



SPRING FAMILY WEEKEND

REMARKS FROM HEAD OF SCHOOL
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APRIL 17, 2026 / HESS CENTER / LARGE AUDITORIUM

“What We Believe”

Good afternoon and a warm, if belated, welcome to our Spring Family Weekend.

I hope you have enjoyed sitting in on classes, meeting with advisors, gathering for lunch in The Brick, and taking in the Performing Arts Showcase. And enjoying the beauty of this campus. Spring has arrived, but not without a lot of help from our incredible grounds crew, so please join me in thanking them.

With our time this afternoon, I would like to do two things. First, offer a brief reflection on campus life—on the activities and achievements that have marked this year. And second, to share with you some of our evolving thinking about what it takes to create—and sustain—a school like Deerfield.

This has been one of the busiest springs in memory, and we are only getting started! We recently concluded our second of two successful Admission Revisit Days, the largest in school history. I left those days buoyed and optimistic by the response of parents and prospective students, and proud of the entire faculty and Admission team for their energy and spirit. As of now, we are slightly over-enrolled for next year, with the student body just north of 650 students. Always a great place to be.

In March, we dedicated and celebrated the opening of “The Brick,” our incredible dining hall, which you saw at lunch. The reimagining of this magnificent, iconic building embodies our commitment to the past, present, and future of Deerfield, bridging generations and, for the first time in our modern history, creating a space for the entirety of our school to gather and share sit-down meals. In that way, it is symbolic of all our efforts to create powerful, shared experiences for students, strengthening our community and the spirit of inclusion.

This winter, we staged an amazing production of *Matilda the Musical*—a two-hour and fifteen-minute tour de force, directed by Lori Clark. I love the winter musical—it brings joy just when it’s needed most—in the dead of winter (and what a winter it was; we woke up to a snowstorm on April 7). I remain in awe of the talent and dedication of our student-artists and their ability to move, inspire, and entertain this community. Producing a musical requires the highest levels of creative collaboration—between musicians in the pit band, choreographers, stage and costume designers, actors, singers, and a dedicated group of faculty. Lori and her team put together one of the finest and most memorable stage productions I have seen in my almost four decades in schools, and it was greeted with acclaim.

At our first School Meeting of the Spring Term, we celebrated our winter athletics teams. Those teams demonstrated grit, spirit, sportsmanship, and pride throughout the winter. There were more than a few highlights:

- The girls alpine ski team captured the NEPSAC Class A Championship.
- Two swimmers won gold at the NEPSAC Division I Swimming and Diving Championships.
- Boys hockey returned to the post-season for a third consecutive year.
- Girls hockey reached the elite division final.
- Boys basketball made history, making it all the way to the Class A semifinal game.
- Boys squash was ranked fifth nationally.
- Our sub-varsity teams had 91 wins against 44 losses this winter.
- And 10 of 11 winter-term varsity teams competed in the postseason New England Championships.

These accomplishments are impressive in their own right, but they are also part of something larger: a culture that values hard work, resilience, and shared effort.

I want to mention that Director of Athletics and Cocurricular Programs Bob Howe is retiring at the end of the school year after a decade at Deerfield. Bob has been an extraordinary and very special member of this community. Among the greatest of his accomplishments was to build into our athletics program a team-based commitment to community service by requiring every interscholastic team to do one community service project of their choosing each season.

One example: Our Physical Plant takes the outdoor ice rink down in late March. It's time-consuming and labor-intensive and requires rolling up the coils lying on the ground and chilling the ice subsurface. There are over 200 coils that need to be rolled up, stacked, and stored. Usually, our Physical Plant team does this work over a few days. This year, the boys and girls rowing teams were asked to help before departing for the boathouse after Wednesday's classes on April 1. They accomplished this task in 13 minutes, saving our staff enormous time and effort.

I am deeply grateful for Bob's service and the impact he has had on Deerfield students. This is a moment of great change and transformation in high school athletics—as well as for collegiate and professional athletics—and Bob has always brought the spirit of an educator to his leadership of Deerfield's storied athletics program. He has been a source of tremendous wisdom and a mentor to his fellow teachers, coaches, and head of school. We are lucky to have Gregg DiNardo taking over as our director of athletics after successful careers at Amherst and Dartmouth colleges.

As I approach my fifth decade in education, I can say without hesitation that the depth, breadth, and vibrancy of Deerfield life are unlike anything I have seen at the secondary school level. This is, quite simply, an extraordinary place.

Over the March break, students traveled with faculty to the Galapagos Islands, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland. In June, our faculty will lead trips to Ireland, South Dakota, Spain, France, and the Dominican Republic.

These experiences matter deeply. They extend the classroom outward into the world, allowing students to engage with ideas, cultures, and languages firsthand and in context. Notably, each trip is led by our faculty, which is unusual for schools with this level of ambition in experiential learning and travel.

Just as we take students out into the world to learn, we also bring the world to our campus. Each year, scholars, artists, researchers, civic leaders, and innovators join us at School Meeting and in our classrooms to share their experiences and expertise with the community. And for that reason, we have enlarged the mission of our Center for Service and Global Citizenship—and reframed it, beginning next year, as the Center for Global and Civic Engagement: to build on our existing travel and service programs, while also emphasizing Deerfield's growing emphasis on dialogue, intellectual diversity, and academic pluralism.

Our goal in taking students out into the world and bringing the world here to campus is to help students explore, understand, and debate a complex and ever-changing world—not to script their understanding of it.

Speakers this year have included Alison Wood Brooks, a professor and behavioral research scientist at Harvard Business School; Jeffrey Rosen, a professor of law at The George Washington University Law School and the CEO emeritus of the National Constitution Center; and Dr. Danielle Allen, a professor of political philosophy, public policy, and ethics at Harvard University. Dr. Allen served as our keynote speaker on MLK Day.

Last week, we welcomed to campus the legal scholar and Yale professor Justin Driver, who spoke to students about the Supreme Court and the debates around constitutional rights of public school students, particularly political expression. The evening before his all-school remarks, Professor Driver spoke about his journey as an educator and lawyer—he clerked for both Sandra Day O'Connor and Stephen Breyer—and he took questions from students on a wide range of topics, including affirmative action, the teaching

of religion in public schools, the laws governing campus student protest, the ethics of lawyers defending criminal defendants they know to be guilty, and the court's 1972 decision upholding parents' right to remove their children from public schools for reasons of religious faith.

You may have seen that our Commencement speaker this year is Elliot Ackerman. Ackerman is a highly decorated veteran of the United States Marine Corps, a former CIA Special Activities Officer, and a distinguished, award-winning author. He was awarded a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and a Purple Heart during his five deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

On April 21, we will stage the fifth Deerfield Forum. We will collaborate for the first time with the Munk Debates, a Canadian non-profit whose mission is "to help the world rediscover the art of civil and substantive public debate by convening the brightest thinkers of our time to weigh in on the big issues of the day."

We will welcome a panel of four distinguished experts to campus. They will explore the ethics of gene editing and debate the proposition: "Be it resolved, let's engineer better human beings."

The debate will be moderated by the long-time host of the Munk Debates, Rudyard Griffiths. Students will vote on the debate proposition twice: once before the debate and then again after its conclusion. The winner will be the team that changes the most minds.

As you can see, there is a lot going on at Deerfield—which is why having a strong sense of mission is so important.

Indeed, mission is everything. Institutions that wish to secure the trust of their communities—and their position in an increasingly competitive marketplace—must remain true to their founding missions, especially when those missions are time-tested, proven, and durable—as Deerfield's is.

Strength of purpose and clarity of mission have always been among Deerfield's greatest assets. Many institutions and non-profits have lost confidence in themselves, drifted away from core commitments, and embraced priorities—and sometimes passing trends—that exceed their reach or available resources. Deerfield has remained true to itself—ever-Deerfield, evergreen. It is unique in that way, and it possesses the resources and conviction to chart its own course.

We have many statements describing Deerfield's purpose, values, and identity. Among those are:

- Our Mission Statement
- Our Core Values
- The Deerfield Student
- Our school motto ("Be Worthy of your Heritage")
- Our school blessing ("For food, for friendship, and for the blessings of this day, we give thanks.")
- Our Community Pledge: "I will act with respect, integrity, and care for others, and I will seek to inspire the same values in our community and beyond."
- John McPhee's *The Headmaster*
- *A Framework for Schools: Thriving in a World of Pluralistic Contention*
- And some of our more recent statements on inclusion, technology, and student flourishing. (I referenced in my fall remarks to families an earlier school motto: *Non Est Vivere Sed Valere Vita Est*, translated as, "Life isn't living but flourishing.")

For some time now, we have thought about bringing these documents and statements of value together into one statement of belief. I will present—and we will discuss—a version of that—tentatively entitled "What We Believe"—at our Board meeting next weekend.

This statement of belief will not supersede any of these documents, but it will seek to synthesize, highlighting lines of thought and commitment that run through each of them. It goes well beyond a typical mission statement and seeks to capture what is uniquely Deerfield in the areas of faculty, educational

and cocurricular programs, instructional philosophy, student and community life, and technology, while touching on concrete practices that distinguish Deerfield. I believe that each of the commitments this document describes is time- and experience-tested; in many cases, they are supported by substantive research in the areas of adolescent health, development, and learning.

“What We Believe” is organized around six statements of commitment. These are, in essence, the promises Deerfield makes to you, our families.

- We are a community that shapes character.
- Our faculty is all in.
- We embrace the enduring value of the liberal arts.
- We are committed to academic pluralism.
- We value/cherish the cocurricular classroom.
- We approach technology with intention.

The hope is that this document will provide a broad framework for internal decision-making across the school, guide us into the future, and sharpen our communication efforts.

Nowhere is clarity of purpose more important than in our approach to technological change—which quickens by the day. As I said to parents on our Admission revisit days, we are living through a Gutenberg-like moment of technological transformation. Barely a day goes by without the appearance of a new AI platform or an educational institution announcing a bold new AI initiative.

The California State University system, partnering with Amazon, OpenAI, and Nvidia, has promised to embed AI across all its 22 campuses with an ambition to become the “first and largest AI-empowered university” in the world. Ohio State has launched a university-wide initiative to ensure that every student is “AI fluent” in their discipline by the time they graduate. Some schools have enthusiastically followed the lead of these universities, seeking the full and comprehensive integration of AI across the entirety of the educational program, including elementary and middle school. As you might imagine, this was a major point of discussion at our Eight Schools meeting over the last three days.

It seems clear that no area of the learning and the school experience will be untouched, including tutoring, standardized test preparation, essay writing, and college admissions. Millions of AI dollars are flowing into the educational space. It’s also clear that you will see schools take very different approaches, and move in very different directions.

The downstream impact of early and comprehensive adoption of AI in schools and universities is as yet unknown. But the history of technology, particularly technology in schools, tells us that there is good reason to proceed with deliberation—and caution. The introduction of new technologies brings tremendous promise but also, and always, unintended consequences and negative externalities. Do general-purpose technologies like agentic AI foster and enhance learning or subvert and degrade it? It’s often difficult to know, and sometimes they do both.

But some of these negative externalities are coming into view. Media scholars have begun to speak not simply of “cognitive offloading” but of “cognitive surrender” among students using AI.

Fully autonomous, agentic AI is now available to students. Platforms such as [Einstein](#), an educational version of [OpenClaw](#), interface independently and without prompting with learning management systems and act as executive assistants for students, completing papers, tests, and quizzes, sending emails, and communicating with teachers, providing digests of assigned reading and suggestions for class discussion, and transcribing and summarizing lectures. Every course on every college campus moves through a learning management system and is vulnerable to agentic platforms like Einstein. Although it was quickly withdrawn, ostensibly due to trademark infringement but also because of the outcry among faculty and students, other similar and more powerful platforms will undoubtedly follow.

Citing studies across a range of fields documenting cognitive decline, Cal Newport, a professor of computer science at Georgetown University and the author of *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, has called for a [“revolution in defense of thinking, launched against the digital forces seeking to degrade it.”](#) In his April MIT [Compton Lecture](#), Jonathan Haidt, updating arguments he first made in *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Has Caused an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, in light of more recent technological advancements, warned that AI will continue to degrade human relationships, erode attention and deep focus, and accelerate cognitive decline.

So, the future is unknown. And the stakes are high. For universities (where AI integration has become a source of strife between faculty and leadership and where decision-making frameworks remain unclear). For schools. And especially for students. Indeed, for young people, this is a confusing, even demoralizing, moment.

Clarity of purpose is critically important.

The final section of “What We Believe,” entitled “We Approach Technology with Care,” tries to articulate Deerfield’s philosophy: “We understand that today’s media environment constitutes a powerful second curriculum, competing for the time and attention of children, and we are especially sensitive to the ways the ubiquity of screens and digital technology can impair the social, emotional, and cognitive development of young people.

For that reason, we approach technology with deliberation, drawing a sharp developmental distinction between adults and children. ‘Phone-light’ expectations, screensensible classrooms, and our long-form daily schedule return time and energy to face-to-face interactions, time outdoors in nature, sleep, study, and reading.

We approach each new technology—including agentic artificial intelligence—in a like spirit, seeking to harness its potential for learning, while recognizing the potential threats it poses to student well-being.”

In that spirit, we will continue to study the potentials and the perils of agentic artificial intelligence, and we will keep a close eye on institutions of learning at both the secondary and collegiate levels, as well as other professional fields, assessing new initiatives in light of Deerfield’s specific mission as a residential school and the needs of our students.

Anne Bruder, our dean of Academic Affairs, has convened regular conversations on agentic AI among faculty and students over the last two years. Anne, as you may know, has been named Hotchkiss’s next head of school, and I am so grateful for her leadership of our academic program. She has built—and leaves behind—an incredible team. I am delighted that our own Brian Hamilton, currently the chair of our History and Social Science Department, will succeed Anne as our first Assistant Head of School for Academic Affairs. Together—Anne, Brian, and our academic team—will partner at the conclusion of the school year to lead a second three-day institute on teaching, learning, and assessment in an era of AI.

At the same time—and even as we weigh the risks of premature AI integration—we have set aside resources and created a pathway for faculty at the more advanced levels of our curriculum to augment learning through what we are calling, quite intentionally, “targeted AI integration,” and we have put in place a process for approving and monitoring those efforts.

We have identified a small number of courses in upper-level science, math, computer science, ethics, advanced historical research, and social science where integration holds the greatest potential for learning.

Faculty who wish to apply for grants in AI integration will describe how targeted AI integration will allow students to achieve the learning outcomes of their course; detail how classroom experiences, assignments, and assessments would be augmented by the use of AI; and identify the specific AI tools they seek permission to use. In all other areas of learning, we will continue to ask students to refrain from using AI unless they have explicit permission from faculty and use it under their direct guidance.

This approach has a number of advantages. It's strategically targeted to specific courses and areas of learning. It allows for thoughtful, directed experimentation. It forestalls misuse and abuse in other areas of our educational program. It provides humanistic disciplines the space and freedom they require to foster the enduring habits of deep, long-form literacy, absorptive reading, and writing.

Deerfield will continue to leverage what has been called the “analog advantage” and strengthen its commitment to humanist modes of instruction (Oxford-style tutorials, oral exams, essay defenses, and exhibitions of learning). As I said to faculty at our opening meeting in the fall, we should take inspiration from a new generation of humanists—scholars, teachers, and librarians—who have brought renewed attention to the power of the Great Books and those time-tested teaching practices that deepen attention, enrich our capacity for slow thinking, and support the habits of disciplined inquiry.

The future is uncertain; it's difficult to see around corners, and I am not a gambler, but I will hazard one prediction: I believe we will witness a new dawn of humanistic learning—and Deerfield will seek to lead that effort. Students who are deeply literate in the core disciplines of the liberal arts will not only find a competitive advantage with universities and colleges, but also thrive in this brave new world of machine-augmented learning and in their professional lives in ways that other students may not.

I know that the DPN is waiting “like greyhounds in the slips,” but before I hand it over to Julia and her team, I have one thing to ask of you.

We know from decades of experience that young people flourish when faculty are fully present in their lives and committed to relationships of trust, challenge, and wise mentorship. Everything we hope for our students rests on the strength and renewal of our faculty. We have an amazing faculty—the best and most fully committed in America today. They model optimism, joy, and a zest for learning. They bring to their work with children a bedrock belief in your children's potential and goodness.

So, here's my ask: Thank them. Before you leave campus, share a written note of gratitude to a faculty member or to a member of the staff whose guidance, effort, and support have been especially impactful to you or your son or daughter. Faculty mailboxes are in the basement of the MSB. And if the person to whom you want to write does not have a box there, put it in mine—I will make sure it finds its recipient.

Thank you. Thank you for your support and trust, for your partnership with us, and, most importantly, for sharing the lives of your children with us.

A handwritten signature in green ink, reading "John P. M. Aust". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small dot above the final letter.

