

A Week in the Life

of Taft's New Head of School

Photographs by Robert Falcetti



This fall marked the beginning of an era as Peter Becker '95 began his tenure as Taft's sixth head of school. Though there is no typical week in the life of a head of school, the following pages give a glimpse of life for Becker as we entered the 2023-24 academic year.

Monday

8 AM

Breakfast in the dining hall

9-10 AM

Meeting with Edie Traina, Assistant Head of School for Faculty and Academics, and Jeremy LaCasse, Assistant Head of School for Student Life

10:15 AM

Phone call with alumnus

10:45 AM-NOON

Respond to emails

Work on ongoing projects



MONDAY

Sunday

NOON

Brunch in the dining hall

1-4 PM

Super Sunday

A community-building activity, Super Sunday is always a student favorite. Students enjoy the Crisco slide, tug-of-war, egg races, three-legged races, and more. It's a great way to make new friends at the start of the new school year.

5-7 PM

Family time

7 PM

Review the week's schedule

Prepare for the week ahead



NOON

Lunch with colleagues

1:30-2:30 PM

Meeting with Thomas Allen, Dean for Community, Justice, and Belonging

2:45 PM

Deans Meeting

This weekly meeting brings all of the school's deans together to discuss ongoing issues and strategic planning for the year ahead.



4-5 PM

TABS Board Meeting via Zoom

Becker is a leader of national stature in the independent school landscape, attending and presenting at professional conferences, serving on the boards of The Association of Boarding Schools (TABS) and the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools, and as a member of the Heads and Principals Association.

Tuesday

7:30 AM

Drive daughters Penny and Marilee to school

9:20-10 AM

Morning Meeting

Twice each week, Tafties gather in Bingham Auditorium for Morning Meeting, where speakers from across the aisle and across the globe grant exposure to new or unique perspectives and offer deeper, broader insights into the world.

10-10:30 AM

Weekly meeting with Kaitlin Orfitelli, Director of Marketing and Communications

11 AM

Meet with the Advancement Working Group

Members of the advancement, admissions, and communications offices meet regularly with Becker. This week, they discussed upcoming alumni and parent receptions and Fall Family Weekend.

A Week in the Life

TUESDAY



7:30-8:30 PM

Meet with Mons

Becker has weekly meetings with the School Monitors (also known as "the Mons"), who are the student leaders at Taft.

4 PM

Enterprise risk management meeting with CFO Jake Odden '86 and Chair of Audit & Risk Committee Jonathan Albert '79

6:30-7:30 PM

Sit-down dinner

A tradition at Taft, sit-down dinners bring students and faculty members together through assigned seating. The dinners are designed to allow students to meet Tafties who they might otherwise not get to know while engaging in meaningful conversation. Table assignments change with each meal to broaden each student's circle of connections.

8:45-9:15 AM

Meet with Alison Almasian '87, Director of College Counseling

9:20-9:50 AM

Assembly

10 AM

Meet with Executive Assistant Heidi Shemms

Becker and Shemms discuss upcoming travel to San Francisco and Los Angeles, as well as planning for the fall Board of Trustees meeting.

NOON

Development phone call

Gifts to Taft are essential to the school. Becker spends a substantial amount of time working with the Advancement Office to cultivate gifts that help make Taft stronger.

1:15 PM

Network update with Tom Chestna, Director of Information Technology

2:30 PM

Meet and greet with Watertown Police Chief

As a new member of the Watertown community and head of school at Taft, Becker has been spending time introducing himself to town officials and learning more about Watertown. In the first months of school, he plans to meet with the fire chief, town manager, and superintendent of Watertown schools.

3:15-3:45 PM

Meet with Andy Dunn, Director of Athletics and Afternoon Program



10:30 AM-NOON

Prepare for the fall Board of Trustees meeting

12:15 PM

Department Heads meeting, led by Academic Dean Jennifer Kenerson

12:30-1:30 PM

Working Lunch with Peter Frew '75, Director of Admissions

2-5 PM

Watch games and play rehearsal

This fall, under the direction of longtime faculty member Helena Fifer, students mounted a production of Matilda the Musical.



7 PM

Date night with Amy Julia '94

The Beckers have a weekly date night, a tradition of theirs that dates back 20 years. They also have a weekly calendar meeting.



Thursday

7:30 AM

Drive daughters Penny and Marilee to school

8:45-9:15 AM

Student Health & Wellness meeting with Director of Counseling Rachel Jacobs

9:20-10 AM

Morning Meeting



10-11:30 AM

Zoom call with Board of Trustees Admissions Subcommittee

Board subcommittees typically meet the week before the full board meeting. In addition to the Admissions subcommittee, Becker met with the Finance Committee, School Life Committee, and College Counseling Committee prior to this fall's full Board of Trustees meeting.

1 PM

Phone call with Sarkis D. Izmirlian II '90, P'20,'22,'24, Chair of the Board of Trustees

2-3:30 PM

Senior Administrative Team Meeting

Taft's Senior Administrative Team (known as the SAT) meets every other week to discuss both immediate issues and long-term goals. This year, they are working on two high-level goals: student health and wellness and an institutional data project.

6:30-7:30 PM

Sit-down dinner

7:30 PM

Birthday party!

The Beckers started a new tradition of celebrating student birthdays monthly. All students who were born in July, August, and September were invited to this first monthly birthday party.



Watch
birthdays
celebration
video.

BIO

Peter Becker '95 began his tenure as Taft's sixth Head of School on July 1, 2023.

As a Taft graduate, Becker knows, loves, and values Taft's mission and culture: its insistence on excellence, passion for community and belonging, commitment to improvement and to service, and pride in school spirit. His career has always been about students. As a teacher, coach, advisor,

dorm head, department chair, and head of school, he has worked with empathy and caring to help students feel valued so they can grow and succeed. As a head, he has shown a tremendous ability to administer and lead, inspiring others with a strategic vision and working collaboratively to improve and transform the school.

Becker's educational career reflects a leader who has devoted his life to independent secondary education. He is a distinguished scholar, receiving a B.A. with

Distinction in Religious Studies from the University of Virginia and an M.A. in History from Yale University. He was awarded a Fulbright Grant to study classical history, architecture, and archeology at the American Academy in Rome, Italy. After working briefly as an investment banking analyst for Harris Williams & Co., Becker first worked with independent school students while on the staff of FOCUS (the Fellowship of Christians in Universities and Schools). He began his boarding school career in 2003

at The Lawrenceville School, where he taught history and interdisciplinary studies, served as department chair, lived in and led Kennedy House, served on and ran multiple committees, and coached squash and tennis. At Lawrenceville, he worked across the school's academic departments to lead the redesign of the Interdisciplinary Studies Department curriculum.

In 2012, Becker was appointed head of school at The Frederick Gunn School, where he left a legacy of school innovation,

improvement, and change. During his tenure, Becker worked with the board, faculty and staff, and the school's leadership teams to translate the life and model of the school's founder, Frederick Gunn, into core values and curriculum design pillars that leverage the inherent potential of boarding schools.

Becker committed The Frederick Gunn School to significant and sustained work in diversity, equity, and inclusion, creating new programs, positions, and practices, and led transformational fundraising initiatives.

With his team, he oversaw more than \$60 million in campus building and improvement projects; prioritized the hiring of a diverse and talented faculty; deepened and broadened the school's curricular offerings; and fostered a global community marked by caring and empathy. During Becker's tenure, Gunn created a new Center for Citizenship & Just Democracy; a soon-to-be launched Center for Entrepreneurship; and the school's IDEAS Program in engineering, robotics, and computer science.



Friday

8:30 AM

Meet with Heidi Shemms to review next week's schedule

On the agenda—scheduling visits to each dorm to meet on corridor and attend a dorm meeting or feed. They also talk about Becker meeting with academic departments as a group and scheduling visits with faculty to sit in and observe classes.

9:20 AM

Meet with Director of Community, Justice, and Belonging and Affinity Group Leaders

10 AM

Dean of Students Lindsay Leal, update on student life

11:15 AM

Development phone calls

12 PM

Lunch with students

1 PM

Meeting with CFO Jake Odden '86

1:45 PM

Video call with Isaacson, Miller to discuss the director of enrollment search

A major goal for this year is hiring a new director of enrollment in anticipation of the retirement of longtime faculty member and Director of Admissions Peter Frew '75 in June.

2-5 PM

Hold for Board of Trustees work

A Week in the Life

Saturday

9:50-10:20 AM

Assembly

10:25 AM

Plan upcoming week

11:45 AM

Lunch

2 PM

Saturday afternoon athletics contests

Go Big Red! Go Rhinos!

7 PM

Boys' soccer home game



SATURDAY

- learn *how* to learn
- develop tools/skills to manage stress and pressure (not all stress is bad)
- unlock the wisdom of this community: ask adults and friends for advice and help
- use screens and tech well (in ways that make you *more* human, not less)
- take good risks



CONVOCATION

An excerpt from Peter Becker's Convocation Speech:

As we start the year I want to talk about three shifts that we hope every student at Taft will make during your time here. First, the shift from xenophobia to philoxenia. Second, the shift from serving ourselves to serving others. And third, the shift from drive to healthy drive. From xenophobia to philoxenia, serving self to serving others, and from drive to healthy drive.

This summer we all read Maria Hinojosa's memoir *Once I Was You*....It is the story of a woman who immigrated to the United States from Mexico with her family when she was young. You'll recall that her story is about perseverance and entrepreneurship in the face of constant challenges.

One of the book's main themes is xenophobia: the experience that countless immigrants to the U.S. have had—and continue to have—of bigotry in all its forms.

Xenophobia is comprised of two words: *xeno*, the word for "strange" or "foreign," and *phobia*, the word for "fear." So xenophobia is fear of the stranger....

In fact, at Taft we aspire to the opposite of xenophobia. A few years ago, Mrs. Becker introduced me to the word for this. The opposite of xenophobia is philoxenia: *philia*=friend + *xeno*=stranger. Our

aspiration at Taft is that we learn to respond to other humans who don't appear to be like us as friends rather than as enemies, despite the fact that our evolutionary wiring prompts us to do the opposite. So we want everyone in our community—adults and students—to make this shift from xenophobia to philoxenia despite the fact that that isn't necessarily our first human instinct....

How do we do this?...What can friendship to strangers look like? It can take the form of responding to a new person or situation with curiosity rather than with the fight/flight/freeze instinct. The differences we will encounter here are of every kind, not only geographic and linguistic—the difference could be racial, socioeconomic, gender or sexuality, religious, political, approaches to learning, or even just interests in music or sports. Regardless, asking a question about someone rather than operating on assumptions—where are you from? What is it like there? What do you do for fun? What are your favorite foods? Music? And go a bit deeper—not just what do you believe, but how did you come to enjoy that music or to take that position on an issue?

Bear in mind that you may be talking to someone who is one of the only people

at Taft from their country—and imagine what that would be like. You may be talking to someone whose country is at war or to someone who has not been able to go home since they got to Taft. (One of my favorite writers, C.S. Lewis, says that there are no ordinary humans—we are all these beautifully complex creatures, and there is power in treating each other with a certain degree of awe and wonder.) So we can practice curiosity toward one another and toward new ideas as one of the most powerful ways to overcome the fight/flight/freeze instinct, and to connect with the common humanity of the person we are speaking to.

So one shift we are committed to at Taft is the shift from xenophobia to philoxenia.

To listen to the full Convocation speech video, visit:

www.taftschool.org/news/featured/~board/news/post/kicking-off-the-school-year-convocation-23-24

