

# Highland Central

School District

2025-2026 Budget

MAY 2025



## Grade 3 Students Explore Life Cycles During Day of Science

On March 14, Highland Elementary School's Grade 3 students participated in a Day of Science, an engaging, hands-on event designed to bring the study of life cycles to life. As part of their science unit, students rotated through various classrooms, each featuring interactive learning stations that explored the different stages of animal and plant life cycles.

From observing how caterpillars transform into butterflies to learning about the growth of plants from seeds, students had the opportunity to deepen their understanding



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## Proposed 2025-2026 School Budget Maintains Staffing and Student Programs; Meets Tax Cap Criteria

The Highland Central School District Board of Education is proposing a \$57,325,285 budget for the 2025-2026 school year—a spending plan that continues to provide students with all existing levels of programs and services. The proposal reflects a 2.63 percent increase in the tax levy, and meets the requirements of the New York State (NYS) tax levy limit calculation for a simple majority voter approval.

budget proposition, members of the community will also weigh in on a separate request for the purchase of five school buses to replace older, high-mileage buses, as well as a pick-up truck with a plow to assist with snow and ice removal throughout the District.

Two Board of Education seats are also available. Current school board members Jeanine Gemmell and Thomas Miller, along with newcomer Ivan Acosta, are seeking election.

Eligible voters can participate in the budget vote and school board election on Tuesday, May 20, between 6 AM and 9 PM, in the Highland High School Band Room, which is located at 320 Pancake Hollow Road.

## Preserves Current Programs and Staffing Levels

This year's budget proposal was developed with a strong focus on fiscal stability and student support. In the face of financial uncertainty caused by the delayed New York State (NYS) budget and unknown State Aid levels, the District worked to create a balanced budget—one in which projected revenues match anticipated expenses—that did not require making cuts. While last year's spending plan required reductions in staff and services, this year's proposal maintains all current staffing levels and student services.

"We are thankful to our administrative team and Board of Education for finding viable solutions to keep our programs whole without negatively impacting opportunities for our students," said Freer. "We are proud of the fact that all student programs remain intact under the proposed spending plan."

*Continued on page 2*

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SUPERINTENDENT JOEL FREER

"We were very grateful to have developed a budget this year that did not require cuts to meet the tax cap criteria," said Superintendent Joel Freer. "I appreciate the careful consideration and collaboration among our building administrators, department directors, and the Board of Education that made this possible. Our shared goal is to create a fiscally responsible budget that maintains the high-quality education our students deserve—without exceeding the State-mandated tax cap."

In addition to being asked to consider the

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# Proposed 2025-2026 School Budget Maintains Staffing and Student Programs; Meets Tax Cap Criteria *Continued from page 1*

## Revenues and Expenditures

This year's budget proposal represents a \$2,936,540 increase from the current year's budget. Contractual obligations of salaries, benefits, and debt services are the three main factors responsible for this increase.

As of the printing of this newsletter, NYS has not yet adopted its budget; however, based on most recently available data included in the proposals, it is anticipated that the District will receive an estimated \$20,646,175 aid package this year. That is an increase of \$1,819,343 from last year.

## Use of Fund Balance and Reserves

The Board has approved applying \$1,150,000 from the District's fund balance to reduce the budget proposal's impact on the tax levy.

After consulting with the District's financial advisors, the Board also approved the use of \$74,347 from the Employee Retirement System reserve and \$376,263 from the Tax Certiorari Reserve to offset eligible expenses. This allowed the District to present a balanced and student-centered budget, without risking long-term fiscal stability.

"We are committed to making responsible financial decisions that prioritize our students' needs while respecting our community's investment in education," said Freer, adding that if the State's final budget includes more State Aid than anticipated, less fund balance will be applied. Likewise, if less State Aid is received, the fund balance or reserves amount will be increased to cover the difference.

## Tax Cap Requirements Met

Under New York State law, a school district must plan its budget around a complex formula that calculates its maximum allowable tax levy increase before needing a super-majority voter approval.

With a tax levy increase of \$890,382—or 2.63 percent—Highland's budget proposal is within that limit, and meets the requirement for a simple majority voter approval of 50 percent plus one.

## What Will the Budget Cost Me?

The tax levy represents the total amount of taxes a school district needs to support the school budget. The estimated tax levy amount for 2025-2026 is \$33,909,225. The cost of the tax levy is shared among all taxpayers included in the tax base. Factors such as overall assessed property values, equalization rates, and exemptions are all used to determine actual taxpayer impact.

The following information represents the estimated increase to a homeowner in the Town of Lloyd and is based on the most current information available. Towns typically do not finalize assessment rolls until early July, so these calculations are estimated based on 2024-2025 equalization rates.

ASSESSED VALUE IN TOWN OF LLOYD	ANNUAL INCREASE	MONTHLY INCREASE
\$100K	\$67.71	\$5.64
\$200K	\$135.43	\$11.29
\$300K	\$203.14	\$16.93
\$400K	\$270.85	\$22.57

## What is a Contingency Budget?

If the proposed budget fails to receive approval, the Board of Education has the option of resubmitting the same budget or a revised version to voters, or adopting a contingency budget. If a budget is defeated a second time, then the District is required to adopt a contingency budget.

Under a contingency budget, budget reductions totaling \$890,382 would

"We are committed to making responsible financial decisions that prioritize our students' needs while respecting our community's investment in education,"

SUPERINTENDENT JOEL FREER

be required. By law, all equipment purchases would be removed from the budget and only essential maintenance on facilities would be permitted. The District would also be required to eliminate free community use of facilities.

## Proposition 2: School Vehicle Replacement

In order to minimize the cost impact of replacing many vehicles at once, the District strategically proposes annual fleet upgrades to retire aged vehicles with high mileage on a schedule. This year, the District is requesting voter approval to purchase five school buses and one pick-up truck with a plow.

The new buses will replace aged ones in the District, while the plow will fulfill a Maintenance Department need. The cost of the vehicles is estimated to be \$962,497 and will appear as Proposition 2 on the ballot. Reimbursement through NYS Transportation Aid is expected to defray 56.8 percent of the cost, which leaves \$415,798 to be financed through local taxes over five years.

## Please Vote

The community is encouraged to participate in the school budget vote and Board of Education election on Tuesday, May 20, between 6 AM and 9 PM, at the High School Band Room.

Absentee ballots and Early Mail ballots are available for eligible voters who are unable to vote in person. Please visit our website ([www.highland-k12.org](http://www.highland-k12.org)) or call (845) 691-1000 for more details.



## ULSTER COUNTY NAMES MARY DUTKA SCHOOL BUS DRIVER OF THE YEAR

The Highland Central School District is proud to announce that Mary Dutka has been named Ulster County's 2025 School Bus Driver of the Year!

Dutka has been a Highland bus driver for nearly 40 years, earning praise for her spotless safety record, care for students, and dedication to the job. From decorating her bus with school colors to supporting students with special needs, Dutka goes above and beyond every day, and we are incredibly lucky to have her. Congratulations!





## Huskies Shine in sPOOKY AND SPeCTACULAR Spring Musical

Highland High School's theater group, Huskies on Stage, brought down the house with their production of *The Addams Family* on March 28 and 29. Under the direction of Erin Matthews, the cast and crew delivered a show filled with laughter, music, and plenty of spooky charm, leaving audiences thoroughly entertained.

Leading the cast, Cameren Thibault-Edmonds was captivating as the charismatic and ever-mysterious Gomez Addams, while Alina Cruz delivered a stunning performance as the elegantly eerie Morticia. Lorelei Donaldson brought humor and charm to the role of Wednesday, and Emily Fitzgerald had audiences in stitches as the lovable and quirky Uncle Fester. Rounding out the Addams clan were Fernando Nieves as Pugsley, Breana Vernon as Grandma, and Roxanne Goldsbary as Lurch, each of whom contributed memorable performances.

Behind the scenes, Stage Manager Kai Roper played a crucial role in ensuring that the production ran smoothly, while the musical elements were expertly guided by Choreographer Ricci Adan, Vocal Director Andrew Hoben, and Pit Orchestra Director Dan Shaut. The entire backstage

crew worked tirelessly to create stunning lighting effects, intricate costumes, and beautifully designed sets that transformed the stage into the delightfully macabre world of the Addams family.

Matthews praised the dedication and talent of everyone involved in the production. "I am incredibly proud of our cast and crew for the hard work and passion they put into this show," she said. "From the first rehearsal to the final curtain call, they brought so much energy and enthusiasm to the stage, and it was amazing to see their growth throughout the process."

Congratulations to the entire cast and crew of *The Addams Family*. Huskies on Stage once again proved that Highland is home to some incredible talent, and we can't wait to see what they bring to the stage next!

## Highland High School Hosts Successful Model UN Conference



On March 7, Highland High School's Model United Nations (UN) club hosted an exciting and educational all-day conference, welcoming students from New Paltz High School and Ulster BOCES. This special event provided participants with the opportunity to step into the roles of global leaders, diplomats, and historical figures while tackling pressing international and domestic issues.

Highland students played a pivotal role in the conference, serving as organizers and committee chairs. They expertly facilitated three committees designed to mirror the real UN, complete with formal procedures and professional attire. Delegates engaged in structured debates, conducted thorough research, and took part in strategic negotiations, all in an effort to form alliances and draft resolutions aiming to resolve difficult issues or conflicts through peaceful means. In a unique twist, some students even took on the personas of figures from Greek mythology, adding an extra layer of challenge and creativity to the event.

Model UN Advisor Stephanie Santagada praised

all of the participants for their dedication, particularly the Highland student leaders who took the initiative to organize the conference, which was held on a scheduled day off from school. "The students truly embodied the spirit of diplomacy and global cooperation," Santagada said. "Their leadership and commitment were evident throughout the day, and they played a crucial role in making this event a success. It's inspiring to see how passionate they are about fostering global awareness and engagement."

We are proud of our students for hosting such a dynamic and engaging event. Their commitment to diplomacy, collaboration, and global awareness continues to have a meaningful impact on their school and beyond.



School District Budget Notice

OVERALL BUDGET PROPOSAL	Budget Adopted for the 2024-2025 School Year	Budget Proposed for the 2025-2026 School Year	Contingency Budget for the 2025-2026 School Year *
Total Budgeted Amount, Not Including Separate Propositions	\$54,388,745	\$57,325,285	\$56,364,171
Increase/Decrease for the 2025-2026 School Year		\$2,936,540	\$1,975,426
Percentage Increase/Decrease in Proposed Budget		5.40%	3.63%
Change in the Consumer Price Index		2.95%	
A. Proposed Levy to Support the Total Budgeted Amount	\$ 33,039,254	\$33,909,225	
B. Levy to Support Library Debt, if Applicable	\$0	\$0	
C. Levy for Non-Excludable Propositions, if Applicable **	\$0	\$0	
D. Total Tax Cap Reserve Amount Used to Reduce Current Year Levy	\$0	\$0	
E. Total Proposed School Year Tax Levy (A + B + C - D)	\$33,039,254	\$33,909,225	\$33,039,254
F. Total Permissible Exclusions	\$1,751,554	\$1,793,194	
G. School Tax Levy Limit, <u>Excluding</u> Levy for Permissible Exclusions	\$31,287,700	\$32,116,031	
H. Total Proposed School Year Tax Levy, <u>Excluding</u> Levy to Support Library Debt and/or Permissible Exclusions (E – B – F + D)	\$31,287,700	\$32,116,031	
I. Difference: G – H (Negative Value Requires 60.0% Voter Approval – See Note Below Regarding Separate Propositions) **	\$0	\$0	
Administrative Component	\$5,111,239	\$5,537,960	\$5,190,219
Program Component	\$41,589,787	\$42,845,811	\$42,232,438
Capital Component	\$7,687,719	\$8,941,514	\$8,941,514

\* Provide a statement of assumptions made in projecting a contingency budget for the 2025-2026 school year, should the proposed budget be defeated pursuant to Section 2023 of the Education Law.

A contingency budget would eliminate all equipment purchases, which are currently budgeted at \$152,600. There would need to be a further budget reduction of \$737,782 to maintain the tax levy at the level in effect for the 2024-2025 school year. There would be only essential maintenance performed on the facilities; no community use of the facilities without fees would be allowed.

\*\* List Separate Propositions that are not included in the Total Budgeted Amount: (Tax Levy associated with educational or transportation services propositions are not eligible for exclusion and may affect voter approval requirements)

Description	Amount
Bus Purchase Proposition	\$962,497

	Under the Budget Proposed for the 2025-26 School Year
Estimated Basic STAR Exemption Savings <sup>1</sup>	\$616.95

<sup>1</sup> The basic school tax relief (STAR) exemption is authorized by section 425 of the Real Property Tax Law.

The annual budget vote for the fiscal year 2025-2026 by the qualified voters of the Highland Central School District, Ulster County, New York, will be held at Highland High School in said district on Tuesday, May 20, 2025, between the hours of 6:00 am and 9:00 pm, prevailing time at Highland High School, at which time the polls will be opened to vote by voting ballot or machine.

Polls will be open on Tuesday, May 20, from 6 AM to 9 PM at the Highland High School Band Room

Am I Eligible to Vote?

In order to vote you must be:

- ★ 18 years of age or older.
- ★ A citizen of the United States.
- ★ A resident of the Highland Central School District for at least 30 days immediately prior to the vote.

Voter registration is required to vote in the School District Budget Vote and School Board Election. Unregistered voters should call the High School at (845) 691-1020, and ask to speak to District Clerk Lisa Cerniglia at extension 3157 no later than Thursday, May 15, to complete a voter registration form. Voters currently registered with the County Board of Elections may also vote in the School District Budget Vote and School Board Election.

Are Copies of the Budget Available?

Copies of the proposed budget are available at all of the District’s buildings, as well as at the Highland High School Band Room. As required by law, copies of Part I of the District’s School Report Card, as issued by the New York State Education Department, are also available for public review and are attached to the District’s budget document. The report includes the State Accountability Status for all schools in the District, as well as a Fiscal Accountability Supplement. Part II of the mandated Report Card is not scheduled for release until June. Please contact the Business Office for more details or to review the State’s report.

What You’ll See on the Ballot

PROPOSITION #1: SCHOOL BUDGET  
VOTE FOR 2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR:  
\$57,325,285

SHALL the Board of Education of the Highland Central School District be authorized to expend for budgetary purposes in the 2025-2026 school year the sum of \$57,325,285 and to levy the necessary tax therefore?"

PROPOSITION #2: SCHOOL BUS PURCHASE

“SHALL the Board of Education of the Highland Central School District be authorized to; (1) acquire five school buses and one Pick-up truck with plow and pay costs incidental thereto at a cost not to exceed \$962,497, which is estimated to be the maximum cost thereof; (2) expend such sum for such purpose; (3) levy the necessary tax therefore, to be levied and collected in annual installments in such years and in such amounts as may be determined by the Board of Education in accordance with Section 416 of the Education Law, taking into account state aid; and (4) in anticipation of the collection of such tax, issue bonds and notes of the District at one time or from time to time in the principle amount not to exceed \$962,497, and levy a tax to pay the interest on said obligations when due?"

TRUSTEES FOR THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

You May Vote For Any TWO:

- ☐ Jeanine Gemmell
- ☐ Thomas Miller
- ☐ Ivan Acosta

Write-in: \_\_\_\_\_

Write-in: \_\_\_\_\_

Write-in: \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE VOTE

MAY 20, 2025

6 AM to 9 PM

HIGHLAND HIGH SCHOOL

BAND ROOM



## Grade 3 Students Explore Life Cycles During Day of Science

*Continued from page 1*

through exploration and discovery. This special day encouraged curiosity, critical thinking, and a love for science, all while making learning both fun and meaningful.

Teachers and staff were thrilled to see students fully immersed in the activities, eagerly asking questions and making connections to what they've been learning in the classroom.

"Watching the students get so excited to explore the stages of life cycles was truly rewarding," said Grade 3 teacher Brittany Jamal. "They were fully engaged, asking insightful questions and making real-world connections. It's always amazing to see their curiosity spark as they learn about the world around them."



## Highland High School Names Top Students of Class of 2025



Highland High School (HHS) is proud to announce that Sahar Mokhal has been named valedictorian of the Class of 2025, and Elaine Shebey is this year's salutatorian.

Sahar, the daughter of Sultaan Mokhal and Javeria Sultaan, earned an impressive grade point average (GPA) of 103.24. She has completed 14 Advanced Placement (AP) and college-level courses offered at HHS.

A Highland student since Kindergarten, Sahar has been actively involved in a wide range of extracurricular activities throughout High School, holding several leadership positions. She currently serves as president of the National Honor Society and Peer Leadership, co-president of Science Olympiad, vice president of Model UN, and secretary of the Tri-M Music Honor Society. She is also a dedicated member of the National Art Honor Society, French Honor Society, Mathletes, FED Challenge, World Languages Club, Multicultural Club, Interact Club, and Environmental Club.

Sahar volunteers for All For One-United We Stand, a nonprofit organization that advocates for human rights, as well as for the Dutchess Outreach Food Pantry. In the past, she served as a visiting tutor at SOS Children's Village Lahore, an orphanage in northeastern Pakistan. She is also a

peer tutor at HHS, helping students improve their skills in Algebra and Geometry.

As for college, Sahar is considering attending either the SUNY Binghamton College of Engineering, Johns Hopkins University, Yale College, or the University of Rochester. Wherever she decides to go, she plans to major in Physics and/or Chemistry, with a possible minor in English.

"I would like to study astrophysics or quantum physics as a postgraduate field," Sahar said. "I hope to remain in academia and envision a future in research and/or education."

Sahar appreciates all of the supportive faculty members who have helped her throughout her time at HHS, saying that each has given her a distinct perspective on the world and on herself. "I am infinitely grateful to all of them for their inspiration, wisdom, and compassion over the past few years, and I will carry forward both the academic skills and the life lessons I have cultivated in every classroom," she said.

Elaine, the daughter of John and Carolyn Shebey, earned a GPA of 103.13 while maintaining a rigorous course schedule of 11 AP and college-level classes.

Also a Highland student since Kindergarten, Elaine competed on the Spring Track and Field team during her freshman and sophomore years of High School. An avid hiker, she has completed several hiking challenges in her free time, including the Catskills 3500 Challenge and the Catskills Winter 3500 Challenge. She serves as treasurer of the Spanish Honor Society and is a member of the National Honor Society, Science Olympiad, Interact Club, and Mathletes.

Outside of school, Elaine plays the piano and volunteers at the Reformed Church of New Paltz. She also works part time at ShopRite in New Paltz.

Elaine said that many of her favorite high school memories are tied to inspiring teachers, connections with friends, and—

## Farewell, 2025 Retirees

As the 2024-2025 school year comes to an end, the Highland Central School District would like to salute this year's retirees. Our heartfelt gratitude goes out to our retirees for their hard work and dedication during their time with the District.

### Our retirees include:

**David Doyle**, Building Maintenance Worker

**Phyllis Letterii**, Typist

**Barbara Phillips**, Teacher Aide

**Daniel Savelson**, ELA Teacher

**William Zimmer**, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction

**Karen Schmitz**, School Bus Driver

**Deborah Southworth**, School Bus Driver

**Robin Lynk**, Food Service Helper

**Mary Santini**, School Bus Driver

believe it or not—the AP Physics classroom. "I remember doing all kinds of fun assignments and projects my junior year," she said. "These ranged from making a homemade speaker to designing a way to protect an egg from crashing into a wall. It was always exciting to tackle these projects with my friends while trying to be creative."

Elaine will be attending the University of Maryland in the fall. She plans to study Aerospace Engineering, hoping to one day work in the space industry and possibly contribute to satellite development.

Each year, HHS also recognizes the accomplishments of its other high-achieving graduates. Rounding out the Top 10 for the Class of 2025 (in order of rank) are Lena Tran, Liam Van Valkenburgh, Michael Secor, Shreya Golkonda, Kaitlyn Brittell, Kai Roper, Daniel Westover, and Erin Smith.

Principal Brandon Opitz expressed his pride in the seniors and their accomplishments. "Sahar and Elaine, along with the entire Top 10, have demonstrated outstanding dedication to academic excellence, leadership, and service," Opitz said. "Their hard work and perseverance are truly inspiring, and I have no doubt they will continue to achieve great things in the future."







## High School Students Showcase Civic Readiness Through Capstone Projects

Highland High School students in Christina Saylor's Citizens in Action class have been making a meaningful impact through their capstone projects, each of which was designed to foster civic engagement and community connections.

These projects not only benefit the school and local community but also help students earn the New York State Seal of Civic Readiness—a prestigious distinction recognizing proficiency in civic knowledge, skills, mindset, and experiences.

On April 9, the students hosted a Civics Showcase to present the culmination of their efforts. The event provided a platform for the young activists to publicly share their projects—initiatives they spent the year planning, organizing, and executing. Each student's work was evaluated by a panel of judges, who assessed the projects using a scale of "Did Not Pass," "Pass," "Pass with Honors," and "Pass with Distinction."

The projects tackled a diverse range of topics, from improving childhood literacy to promoting cultural awareness. Several students chose to focus on environmental issues, while others explored ways to support mental health. A few projects even raised much-needed funds for worthy

organizations, including the Ulster County SPCA.

"These students took on real-world issues and turned their passions into action," said Saylor. "Watching them grow as civic leaders and seeing the tangible impact of their projects has been incredibly inspiring."

Students who met the requirements for the Seal of Civic Readiness will be honored with an official medal and a sticker on their diploma at graduation on June 26.

Congratulations to all the students for their dedication, creativity, and commitment to making a difference!



## CAPITAL PROJECT UPDATE



The District is pleased to share that work is nearing completion on our Capital Project, which was approved by voters in 2022.

At the High School, a layer of track coating is scheduled to be applied in May, completing the track resurfacing and athletic field work. Inside the building, floor tile abatement and classroom upgrades have already been completed, including updates to floors, ceilings, and lighting. New lockers have been installed as well.

Classroom renovations have also enhanced learning spaces at the Elementary School. Upgrades there included the removal of outdated folding walls, as well as the installation of new doors, ceilings, lighting, and flooring. Additionally, the softball field at the Elementary School has been improved and is currently in use.

Significant HVAC upgrades are also underway. Preliminary work took place over spring break, with the remaining installations scheduled for the summer. These improvements will impact multiple key areas, including the Elementary School gym and both cafeterias, the Middle School gym and cafeteria, and the High School gym and cafeteria. In conjunction with the HVAC work, building management systems are being updated, transitioning all systems to more efficient, electronic platforms.

Finally, visitors and spectators will enjoy the new press box and concession stand (with restrooms) at the High School, which have been completed and are already in use.

All remaining work is expected to be completed prior to the start of school in the fall.





## Highland Hosts 65th Annual Scholarship Concerts

The Highland Central School District's Music Department held its highly anticipated 65th Annual Scholarship Concerts in March, celebrating the dedication and talent of student musicians and vocalists. These performances, which took place during Music in Our Schools Month, showcased a wide range of musical ensembles, highlighting the District's strong commitment to music education.

The first of the two concerts, held in the High School auditorium on March 12, focused on choral performances. Under the direction of Jodie McCaffrey, the Fourth and Fifth Grade Choruses opened the show, performing songs such as "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)," "The Never Ending Story," and "Waka Waka (This Time for Africa)." Next, the Sixth Grade Choir and the Seventh and Eighth Grade Choir, led by Cailin Cienki, took the stage. The students showcased their vocal talents with songs like "Pure Imagination," "Break Free," and "Roar."

The evening concluded with a performance by the High School Choir, which captivated the audience with "Viva la Musica" and "Friday I'm in Love."

The second concert, held on March 17, featured an impressive lineup of instrumental performances in a "round style" format in the High School gymnasium. The evening began with a combined performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" by students in Grades 5-12 and continued with selections by the Fifth Grade Band (under the direction of Karen Adamec); the Middle School Jazz Ensemble, Sixth Grade Band, and Seventh and Eighth Grade Band (under the direction of Vincent Rizzi); and the High School Jazz Ensemble and Concert Band (under the direction of Dan Shaut).

The concert concluded with a combined

finale—an energetic performance of "Theme from New York, New York."

Since its inception in 1959, the Highland Music Department Scholarship Fund has awarded thousands of dollars to graduating HHS seniors who exemplify leadership, musicianship, dedication, and professionalism in the instrumental and choral programs. The scholarship continues to support students in their musical journeys, ensuring a lasting impact on their education and careers.



The Highland Music Department extends its gratitude to parents, faculty, staff, administrators, and the entire community for their unwavering support in fostering a love for music. These annual concerts not only showcase student achievements but also reinforce the District's commitment to providing a high-quality music education.

"Our students put in an incredible amount of hard work and dedication to prepare for these performances, and it's truly inspiring to see their passion for music shine on stage," said Adamec, who serves as the Music Department coordinator. "The support from our community makes all the difference in ensuring that music education remains a vibrant part of Highlands schools."



## Highland High School Hosts Inaugural Elective Fair

The High School's first-ever Elective Fair, held on February 28, exemplified Highland's commitment to providing students with the tools they need to make informed choices about their education. This inaugural event, hosted in the Library Media Center during lunch periods, was met with enthusiasm and curiosity as students explored a wide variety of course options for the upcoming school year.

The Elective Fair featured tables set up by faculty and peers, offering students an interactive way to learn about the many different electives available to them. From arts and technology to business and sciences, the event showcased the diverse opportunities the High School provides to help students tailor their education to their interests and aspirations.

"The Elective Fair was a great success, and it's exciting to see so many students eager to explore the different opportunities available to them," said Principal Brandon Opitz. "Our goal is to help students make informed decisions about their educational paths, and this event was an excellent way to give them the tools to do that while fostering excitement for the upcoming school year."

The event was not only informative but also engaging, as students had the chance to ask questions, gather insights, and start envisioning their ideal class schedules. By giving students direct access to faculty and upperclassmen who could share firsthand experiences, the Elective Fair fostered a sense of excitement about their academic futures.

Given the overwhelming success of this year's fair, the High School looks forward to making it an annual tradition!







## KUDOS TO THESE HIGHLAND HUSKY SUPERSTARS!

**T**he **Varsity Indoor Track and Field** team finished in second place at the Divisional meet and fifth place at Sectionals.

**Joshua Bishop** joined three other Section IX runners to compete in the 3400m Intersectional Medley Relay at the New York State Indoor Track Meet Championship in Staten Island. Joshua ran the 200m leg and together the team secured first place, earning a gold medal.

The **Varsity Wrestling** team had an impressive season, finishing second in Section IX and second in the League. Wrestlers **Bradley Gatto**, **Quin Jones**, and **Jacob DeClair** earned Sectional titles and represented the Division 2, Section IX, team at the New York State Wrestling Championship.

The **Varsity Boys Basketball** team had a milestone season, qualifying for Sectionals for the first time since 2019. **Reid Berean** scored his

1,000th career point during the team's 64-56 win against O'Neill.

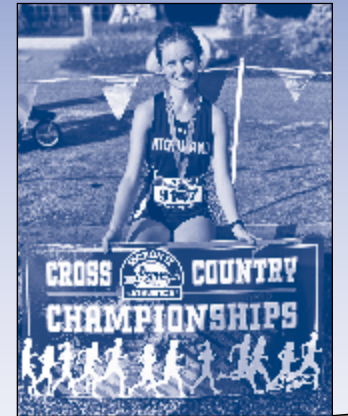
The **Varsity Girls Basketball** team made it to the Section IX, Class A, semifinal game this past season. Teammates **Samantha Calahan**, **Deanna Barry**, and **Danica Valente** were named Section IX Top 50 All-Star Players by the Basketball Coaches Association of New York.

Juniors **Connor Elliot** and **Logan Ellison**, along with seniors **Joshua Bishop** and **Kulin Ogelle**, were recognized as All-Section players at the Section IX Football Banquet in February.

The **Varsity Volleyball** team qualified for the Section IX, Class B, Championship after defeating Spackenkill in the Section IX, Class B, Semifinal. Captains **Cadence Meltz** and **Amelia Delforno** were named First-Team Class B All-Stars by *The Daily Freeman*. **Kelcey Whalen** was named a Second-Team Class B All-Star, and **Maddie Violaris** and **Danica Valente** received Honorable Mentions.

Sophomore **Parker Jackson** and freshman **Sophie Valentino** were named to the Section IX Coaches Association's Class B All-Section team.

Varsity Cross-Country team member **Alexandra Carey** delivered an impressive 5K performance at the Section IX Cross-Country Championships at Bear Mountain. Alex placed 7th with a finish time of 22:02.



## IBM Engineers Spark STEM Excitement at Highland Elementary School

**E**xcitement filled the classrooms of Highland Elementary School on April 4 as a team of engineers from IBM paid a special visit to celebrate National Engineers Week. Their mission? To show students in Grades 4 and 5 just how fun and impactful engineering can be.



Through engaging presentations, the IBM team introduced students to the world of engineering, highlighting how engineers use creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration to solve real-world problems and improve lives. From bridges to computers, students got a glimpse into the many ways engineers shape the world around them.

Following the presentations, students eagerly took on a hands-on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) challenge designed to put their problem-solving skills to the test. Working in small groups, the young Huskies were tasked with designing and building devices that could launch a

small plastic duck toward a target using only basic materials like straws, rubber bands, and tape.

As the Huskies built, tested, and adjusted their creations, there was much laughter, many shouts of encouragement, and the occasional "splat" of a duck falling short of the target—all part of the learning process. Along the way, students discovered the power of teamwork, trial and error, and the science behind stored energy.

"The students' creativity and enthusiasm were incredible," said visiting IBM engineer Tanya Buchanan. "It was inspiring to see how quickly they took on the challenge, supported one another, and celebrated every little success. These are the kinds of moments that spark a lifelong interest in STEM."

The activity was a memorable experience for all involved and a shining example of the power of community partnerships in education. Highland Elementary School extends its heartfelt thanks to the IBM employees for donating their time and talents to inspire the next generation of engineers.



# NEW SLATE OF HONOREES INDUCTED INTO HUSKY HALL OF FAME

Highland's Husky Hall of Fame was created several years ago to recognize the achievements of accomplished alumni and dedicated faculty and staff, and to inspire today's students to do great things with their education. Like previous inductees, this year's honorees exemplify an outstanding commitment to the Highland community. Their full biographies are available on the District's website, but here are a few highlights:



## FRED DEMAIO

Fred DeMaio is a dedicated community leader whose lifelong commitment to service began while attending Cornell University and working with the Cayuga Heights Fire Department. After returning home, he continued his family's legacy at Minard Farms Beverage Company alongside his wife, Diane, while raising a family grounded in service and tradition. As the oldest certified interior firefighter of Highland Hose Company #1, he has mentored many firefighters, including his son, and serves in multiple leadership roles within the Highland Fire District. A former president of the Highland Board of Education, DeMaio is also a devoted church elder who has spent decades guiding others in faith and values, embodying his belief in giving more to the community than he takes.



## GENE RIZZO

Gene Rizzo has dedicated his life to serving his community through law, justice, and civic engagement. A graduate of Highland High School, Marist College, and Albany Law School, he built a distinguished legal career, co-founding McCabe & Rizzo in 1985 and later Rizzo & Kelley in 1990, before retiring in 2024. Beyond his legal work, Rizzo has been Highland's town judge since 1985 and is an active member of the New York State Magistrates Association. His contributions extend to local organizations such as the Lions Club, Little League, Pop Warner, and Mock Trial programs. Through his commitment to justice, mentorship, and service, Rizzo has left a lasting impact on Highland, making him a truly deserving honoree.



## MARY BETH SASO

Mary Beth Saso dedicated over 30 years to teaching in the Highland Central School District, where she was more than just an educator—she was a mentor, friend, and respected community member. Born and raised in Highland, she returned after college to give back to the district she loved, forming lifelong connections with students and colleagues. Her influence extended beyond the classroom, whether she was traveling to Haiti to teach empathy and compassion, mentoring aspiring teachers, or volunteering with "Girls on the Run" to support young girls' development. As a longtime grade-level coordinator, she worked tirelessly to support fellow teachers and students. Known for her selflessness and dedication, Saso possesses a passion for education and service that continues to leave a lasting impact on Highland.

**This year's Husky Hall of Fame inductees will be honored at the Highland Educational Foundation's annual Spring Gala dinner dance and silent auction, which will take place on May 9. Proceeds will go towards purchasing equipment for the recently built concession stand at Highland High School.**



## Highland Middle School Students Compete in PBIS House Games

Highland Middle School (HMS) students embraced their competitive spirit and love of teamwork this spring during an action-packed PBIS House Games event. Organized by Physical Education teachers Cathleen Bowman and Matthew Earley, the games brought students together for a fun-filled day of outdoor challenges, friendly rivalry, and plenty of excitement.

The Middle School's PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) House system encourages students to demonstrate positive behaviors while earning points for their respective "houses"—Earth, Fire, Water, or Air. This high-energy event, which took place in March, gave students the opportunity to showcase their teamwork, sportsmanship, and enthusiasm while competing in a variety of games designed to test their physical abilities and collaboration skills.

From relay races to strategic team-building exercises, every student had a chance to contribute to their house's success. It was especially heartening to see so many students outside on the field, enjoying the fresh air and sunshine—many for the first time in months!

"The PBIS House Games were a fantastic way for students to engage with each other and show what they can achieve as a team," said HMS Principal Andrew Carnright. "We are incredibly proud of the positive attitudes and sportsmanship displayed by all participants. The multi-day event not only helped build school spirit but also reinforced the importance of working together and supporting one another."

The enthusiasm on display was truly inspiring, and thanks to the hard work of our dedicated HMS faculty and staff, the event ran smoothly and successfully. Students cheered on their classmates, celebrated victories, and demonstrated resilience through challenges, making it a memorable day for all.

As the competition wrapped up, the scoreboard reflected the fierce determination of each house. But the big question remains: Which house will take the lead next and, perhaps more importantly, who will take home the coveted House Trophy for being named House Cup Champions for the 2024-2025 school year?







## Highland Elementary Celebrates Learning Milestones

February 20 was a day of celebration at Highland Elementary School (HES), as students marked major academic milestones. For our youngest learners as well as our soon-to-be middle schoolers, the day was filled with fun, reflection, and excitement.

Marking the 100th day of school, Kindergarten and Grade 1 students enjoyed a host of creative projects and engaging activities as well as plenty of smiles. Many of the young Huskies got into the spirit of the occasion by dressing up as their 100-year-old selves, complete with suspenders, gray hair, canes, and other fun accessories. It was a wonderful way to celebrate 100 days of learning, growth, and friendships.

Meanwhile, our Grade 5 students had an even bigger milestone to celebrate—their 1,000th day of school! Since stepping into Kindergarten years ago, these students have worked hard, built lasting relationships, and developed valuable skills. They commemorated this impressive achievement with special activities and reflections on their journey so far, preparing to take their next big step toward Middle School.

Principal Ian MacCormack emphasized that celebrating these milestones is an important way to acknowledge the hard work and progress of HES students. “It’s inspiring to see how much our students have accomplished and how excited they are about their futures,” he said. “We are incredibly proud of each and every one of them as they continue to learn, grow, and prepare for the next chapter in their academic journeys.”

We applaud our students’ progress and the bright futures ahead. Congratulations to all our Huskies for reaching these exciting milestones!



## Highland Middle School Students Sweeten Their Science Skills with Maple Syrup Project

This past February and March, students in Cornelia Harris’s Environmental Science elective class at Highland Middle School participated in a sweet hands-on project. Over the course of six weeks, the students tapped trees, collected sap, and delved into the science behind one of nature’s most delicious treats: maple syrup.

In the chilly early months of the year, the Huskies in Grades 6-8 worked diligently, exploring how the diameter of a tree affects sap output, how temperature influences sap movement, and the reasons why trees produce sap. They also learned about the traditional methods used by Native Americans to gather sap and make maple sugar—a fascinating part of their studies that connected history with science.

The students didn’t just read about these concepts—they also put them into practice. After collecting 40 gallons of sap, they spent two days on the cusp of spring boiling it over an outdoor fire, which eventually resulted in the creation of two quarts of maple syrup.

To share their newfound knowledge, the students hosted tours for groups of Highland Elementary School students in Grades 1-5, guiding them through the syrup-making process and showcasing everything they had learned. It was an educational and fun experience for both the Middle and Elementary School students.

At the project’s conclusion, the middle schoolers celebrated by enjoying pancakes and waffles topped with their very own homemade syrup. Harris was pleased to see the students connect with both science and nature.

“Engaging in hands-on learning, like tapping trees and boiling sap, allows students to connect with the natural world while deepening their understanding of environmental science concepts,” said Harris. “It’s rewarding to see them apply their knowledge in such a practical and meaningful way.”

**Congratulations to Highland High School student Amelia Delforno, who was among the distinguished individuals honored with the Highland Rotary Club’s “Service Above Self” award this year. The award recognizes people who live by the Rotary’s principle motto and who are dedicated to providing service to their local community. Amelia was told about her selection during an Interact Club meeting that took place at the school this winter. The meeting was attended by several Highland Rotary Club members, including the liaison to the Interact Club, Pat Roza. Amelia, along with the other honorees, was recognized during a Rotary event in April.**





## Highland Students Explore Local Agriculture Through Farm-to-School Experience

This year, Highland Elementary School continued to enrich students' understanding of local agriculture through its collaboration with the Rondout Valley Growers Association (RVGA). As part of their innovative Farm-to-School program, "The Share Table," representatives from the RVGA visited the school to provide an interactive and flavorful learning experience.

During this exciting event, students in Grades 3-5 had the opportunity to sample a delicious and nutritious dish featuring a star ingredient—pinto beans! The Huskies enjoyed a warm serving of pinto bean soup, prepared with locally sourced beans from Milestone Mill in Kingston. This hands-on tasting experience allowed students to connect with a local food source while learning about the benefits of fresh, homegrown ingredients.

To make the activity even more engaging, students shared their thoughts on the dish by placing stickers on a feedback poster, offering insights into



their culinary preferences. This interactive element encouraged young tasters to explore new flavors while reinforcing the District's commitment to providing healthy, cost-free meals daily.

Highland Food Services Director John Matthews emphasized that the Farm-to-School program is an excellent way to connect students with food from their own community. "We're committed to offering wholesome meals and teaching students about the value of local agriculture," he said. "It's an experience that will hopefully inspire healthy eating habits for years to come."

The Highland Central School District takes pride in its strong partnerships with local growers, which help enhance students' understanding of nutrition and sustainability. A special thank-you to the RVGA and Milestone Mill for making this event both educational and delicious!

**Highland families are reminded that breakfast and lunch are available to all students at no cost each day. Ensuring every child has access to balanced, nutritious meals remains a top priority for the District.**



## Highland High School Celebrates Black History Month with Inspiring Musical Assembly

On February 14, the Highland High School auditorium was filled with energy, rhythm, and celebration as students and staff gathered for a dynamic musical assembly honoring Black History Month. The event featured an impressive collaboration between Highland Choir and Band students and visiting professional musicians, creating an unforgettable experience for all in attendance.

The assembly welcomed multi-instrumentalist and producer Nikhil Yerawadekar and acclaimed singer Rhonda Denét, both of whom brought their unique talents and passion for music to the stage. Through powerful performances and engaging storytelling, they guided the audience on a musical journey through the rich history and influence of Black musicians across generations. From classic spirituals and jazz to modern hits that continue to shape today's music industry, the concert highlighted the profound impact of African culture on global music.

Throughout the assembly, students enthusiastically clapped and sang along, fully immersing themselves in the uplifting spirit of the event. The combination of live music, historical context, and interactive elements made for a truly inspiring celebration—one that left the audience not only entertained but also with a deeper appreciation for the cultural contributions of Black artists.

A huge thank-you goes out to our talented Husky performers, our guest musicians, and everyone who helped make this such a meaningful experience for our students and staff. Highland High School is proud to celebrate the legacy and artistry of Black musicians, both past and present!



## Student Talent on Display at Highland Library

Please join us in celebrating the incredible creativity of our K-12 students at the Highland Central School District Art Showcase!

The exhibit will be on display at the Highland Public Library (14 Elting Place, Highland) through May 29.

Come show your support for arts in education and the vibrant imaginations of our students!



## Middle School Students Showcase Creativity in the Art Room

Highland Middle School students have been busy unleashing their creativity in the art room this year, engaging in a variety of exciting projects that have showcased their artistic talents and their imaginations. From painting and drawing to sculpture and mixed media, students have explored different techniques and materials to translate their artistic visions into works of art.

Under the expert guidance of Art teacher Christina Osburn, students have worked on projects that incorporate elements of design, color theory, and self-expression. Some highlights include colorful posters that brighten the hallways, detailed self-portraits and grid drawings, and three-dimensional, imaginative assemblages. These projects not only enhance artistic skills but also encourage problem-solving, patience, and creative thinking.

"The students have shown incredible enthusiasm and dedication to their artwork," said Osburn. "It's inspiring to see them experiment with new techniques and express themselves in such unique ways."

We are proud of our talented young artists and look forward to seeing their continued creativity throughout the year!





## Health Class Topics Empower Highland Students with Real-World Safety Skills

This year, Highland High School's Health classes have focused on real-world lessons designed to help keep students safe while equipping them with essential life skills. Students have participated in a number of eye-opening programs, exploring topics ranging from internet safety to drug prevention to responsible driving.

One impactful lesson, led by Highland School Resource Officer Brian Scott, focused on the dangers of impaired driving. After engaging in a candid discussion about the risks of drugs and alcohol, students used alcohol- and THC-impairment simulation goggles to experience firsthand how such substances affect balance, motor coordination, and reaction time. By attempting standardized field sobriety tests while wearing the goggles, they saw just how dangerous it is to drive while "under the influence."

"Many people think they're in control after just a drink or two, but these exercises really show how much even small amounts of alcohol or drugs can impact your ability to drive safely," said Officer Scott. "Our goal is to help students understand that making smart choices can save lives—both theirs and others on the road."

Students also gained valuable insights into internet safety and security during a visit from FBI Intelligence Analyst Odessa Simms. Simms led an open discussion on protecting personal information, recognizing online threats, and making smart digital choices. Her presentation highlighted the importance of cybersecurity in today's digital age, empowering students to navigate the online world safely and responsibly.

Students also participated in "Too Good for Drugs," a 10-week substance use prevention program facilitated by members of the Ulster County

Prevention Council. This evidence-based curriculum helps students develop skills for making healthy choices, building positive friendships, and resisting peer pressure. Through interactive activities, role-playing, and social games, they reinforced



the importance of making informed decisions while strengthening character development.

"The program went beyond just saying 'no'

to drugs—it gave students real strategies for making positive choices in all aspects of their lives," said Health teacher Noelle Randolph. "By building confidence and communication skills, we're helping them navigate challenges both in and outside of school."

Kudos to Highland High School for preparing students for real-life challenges, helping them make informed decisions that promote their safety and well-being!

## Honoring the Class of 2025

With graduation around the corner, please join us in acknowledging the efforts and achievements of the current graduation candidates for the Class of 2025. We are so proud of their hard work, determination, and spirit.

To our seniors: you are almost at the finish line! Keep the end in sight and reach for that bright future that is ahead of you. We are so happy for you and can't wait to see you in your caps and gowns, crossing the stage into the next chapter of your lives!

Cameron Kijani Adoma  
Madison Helena Agustin  
Deborah Jadesola Akanni  
Christian Thomas Alexander  
Adriana Marie Almodovar  
Peter Joseph Arciuolo  
Alessandra Marie Bardowell-Barbaro  
Gabriella Georgine Barbaro  
Deanna Rose Barry  
Reid Louis Berean  
Joshua Kole Bishop  
Rachel Ann Branda  
Kaitlyn Emma Brittell  
Noah G. Cabrera  
Angelese Ann Cabrera Hill  
Sianni Michaela Caicedo  
Samantha Shea Calahan  
Diana Maria Calderon  
Nicole Margarita Carrera  
Bethany Hope Childs  
Wesley Amin Clarke  
Sophia Marie Colonna  
Charles Michael Conklin  
Alina Rose Cruz  
Hugo Enrique Cruz  
Molly Marie Darcy

Yushanna Mileshe Davis  
Amelia Lynn Del Forno  
Kailyn Renee Dennis  
Sarah Melissa Dewitt  
Christopher Eric Dickey  
Joseph Lee Dolcemasclo  
Lorelei Ursula Donaldson  
Theodore Eager Druttman  
Leland Chase DuBois  
Michael Conner Duncan  
Kyle Daniel Dwyer  
Jake Carson Dyle  
Preston Marcus Ebert  
Amari Elbakry  
Angelina Corinne Esposito  
Jack Jordan Fasano  
Cody James Fernandes  
Emily Teresa Fitzgerald  
Katherine Margaret Fitzgerald  
Michael Vincent Forzano  
Bradley James Gatto  
Jackson Paul Gillespie  
Anthony Donald Nathan  
Goldsborough  
Shreya Golkonda  
Emilio Pepe Gonzalez  
Gary J. Gonzalez Martinez

Gavin Jason Goodenough  
Henry Brian Goodwin  
Aiden Michael Goudreau  
Makenzie Leigh Gray  
Nafisah Laela Gray  
Jose Kyle Gurnee  
Zachary Edward Haeser  
Karl Jacob Haviland  
Paul Alejandro Herrera Aucacama  
Lucia Jean Hipolito  
Madison Lyn Hughes  
Danial Munther Jamal  
Quinlan Taylor Jones  
Kenneth King  
Rachael Leah Kitzweger  
Aaliyah Rose Lacy  
Janelle Natasha Landell  
Ava Evangelina LaValle  
Alexandria Grace Lockhart  
Aidan James Lucas  
Kayleigh Nicole Mabie  
Emily Rose Martin  
Francis Mazariego  
Matthew Ryan McCaffery  
Dylan Jacob McCrory  
Cadence Jade Meltz

Jolie Theresa Merced  
Basil Matthias Metz  
Eva Lillian Meyer  
Isabelle Rose Mieth  
Sahar Zarin Mokal  
Austin Lino Monteverdi  
Linguere Rackietou Ndiaye  
Stephen Christopher North  
Belen Pamela Ocampo Quiroz  
Kulin I. Ogelle  
Carter Michael Okrent  
Stephania Matilda Origene  
Alexa Lynn Pavese  
Rafiq Terell Reid  
Lillian Danyelle Reynolds  
Angelina Marie Rios  
Luca Julianna Rizzo  
Arryana Cornella Robinson  
Kai Marie Roper  
Chase Dovey Roraback  
Elizabeth Adel Ryan  
George Anthony Salinovich Jr.  
Julius Fitzroy Samuel  
Kayla Skye Santiago  
Lauren Grace Santiago  
Alyssa Schoonmaker

Rashad Scott  
Michael Anthony Secor  
Elaine Ann Shebey  
Erin Marie Smith  
Gunnar P Smith  
Owen Jacob Smith  
Makyah Julian Steppe  
Salmah Ann Suleiman  
Hayley Marie Sutfin  
Nathaniel Robert Swart  
Isaiah Lee Teamer  
Michael Andrew Thomas  
Lena Tran  
Gunner Alexander Trombetta  
Danica Therese Valente  
Sofia Raquel Valerie  
Liam Michael VanValkenburgh  
Breana O. Vernon  
John Joseph Vogt  
Daniel Charles Westover  
Sarah Elise Weyrick  
Kelcey May Whalen  
Jenna Marie Wilson  
Sierra Claire Wiser  
Mae Anne Wright  
Dylan Matteo Zocchi