



# SPRING FAMILY WEEKEND

REMARKS FROM HEAD OF SCHOOL  
DR. JOHN P.N. AUSTIN



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## Married to Amazement: Some Reflections on Student Flourishing

Good morning and welcome, everyone. I am delighted that you are here to enjoy and participate in Deerfield's Spring Family Weekend.

I know that many of you have traveled great distances, rearranged schedules, and jumped through various hoops to be here on a Friday. Thank you. I also want to welcome those of you who couldn't be here in person but are joining us via the livestream.

The weekend offers an array of great programming, including our learning showcase, class receptions, co-curriculars and athletics practices, and games. Most importantly, this is a chance for you to get to know Deerfield better and spend time with your children. You will, I am sure, meet some of their teachers and friends and experience much of what they experience in their home away from home.

Each academic term has its own energy and feel. Spring at Deerfield begins, of course, with a shift in the weather. Which invariably leads to a shift in the mood across campus.

Paradoxically, spring also marks the beginning of an end, at least for our seniors, who sense, very keenly, that these are the last of their Deerfield days. And this awareness encourages reflection on their part as they think about and appreciate the opportunities they've had and the relationships they've created in their time here. They are also very excited about all that lies ahead, and we share that excitement, knowing that they are prepared to head into the next chapter of their lives with confidence and pride.

I do want to recognize our seniors' leadership and resilience, their generosity of spirit, as they set an example this year for their fellow students. Each class learns from those that precede it, creating a virtuous cycle across generations that supports our traditions and core values.

I am happy to report that the term is off to a fantastic start. Our student-athletes have taken to the fields, courts, pool, and river with enthusiasm and tremendous school spirit. We've already seen extraordinary athletics performances, and our student-artists have moved and entertained us with their creativity, passion, and imagination. We ended the winter with an absolutely amazing performance of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. I also hope you will spend some time exploring this building, the Hess Center for the Arts—including the von Auersperg Gallery just next door—to see our students' extraordinary work.

I am grateful to my colleagues—our exceptional faculty and staff—as well as to our parent and alumni bodies. We simply could not do what we do without your participation, support, and feedback, and certainly not without the trust that you place in us.

Spring is always busy, and this spring is no exception, with Admission's visit back days after a record year in inquiries and applications, a visit from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges reaccreditation team—a process on which we are about to embark—and continued planning for the future.

We've finalized a Vision for [“The Deerfield Student”](#) that will ground and shape our work as teachers, support innovation, and deepen conversations among faculty about learning at the Academy—more about that later.

Just last week at School Meeting, we heard from filmmaker Ken Burns. He shared with students clips from his most recent documentary on Ben Franklin, and discussed the art of historical documentary filmmaking.

We also heard from Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Quiara Hudes. And this past Tuesday, we held our inaugural Deerfield Forum, featuring journalist and author Jonathan Rauch, author of *The Constitution of Knowledge*; *The New Yorker* writer and Deerfield graduate, Jiayang Fan, Class of 2002; and the president emeritus of the University of Richmond, Dr. Ronald Crutcher.

During the Forum, we explored issues of speech, inquiry, and civic discourse, as well as the question of principled neutrality on campus. You'll be happy to know students asked some pointed questions about some of my thoughts on that. The Forum was brilliantly moderated by Libby Leist, Class of 1997.

As you know, the Forum is intended to promote viewpoint diversity on campus, model constructive and searching civic engagement, and stage for students spirited conversation among educators, journalists, scholars, and civic leaders. That's just what it did. I was proud, not simply of the level of engagement, but of the high quality of the questions our students asked.

We've also been moving forward on a number of on campus initiatives. As I look at many of these, I realize they share a common concern, namely, the health and well being of students.

## Well-being and Happiness

You've probably read some of the many articles and news items about declining levels of student health and well-being on our college and high school campuses.

The CDC and the American Academy of Pediatricians have both posted recent reports on declining levels of student well being, and a number of recent articles have drawn our attention to a range of factors that are impacting student well being.

In one recent article in *The Atlantic*, [“Why American Teens Are So Sad,”](#) Derek Thompson notes that “Almost every measure of mental health is getting worse for every teenage demographic, and it's happening all across the country.”

The pandemic, of course, both deepened these trends and placed a spotlight on questions of public health, particularly adolescent health, as so many students, absent from school for long stretches and disconnected from friends and peers, have struggled with isolation and loneliness.

The reasons for this are complex. And those who study these trends have mentioned a variety of factors, including the impact of social media; a news cycle that besieges them with a stream of negative news; the decline of play among children, and a culture of what some call “safetyism;” and changing styles of parenting. Professor Laurie Santos, who taught the most popular course in the history of Yale University, “Psychology and the Good Life,” speculated that interest in her course was the result of a high school experience in which students had to deprioritize their happiness to compete in the college admission process.

Our students have been very, very fortunate in this way over the last two years. Deerfield has always aspired to be a school of joy, friendship, and optimism. This has always been incredibly important for the Academy, and it’s been important to me as an educator. It’s a strength that I hope we can build on in the coming months and years as a defining institutional objective.

I offer three broad areas where we seek to do that.

## A Holistic Approach

First, we’re trying to think about student well being holistically and comprehensively. No single initiative or effort can address the challenges facing young people today.

We have to look comprehensively at everything we do across the school: our efforts at inclusion, our efforts in the classroom, our efforts in the arts and athletics, our residential program, and, of course, the support we provide students on campus through our advising program, our health program, our counseling program, and through all of the support we provide through the D.S. Chen Health and Wellness Center.

Additionally, we’re collecting comprehensive data about the student experience, particularly with an eye to measuring student happiness and flourishing. We’re in the midst of completing our second “pulse survey”—a quick six question survey that students take—which allows us to get a sense of their feelings of belonging, engagement, resiliency, and self-efficacy. And, we’re finalizing a more comprehensive “campus climate” survey. This data, supplemented by important data from our own health center and other areas of student and academic life, will allow us to study our culture, identify areas of attention and focus, and ensure that we’re asking the right questions and providing the kind of support that students need.

We’ve given a lot of thought to our approach with students—and this will always be the case as long as students are at Deerfield—who make mistakes or poor decisions. As we think about discipline, we want to stay focused on growth, and taking a supportive, educational approach, even as we maintain the highest standards of conduct at the school. Amie Creagh and the Student Life Office

have done a lot of work over this past year to make our processes not simply more responsive and fairer, but also more supportive of kids. As you may recall, some substantial updates were made to our [Rules and Expectations for Deerfield Students](#), and we will continue to study and think about best practices in this important area.

We will also pioneer a new grade dean model next year, and longtime faculty member Becca Melvoin will serve as our first Dean of Residential Life. This new model will allow us to sharpen and define educational programming for each grade in a way that's developmentally specific and appropriate, and will better support the individual growth and development of each student at Deerfield. Obviously, a ninth-grader has quite different needs than a 12<sup>th</sup>-grader, and we want to be attentive to those disparate needs. Our Peer Counselors continue to do great work throughout the school, and the Student Life Office has led—and will lead—a number of important initiatives and campaigns, including Move4Love, focusing on healthy relationships, the Be Worthy Program, which seeks to deter experimentation with drugs and alcohol, and for our seniors, the Transition to College series.

## Encouraging Connection and Pro-Social Behavior

The second area that I believe is an important and powerful part of our students' Deerfield Experience is the way we encourage what Derek Thompson calls “pro social behavior.” That's a fancy phrase for getting people together and promoting a sense of connectedness between students and between students and adults. An inclusive school is a school that intentionally multiplies social connection, and that actively cultivates—creates a culture—of deep and extensive relationships. Students at Deerfield have a tremendous opportunity to connect with other young people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs, and we should seek to leverage those.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's how important—and how powerful—our common rituals are, whether it's School Meeting, gathering for artistic performances, sit down meals and singing the “Evensong” together or athletic events.

These are reasons why I feel it is so important for us to steward and to protect these incredibly important community rituals. Many schools have allowed their rituals to lapse or simply given up on them. But these kinds of moments are more important now than ever before, and we need to be intentional in how we create and sustain them.

One of the most important findings of the Harvard Study of Adult Happiness, which commenced in 1938, making it one of the longest research studies of human happiness ever conducted, is that people with strong social bonds are more likely to be happy, healthy, and live longer. Janice McCabe, professor of sociology at Dartmouth College, and author of *Connecting in College: How Friendship Networks Matter for Academic and Social Success*, has studied the role that friendship networks play in college, concluding that regular contact in shared physical spaces, opportunities for structured collaboration and “teaming,” and broad, diverse networks of friendship ultimately support success and well-being.

It's also very important for us as a school—and as parents and teachers—to help students manage the enormous challenges and pitfalls that technology presents.

The technological advances we have seen over our lifetime are truly amazing and transformative. It's pretty clear that with the advent of artificial intelligence and virtual reality, we are on the cusp of a second great tsunami of technological change. It will undoubtedly have an immense impact on schools and on the lives of children. What do we do in the face of this challenge?

Writers such as Jean Twenge, Jonathan Haidt, and Sherry Turkle have described the extraordinary impact that technology, and particularly social media, have had on the lives of young people. Turkle's book, *Alone Together*, describes beautifully the paradox of some of our more potent forms of social media. Derek Thompson puts it simply when he says, "Social media use displaces pro social behaviors."

What are schools to do? If you discover an answer to that question, I hope you'll speak to me. I joked with a group of parents at one of our recent Spring Visit Days that if I had my way, I would confiscate every smart phone in the school and provide every student with a flip phone. This is probably not realistic, but I do think we can continue to emphasize and encourage "heads up" behavior on campus. Truth be told, that has eroded somewhat over the course of this pandemic—for understandable reasons.

But the other day, at sit down meal, I was happy to hear that some students had organized an early morning walk to the Rock. For 5:45 am, I think it was. They said, "Let's all leave our phones in our rooms." That's great advice. Sometimes we simply need to leave them behind, so that we can enjoy one another more immediately and authentically, and remain fully present to one another. And perhaps we can organize occasional fasts for students from their phones over the course of the year. Deerfield has a strong culture in this way. We need to continue to build it, even as we look to harness the tremendous power that these new forms of technology provide.

## Deep and Happy Learning

We also want to ensure that our approach to learning, and the way we think about academic excellence, supports students' well being.

Scholars of learning have drawn a useful distinction between what they call "strategic" and "deep" learning. Both are oriented toward high achievement. Yet strategic learners are generally driven by extrinsic rewards, in contrast to deep learners, who are driven by their own curiosity and sense of wonder. The research tells us that strategic learners are subject to high levels of stress and anxiety, and that deep learners are both more successful and happier. We hope to cultivate both high achievement and deep learning.

In my debrief with the chair of the visiting committee from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, he commended Deerfield on our new schedule, and reported that they had very,

very good conversations with both parents and students about it, noting overwhelmingly positive feedback. Community Time, in particular, seems to be a great hit, and we will continue to protect that mid-morning period as unscheduled time and leave it to students as theirs to fill.

Our goal in this schedule change, as you might remember, was twofold. First, we wanted to create longer periods, thus providing ample time for deep learning and allowing for different kinds of assessment. We also sought to create a healthier pace to the day and the week for students *and* adults, which was a recurring theme from our previous two accreditation reports. We sought to reduce the number of nightly assignments for students to better manage workload at the institutional level, and we wanted to provide a slower pace to the day. No schedule is perfect, but our new approach to time, I believe, better supports student health and well being.

Some of you may have seen a recent *New York Times* editorial on freedom of expression, something I have been thinking about a great deal. For me, it was most notable in the sense that it connected creative, expressive freedom to the idea of human flourishing, and that is what we emphasize in our newly-developed Vision of a Deerfield student: This Vision will inform how we think about teaching and learning, how we review and study our own curriculum and pedagogical practices, and how we think about our own growth as teachers.

It centers on four areas: Leadership and Judgement, Mastery and Metacognition, Scholarship, and Open-Mindedness and Curiosity. The latter includes:

- Inquisitiveness: embracing question-asking and dialogue as paths to knowledge.
- Intellectual humility: understanding that knowledge is subject to revision, experimentation, and testing.
- Heterodoxy: the willingness to seek out and consider appreciatively and generously multiple perspectives.
- Reading and listening: teaching young people to read actively, deeply, and with absorption.

This statement of a Deerfield student also embraces the larger values of learning for its own sake and learning through growth and challenge. The idea that we learn through challenge and failure is universally accepted. It's also very difficult to institutionalize in the context of high achieving schools, particularly with all of the pressures that come with the college and university admissions process, which becomes ever more complex and competitive.

These are reasons why the arts and athletics are so critically important to our students' experience because they remain one of the last arenas where students can struggle with discomfort, challenge themselves, meet with defeat and triumph, and emerge with a more robust sense of self and confidence. These experiences build what has been called "anti-fragility." Many experiences, Jonathan Haidt notes, are like our immune systems: "They require stressors and challenges in order to learn, adapt, and grow." Children, too, are anti-fragile, and we should seek to create experiences for them—across school life—that support growth, confidence, and resiliency.

So, we need to think about student flourishing holistically across every dimension of school life. We need to continue to create opportunities for inclusion, for community, and for connectedness. We need to ensure that our academic program promotes not only high achievement, but intellectual vitality, deep learning, and joy. We need, as the poet Mary Oliver suggested, to “marry our children to amazement;” to wonder and curiosity. If we can do this, our children will thrive. They will find success. They will find happiness.

I hope you have a great weekend. Thank you.

