



# FALL FAMILY WEEKEND

REMARKS FROM HEAD OF SCHOOL  
DR. JOHN AUSTIN



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2024 / HESS CENTER AUDITORIUM



*John P. M. Quirk*



## Fall Family Weekend / October 4, 2024

Good morning, and a warm welcome to our Fall Family Weekend. I know you have come from near and far, and I'm grateful to each of you for rearranging schedules and jumping through various hoops to be here on a Friday. I want to extend a special welcome to our new families and those of you who couldn't be here in person but are joining us via the livestream. And thanks, as always, to our incredible staff for their preparations for this weekend.

I thought I would do two things this morning: provide a short update on the school year to date and offer some reflections on our hopes for your children and what we might think of as the spirit of the Deerfield classroom.

The beginning of each new school year is filled with excitement, anticipation, and a sense of possibility—and I will admit, it also makes me a little nervous. There are well over 100 members of the faculty and 652 students. In short, students outnumber us. They represent a superior force.

So, we have to be on our toes and ready for kick-off. When I spoke to faculty at our opening meeting, I mentioned that four of the five fastest goals in the history of the European football/soccer Championship happened this summer. Albania scored in a mere 23 seconds against World Cup champion Italy. None of the four teams conceded those early goals advanced beyond the quarterfinals.

Beginnings matter and they matter a great deal. (I am happy to report that our girls field hockey team defied this logic recently, giving up a very early goal and storming back with six goals for a resounding come-back victory.)

So, when team Deerfield gathered for opening meetings this year, I offered the faculty the advice I offered my teams when I was coaching soccer: win the first five minutes. Opening day (a moment that we know every new student will likely remember for the rest of their lives.) The first sit-down meal. The first class. The first dorm meeting. The first meeting with advisees. All the firsts that make for a great beginning of the year—and establish the tone and rhythm of the school year.

And I'm happy to report that we've had an exceptionally strong opening to the year (though metaphorically, we still have 85 minutes to go). The spirit on campus—that intangible feeling that means so much to schools—has been overwhelmingly positive. Our faculty has brought all their energy and commitment to these opening weeks—as advisors, coaches, mentors, and teachers. Our students, especially our returning students, and especially our seniors, on whom we depend, have beautifully led this annual cycle of renewal and reinvention with commitment and purpose. I could not be more grateful—or happy—with their leadership. You will, I hope, see much of that this weekend—in classes, at the Art Showcase this evening, and during our athletic contests today and tomorrow.

We have 208 new students this year. I spoke with a new parent last week and asked her how the transition into Deerfield had been for her daughter. Her daughter told her, "Deerfield doesn't feel like a school—everyone is so happy." Not exactly an endorsement of "school," but very gratifying to hear from a parent whose daughter had only been here for five weeks. It's often difficult for schools to marry challenge, excellence, and achievement—all things we value—to an experience that allows for joy, playfulness, and a sense of community—but that is what we strive to do.

I also shared with faculty at our opening meetings some reflections on the work of the political scientist Robert Putnam. Putnam is best known for his 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* and a sequel to that book he published just a few years ago, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*. Both books tell the story of a century-long fragmentation and splintering of American society, a decline in forms of voluntary association and connection, and increasing social isolation and declining levels of social trust. How, in short, we have, as one national publication put it, slowly transformed from “a nation of joiners to a nation of loners.”

Putnam famously made a distinction between what he called “bonding” and “bridging” social capital. “Ties,” he wrote, “that link you to people like yourself are called bonding social capital . . . bridging social capital is your ties to people unlike yourself.” He went on to say: “I’m not saying “bridging good, bonding bad,” because if you get sick, the people who bring you chicken soup are likely to reflect your bonding social capital. But I am saying that in a diverse society like ours, we need a lot of bridging social capital.” He argued that we have less and less of that kind of capital.

As I revisited his work over the summer, I realized how important and relevant these ideas are to our schools. At their best, schools can be great engines of binding social capital. By bringing young people from all backgrounds, nationalities, and walks of life together and encouraging them to connect in meaningful ways, we offer our students extraordinary opportunities to create community across differences. To create trust.

That is one of the things that Deerfield does so well, and that is why the Dining Hall project—and the New Dining Hall—is so important. As you know, this is not an inexpensive project—but it’s a critically important one, and it will last for generations. If someone asks you about the cost of this project, I suggest you ask in return: how much is community worth? For young people? Today—with all that is happening in the world? I believe that is an investment worth making, and we should be unapologetic in doing so.

I should say that our transition into this new temporary space has been seamless. We’re lucky to have a facility that seats the entirety of our student body and faculty—a first in Deerfield’s modern history. I am happy to report that the renovations of the existing Dining Hall are on time, with its opening only a little over a year away.

So, this is a project about community and connection. It’s about our core values of shared experiences and face-to-face interactions. It’s about Deerfield remaining Deerfield while meeting one of the most important challenges of the future.

Those goals also inform how we think about the residential program. You might know that our dorms are built around what our Associate Head of School Amie Creagh calls “twins and quads”—a design that encourages healthy interactions between boys and girls and also builds connections. Only one dorm lacks a twin: Barton. We plan to construct a new dorm between Barton and the Koch Center and serve as its companion.

A second residential project—also in the planning stage—is a reimagined Ninth Grade Village. The Village is a relatively innovation at Deerfield—less than a decade old—and it’s been a great success. But it’s been shoehorned into an existing structure built for a very different purpose. Our new purpose-built Village—which I will offer more detail about at a later date—will serve as the doorway to Deerfield for all entering ninth graders and become the foundation of every new student’s Deerfield Experience.

Together, these two new residential projects will (without altering the size of the school):

- Offer long-term flexibility by providing residential space when existing dorms undergo necessary renovations;
- Balance the number of students living on the West Side and East Side of campus;
- Allow us, for the first time in the history of the school, to enfold local (day) students as full and equal citizens in the boarding program;
- In the case of the new Village, improve the student-to-faculty ratio from the current 18:1 to an ideal 10:1; deepen the ninth-grade residential experience; and enhance opportunities for early and enduring connections between students;
- And perhaps most importantly, they will provide 15 additional faculty residences, bringing more teachers and their families closer to the center of the campus core and the student experience, reinforcing our commitment to a highly engaged faculty.

You might remember that last May, Deerfield published *A Framework For Schools: Thriving in a World of Pluralistic Contention* with the support of the Edward E. Ford Foundation and in collaboration with other schools across the country.

The *Framework* makes the case for what we call “academic pluralism,” it advances three “pillars” in support of it: educating for expressive freedom, disciplined nonpartisanship as both an institutional posture and instructional aspiration, and intellectual diversity in both programming and curriculum.

The idea of “academic pluralism” rests on the assumptions that schools are first and foremost places of inquiry and exploration—that’s the “academic” part—that schools serve diverse populations across a broad spectrum of backgrounds, political orientations, religious beliefs, and personal values—that’s the “pluralism” part—and that our students are best served when schools avoid political commitments that exceed their reach and resources while seeking, at the same time, to foster, across the school, a climate of intellectual exploration and courageous inquiry.

These ideas seem to be catching on at both independent schools, where the *Framework* has been received with interest and curiosity, and at the colleges and universities our students will attend, many of whom have, over the last months, adopted policies in keeping with the spirit of the *Framework*.

A parent just sent me the recent inauguration address of the new President of Stanford University Jonathan Levin. I was encouraged to read his strong defense of these principles. “The university’s purpose,” he wrote, “is not political action or social justice.” He continued: “We should strive to foster searching discussion, to listen with curiosity, and to ensure the freedom to study and learn”—even, he added, as we seek to create opportunities where students can “wrestle with social and political issues.”

That beautifully captures our aspirations. Our Board of Trustees has unanimously endorsed the principles of the *Framework*. Our Dean of Academic Affairs Anne Bruder and Dean of Faculty Patrick Andren have been exploring ways to deepen and sharpen our commitment to those principles: in how we think about teaching, classroom instruction, and professional learning; how we think about intellectual diversity across our curriculum and in programming; and how we promote among students constructive, non-partisan debate and dialogue across all of the differences that define us.

Dr. Bruder, David Miller, and other members of the faculty have launched what we're calling "24 for 24," an election education series of events and conversations that invites students to explore issues and questions leading up to the November 5 election. Our hope is not simply to shape thoughtful conversation about the upcoming state, local, and national elections but to bring the principles of the *Framework* fully to life. That means elevating the conversation on campus beyond the simplistic short-hand of social media memes, news headlines, and soundbites by providing our students opportunities to explore and discuss complex issues with nuance, sophistication, and respect for divergent and competing views.

Earlier this week, we held an event called *Political Parties in Polarized Times: A Conversation with Chairs of the Massachusetts Democratic and Republican Parties*. Notably, they had never been asked to appear together at such an event. The conversation, brilliantly led by the Chair of our History Department Dr. Brian Hamilton, offered an insider look at how political parties work, how they are funded and organized, and how they are navigating a divided and polarized political climate. The overflowing student audience suggested a real appetite for this kind of conversation and dialogue among the student body.

The second event will be our fourth Deerfield Forum, which we have moved from the spring to the Fall for obvious reasons. It's called *How the Press Shapes American Elections*. Our speakers will be professor and press critic Jay Rosen of NYU, *Politico* reporter Meridith McGraw Deerfield Class of 2008, and *Wall Street Journal* White House correspondent Annie Linskey.

Speaking of the *Wall Street Journal*, some of you may have seen the recent article about our new accessibility and financial aid initiative.

Deerfield's commitment to affordability and access is historic and deep. So, beginning in this admission cycle, and for our returning families in the 2025-26 school year, all qualifying domestic families with income below \$150,000 will pay \$0 in tuition and fees to attend the Academy. Families with incomes above the \$150,000 threshold will pay no more than 10% of their verified income for tuition and fees.

This past June, I spoke to an alumnus who had returned to campus for his 50<sup>th</sup> Reunion, and he told me an incredible story—one he had learned very late in life and not long before his father had passed away. As he was going into his senior year at Deerfield, his father lost his job—and, with it, his ability to pay tuition. His father wrote to Deerfield to inform the school that his son would not return for his senior year. Upon receiving this letter, someone at Deerfield picked up the phone and called his father to say how saddened they were to learn that his son would not return for his senior year. After some

gentle prodding, the father reluctantly explained his changed financial situation. The school's response was immediate. They simply said, "Pay what you can when you can." Mr. Boyden, who had passed away only a few years earlier, had been saying this to families for almost seven decades. It's not too much to say that Mr. Boyden was an early pioneer in using need-based financial aid, so this commitment is part of our DNA—and a defining component of who we are as a school.

We have received tremendous support for this new initiative from alumni, families, and others—in and outside the Deerfield community, including other educators. As the Dean of Admissions at one of the peer schools said in a recent NPR story about it, "What's good for Deerfield will, we hope, have a positive impact on other schools as well, by getting the word out about the value of boarding schools and increasing everyone's applicant pools."

Lastly, a word about one of the highlights of the weekend: the opportunity for you to visit classes. I hope you will get a sense of the vitality and dynamism of our classrooms, laboratories, and studios and our faculty's creativity, energy, and skill.

Of course, today is just a snapshot of learning at Deerfield and of your child's education—the briefest moment in time. And I hope that, as you observe classes, you will take the long view—not always, I know, an easy thing to do. We live in an age of instant delivery, where almost everything is at our fingertips: our friends, an Uber, a movie from Netflix. But education does not always work that way. It doesn't come overnight by FedEx delivery. Learning, at its best, is a slower process of discovery and self-formation, and it requires, on our part as parents, a certain kind of patience, perspective, and, at times, fortitude. Writing recently in the *American Scholar*, the literary critic Mark Edmondson asked us to imagine school as a place where young people "can be changed, learn who they are and what they value, and aim themselves toward higher goals." As I suspect we all know, that is not the undertaking of a term or two—but of a lifetime. That is why I've come to think of learning as a journey and a great adventure—an unfolding story of promise, potential, and transformation.

That story is rarely predictable or linear, and now I speak to you as a fellow parent. Each of our children's educational journeys is full of ups and downs, and every child develops according to a narrative that is uniquely and individually their own.

So, as you continue to visit classes and think more expansively about your children's education, I offer some questions inspired by the aptitudes and habits we describe in *The Deerfield Student* for you to think about. I got a bit carried away writing these—so I have reduced them to four and made all the others available to you, courtesy of our Communications Office, outside in the lobby. Here they are:

- Is my son or daughter taking good care of themselves—and making good decisions—about diet and nutrition, sleep, exercise, and screens?
- Are they building strong, trusting relationships with others, particularly adults, and seeking to extend their friendships beyond their immediate peer group?
- Are they leading by example and influence—engaging in the essential work of helping create the goodness of this school?

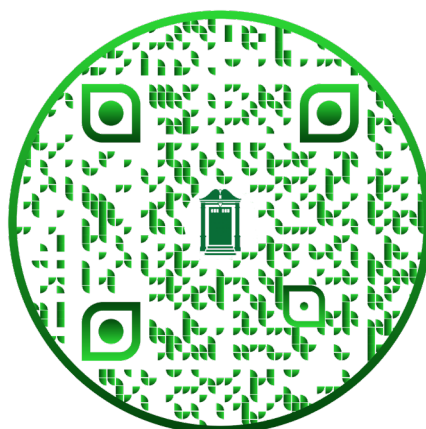
- Are they learning, in the words of one of the great educators, Ted Sizer, learning to use their minds well?

I have one final request. As beautiful as our facilities are and as broad and deep as our program might be, we know that the decisive moments in our children’s education—those moments that change the direction and intensity of a student’s educational experience—happen through people, through the connections and relationships that students are able to make with teachers.

Our faculty are tireless and dedicated, part of a long tradition of inspired teaching and coaching at Deerfield. The goodness of Deerfield depends upon them. I hope each of you will find a moment to offer a word of thanks to them and their work with your children. I know it would mean a great deal to them.

Thank you. Thank you for your trust and confidence. I hope you all have a wonderful weekend with your children.

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DIGITAL COPY OF  
PAST FAMILY WEEKEND  
REMARKS



## Questions Inspired by the Aptitudes and Habits in The Deerfield Student

- Is my son or daughter developing open, strong, and trusting relationships with their teachers?  
With their advisor and other adults at Deerfield?
- Are they comfortable working and collaborating with other students and working in teams?
- Do they recognize and express gratitude to others?
- Are they taking advantage of the tremendous diversity of this community and extending themselves beyond their core group of friends?
- Do they exercise and model leadership—and lead through influence?
- Are they adventurous and fully engaged in the life of the school?
- What positive commitments have they made to school and community?
- Are they developing strong habits of self-management and appropriate levels of independence and self-direction?
- Are they reflective about their learning, open to feedback and able to act upon it?
- Can they talk in an informed way about what and how they are learning?
- Do they seek help as needed and are they thoughtful, open, and responsive to feedback?
- How are they managing free time, evening time, and time on weekends?
- How are they striking a balance between fun, friendship, and study?
- Are they managing their screen time well or is the screen managing them?

## In terms of their academic and intellectual development, you might ask:

- Is my child learning to read for pleasure, enjoyment, and appreciation?  
(It's rightly been said that reading is the skill that makes all other learning possible.)
- Are they learning to write and speak effectively and with rhetorical power?
- Are they learning the art of asking questions and expressing curiosity?
- Do they enjoy numbers? Can they think mathematically and with statistics and use them to advance and interrogate claims?
- Are they learning to think in a disciplined way as a scientist, an historian, an artist  
(which differs from learning subject area content—as important as that might be)?
- Are they demonstrating high levels of engagement in class? Do they listen actively and engage with peers?
- Are they open and curious about new ideas?
- Do they lean into the discomfort of challenge? Do they seek out and consider—appreciatively and generously—multiple perspectives?
- Do you see emerging signs of a growth mindset: the belief that effort, practice, and hard work, rather than fixed notions of intelligence, are the keys to performance and success? Are they developing a robust sense of self-confidence, a sense of “Yes. I can do this.”?
- What are their strengths? So much in education focuses on deficits, but much more important than these, especially during secondary school, is the discovery of strengths. What are those and how can we deepen them?
- Are they developing curiosity and new interests?

