



FALL FAMILY WEEKEND

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



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2023 / HESS CENTER / LARGE AUDITORIUM

Good morning, and welcome to Fall Family Weekend.

Thank you all for making the journey and taking the time to be here. I know that many of you have attended Family Weekends before, and for others, this is a new experience. We are excited that you made it.

This is an all-hands-on-deck effort for us, and one of our biggest on-campus events of the year, so I want to begin by thanking our faculty and staff, who have been preparing for months with much care and dedication to ensure that you have a great weekend.

We did try to create some AI-generated sun for you, but the technology isn't there just yet.

There has been terrific energy on campus since the opening weeks of school back in September, and spirits have remained high even as we are well into the Fall Term. I have been proud of our students—of their engagement, their leadership, and, most importantly, the innumerable ways they show up for and care for one another. I hope that you'll see and feel their enthusiasm, dedication, and fellowship this weekend.

I'd like to use our time together this morning to offer updates on the campus, the school year to date, and some important priorities that will shape the future of Deerfield. And then, if we have time, I'll be happy to take some of your questions.

The talent and creativity of our student-artists are simply extraordinary. Their performances, across a range of artistic forms, never fail to bring our community together in a spirit of joy and pride.

Now, I can't talk about the arts at Deerfield without mentioning the new film *The Holdovers*. It's directed by two-time Academy Award winner Alexander Payne, who directed, among other films, *Sideways*, and it stars Paul Giamatti and Deerfield's own Dominic Sessa, Class of '22. A number of other students have minor roles and speaking parts. The film was shot in part on our campus, and Dom was a senior while participating in the production. I'm sorry that we can't offer a sneak preview this weekend, but I understand that it's opening nationwide on November 10, so look for it, and look for Dom! He is representative of the many student-artists on campus doing phenomenal and inspiring work.

Beginning tomorrow afternoon, we've got some exciting athletic contests scheduled. One of Mr. Boyden's greatest accomplishments over the course of his 66 years at Deerfield was building our interscholastic athletic program. When he arrived at Deerfield in 1902, there was a national movement to eliminate athletics from schools and colleges, led by none other than the President of Harvard University at the time, Charles William Elliott. He spoke often and publicly against baseball, basketball, and hockey. He described football as "a fight whose strategy and ethics are those of war . . . [where] The weaker man is considered the legitimate prey of the stronger." (As his language suggests, the idea of young women participating in athletic competitions was unthinkable.) Of baseball he wrote: "This year I'm told the team did well because one pitcher had a fine curveball. I understand that a curveball is thrown with a deliberate attempt to deceive. Surely," he lamented, "this is not an ability we should want to foster at Harvard."

Contrast that with this story from John McPhee's *The Headmaster* describing a young Mr. Boyden playing first base on Deerfield's baseball team—and yes, he did play side-by-side with his own students:

“In the early days, having the headmaster as a player produced some disadvantages for Deerfield teams. Once, in a pickoff situation in baseball, when he caught the throw from the pitcher and put his glove down, the opposing player slid safely under him. ‘Out!’ said the umpire. Any other baseball player would have congratulated himself on his luck, but the headmaster had to tell the umpire that the fellow had in fact been safe.”

Mr. Boyden sought to shape Deerfield's athletic program around the values of fairness, sportsmanship, grace, and humility. He saw it as a way to foster the virtues of teamwork, practice, and hard work. He sought to make athletics, as quoted again by John McPhee, “a moral force.”

That tradition is carried on by our coaches, our athletic staff, and most especially by our Director of Athletics and Cocurricular Program Bob Howe, whose commitment and dedication to our cocurriculars is unmatched. Bob has deepened our commitment to athletics at all levels—I recommend to you the article recently published in *Deerfield Magazine* on our JV program—and Bob and his team have translated our community pledge into a series of aspirations and values that are lived every day by our athletes. You will see these posted throughout the school. The first is: “Be a great teammate.”

It is not accidental that we speak of “cocurriculars” and not “extra-curriculars” (though we have a lot of those, too). The athletics and the arts are not “extras” or add-ons at Deerfield. They are intrinsic to who we are—equals to academics in our educational program—and an important and defining part of the student experience. Nor is it accidental that we require participation and ask students—whether they are involved in our athletics or arts or service programs—to work as “teams.” One of the things I value most about the arts and athletics is that they offer young people the opportunity for teamwork and collaboration, and for self-effacement in the service of something bigger than they are.

If a student is a part of an ensemble, a dramatic performance, or a team, there are, of course, opportunities for individuals to stand out and excel, but in the end, success, as it is in life, is always a collective achievement (one of the reasons we don't have names on our jerseys). Whatever you accomplish as a member of a theater production or a crew, you accomplish it as part of a team. And this is as true in defeat as it is in victory. Arts and athletics remain one of the last great laboratories for leadership: an arena where young people can meet, and overcome, adversity and setback. Failure, as it were, is built into the curriculum, which is why student-athletes and student-artists often develop such high levels of confidence and resiliency.

It's probably worth pointing out that Mr. Boyden was also quite skeptical of over specialization. He famously went so far as to remove baskets from backboards in the off-season. Although he did not have access to it, there's a great deal of research suggesting that his skepticism was warranted. (A smart summary of that research can be found in David Epstein's *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*.) Those days are behind us, I suspect, and I don't think it's necessary to prohibit the off-season pursuit of excellence, but there is much to be said for a commitment to broad student engagement. I'm very proud of our artists and our athletes, and I'm also grateful to our artist-athletes

(those students who do both) as well as our multi-sport athletes; they contribute to Deerfield's competitiveness, which is why a school of our size can support 31 athletic programs and twice that number of teams, allowing us to compete at the highest levels at each. This fall our teams have, at all levels, a combined record of 72-38-7.

One of the highlights of the Fall Term was a "Friday Night Lights" football game, the first in Deerfield's history. I think the entire school came out in support, which was as exciting as it was unsurprising. A strength of Deerfield is the quality of our weekend program. Unlike other schools closer to Boston or New York or boarding schools with a sizeable proportion of day students, the social energy remains on campus during the weekends, and this is a defining aspect of life here—one we seek to leverage in our weekend programming.

We're still very much in the planning phase for our campaign, and still in the process of prioritizing institutional needs and aspirations. But, as you know, we are already moving ahead with the renovation and expansion of the Dining Hall, which is largely as it was when it was first built in 1948. You may not know this, but we do not outsource our dining; all our menus and food preparation are done by our staff. In the end, this project is not merely about refurbishing a beloved building. We are not building a cafeteria. It's about creating connection, fostering inclusion, and deepening our sense of community. We're currently unable to bring everyone together in one space for meals, and expansion will remedy this. The Dining Hall project is ambitious, and it will take about eighteen months to complete. It requires several chess moves on campus, the first of which is the temporary facility. You may have already noticed the construction and earth-moving on Albany Road, where Headmaster's Field—our baseball field—is located. We're building a temporary dining facility there, and although it's temporary, it too will be a historic first for Deerfield, in that it will allow all of us to gather for meals together at the same time.

As you drove onto campus, you may have also noticed construction between Main Street and Routes 5 and 10. We are creating a new, five-acre, multipurpose synthetic playing field. So, no baseball games will be called on account of our Dining Hall project. This new field will not only enable our baseball season to go forward without a hitch, but it's located beyond the flood plain. You'll recall in the summer we had extensive flooding and damage to the Lower Level playing fields after the Deerfield River overflowed its banks. Our grounds and facilities teams were heroic in addressing the flooding—working tirelessly to restore the fields and prepare campus for the arrival of students.

As weather events increase in both frequency and intensity, exploring long-term solutions to campus challenges has become a priority. This new, versatile field is part of that solution, providing additional playing fields outside the flood plain. You will have a chance to see it in action come Spring Family Weekend. And I should mention that when the temporary dining facility is no longer needed, Headmaster's Field will return to its former glory.

Great schools, like Deerfield, are national treasures that need to be protected. We are carefully planning for Deerfield's future and what the school, its students, and its faculty will need to thrive in the decades ahead. Over the last few years, we have dialed up, in both large and small ways, our

emphasis on forms of pro-social connection and inclusion: Our campaign, at its core, is for community and connection in support of student flourishing and excellence. The Dining Hall is an expression of that commitment—as are our commitments to school ritual and spirit, face-to-face interactions that are free, as much as possible, from the distractions of technology, and the highest levels of faculty engagement with students.

Through our campaign, we will invest in what we are calling a faculty model of “high engagement,” where teachers connect deeply and broadly with students across multiple dimensions of school life. High engagement means much more than simply being an exceptional and inspiring classroom teacher—that goes without saying. It means believing in the potential of all students to grow and learn. It means working collaboratively with colleagues in support of our mission and broader, shared institutional priorities. And it means working together to actively create a culture of connection, joy, optimism, and reciprocity. Highly engaged teachers maintain a strong presence on campus and enthusiastically support school events as audience members and spectators. They embrace the lifestyle of living and working on a residential campus and the opportunities that it affords for teaching and mentoring beyond the classroom.

In support of this high engagement model, we will invest in new and existing residential spaces, create additional residential housing for faculty so they can be closer to students, and dramatically improve teacher-student ratios in residential spaces where that can be improved. These priorities inform our hiring and the great work that our Dean of Faculty Ivory Hills and Associate Dean of Faculty Abe Wehmiller do each year.

Another campaign priority is to continue Deerfield’s long and robust tradition of creating access for students of every socioeconomic background, in keeping with Mr. Boyden’s tradition of asking families “to pay what you can.” Roughly 40 percent of the student body now receives financial aid. With the campaign, we hope to fully endow our existing financial aid program—all told, an annual commitment of 15 million dollars—to bolster supplemental aid and fully meet the needs of families across the economic spectrum, with a particular emphasis on middle-income families. Over the last two decades, tuition growth has outpaced family income, so the need for assistance is spread widely across income levels. These efforts are based on a simple premise: A family’s resources should never be a reason to keep a student from attending Deerfield.

A final campaign priority speaks to our educational program and some of the unique challenges schools face. In 1952, four years after she led the effort that resulted in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt came to Deerfield to speak with students about the United Nations, and in 1964, Deerfield hosted a United Nations symposium featuring delegates from Yemen, Jamaica, Australia, Pakistan, the Netherlands, Honduras, and the Ivory Coast, among others. I mention these events because they underscore Deerfield’s long history of promoting citizenship, international and global engagement, and constructive discourse.

Like you, I have been following with deep sadness the events in the Middle East that began with the terror attacks on southern Israel.

Over the last four years, schools and colleges have been deeply impacted—and tested—by world and national events, and I have been following and studying closely how they have responded. The challenge for educational institutions, I believe, is threefold: to support impacted students in a caring and compassionate way; to provide structures for dialogue and conversation across differences—something our Director of Inclusion and Community Life Steven Lee has led so skillfully; and to hold fast to the intellectual ideals to which Deerfield is uniquely committed: capturing in constructive, thoughtful, and disciplined ways the sometimes anarchic political energies that, from time to time and of late with increasing frequency, descend upon our campuses. These challenges will, I suspect, only increase over the next years.

I continue to insist that Deerfield is, first and foremost, a community of learning and inquiry. Our approach to national and international events, both in and outside the classroom, follows from that core commitment. Over the last weeks, our deans, advisors, and Student Life leadership have been particularly alert to students who may have been impacted by events in the Middle East. Under the leadership of the Student Life Office and our Dean of Ethical and Spiritual Life Jan Flaska, the Deerfield Academy Student Spiritual Council and other student groups have convened for conversation and mutual support. Classes in history and ethics have also touched on the ongoing war within the disciplinary framework of their courses.

This kind of teaching and engagement is happening throughout the school. Last spring, history teacher Joe Lyons approached me about his senior elective constitutional law course. There was tremendous interest among his students in discussing the legal arguments around affirmative action that were before the Supreme Court. Joe, master teacher (and trained lawyer) that he is, was appropriately sensitive to the challenges of teaching such a controversial topic and doing it well, which he did with tremendous success, with high levels of engagement among his students, and with appropriate attentiveness and sensitivity to the complexity of American history, constitutional debate, and legal disagreement.

As you know, I have resisted the temptation to speak or position the Academy on matters of national controversy and urgency, as difficult as this has sometimes been. At the same time, I remain committed to providing opportunities and structures for dialogue and inquiry at Deerfield. One initiative is worth mentioning. A few weeks ago, at our Thursday advisory lunch, each student received their own pocket Constitution of the United States. Over the course of the year, we will stage a series of conversations, talks, dialogues, and performances about the history of the Constitution. Some of these are simply fun and entertaining, such as quiz show competitions at School Meeting, an upcoming presentation by a member of the math department on the mathematics of the Constitution, and skits performed by students. At a School Meeting in September, two students, one playing James Madison and one playing Thomas Jefferson, debated, in full costume, the merits of the provision for amending the Constitution, calling historical figures as witnesses in support of their arguments. Those figures included students playing the roles of civil rights activist Wong Kim Ark, suffragist Alice Paul, journalist Neil Sheehan, and Martin Luther King Jr.

This year of conversation around the Constitution will culminate in the spring with our third Deerfield Forum, which will consider the question of whether or not it is time to hold a second constitutional convention and substantially alter our governing structures. The forum will feature columnist and political correspondent Jamelle Bouie of the *New York Times* and Akhil Reed Amar of Yale Law School; it will be moderated by Jeannie Suk Gersen. Gersen is a professor at Harvard Law School and a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*. This model of shaping the Deerfield Forum around a shared text of enduring significance will, we hope, continue in future years, and it reflects our commitment to providing students with shared intellectual experiences.

You might remember that Deerfield received a grant from the Edward E. Ford Foundation to draft a framework for independent schools in support of inquiry. Our thinking is still evolving and our work will continue in the coming weeks, but the core commitments are falling into place. The framework, as it presently stands, rests on three pillars. The first pillar is the importance of expressive freedom for schools and students, centered on three dispositions:

- **Courage of expression:** cultivating in students the ability to express confidently and courageously their own opinions and arguments, even when they run counter to prevailing orthodoxies and peer beliefs;
- **Conscientiousness of expression:** providing students with the skills and opportunities to practice speaking with consideration, civility, and temperateness;
- **Toleration of expression:** fostering in students a willingness to listen deeply and patiently, even in the face of provocation and arguments with which they might disagree.

The second pillar is promoting an ethic of disciplined nonpartisanship on the part of institutions, school leaders, and teachers. We are living through a moment when levels of trust and confidence in major United States institutions have reached historic lows. Yet we know that institutions that adopt norms protecting themselves against the appearance of partisan or political bias enjoy higher levels of public confidence and trust. Public stance taking on the part of school leaders can compromise that trust, and it can also risk constricting or even closing space for inquiry by appearing to establish an orthodox view, discouraging dissent, and silencing minority opinions.

And the third pillar is a commitment to intellectual diversity—the idea that schools should foster standards of teaching and curricular structures that intentionally expose students to a broad range of ideas, arguments, and materials. My hope is that, once completed, this framework will also ground and inform our efforts here at Deerfield, including in our Center for Teaching and Learning.

I believe I have successfully run out the clock, so I'll leave it there. But please know that my door is open. Find me, email me, if you want to continue the conversation or wish to share your thoughts on anything I've said today. I always welcome your questions and feedback. And, as always, thank you for sharing the lives of your wonderful and extraordinary children with us, and for entrusting them to our care. //

