



SPRING FAMILY WEEKEND

REMARKS FROM HEAD OF SCHOOL

DR. JOHN AUSTIN



FRIDAY, APRIL 19, 2024 / HESS CENTER AUDITORIUM



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Spring Family Weekend / Friday, April 19, 2024

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Spring Family Weekend.

There are many times in any given week when I say to myself, I wish family members—parents, grandparents, siblings—were here to see what I see: the performances, the games, matches, meets, the singing of the Evensong at Sunday sit-down dinner, the deep and consistent engagement our students bring our classrooms and studios.

I know that many of you can come to campus throughout the year, which is fantastic. I also know that for others—particularly those who live across the country or around the globe—these family weekends are the only time that you can visit and see life at Deerfield. So, I am thrilled that you're all here today and that we can share some of these moments with you.

This weekend is first and foremost an opportunity for you to spend time with your children and see the school as they see it. As you spend time in classrooms and at contests and performances—and in casual conversation with teachers and other parents—I hope you will see and feel the energy, goodness, and vitality that is Deerfield.

Spring Family Weekend is also an opportunity for me to thank you. You, of course, are your children's first teachers, and we are grateful to you for entrusting us with your children and sharing their lives with us. Only with your support are we able to realize the promise of the Academy.

Deerfield has always aspired to be a school of challenge and excellence, *and* a school of joy, friendship, and optimism. Doing both well is, to me, the single greatest challenge facing schools like Deerfield. School should be fun—serious, but fun—and I believe that Deerfield does this exceptionally well.

One thing that I believe distinguishes Deerfield is the goodness of this place. You see that goodness in many places, but particularly in our spirit; at Deerfield, school spirit is simple—students supporting and caring for one another, students cheering for one another, and students taking pride in the accomplishments of their peers and friends. School spirit at Deerfield is a celebration of excellence and students' belief in their friends' and peers' ability to take risks and do great things. Yes, there is healthy competition here, but our students don't achieve at the expense of their classmates, friends, and peers; they inspire and celebrate one another.

One of my educational heroes is the writer and media critic Neil Postman, whose books and essays I went back to this past summer. In 1969 he wrote a book called *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. Ten years later he wrote a second book called *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*. Anyone who can so brazenly and elegantly contradict himself like this has my full attention. Postman was a student—and ruthless critic of—modern media; first television then the emerging digital and electronic media at the time of his death in 2003. His most famous book was titled: *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, and he advanced what he memorably called “the thermostatic view of education.” What he meant here was simple: Schools exist to provide an alternative—a counter-argument—to the educational excesses and biases of dominant culture, particularly the dominant media culture. He was fond of quoting Marshall McLuhan, who described “education as civil defense against media fallout.”

A thermostat is a dial, and I sometimes find it useful to think of Deerfield as a series of dials, which depending on the needs of our children and the challenges they face, we turn up or down.

I thought I would use the opportunity of these remarks to touch on three areas—three dials, as it were—where Deerfield’s approach to the growth and well-being of students is distinctive and where we strive to be intentional.

- One dial has to do with how we create community, and with technology;
- another dial has to do with academic principle; the principles we need to embrace to prepare children to thrive during a moment of intense social and political conflict;
- and the last has to do how we think about the profession of teaching in a 21st century boarding school.

It won’t surprise you that I believe we need to turn down the technology dial, even as we are attentive to its potentials and possibilities. A few weeks ago, the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt published a book that I highly recommend to you: it’s entitled *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. His thesis—and he cites a weighty body of research in support of it—is that what he calls a phone-based childhood has eroded our children’s powers of concentration, distracted them from other much more important activities, and undermined their ability to develop, and sustain, meaningful relationships.

He notes that roughly a third of a young person’s life today is spent on various kinds of screens. He characterizes this increased time on screens as “an experience blocker,” and he documents how that screen time comes at the expense of other things that really matter; those things that Deerfield seeks to prioritize:

- face-to-face interactions with friends, peers, and adults;
- time outdoors in the beauty of nature;
- time competing, performing, practicing, and playing;
- time sleeping;
- and time reading and studying.

Haidt’s research overwhelming supports our insistence on a heads-up culture—something we hope to deepen and extend. We will likely take steps next year to encourage healthy sleep among our ninth-grade students by providing cell phone lockers that they can use to store their phones before they go to bed. Lest you think I am anti-technology, we will also provide each student with a new technology they may not be familiar with: an old-fashioned alarm clock!

You may have seen the large white structure behind first base on Headmaster’s Field. It is not a hangar for a Deerfield dirigible, as someone joked. Though, as I thought about it, that’s not bad idea. Imagine a Deerfield blimp—emblazoned with a giant D—circulating the Lower Level during Choate Day. That would be fantastic!

No, that white structure is our temporary dining hall. And for the first time in the Academy's history, beginning in the fall, we will have a seat for every student at the school.

Over the last quarter century, independent schools have rightly done much to diversify their student bodies. By one estimate, independent schools in this country spend over three billion dollars annually in need-based financial support. Deerfield spends nearly 15 million dollars each year, an investment that allows us to bring to campus students from all walks of life and backgrounds, including students from 32 states and 42 countries. This is an investment Deerfield needs to protect and deepen.

But schools have been less successful leveraging that diversity for learning and growth and creating structures that support connection across difference. Our sit-down meals do just that.

If the cell-phone based childhood is an experience blocker, our dining hall is an experience enhancer. Our commitment to sit-down, family-style meals where students from different grades and backgrounds work with our staff to set the table, serve the meal, clean up, and sit and eat together, along with a member of the faculty, creates a shared sense of community and closeness as a school.

Over the course of four years, students will sit and interact with hundreds of students they might not otherwise get to know. Conversation is not always easy, I know, but coming together in this way is an essential means of creating community and a powerful expression of our commitment to inclusion. In our dining hall, students learn the art of interaction and conversation and develop enduring social skills.

You may have heard me say before that we are not building a cafeteria. The Dining Hall—as with each of our campaign initiatives—is about creating community and connection in support of student flourishing.

When students and teachers from across the world and from every background share meals and stories and time together, they are sharing their lives with each other. They're creating community and participating in decades-old Deerfield traditions. The Dining Hall is truly the heart and soul of this campus, and perhaps our greatest classroom. That is why I believe it is one of the most important projects in Deerfield's history, and indeed, in American secondary education.

As you may know, the renovation and expansion of the existing Dining Hall is a centerpiece of our upcoming campaign. While the public launch of the campaign is still many months away, we are excited to be moving forward with the Dining Hall project. I want to take a moment to thank all of you who have contributed to the Dining Hall project and created the resources to get us to this point. And thank you in advance to those who will support us down the line. With your help, I know that we will reach our goal.

Dial Number 2: creating space for inquiry and dialogue.

One of our greatest goals is to cultivate in our students an openness to new perspectives and ideas and an intellectual climate and classrooms where students listen deeply, engage with others generously, and actively seek out different perspectives, ideas, and arguments. We have developed principles and norms that support and anchor these goals.

Last year, Deerfield was awarded a grant from the Edward E. Ford Foundation to develop a framework in support of these values. That work is now complete, and we will publish that framework on May 1. I spoke to faculty about it last week, I will introduce it to students next Wednesday at School Meeting, and it will be an important topic of discussion at our upcoming Board meeting. The Framework centers on three pillars, each of which is essential for student flourishing: educating for expressive freedom; disciplined nonpartisanship as an institutional commitment and instructional ethic; and intellectual diversity. Together, these values encourage open-mindedness and intellectual humility, create space for active and deep listening, and foster the ability to engage constructively, imaginatively, and with empathy across differences.

In response to a deeply polarized political climate—and the exhaustion and cynicism that is its byproduct—we encourage students to assume good faith and good intentions on the part of their peers, and we foster in them a spirit of generosity, empathy, thoughtful self-regulation, and openness to the diverse beliefs and views that a student body such as ours inevitably and always bring to our campus.

Our approach to learning—embodied in our *Portrait of a Deerfield Student*, embedded in our approach to curriculum and instruction, and reflected in programs such as the Deerfield Forum and our many global initiatives and trips—does just that. It eschews the overt politicization that characterizes so much of American life—and many American schools—and instead centers inquiry, curiosity, complexity, and the creative exploration of divergent ideas in a way that reflects the best pluralistic traditions of American education.

Over the course of this year, students have had the opportunity to hear from a diverse range of speakers: artists and poets, diplomats and public servants, entrepreneurs and educators, among others.

A week ago, we held our third annual Deerfield Forum. The event brought together three important voices to discuss the future of the United States Constitution, the culmination of a series of student-led events and opportunities to learn about the Constitution. Our participants were Akhil Reed Amar, Sterling Professor of Law and Political Science at Yale University, and Jamelle Bouie, a columnist for the *New York Times* and former political analyst for CBS News, who covers US politics, public policy, elections, and race. The discussion was moderated by Jeannie Suk Gersen, the John H. Watson, Jr. Professor of Law at Harvard Law School. It was a great evening.

Earlier this month, we had the pleasure of welcoming Ali Berry, Deerfield Class of 2005, back to campus. Ali was here to receive the Ashley Award, which is named for Tom Ashley, a Deerfield graduate and teacher from the Class of 1911, known for his loyalty and service to others, who was killed in France while serving in the first World War.

Ali met with students and faculty here in the Hess and talked about her work in school reform, civics, and citizenship education. It was a terrific visit.

The renowned scholar and historian Peniel Joseph, from the University of Texas at Austin, was our Martin Luther King Jr. Day keynote speaker.

Maria Paz Guerrero, a poet and professor in the Creative Writing Department at the Central University in Bogotá, Colombia, gave a reading and facilitated a dialogue on women's societal roles as depicted in her work.

Taylor Gibson, Dean of Data Science and Interdisciplinary Initiatives at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics, met with faculty and visited our new Data Science courses to speak with students and provide feedback.

Several Deerfield parents have been incredibly generous by making time, in person or virtually, to spend with students, and I am deeply grateful for their contributions to this community. They include Camille Zamora, a current parent and highly accomplished soprano, who spoke with our visual and performing artists about ways in which the arts can enhance well-being and human flourishing. Dominic Pang, an alumnus and parent, spoke to our honors economics students via Zoom about US and China trade relations. Dominic is an experienced and successful businessman in Hong Kong. Rob McDowell, also an alumnus and parent, and former Commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission, gave a presentation on the Constitution.

And earlier this week, Bridget Brink a Deerfield parent and the US Ambassador to Ukraine spoke at School Meeting. It was a powerful and inspiring presentation by one of this country's most courageous and distinguished public servants.

I am grateful to my team and the faculty for creating these opportunities and bringing these voices to Deerfield . . . Which brings me to our faculty. The third and most important dial.

Everything, absolutely everything, we do at Deerfield depends upon the deep, broad, and caring engagement of our faculty and staff. Deerfield remains committed to a model of faculty engagement that extends across every dimension of school life.

There are many pressures bearing down on this model of faculty engagement. It is clear from my conversations with other heads of school that faculties are in retreat and that many teachers, perhaps even a critical mass at some schools, are withdrawing from school life. Heads of school have reported to me that they see fewer and fewer faculty at voluntary school activities, such as meals, performances, competitions, and school events, and that faculty are increasingly transactional in their relationships with the school. Some schools are exploring alternative models, redefining the roles and responsibilities of faculty members, and moving towards a more specialized faculty: one faculty for the classroom, another for arts and athletics, and another for residential programs.

Not so at Deerfield. Deerfield's faculty remains as deeply engaged as any faculty in the country; committed to working with young people across every dimension of school life. That was clear throughout the pandemic, and it remains true today. This is a model we need to deepen and extend—a dial we need to turn up.

Creating a powerful sense of community where children can thrive and flourish, meet challenges, and develop confidence, strength, and resiliency is the foundation of our collective work. It is a responsibility we share together—a collective undertaking that each and every member of our adult community embraces.

Our faculty model empathy, optimism, excitement for learning, and a sense of joy for our students, and they bring to their every interaction a bedrock belief in students' potential and goodness. That commitment to students' learning and growth extends from early morning to late in the evening.

The writer and Deerfield graduate John McPhee, Class of 1949, defined our long-serving Headmaster Frank Boyden's ideal faculty as "a group of people much in evidence all of the time." I never tire of quoting that because it so beautifully captures the collective work of a fully, deeply, and broadly engaged faculty who are present, available, and generous with their time and attention. This professional standard of high engagement, and nothing less than that, is the gold standard for a boarding school faculty in the 21st century.

I believe that if we can deliver on each of these—a powerful sense of community built around shared experiences, a heads-up culture of connection and friendship, the principles of academic pluralism, and a deeply engaged faculty—we will strengthen Deerfield for generations to come.

We are heading quickly toward Commencement, and I'd like to wrap up by offering my appreciation for the senior class.

Dr. Melvoin and I spoke to seniors on Wednesday to thank them for their exceptional leadership, and to encourage them to finish well and strongly; a message I hope you will reiterate as our seniors head down the homestretch.

The Class of 2024 arrived in the fall of 2020, just as we returned to in-person teaching. The story of Deerfield's success during that time is now well known and does not need to be repeated. But much of the credit is due to our seniors—who were only ninth graders in 2020. I remember that day well: Young children pushed out of passenger side doors, luggage dropped by the curb, parents driving off.

They chose to come here at an uncertain time, and they did all that was asked of them. They were intrepid. They helped carry us through that year—and beyond—and they will be remembered for the example they set. I will remain grateful for their courage and commitment, and I look forward to celebrating them with families and friends next month.

So, thank you. I hope you enjoy the rest of the day and weekend. And please, as always, my door is open. Find me with any questions, ideas, and input that you have and would like to share. //

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PAST FAMILY WEEKEND REMARKS

