or retreating into silence. Such forums have the promise of building in schools and colleges what Ripley calls (following the late Civil Rights leader John Lewis' idea of "good trouble") a "superstructure of good conflict."

Act with Generosity: We should encourage students to assume good faith on the part of peers and cultivate within them a spirit of generosity. Our statement on "Conscientious Speech and Expression" (included in our Rules and Expectations) provides students with school-wide norms in their use of language while encouraging robust discussion, strong student voice, and diversity of opinion.

Create the Conditions for Intellectual Adventurousness: Our students should be intellectually adventurous and bold. To that end, we should remain appropriately skeptical of well intentioned but illiberal practices that inhibit the asking of questions, discourage intellectual mistake-making, and chill inquiry: the framing of the classroom as a therapeutic space or, as the President of Northwestern University recently warned, as a venue for "identifying and exposing intellectual heretics;" the over-privileging of emotion and personal experience at the expense of the common languages of analysis, reason, and argument; overly expansive definitions of harm and classroom safety; administrative overreach and the aggressive policing of everyday mistakes in speech—mistakes to which we are all prone, especially when standards of usage and convention are in rapid flux.

The best schools of the future will embrace these practices in their pursuit of intellectually inclusive classrooms.

Not long ago I came across a talk by Mr. Boyden from 1965, in which he outlined his hopes for the newly-constructed Academy library—and how teachers might use the library in their courses.

"Take history," he said. "Just take something that's easy." [I love that line—as if American History is uncomplicated or uncontroversial!] "Take the Revolutionary War. We'll study what were the political causes of the Revolutionary War. We'll pick out the best book on the political. We'll get 12 copies of it. Then there will be the financial. We'll get 12 copies of that. Then, what were the social causes? What were the religious causes? Now, we'll have five different books. [A student will] go in and look them over and say, 'I think I'll take X.' You'll be prepared the next day to talk about X in class. Somebody else will take Y. Somebody else will take Z. When the week is over, each student will have read [a different] book. Then there'd be a general discussion [of all of these books]. When the term was over or perhaps when the month was over, they would have gotten a great deal of knowledge about [the causes of the Revolutionary War]."

There are three things I admire in Mr. Boyden's thinking: the emphasis on student choice, the emphasis on depth of inquiry, and the emphasis on multiple perspectives. He re-imagines the library as a kind of history lab, putting forth—in only the way Mr. Boyden could—a version of what I just called argument inclusiveness. Not one argument, one perspective, one story, but many: a curriculum that is many-voiced and pluralistic.

This, of course, is what the liberal arts do best. Mr. Boyden was talking about a single discipline—history—and a single question within that discipline: the causes the Revolutionary War. But what is true of individual disciplines is also true of the liberal arts taken as a whole. To some observers the liberal arts seem fragmented and incoherent—a list of unconnected subjects. But there is a coherence to this seeming incoherence. The liberal arts is the study of the diverse—and wonderful—ways in which we come to know the world. It's an education in epistemology. It offers young people a tool kit for knowing: in how different disciplines ask questions, gather evidence, generate conclusions, shape arguments, and then test those through further dialogue and experimentation.

This is the great value of multidisciplinary courses and team taught courses, which we do well here at Deerfield, and need to do more. They allow students to see how different disciplines, different theories, different approaches and methods result in different conclusions. That is what Hutchins meant by The Great Conversation.

By taking such an approach, we encourage students to engage with competing and complicating views, consider alternative arguments, foster their willingness to change their minds as necessary and as evidence dictates, recognize the limits of their own knowledge, register uncertainty and skepticism, and sometimes simply say, "I don't know." These qualities are, in my view, the mark of a mature intellect. Answering "I don't know" on the next test may not get you the best grade, but in life it means everything.

High school students are more than ready for this kind of learning. That is why so many student clubs and alliances are coming together to create forums for civic debate and open discussion here on campus. Students crave intellectually-inclusive classrooms. And in my experience—and from what I see in our classrooms at Deerfield—it's the most exciting, engaging, and valuable way for young people to learn. It's the best preparation we can provide our students for university, for professional success and the adaptability that success requires, and for a life of deep and sustained learning.

It's certainly not the only kind of learning we value, but it remains an indispensable element of liberal education, at least for schools such as Deerfield, committed to graduating young people who can think critically, judiciously, and independently.

You have been excellent listeners, and I thank you for your attentiveness. But more importantly, I thank you for your support and for sharing the lives of your children with us.