



# SPRING FAMILY WEEKEND

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



APRIL 21, 2023 / HESS CENTER / LARGE AUDITORIUM



Good morning, and welcome to our Spring Family Weekend. My thanks to each of you for your support and trust, for your partnership with us, and, most importantly, for sharing the lives of your children with us.

I thought I would do three things this morning: give you a brief update; offer a few reflections on the future of Deerfield; and, time permitting, answer a few questions.

The feeling on campus turns with the change of every season. With spring, a new energy is released as the days lengthen, the weather warms, and the greenness of our campus and the surrounding hills come alive again. You can see students sunbathing on the Lower Level, walking and hiking to the Rock, and “shriving” in the River. And, of course, our seniors bring a mixture of feelings to these final weeks as they reflect on their experiences here, savor time with friends, and look with excitement and a sense of opportunity to the years ahead.

I always say that the success of any school year depends on the leadership and engagement of its senior class; they set the tone, they lead the way, and they create the goodness of this school. And this year’s class has been exceptional. By chance, my youngest daughter, Maia, graduates from her school on the same day at the same time as Deerfield’s Commencement, so I will be recording a video message for our Commencement this year. And I have to say: This was not an easy choice for me. This class entered with Monica and me. We have journeyed through the last four extraordinary years together, shoulder to shoulder, and they will always have a special place in my heart.

Last week, Deerfield hosted the annual spring meeting of trustees and heads of the Eight Schools Association—our peer boarding schools in New England and the Mid-Atlantic. Many of those in attendance mentioned to me how friendly and welcoming our students are, and how impressed they were by the positive energy on campus. They could see and feel our strong and powerful sense of community. That is always gratifying to hear, and even more so when it comes from respected colleagues such as fellow heads of school.

I think I have been able to see every team play this spring. A highlight for me, thus far, was a testy, competitive mid-week Ultimate Frisbee match against one of our peer schools. One of the reasons I love watching Ultimate is that players serve as their own referees. This makes for some entertaining on-field discussion, especially when our opponents seem to be playing a sport more akin to ice hockey or football than Ultimate, as our opponent was on this particular afternoon. Occasionally, the game just stops, as players debate a called foul and resolve disagreements of interpretation. I’m still working out the rules, which is ok; I have been working out the rules for girls field hockey for 42 years, but it did seem to me that we lost more than one discussion that should have properly gone our way. I attribute this to our magnificent sportsmanship, our flexibility of mind, and willingness to compromise. It may have also had something to do with the size of our lead; we won this game by a considerable margin, so the stakes were much lower with each contested call. As an aside, we are working to align our athletic schedule with family weekends next year so that we have more games on campus!

Our spring arts performances build slowly over the course of the term, and we have already had some wonderful performances and concerts; at least one performance is a staple of our School Meetings. I'm always in awe of our student artists' talent and commitment to craft, so I hope you will be able to attend the Arts Showcase this evening.

Over the previous few years, we have welcomed to campus some extraordinary speakers: presidents of colleges and universities, a Nobel Prize winner, military and civic leaders, authors, scientists, and artists, and this year is no exception. In January, we heard from Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and former US Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith and National Book Award winner and poet Terrance Hayes. You don't often get a Pulitzer Prize and National Book winner in the span of four days: but we did. Last week we heard from Maya and Denley Delaney, sisters and Deerfield graduates from the Class of 2013, who received the Ashley Award for outstanding service to their communities. As one student said to a member of the faculty, it was like hearing two Commencement addresses in row—and in less than 20 minutes. They spoke on their work in the fields of oceanography and environmental sustainability in the Caribbean, and offered students incredibly wise advice. Earlier this week, Hussain Aga Khan, Class of 1992, spoke to students about his conservation efforts and his extraordinary ocean photography, which you can see on display in the Hess Lobby and above the Starfield in the Koch Center.

We also hosted our second annual Deerfield Forum on the topic of "Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Learning." The purpose of the Forum is to model constructive and scholarly debate and stage respective and searching civic dialogue for students. This year's Forum featured Dr. Stuart Russell, a professor of computers, science, and engineering at UC Berkeley—he recently delivered the prestigious BBC Reith Lectures—and researcher, professor, and writer Melanie Mitchell. Both are leading experts on generative artificial intelligence and machine learning. The panel was moderated by the author Steven Johnson.

The Forum was a wide-ranging discussion that touched on the nature of intelligence and cognition; possible impacts of AI on how we think and learn; the risks artificial intelligence poses to the integrity of our political and economic systems; and debates about how it should be regulated. Dr. Russell, just prior to his appearance at Deerfield, spearheaded an effort to place a moratorium on the development of AI systems more powerful than ChatGPT4. That debate will likely continue, but two things seem certain: first, that the development of generative artificial intelligence is moving at an extraordinary pace, and second, that it will have a dramatic impact on teaching, learning, and human creativity—indeed, on all work. I was incredibly impressed by the engagement of our students in this discussion.

We continue to think creatively about our academic program, and our faculty continues to update our course offerings. Even as we limit access to cell phones—a trend I think you will see at more and more schools over the next few years—we also seek to build into our curriculum emerging topics in science and technology and leverage new technologies for learning. Next year, we've expanded our course catalog to include advanced courses in the fields of data science and engineering, as well as new offerings in a range of other disciplines.



During an early April faculty meeting, each of our academic departments shared with colleagues the defining learning outcomes of their disciplines as well as the instructional practices that support those outcomes. This important work was a charge given to us by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges as part of our upcoming accreditation process, which will happen next fall. It was the best faculty meeting I've been to in my four years. These outcomes reflect and reinforce the mindsets and capacities we have outlined in our portrait of a Deerfield Student, and their explicit articulation will enable us to become more intentional in how we teach and construct curriculum; they will provide a framework for collaboration and future interdisciplinary efforts; and will support mentoring, appraisal, and professional learning at Deerfield.

We were also informed at the end of March that the E. E. Ford Foundation, the leading educational foundation serving American independent schools, has awarded Deerfield Academy an Educational Leadership Grant. Grants are awarded to schools offering proposals that promise a significant impact on the practice and thinking of independent schools; that are innovative and replicable; that address challenges faced by independent schools; and that encourage bold new ideas, catalyzing change. The grant will support the development and writing of a practical, school-based framework of principles that will:

- foster an intellectual culture for students that actively promote expressive freedom, inquiry, and curiosity without fear;
- develop guidelines to help schools determine when—and if—to assert neutrality on matters of politics and social action;
- promote impartial, nonpartisan teaching in support of student agency and the development of their personal views on matters of public interest;
- and integrate diverse arguments and perspectives in the design of teaching and courses, and in all school activities.

The goals of the framework, which will be written by a nationally representative working group of secondary school heads, are to deepen the national conversation about the critical importance of expressive freedom and open inquiry; provide schools with a meaningful tool for institutional reflection and assessment; and create a vehicle for shared understanding and consensus building among boards, school leaders, teachers, students, and parents.

I believe that it is more important now than ever for schools to develop—and institutionalize—principles of teaching and instruction that support viewpoint diversity, protect the autonomy and independence of students, and equip them to engage with others across difference. Many colleges and professional schools are now moving forcefully in this direction. Over the past two weeks we have seen important statements and initiatives come out of Stanford Law School, Vanderbilt, Harvard, and Cornell. Independent schools such as Deerfield have an obligation to prepare students for a life of pluralistic contention by embracing practices that support inquiry and expressive freedom and discarding those that do not.

We have also been hard at work defining future priorities for the Academy and a comprehensive campaign in support of them. We will stage a number of conversations next year about these priorities. I look forward to sharing them with you in greater detail and, most importantly, getting your insight and feedback and hearing about your hopes for your children and for our school.

Great schools—those, like Deerfield, that sustain excellence in learning and leadership over many generations—are confident in their ethos and values, building outward from their defining strengths and distinctive histories. They are also agile, open to change, and attentive to future opportunity. Deerfield's next campaign will seek to build on our legacy strengths even as we look to the future. In many ways, it will be a campaign about people, about culture, and about community, firmly centered on our students and their experience.

We will seek to increase access and opportunity by fully endowing our existing financial aid commitments and additional resources for families across income levels. Over the last decades increases in tuition have dramatically outpaced income; according to the National Center for Education Statistics, tuition, fees, and room and board for college have increased 59 percent since the year 2000. In contrast, inflation-adjusted median income for people with a BA has risen by 5 percent over the same time period.

It is critically important that Deerfield ensure access to future generations of students irrespective of their financial resources. That kind of diversity is central to the kinds of learning and interactions that happen at Deerfield, and it's the best possible preparations for every student's future. And that commitment to affordability and access has always been part of Deerfield's DNA—a commitment beautifully articulated by Mr. Boyden's idea that families should simply "pay what you can." Deerfield was one of the first American independent schools to extend its reach in this way, and it's one way that we will seek to be worthy of our heritage.

We will invest in spaces at the school that unite, connect, and create community. We will invest in the renewal of existing residential spaces and additional faculty housing in, or in close proximity to, those spaces. This will enable us to ensure a strong, visible presence of adults on campus and a lower ratio of students to adults in the dorms. We will invest in the renewal of historic buildings, including the Main School Building and Arms, to create spaces for team teaching, interdisciplinary learning, and collaboration. A great faculty is a learning faculty, and this kind of collaboration fuels creative teaching and instructional design.

And we will invest in a renovated, upgraded, and expanded Dining Hall that can comfortably seat and bring together our entire community. In many ways that space is the beating heart and soul of the school. Our sit-down meals connect students to students and students and faculty in ways that are the envy of our peers, and it is a powerful and enduring bridge between generations of alumni and between Deerfield's past and present.

We will invest in programmatic renewal and innovation in the form of a Center for the Study of the Liberal Arts. This Center will seek to renew and invigorate the liberal arts as a lasting source of wisdom and inspiration even as it reimagines them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century so that our students can meet the challenges and complexities of a future we cannot predict or fully anticipate; it will seek to identify high-impact practices consistent with our philosophy of education; practices that will supercharge the classroom experience for students; it will sponsor the Deerfield Forum—our effort to promote inquiry and expressive freedom; and support summer institutes for professional learning that will bring faculty from other schools to campus (and that, we hope, will strengthen our recruitment efforts) and provide opportunities for growth and renewal.

And we will invest in the high-engagement model of teaching, coaching, and mentoring that has stood at the center of Deerfield for well over a century and that drives the goodness and the excellence of the Academy. If asked what is the greatest challenge facing boarding schools today, I would answer in the form of a question: How do we create opportunities for excellence, challenge, and achievement for students and at the same time forge a community characterized by joy, optimism, care and mutual obligation, and connection? After one of our three recent visit back days, a prospective parent wrote to Dean of Admission Chip Davis and said that Deerfield was the happiest school they had seen in their many campus visits. Happiness—students thriving and flourishing—is not an accident. It's the result of careful design, intention, and a deeply engaged faculty.

Deerfield was founded on the idea that young people can fully flourish while embracing challenge, excellence, and achievement at the highest levels. These are mutually supportive goals, and the principal means by which we these are achieved is through the faculty. So, we must invest in their renewal and their growth. We have a long tradition of school leaders and administrators who teach, and of teachers who coach, mentor, and share their lives generously and widely with students across multiple dimensions of school life. I want to sustain this model.

As I said to prospective parents, everything—absolutely everything—depends upon the deep, broad, and caring engagement of our faculty and staff. There are, it is true, considerable pressures bearing down on this model of engagement: changing attitudes toward work, increased pressure on faculty time, increased demands for programmatic excellence everywhere and in every facet of school life, among others. For all of these reasons, it's critically important that we continue to think creatively about how we support, compensate, renew, and invest in our faculty, and I believe that Deerfield has a unique opportunity to do this better than any other school in the country. With your wisdom and support, I know that we can accomplish that. Thank you.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "John P. N. Austin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

