

**New England Association of  
School and Colleges, Inc.**

**Commission on Public Schools**



**NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION  
OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES**

**Commission on Public Schools**

**Report of the Visiting Team for  
Darien High School**

Darien, CT

10-20-2024 - 10-23-2024

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# School and Community Summary

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## School and Community Summary

Darien High School is a public four-year high school located in the town of Darien, Connecticut, in southwest Fairfield County, 30 miles northeast of Manhattan. This coastal, residential town is known for its proximity to New York City, and many residents commute into the city.

At the time of the 2020 US Census, Darien's total population was 21,742. The population is racially, culturally, and ethnically similar: 91 percent of residents identify as white; 5.6 percent identify as Asian American; 4.1 percent identify as Hispanic or Latino; 0.9 percent identify as black or African American; 2.1 percent identify as multiracial. English is the primary language spoken by 94 percent of the student population throughout the district. The median family income is \$232,523; the mean family income is \$365,528. Less than 3.5 percent of the students at Darien High School qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 60 families in the district qualify for free or reduced lunch. Enrollment is stable over time, with most students beginning and ending their K-12 educational careers in Darien Public Schools. The district experienced a small influx of families moving from urban areas or out of state to the town during the pandemic.

The Darien Public School System ranks 34th in Connecticut school districts in per pupil expenditures, spending \$22,838 per pupil, compared with a state average of \$20,707. Darien Public Schools are funded 99 percent through local taxes and fees, with 1 percent coming from state and federal grants. The board of education budget represents 74 percent of the Town of Darien's operating budget. The public school system includes one early childhood education program; five elementary schools, with approximately 2,100 total students in grades kindergarten through five; one middle school, with approximately 1,100 total students in grades six through eight; and one high school, with 1,385 total students.

The 2024-2025 population of Darien High School includes 1,385 students in grades 9 through 12, which includes 15 students attending the alternative Fitch Academy. The school population has increased 5.6 percent over the past decade. The ethnic, racial, and cultural composition is 1.5 percent African American students, 8.27 percent Asian students, 8.49 percent Hispanic students, and 0.5 percent Indian/Alaskan students during the 2023-2024 school year. The average daily student attendance rate is 96.9 percent, and the average attendance rate among teachers is 96 percent.

Darien High School has 158 certified staff members, creating a student-to-teacher ratio of 8.78:1. Individual teachers teach an average of five sections of classes each semester, with an average class size of 18. Students attend school for 180 days and a minimum of 1038 hours.

Beginning with the Class of 2023, all graduates must complete nine credits in humanities (including four credits in English, three and one-half credits in history, one credit in fine or practical arts, and one-half additional credit in humanities), nine credits in STEM (three credits in laboratory science, three credits in mathematics, and three additional STEM credits), three open elective credits, and one credit each in world languages, physical education and wellness, healthy and safety, and mastery-based diploma assessment. Beginning with the Class of 2027, a half credit in personal finance is a graduation requirement. The Darien High School Course Catalog includes over 170 course offerings, 46 designated as honors and advanced placement levels. In the class of 2024, 92.7 percent of graduates attended four-year colleges, with 1.9 percent enrolling in two-year colleges and 4.8 percent enrolling in business and technical schools, the military, and the workforce.

Darien High School has established several partnerships in the community, including a semi-annual volunteer fair that invites dozens of community organizations to connect with students who volunteer their time and talent. Various school clubs, such as the student council, organize community service projects and collections to support nonprofits throughout Fairfield County. A senior internship program allows seniors to participate in a five-week, 30-hour-per-week job shadowing program to gain experience in a future career. Over the last two years, the program has expanded to include the opportunity for students to design an independent or partner project as a culminating activity. During the 2023-2024 academic year, 334 students participated in senior internships at more than 160 sites throughout Connecticut and New York. In collaboration with the Darien High School Parents Association, the school counseling department traditionally hosts 150-165 college visits during the academic

year, when seniors can meet with college representatives during the school day, as well as many guest speakers who discuss various topics supporting the whole student.

Darien High School offers students extensive co-curricular opportunities, and many students also have robust experiences through community opportunities. Darien High School runs over 60 clubs that range in interest from business competitions to filmmaking to human rights advocacy, as well as six academic honor societies. In the 2023-2024 school year, Darien High School had 69 athletic teams in 39 different sports. The program features 39 varsity, 20 junior varsity, and 10 Freshman teams, with rosters totaling 1514 athletes; the program involves 960 individual student-athletes, with many playing on teams in multiple seasons.

Post-COVID pandemic, Darien High School facilitated several international field trips for students and faculty to Spain, Germany, and Switzerland in 2022 (for 64 students and 10 faculty); the Galápagos Islands, Ecuador, and Italy in 2023 (for 39 students and five faculty); Argentina and France in 2024 (31 students and five faculty); and England (for 20 students and three faculty). The 2024-2025 academic year plans include trips to Paris, Greece, and Costa Rica.

Outside of school, many students also serve as volunteers and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) for Post 53, a nationally recognized program, and the local volunteer fire departments. The Darien Y.M.C.A. and Darien Depot, a collaborative youth center, offer a wide range of programs and leadership opportunities for students of all ages.

Students are recognized for their accomplishments and community service. For the 2023-2024 school year, approximately 295 school and community awards were presented to 204 students at an annual awards ceremony. Additionally, 48 organizations and donors gifted over \$135,000 to 67 graduating seniors from the Class of 2024. The Class of 2024 produced one U.S. Presidential Scholar, six U.S. Presidential Scholar candidates, three NMSQT finalists, one NMSQT semi-finalist, and 21 commended students. The most recent recipients were announced this fall.

## Core Values, Beliefs, and Vision of the Graduate

**Core Values and Beliefs:** We, the members of the Darien High School community, believe that learning best occurs in an environment that is safe, supportive, respectful, and intellectually challenging for all students, one that promotes personal excellence through active, collaborative, and creative thinking; individual growth; and development of the skills and integrity necessary to become productive members of society.

**Vision of the Graduate:** All students will have the confidence and capacity to be self-directed, independent adults who live purposeful, happy, fulfilling lives, and that they become citizens who contribute collaboratively and innovatively to their local and global communities.

In an era of rapid change to education and to the workforce, the Darien Public Schools recognizes the need to identify through this Vision the skills and dispositions required to raise compassionate, resilient problem-solvers and leaders: Communication, Creativity, Curiosity, Empathy, Independence, and Integrity.

- **Communication:** Effective collaboration will depend on your ability to listen with a discerning ear and express your ideas with clarity and passion. Communication is a two-way exchange. Listen before you speak. Hear what is behind the words. Craft your communication with purpose and choose your words carefully - they hold great power. Know that your actions also tell your story. Find your own voice and dare to use it to build your community and change your world.
- **Creativity:** Pursuing new ideas will inspire you and others. Connect all that you have learned in order to generate novel thinking, design solutions, and innovate. Embrace the trial and error process. See mistakes as opportunities. Problems are solved by thinking about what can be rather than what has been. Seek and appreciate the beauty within each discipline. Believe in your vision and give form to your ideas
- **Curiosity:** Approaching the world with childlike amazement will lead you to new questions and inspire learning for life. Pursue knowledge as it provides the bedrock for thinking. Turn your mind to inquiry while

pursuing your passions. Engage with others' thinking and question with persistence to deepen your understanding. Commit to fearless exploration of the unknown because it will open doors to new possibilities

- **Empathy:** Understanding other people's experiences will enable you to form meaningful relationships and empower you. Open your heart and mind to the ideas and feelings of others and, as a result, learn more about yourself. Radiate kindness. Act with compassion. Embrace diversity and stand up for others and for inclusion. Honor the humanity of each person and contribute to a community that provides all with a sense of belonging.
- **Independence:** The life you build for yourself will be founded on how much you trust and rely on your unique talents and thinking. Self-reliance frees you to become who you are meant to be. Persist when you encounter obstacles and know that you can seek guidance to help you grow. Set goals and work hard to reach them. Diligence has its own rewards. Confidently choose what's best for you, balancing life's demands
- **Integrity:** Those who earn the respect of others conduct themselves honestly and adhere to principles in the face of adversity and social pressures. Tell the truth no matter how difficult. Accepting responsibility earns trust and reveals strength of character. Advocate for justice. Lead by example. Know who you are and let your actions speak for you. Develop your moral compass and demonstrate the courage to honor it.

The Darien Public Schools is committed to giving all of our students multiple opportunities to master these competencies and to acquire these dispositions, throughout their experiences in our schools and their engagement with our curriculum, from kindergarten through to graduation. As a result, we believe we will graduate individuals who have a strong academic foundation and are prepared to use the knowledge and skills they have acquired to cast and fulfill a purposeful vision for themselves, their community, and the world.

## School Improvement/Growth Plan

The school improvement/growth plan is attached.

### Related Files

- [2024\\_09\\_30-07\\_03\\_DHS Improvement Plan 24-25.pdf](#)

# LEARNING CULTURE

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## Learning Culture

*The school provides a safe learning culture that ensures equity and fosters shared values among learners, educators, families, and members of the school community. These shared values drive student learning as well as policy, practice, and decision-making while promoting a spirit of collaboration, shared ownership, pride, leadership, social responsibility, and civic engagement. The school community sets high standards for student learning, fosters a growth mindset, and facilitates continuous school improvement to realize the school's core values, beliefs about learning, and vision of the graduate.*

1. The school community provides a safe, positive, respectful, and inclusive culture that ensures equity and honors diversity in identity and thought.
  - 1a. The school community provides a safe environment.
2. The school's core values, beliefs about learning, and vision of the graduate drive student learning, professional practices, learning support, and the provision and allocation of learning resources.
  - 2a. The school has a written document describing its core values, beliefs about learning, and vision of the graduate.
3. The school community takes collective responsibility for the intellectual, physical, social, and emotional well-being of every student and can demonstrate how each student is known, valued, and connected to the school community.
4. The school community's professional culture demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement through the use of research, collaborative learning, innovation, and reflection.
5. The school's culture promotes intellectual risk taking and personal and professional growth.
6. The school has an inclusive definition of leadership and provides school leaders with the authority and responsibility to improve student learning.
7. The school culture fosters civic engagement and social and personal responsibility.

# STUDENT LEARNING

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## Student Learning

*The school has a vision of the graduate that includes the attainment of transferable skills, disciplinary/interdisciplinary knowledge, understandings, and dispositions necessary to prepare learners for their future. Students are assured consistent learning outcomes through a defined curricular experience and have the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in a variety of creative ways. Students actively participate in authentic learning experiences while practicing the skills and habits of mind to regularly reflect upon, and take ownership of, their learning.*

1. The school has a vision of the graduate that includes the attainment of transferable skills, knowledge, understandings, and dispositions necessary for future success and provides feedback to learners and their families on each learner's progress in achieving this vision.
2. There is a written curriculum in a consistent format for all courses in all departments that includes units of study with guiding/essential questions, concepts, content, and skills and integrates the school's vision of the graduate.
  - 2a. There is a written curriculum in a consistent format for all courses in all departments.
3. Curriculum ensures that learners demonstrate a depth of understanding over a breadth of knowledge.
4. Instructional practices are designed to meet the learning needs of each student.
5. Students are active learners who have opportunities to lead their own learning.
6. Learners regularly engage in inquiry, problem-solving, and higher order thinking skills.
7. Learners demonstrate their learning through a variety of assessment strategies that inform classroom instruction and curriculum.
8. Learners have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning, receive corrective feedback, and use this feedback in meaningful ways to support their learning.
9. Learners use technology across all curricular areas to support, enhance, and demonstrate their learning.

# PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

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## Professional Practices

*The school maintains and implements a school improvement/growth plan, organizational practices, and productive community relationships to meet and support student learning needs. Educators engage in ongoing reflection, collaboration, and professional development to improve their practice and examine evidence of student learning and well-being to improve curriculum, instruction, assessment practices, programs, and services.*

1. The school engages all stakeholders in the development and implementation of a school improvement/growth plan, which reflects the school's core values, beliefs about learning, and vision of the graduate.
  - 1a. The school has a current school improvement/growth plan.
2. Educators engage in ongoing reflection, formal and informal collaboration, and professional development to improve student learning and well-being.
3. Educators examine evidence of student learning and well-being to improve curriculum, instruction, assessment practices, and programs and services.
4. Collaborative structures and processes support coordination and implementation of curriculum.
5. School-wide organizational practices are designed to meet the learning needs of each student.
6. Educators develop productive student, family, community, business, and higher education partnerships that support learning.

# LEARNING SUPPORT

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## Learning Support

*The school has timely, directed, and coordinated interventions for all students. The school provides targeted supports to meet each student's individual needs, including counseling services, health services, library/information services, and other appropriate support services to assist each student in meeting the school's vision of the graduate.*

1. All students receive appropriate intervention strategies to support their academic, social, and emotional success.
  - 1a. The school has intervention strategies designed to support students.
2. All students receive counseling services that meet their personal, social, emotional, academic, career, and college counseling needs from adequate, certified/licensed personnel.
3. All students receive health services that ensure their physical and emotional well-being from adequate, certified/licensed personnel.
4. All students receive library/information services that support their learning from adequate, certified/licensed personnel.
5. Identified English Language Learners and students with special needs and 504 plans receive appropriate programs and services that support their learning from adequate, certified/licensed personnel.

# LEARNING RESOURCES

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## Learning Resources

*The school has adequate and appropriate time, funding, and facilities to support the realization of its core values, beliefs about learning, and vision of the graduate. The school and school community provide time, funding, and facilities for student learning and support; teacher collaboration and professional growth; and full implementation of curricular and co-curricular programs in the school. The school has appropriate plans, protocols, and infrastructure in place to ensure consistent delivery of its curriculum, programs, and services.*

1. The community and district provide school buildings and facilities that support the delivery of high-quality curriculum, programs, and services.
  - 1a. The community and district provide school buildings and facilities that support the delivery of curriculum, programs, and services.
2. The school/district provides time and financial resources to enable researched-based instruction, professional growth, and the development, implementation, and improvement of school programs and services.
3. The community and the district's governing body provide adequate and dependable funding to fully implement the curriculum, including co-curricular programs and other learning opportunities.
4. The school/district has short-term and long-term plans to address the capital and maintenance needs of its building and facilities.
5. The school has infrastructure and protocols in place to ensure effective responses in crisis situations.

# Introduction

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## Introduction

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) is the oldest of the six regional accrediting agencies in the United States. Since its inception in 1885, the Association has awarded membership and accreditation to those educational institutions in the six-state New England region who seek voluntary affiliation.

The governing body of the Association is its Board of Trustees, which supervises the work of three Commissions: the Commission on Independent Schools (CIS); the Commission on Public Schools (CPS); and the Commission on International Education (CIE).

As the responsible agency for matters of the evaluation and accreditation of public school member institutions, CPS requires visiting teams to assess the degree to which schools align with the qualitative Standards for Accreditation. The Standards are *Learning Culture, Student Learning, Professional Practices, Learning Support, and Learning Resources*.

The accreditation program for public schools involves a five-step process: the self-reflection conducted by stakeholders at the school; the Collaborative Conference visit, conducted by a team of peer educators and NEASC representatives; the school's development and implementation of a growth/improvement plan; the Decennial Accreditation visit conducted by a team of peer educators and NEASC representatives; and the follow-up program carried out by the school to implement the findings of its own self-reflection, the recommendations of the visiting team, and those identified by the Committee in the follow-up process. Continued accreditation requires that the school participate in the accreditation process over the ten-year cycle and that it shows continued progress addressing identified needs.

### Preparation for the Accreditation Visit

Accreditation coordinators and a steering committee composed of the professional staff were appointed to supervise the school's Accreditation process which includes the self-reflection, the Collaborative Conference visit, the development and implementation of a growth plan, and the Decennial Accreditation Visit.

Public schools seeking Accreditation through the Commission on Public Schools must complete appropriate materials to assess their alignment with the Standards for Accreditation and the quality of their educational offerings in light of the school's core values, beliefs, vision of the graduate, and unique student population. In preparation for the decennial visit, schools are required to complete a Decennial Summary Report to inform the team about their progress since the time of the Collaborative Conference visit.

In addition, the professional staff was required to read and come to consensus on the summary report to ensure that all voices were heard related to the school's progress on their priority areas for growth.

### The Process Used by the Visiting Team

A visiting team of eight members was assigned by the Commission on Public Schools to conduct a Decennial Accreditation visit to Darien High School in Darien, Connecticut. The visiting team members spent four days conducting a visit to the school; reviewed the self-reflection, Collaborative Conference report, and Decennial Summary Report documents; met with administrators, teachers, other school and system personnel, students, and parents; and visited classes to determine the degree to which the school aligns with the Committee on Public Secondary Schools' and Public Elementary and Middle Schools' Standards for Accreditation and the degree to which the school is making progress toward their identified priority areas for growth as indicated in the school's improvement/growth plan.

Each conclusion in the report was agreed to by visiting team consensus. Sources of evidence for each

conclusion drawn by the visiting team are included within each section of the report. The report includes commendations and recommendations that, in the visiting team's judgment, will be helpful to the school as it works to improve teaching and learning and implement its plan for growth and improvement. The report also includes an analysis of the conceptual understanding, commitment, competency, and capacity (4Cs), which is a framework used to evaluate the school's ability for continuous growth and improvement as a learning organization.

This report of the findings of the visiting team will be forwarded to the Commission on Public Schools, which will make a decision on the Accreditation of the school.

# Foundational Element 1.1a - Learning Culture

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## Foundational Element 1.1a

The school community is committed to creating and sustaining a socially, emotionally, and intellectually safe environment for everyone. According to the NEASC survey, most students, staff, and parents believe the school provides a secure atmosphere. This commitment is reflected in the vision of the graduate, the school's student and family handbook, the school counseling programs, and the district's strategic plan, mission, vision, and values. Multiple board of education policies and the Darien Standards of Behavior for Extracurriculars and Athletics also support this safe environment.

The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) from the National School Climate Center (NSCC), conducted in late April and early May 2024, shows that students feel physically and emotionally safe at school. School suspension rates have remained consistent while the administration prioritizes restorative and educational opportunities within its discipline approach.

Policies and protocols are established to ensure respectful treatment of all school members, especially those from historically marginalized communities. Since the Collaborative Conference, the school has allocated more resources to programs that promote students' social and emotional well-being. Darien High School opened a wellness center in August 2022, accessible during lunch in the 2022-2023 school year. In 2023-2024, a wellness center coordinator was hired, allowing the center to operate from 7:40-2:20 daily, along with additional wellness programs. The district appointed a director of mental health in March 2023 to oversee social-emotional learning, foster community connections, offer professional development, and support complex clinical cases. A teen talk counselor was added in the same school year, increasing students' access to mental health resources within the school and community.

## Rating

Meets the Standard

# Foundational Element 1.2a - Learning Culture

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## Foundational Element 1.2a

The school has a written document describing its core values, beliefs about learning, and vision of the graduate that includes the attainment of transferable skills, knowledge, understandings, and dispositions necessary for future success. The school district developed its vision of the graduate in 2020 and 2021 with input from students, parents, K-12 teachers and administrators, community leaders, and board of education members. This document is widely distributed and displayed in classrooms and common spaces to build awareness of the vision of the graduate competencies: communication, creativity, curiosity, empathy, independence, and integrity. Learning outcomes connected to each competency are defined, and the school's longstanding core values and beliefs are also prominently displayed around campus and included in the student handbook.

## Rating

Meets the Standard

# Foundational Element 2.2a - Student Learning

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## Foundational Element 2.2a

There is not yet a written curriculum in a consistent format for all courses in all departments across the school. While a standardized curriculum format across all courses is not yet fully in place, significant strides have been made in aligning the curriculum with the Understanding by Design (UbD) format. This approach includes units of study with guiding/essential questions, key concepts, skills, instructional strategies, and assessments. In the 2023-2024 school year, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction and department chairs launched a new curriculum writing cycle with embedded professional development. This seven-year cycle follows the UbD model and integrates the vision of the graduate and the district's teaching and learning principles. The preK-12 curriculum is gradually being updated to this format, with public access planned for course descriptions, essential understandings, and questions through the EduPlanet21 platform. Teachers and staff will have full access to the UbD documents, including performance assessments and key experiences. This curriculum revision cycle is flexible and will adjust to accommodate changes in standards, new courses, or resource shifts.

## Rating

Does Not Meet the Standard

# **Foundational Element 3.1a - Professional Practices**

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## **Foundational Element 3.1a**

The school has a current school improvement/growth plan. In 2021, the Darien Public School District adopted a strategic plan. Before this, the board of education created and approved yearly district goals. Based on feedback from faculty and the community and aligned with district goals, Darien High School developed a school improvement plan for the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years. The leadership team supports the district's board of education goals, such as creating a balanced definition of success through the vision of the graduate. For example, the school improvement plan includes developing performance-based assessments to measure the vision of the graduate competencies and revising curricula to integrate these competencies.

### **Rating**

Meets the Standard

# **Foundational Element 3.6a - Professional Practices**

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## **Foundational Element 3.6a**

N/A

### **Rating**

Meets the Standard

# **Foundational Elements 4.1a - Learning Support**

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## **Foundational Elements 4.1a**

The school has intervention strategies designed to support learners. The school has a structured process to identify and refer students who need extra support and offers various interventions. This support continuum includes team teaching, co-teaching, multilingual learner (MLL) support, 504 plans, the health office, the academic success center, lab classes, and special education referrals. The school has eight counselors who implement a comprehensive counseling curriculum, five psychologists, a social worker, and a part-time connections counselor focused on substance-use prevention. The school also has four full-time nurses to provide preventative care and direct support.

The Darien High School Library Learning Commons, staffed by two full-time library media specialists and one support staff member, is available before, during, and sometimes after school. It offers curriculum support in collaboration with teachers. Certified staff provide services for multilingual learners and students with IEPs and 504 plans.

To support student mental health, the district has implemented several programs across all grades, including RULER, Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), and Question, Persuade, Respond (QPR) training for teachers and support staff. School and district leaders are working toward incorporating social-emotional well-being into a multi-tiered support system.

## **Rating**

Meets the Standard

# **Foundational Element 5.1a - Learning Resources**

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## **Foundational Element 5.1a**

The community and district ensure that school buildings and facilities support high-quality education, as shown in the Darien Public Schools Master Plan. The Darien High School building, opened in 2005, is well-maintained and designed to enhance various activities. Facilities include learning connection rooms for collaboration, a technology education suite, a little theater, multiple turf fields, and spacious science labs. According to the NEASC survey, 73.6 percent of faculty agree that the school is clean and well-kept, and 67.9 percent believe the building supports student learning. The school complies with all federal, state, and local safety regulations. Anticipated long-term projects addressing ongoing facility needs and supporting emergency response preparedness are outlined in the district's technology plan and master plan.

### **Rating**

Meets the Standard

# **Foundational Element 5.5a - Learning Resources**

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## **Foundational Element 5.5a**

The school has policies, protocols, and processes to ensure physical safety. Four campus monitors are stationed at the welcome center, outside, in the cafeteria, and throughout the building, supervising the inside and outside of the building during the school day. The Darien Police Department provides a school resource officer who works with students and staff daily. In January 2023, the district hired a director of security, followed by six school security officers, primarily for elementary schools, with one occasionally covering the high school.

Students and staff are trained in emergency procedures, with regular fire, secure school, and lockdown drills held at Darien High School and Fitch Academy. The school has ten areas of refuge on the second and third floors, six automated external defibrillators (AEDs) in the building, and five on nearby sports fields. Nurses, the athletic director, and the assistant athletic director receive annual CPR/AED training, while campus monitors are trained every other year.

School entrances are locked during the day, allowing entry only through an electronic ID system. Visitors must enter via the welcome center, have an appointment, and scan their driver's license upon entry. The campus is monitored by over 65 interior cameras and 27 exterior cameras, an increase since the Collaborative Conference. Additionally, the school has an Alertus Emergency Lockdown System with beacons throughout the campus to alert and instruct in a lockdown event.

## **Rating**

Meets the Standard

# Foundational Elements Ratings

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## Foundational Element Ratings

Foundational Elements	Collaborative Conference School's Rating	Collaborative Conference Visitors' Rating	Decennial School's Rating	Decennial Visitors' Rating
1.1a - Learning Culture	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets
1.2a - Learning Culture	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets
2.2a - Student Learning	Does Not Meet	Does Not Meet	Does Not Meet	Does Not Meet
3.1a - Professional Practices	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets
3.6 - Professional Practices	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
4.1a - Learning Support	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets
5.1a - Learning Resources	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets
5.5a - Learning Resources	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets

# Priority Area 1

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## Priority Area

Continue to develop and implement programming, practices, and policies that cultivate an inclusive, equitable community and which prioritize mental health for all students. (1.1, 1.3, 3.3)

## Action, Impact, and Growth

Darien High School is strongly committed to creating and maintaining an inclusive, equitable environment prioritizing student mental health. This commitment is reflected in a range of initiatives designed to support students' well-being, foster social-emotional learning, and promote equity and inclusion across the school community.

One area of significant progress is the expansion of the school's mental health support systems. The wellness center, launched in 2022, has become an essential resource for students, offering a safe space to learn how to manage stress and address emotional challenges. Initially open only during lunch, the center's hours expanded in 2023-2024 with the addition of a full-time wellness center coordinator, allowing access from 7:40 AM to 2:20 PM each school day. This expanded availability has increased student access to the center's resources and programming, focusing on stress reduction, emotional well-being, and mindfulness practices. The school also hired a teen talk counselor, further enhancing the mental health resources available to students by bridging school-based and community-integrated mental health support.

Darien High School has also implemented Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) training for teachers to help staff better support students. DBT equips staff with specific skills and strategies for helping students regulate emotions and manage anxiety, increasing their capacity to provide meaningful support within the classroom. Staff have found DBT particularly valuable in fostering a compassionate environment where students feel comfortable seeking help.

The school's social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives have also been key in promoting a supportive and emotionally safe environment. Programs such as RULER and The Classroom Charter tool are helping students develop skills in self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy. RULER encourages students to identify, label, and express their emotions constructively, which has led to improved peer relationships and a more positive overall school climate. The Blue Wave Anchor peer mentorship program also supports a sense of belonging, leadership development, and connection among students. This program has contributed to building a supportive network where students feel empowered to help one another and foster a stronger community.

The school's commitment to equity and inclusion is evident in its proactive measures to address bias issues and create a welcoming, respectful environment for all students. Darien High School has partnered with the Anti-Defamation League and introduced the "Names Can Really Hurt Us" workshop, which encourages students to confront and discuss bias, bullying, and equity issues. This workshop has been instrumental in reducing bias incidents, as both students and faculty report feeling better equipped to recognize and respond to instances of bias in real time. These initiatives underscore the school's dedication to creating a respectful environment that honors the experiences of all students, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds.

The school has also made strategic, data-driven adjustments to attendance and discipline policies to support these efforts. Guided by insights from comprehensive school climate data, these revisions have positively impacted student behavior and attendance rates. Policies now incorporate restorative practices, offering students opportunities to reflect on their actions and make amends rather than relying solely on punitive measures. By focusing on restoration and learning, the school helps students build skills for managing conflicts and making better choices in the future.

In addition to these mental health and social-emotional learning programs, Darien High School has strengthened its advisory and counseling programs to support students academically, socially, and emotionally. The Darien

High School Guidance Seminar program, which brings school counselors into regular contact with students, addresses a range of academic and personal concerns. Counselors meet with each student quarterly, providing opportunities for one-on-one support and creating a network of resources. Feedback from students and teachers highlights the effectiveness of these seminars, with lesson topics chosen based on students' needs, from conflict resolution to engagement strategies. This program is a crucial element of the school's approach to proactive student support, allowing students to voice concerns and receive timely assistance.

Darien High School's ongoing commitment to a socially and emotionally safe environment is seen in every aspect of its programming and policies. From mental health resources and peer mentorship to SEL initiatives and policy revisions, the school is dedicated to ensuring that students and staff feel secure, supported, and connected.

## **Recommended Next Steps**

Address the stress and pressure students face balancing academics and athletics by implementing targeted professional learning for coaches and working with educators to ensure academic and athletic commitments are balanced effectively

Assess students across K-12 using screeners and surveys to identify needs and target programming through a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model

Implement planned programming to reduce conflict, improve self-care, and build resilience

## **Sources of Evidence**

- central office personnel
- classroom observations
- department leaders
- priority area meetings
- school board
- school leadership
- students
- teacher interview
- teachers

# Priority Area 2

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## Priority Area

The school will utilize the competencies of the vision of the graduate as driving elements to revise curricula in a common written format for all courses in all departments across the school. (1.2, 2.1, 2.2a, 2.7)

## Action, Impact, and Growth

Darien High School is working to use the competencies in the vision of the graduate as guiding elements to revise curricula in a common format for all courses in all departments across the school. Faculty and staff started aligning the curriculum with the vision of the graduate competencies in 2020. Since the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Collaborative Conference visit, teachers have engaged in professional development on Understanding by Design (UbD) and training on the curriculum platform EduPlanet21. The school has committed to a curriculum writing cycle and has worked with department leaders to align and calibrate curriculum writing approaches across subjects.

The results of the vision of the graduate discernment process are embedded in core values and competencies displayed throughout the school on graphic organizers and posters. The impact of the vision of the graduate process has paralleled the introduction of instructional rounds, which teachers and administrators recognize as valuable. Curriculum documents reflecting the vision of the graduate competencies are compiled in EduPlanet21 by department heads, and the FY2025 budget has approved funds for curriculum writing, revisions, and new course proposals. These revisions impact 44 of the course catalog's 170 core courses and electives. The vision of the graduate competencies also align with teacher goals in the evaluation process, fostering common language in discussions on curriculum, UbD, and professional learning committees (PLCs).

The growth from these actions is evident in newly drafted and published curriculum documents incorporating various vision of the graduate competencies. Department heads report successes in aligning the vision of the graduate with their curriculum-writing approaches, describing the process as “organic.” Over 90 percent of courses have updated course descriptions, and roughly two-thirds have Stage 1 UbD documents in progress or complete. Priority has been given to core 300 and 400 level classes, while AP and ECE course curricula follow the College Board's or partner institutions' guidelines. Teachers have also focused on developing common assessments during PLC meetings, contributing to Stage 2 development in the curriculum documents. In project presentations, students are increasingly able to articulate their growth in one or more vision of the graduate competency areas.

The school's curriculum has made significant progress in moving into a common Understanding by Design (UbD) format over roughly a year and a half, establishing a curriculum-writing cycle with embedded professional learning. This seven-year cycle prioritizes the vision of the graduate competencies and district teaching and learning principles. Once finalized, the school plans to make aspects of the curriculum—like course descriptions, enduring understandings, and essential questions—publicly accessible through EduPlanet21. Teachers and staff will have access to UbD documents, including performance assessments and assured experiences. This curriculum-writing cycle will adjust if standards change, new courses are created, or instructional resources require significant shifts.

## Recommended Next Steps

Complete writing the curriculum for all courses across all three stages of the common UbD curriculum template

Publish Stage 1 UbD unit templates on EduPlanet21 with vision of the graduate alignment

Establish a vision of the graduate tracking system to show transparent alignment and inclusion of all vision of the graduate competencies across the curriculum

## **Sources of Evidence**

- central office personnel
- classroom observations
- department leaders
- priority area meetings
- school board
- school leadership
- student work
- teacher interview
- teachers

# Priority Area 3

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## Priority Area

Expand opportunities for regular, formal collaborative time for common planning, creation of common assessments, curriculum revision, and data analysis. (1.2, 2.2, 2.4, 2.5, 3.2, 3.4, 5.5)

## Action, Impact, and Growth

Darien High School has worked to expand opportunities for formal collaborative time for common planning, assessment creation, curriculum revision, and data analysis. Since the 2021-2022 school year, the school has operated on a block schedule, with nine two-hour delayed starts for PLC meetings focused on implementing the vision of the graduate goals. Teachers are assigned to PLCs based on content area, meeting ten times per year to design and implement common assessments collaboratively. Teams present their work in an instructional rounds format at the end of each PLC cycle. The school improvement plan has identified collaborative teacher time as a priority for the 2025-2026 school year, including goals for collaboration time, guidelines for examining student work, and continued support for instructional rounds.

Teachers report that interdisciplinary sharing during PLCs is enjoyable and meaningful; however, monthly meetings do not provide sufficient continuity for teachers to implement best practices in collaborative planning, design, assessment, and data analysis. Department chairs strive to schedule common prep time for teachers of the same courses when possible, but this is not yet codified in the master schedule. For example, the American Studies team meeting time was removed in 2016-2017, affecting the ability of history and English teachers to deliver a fully integrated experience. Non-teaching staff also report a need for more opportunities to discuss trends in student social and emotional needs and to implement new resources. Despite limited formal scheduling, teachers collaborate informally when possible, demonstrating their dedication to best practices.

A schedule committee was formed in 2021-2022, consisting of teachers and school leaders, and surveyed parents, staff, and students. Most participants preferred the block schedule, citing fewer daily classes as a benefit. The committee also researched other districts and learned none had reverted after implementing a block schedule. This research highlights the commitment of faculty to collaborative decision-making. The committee also explored the idea of "flex days," but surveys showed inconclusive support among faculty. The committee's work is paused as discussions about additional delayed-start PLC days continue.

## Recommended Next Steps

Develop a collaborative meeting model that includes essential components, with evaluations for effectiveness

Expand opportunities for collaboration outside the school day for planning, assessment creation, and vision of the graduate alignment

Create additional collaboration time for co-teaching and team-teaching planning

Balance collaboration time between work aligned with school improvement plan goals and teacher-directed professional activities

## Sources of Evidence

- central office personnel

- department leaders
- NEASC survey
- priority area meetings
- school leadership
- school summary report
- teacher interview
- teachers

# Priority Area 4

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## Priority Area

Collaboratively design and calibrate common assessment practices that measure the learning outcomes of the vision of the graduate and provide regular feedback to students' families. (2.1, 2.7, 2.8, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4)

## Action, Impact, and Growth

Darien High School has committed to designing and calibrating common assessments that measure the learning outcomes of the Vision of the Graduate and providing regular feedback to students and families. During the 2023-2024 school year, PLCs focused on creating assessments that reflect the vision of the graduate competencies. Each PLC team researched, designed, executed, evaluated, and shared at least one common assessment per semester. Teachers also set a student learning goal using two indicators aligned with the vision of the graduate competencies or dispositions, along with a professional learning goal tied to the vision of the graduate.

The vision of the graduate competencies are prominently displayed on posters throughout classrooms, hallways, and common areas. Teachers have seen success with shared assessments, such as projects in history on Frederick Douglass and an English on Of Mice and Men that focus on empathy, a biology project called Anna's Story that emphasizes empathy, and the Algebra 2 investment project, which includes all six vision of the graduate competencies. Seniors must reflect on two vision of the graduate competencies as part of their mastery-base diploma reflection.

Teachers and students alike can connect vision of the graduate competencies with student projects, such as those on Robert Moses, *McFarland, USA*, and the creation of a rocket engine. Teachers can also point to vision of the graduate competencies embedded in their assignments, further integrating these competencies into the school culture.

The 2024-2025 school improvement plan highlights fostering and measuring vision of the graduate competencies as its main goal, specifically calling for each course to have a complete curriculum in EduPlanet21, demonstrating how vision of the graduate competencies are woven throughout.

## Recommended Next Steps

Provide staff with additional time to develop vision of the graduate-aligned common assessments, possibly by increasing PLC time

Allocate time and guidance to calibrate shared assessments to ensure a consistent student experience

Create a cumulative, reflective method for measuring student competencies over four years, such as a portfolio

Evaluate how the vision of the graduate competencies are authentically embedded in instruction and assessment practices

## Sources of Evidence

- central office personnel
- classroom observations
- department leaders

- priority area meetings
- school leadership
- school summary report
- student work
- students
- teacher interview
- teachers

# Part 3 - Reflection on Student Learning

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## Reflection on Student Learning

Instructional practices at Darien High School are carefully designed to meet each student's learning needs. With the school's block schedule, teachers employ a variety of instructional strategies to keep students engaged and encourage reflective thinking about previously covered material. For example, in an American Studies classroom, the teacher asks students to write questions about their assigned readings, which they then reflect on during the day's lesson to ensure they are addressed. The teacher reviews any remaining questions at the end of class, providing a complete learning experience. In AP Environmental Science, students are introduced to a unit on population density through a hands-on activity involving beans marked with different "demographics," making abstract concepts more accessible and engaging.

Differentiated instruction and individualized support are central to the school's teaching practices. While some differentiation occurs spontaneously as needs arise during lessons, other instances are more intentional. In a ceramics class, for instance, the teacher provides individual guidance by working one-on-one with students on the pottery wheel, ensuring each student has dedicated time for skill development. Another example of targeted differentiation is seen in an English co-taught class, where two teachers lead students in a review of past chapters and a group activity focused on character perspectives, creating a collaborative environment that supports varied learning needs. Similarly, in English 9, students work in diverse groups to collaboratively analyze character traits from *Of Mice and Men*, displaying their findings, visually, graphically, and through written analysis. Across subjects, intentional grouping strategies are used to foster collaboration and provide support where needed.

Teachers incorporate a variety of formative assessment practices to check for understanding and adjust instruction as needed. In a French class, for instance, students are called upon to answer questions, with the teacher giving immediate, specific feedback. If a student selects the incorrect answer, the teacher models their thought process to guide the student to a better response. In an algebra course, a teacher uses prior student work to create customized review worksheets that target areas for improvement, helping students prepare effectively for upcoming tests. Organizational grouping is achieved through course leveling, co-teaching, and lab classes. For example, a co-taught English class allows both teachers to guide students through character analysis assignments, building a structured approach to understanding the text.

Teachers encourage active learning by allowing students to take on leadership roles. In a co-taught English 10 class, students work in pairs, reading articles about different cultures and sharing findings with their partners. Another example is found in a law and government class, where students present their research on a specific amendment (such as the Fourth Amendment) and demonstrate their understanding of historical and contemporary issues. In *The Lettered Athlete* course, students demonstrate their comprehension by analyzing a scene of their choosing, while students in the capstone course pursue independent research on topics of personal interest. In this course, students develop five questions about their selected topics, determine the necessary information, and independently plan their research. They engage in flexible group discussions to share progress, further personalizing their learning experience. Active learning opportunities are also present in courses like *Imaginative Literature*, where students choose their own project focus and decide how best to analyze or illustrate the text. In a multivariable calculus class, students create real-life connections to math concepts, defining terms like "skew lines" through collaborative inquiry.

Many faculty members provide structured, goal-oriented learning experiences that encourage students to set goals, reflect on progress, and pursue authentic applications of their knowledge. In AP Chemistry, for example, students engage in challenging problem-solving activities, manage their time, and work with peers for feedback. Faculty are working to enhance active learning through curriculum revisions, allowing students to apply their skills to real-world tasks. An example of this approach is seen in an English capstone class, where students select books and topics, interview experts in their field, and research secondary sources like TED Talks and scholarly articles. Students in a Spanish honors class wear lanyards to indicate group leaders in daily practice, fostering accountability. Across departments, students frequently pursue personal interests and engage in creative

expression, particularly in visual arts. For instance, in AP Art and Design 3D, students explore art through experimentation, refining processes and materials to create meaningful works. In AP Sculpture, students select a theme, such as animals or trees, and develop complex, theme-based sculptures, while in ceramics, students are tasked with creating a large piece featuring carvings or scrolls.

Students engage in problem-solving, inquiry, and higher-order thinking. In calculus, students collaborate to graph derivatives, using prior knowledge and peer support to complete the task. The teacher facilitates by asking probing questions like, "How did you get from here to down there?" rather than providing answers, encouraging students to think critically. In AP English Literature and Composition, students discuss connections between cognitive science and literature, preparing for advanced analysis. Many teachers design assessments that require cognitive engagement across a range of thinking skills. For example, following student presentations in a law and government class, the teacher leads discussions, challenging students to agree or disagree with case rulings, prompting deep reflection. Similarly, an AP Language and Composition class holds a student-led "fishbowl" discussion involving student-created questions and text analysis on capital punishment. In AP Geography, students analyze open-ended questions on refugee situations, drawing conclusions and making predictions. In a formal debate in law and government, students debate the electoral college with assigned roles like orator and note-taker, demonstrating analysis, synthesis, and creativity.

Teachers regularly encourage students to self-reflect and apply their knowledge to new contexts. In a Western civilization class, students review material for an upcoming test, answering questions and "phoning a friend" if they need help. American literature students receive constructive feedback on their work, with time to make revisions based on this guidance. This approach is evident in a Latin class, where the teacher provides real-time feedback on pronunciation, reviews conjugations, and helps students correct their mistakes. The ceramics teacher provides actionable feedback, allowing students to improve their artwork immediately, and in music theory, students adjust their compositions based on instructor feedback. Revision opportunities are common, with students receiving teacher and peer feedback to guide their next steps. For instance, in an English class, students engage in a "silent discussion" exercise, writing reflections on a passage, reading others' reflections, and leaving comments. This exercise gives students time to synthesize feedback from their peers, helping them gain new insights into the material. This reflective approach is also present in mathematics classrooms that use the *Building Thinking Classrooms* approach, where students collaboratively solve problems and exchange ideas, fostering independent problem-solving.

Students have access to various assessment methods that allow them to demonstrate their learning and receive constructive feedback. In a Spanish class, students complete an open-note quiz using notes for reference. In a co-taught English 9 course, students participate in a reading check, a "heads-down" opinion vote, and a group analysis activity with a "popsicle-stick" selection, making the assessments interactive. In a precalculus honors course, students work in pairs on a whiteboard, practicing trigonometric functions. The teacher circulates, providing feedback and facilitating peer support. Many classrooms, such as a Latin class, emphasize specific, timely feedback. Here, the teacher corrects mispronounced words and helps students identify grammatical cases. In art, teachers provide clear and practical guidance, allowing students to revise their work based on detailed input.

Technology is widely used across disciplines to support and enhance student learning. In biology honors, students use technology to create ecosystem models, with teachers providing one-on-one support. In digital photography, students use DSLR cameras and digital tools to explore aperture views. In AP Spanish, students create presentations about identity and explore constructive uses of AI, while architecture students use Autodesk for professional-level design work. In physics, students apply Newton's second law to analyze car acceleration, using timing and measurement tools to collect data and graph results. Technology also helps students personalize their learning pace. For example, Spanish students use cell phones in an activity about *Coco*, and ESL students rely on Google Translate for assistance. Technology supports students as they work independently, conduct research, and collaborate digitally. In American literature, for example, students use digital devices to take notes, share ideas, and add insights from a projected document on Frederick Douglass. In law and government, students create presentations with Google Slides, integrating technology seamlessly into their learning.

# Part 4 - Capacity for Continuous Growth as a Learning Organization

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## Conceptual Understanding

Darien High School has a shared understanding of effective learning, Priority Areas, and the vision of the graduate. Four Priority Areas for Growth were identified based on NEASC standards and insights from the Collaborative Conference visiting team. These areas include prioritizing mental health for students, integrating the vision of the graduate into curriculum revisions, developing common assessments that effectively measure learning outcomes, and expanding formal collaborative time for staff. Darien High School has made strides in each area, yet ongoing work is needed to reach the school's improvement goals.

The school improvement plan highlights the importance of wellness and fostering a balanced environment that is physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually safe and supportive. Darien Public Schools has implemented the RULER approach to social-emotional learning (SEL), encouraging students to develop emotional regulation and management skills. Additionally, the school has created wellness weekends, offering academic breaks to relieve stress and promote student well-being. The school's wellness center is available for students during the school day, providing a dedicated space for relaxation and support. The improvement plan also emphasizes creating a community that celebrates diversity, considers the feelings and experiences of others, and promotes inclusion. The vision of the graduate values align closely with these priorities, and further integration of the vision of the graduate competencies into the curriculum, school activities, and events is expected to strengthen these efforts.

Darien High School leaders and faculty actively work to build a shared vision of high-quality learning through instructional rounds, where educators observe each other's practices, assess instructional effectiveness, and track progress toward school improvement goals. This approach promotes awareness and continuous growth within the faculty. School and district-level administrators understand the importance of ongoing curricular development and implementation across Darien Public Schools, guided by a multi-year plan led by the assistant superintendent.

The school is in the early stages of embedding the vision of the graduate into its curriculum. Although student reflections and senior-level reports show that some competencies are being incorporated, there is room to deepen understanding and engagement with the vision of the graduate among students, staff, and families. The vision of the graduate has not yet been fully integrated as a foundational driver of the school's learning culture. Still, both students and staff can articulate how assessments connect to the competencies, and school administrators are committed to moving this initiative forward. The full vision of the graduate implementation will provide students with ongoing feedback that helps them develop the adopted skills and aptitudes. Currently, seniors are required to submit a reflection on their growth in two of the six competencies. A more substantial culminating experience may be beneficial for complete integration, allowing students to connect with all six competencies. The school improvement plan reflects this commitment, with clear goals for further vision of the graduate integration in the years ahead.

## Commitment

Darien High School demonstrates a strong commitment to the school's understanding of effective learning, Priority Areas, and the vision of the graduate. Administrators, faculty, and staff are dedicated to continuous development that supports the success of each student. The school has expanded programming, practices, and policies to cultivate an inclusive and equitable community with a strong focus on mental health for all students. This commitment is visible in the school's adherence to the vision of the graduate, which is in the early stages of integration within the curriculum. Examples of the vision of the graduate competencies appear in various student projects, reflecting a commitment to aligning instruction with these competencies. However, the faculty is still working on fully embedding the competencies in instruction and assessment, with the administrative team identifying the vision of the graduate as a core component of decision-making at the school and across the

district.

Educators and district leaders foster a growth mindset for students and adults alike. The school's teacher evaluation program encourages teachers to set professional growth and improvement goals. Students can access additional academic support through help centers and resources available in the library learning commons. This shared commitment is also evident in the school improvement plan and the district's strategic plan, with the board of education and central office leadership allocating resources and time to support curriculum development.

The school recognizes the challenge of building a schedule that meets student needs while providing increased planning time for educators, which has impacted the pace of progress. Nevertheless, the school remains firmly dedicated to meeting these goals and advancing the integration of the vision of the graduate, fostering a well-rounded, supportive environment for learning.

## **Competency**

Darien High School is building the competency of its educators to implement effective learning that is aligned with the Priority Areas and the vision of the graduate. The Darien Professional Development and Evaluation Committee (PDEC) ensures that teacher evaluations are closely tied to the professional development opportunities provided throughout the district. Professional learning communities (PLCs) work collaboratively to create common assessments connected to the vision of the graduate competencies, reinforcing shared goals. Additionally, the school has developed programming, practices, and policies that emphasize inclusion, equity, and student mental health. The wellness center and wellness weekends are examples of these efforts, alongside Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) training for staff.

Educators demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for professional collaboration. Department chairs and coordinators support their colleagues and facilitate horizontal and vertical alignment within departments. They lead curriculum development and revision efforts, plan professional development activities, and inspire colleagues to refine their instructional practices. Teachers are dedicated to collaborating on curriculum revisions and aligning assessments with the vision of the graduate competencies.

There is ongoing growth in these areas. More time for collaboration, alongside professional development on effective PLCs, will enhance the quality and impact of meetings, positively influencing student outcomes. The school would benefit from continued reflection on the implementation of the vision of the graduate at the school and classroom levels. Further development of an assessment plan for the vision of the graduate competencies, expanding beyond the current senior reflections, would support more effective integration of the competencies. The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction has created a required primer on UbD and vision of the graduate integration for all curriculum writers, and the high school administrative team has visited other high schools to explore different schedule models. Further plans include expanding career pathways through community partnerships and building stronger connections with higher education institutions.

## **Capacity**

Darien High School is increasingly being provided with the time, resources, and support needed to implement effective learning, make progress on Priority Areas, and implement the vision of the graduate. Additional collaborative time for educators will enhance teaching and learning within the school. Currently, teachers participate in nine monthly PLC meetings during scheduled two-hour delayed openings. Beyond these meetings, no structured collaborative time is available during the school day, though teachers often collaborate informally during free periods or before and after school. Non-instructional staff would also benefit from additional professional development and collaboration time. Despite these constraints, staff regularly use shared office spaces to collaborate as needed.

During PLC meetings, educators work together to develop common assessments aligned with the vision of the graduate competencies. They administer these assessments, analyze student data, reflect on the results, and

share findings with their peers. The district proposes more collaborative time to allow teachers to align instructional practices, design assessments, and analyze student work to plan timely interventions.

PDEC introduced the Darien Public School's Educator Growth and Support Plan in 2024. This new plan emphasizes teacher growth, collaboration, alignment of teacher goals with professional learning, and opportunities for quality feedback. Teachers participated in instructional rounds in the 2023-24 school year, which will continue this year. Teachers believe these rounds provide valuable opportunities to celebrate strengths, learn from one another, and highlight effective strategies. Instructional rounds also allow teachers to contribute to school-wide decision-making on the next steps in professional development.

The school is well-resourced, with classrooms, teachers, and students equipped with technology to support and enhance learning. Additional collaborative time would allow educators to pursue their individual curricular and professional growth goals, particularly those that align with their professional goals and areas of interest. The school continues to implement the vision of the graduate as a core part of its culture, and ongoing support will help build a shared understanding and commitment to this vision among all stakeholders.

# Additional Information

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## Additional Information

### Standard 3 Principle 6

School's rating in the Self-Reflection report: Developing

School's rating in the Summary Report: Implementing

#### Explanation from the School

The school community is proud of its ongoing initiatives to support students' interests and engagement and our commitment to partnerships throughout our larger Darien community. Since the Collaborative Conference, Darien High School has had the opportunity to expand many of its partnerships to support student learning. The school reflects that the losses experienced by our school community and the ever-increasing return to pre-pandemic norms have likely expanded to the school's connection and reliance on the many available and generous partners in our community who have offered ongoing support for our students. The robust senior internship program continues to provide experiential learning opportunities for our students through strong community partnerships; 99 percent of the Class of 2024 participated this past spring with placements in over 160 businesses and organizations. In 2024, the National Technical Honor Society hosted a STEM night for young children and families, which they plan to continue annually. The music department will continue expanding its programming for students and the community through various offerings each year, such as welcoming the Simsbury High School Gospel Choir for performance and dialogue for Black History Month. The music department also collaborated with the history department to bring *The Blues and Beyond* to all eleventh-grade students. The organization performed its presentation, *Fighting For Civil Rights: The Music and The Movement!* The presentation explored the history of the African American experience through the lens of the music of the period and drew connections to contemporary music.

### Standard 5 Principle 3

School's rating in the Self-Reflection report: Implementing

School's rating in the Summary Report: Developing

#### Explanation from the School

Darien Public Schools continue to be a well-funded organization with generous resources to implement many facets of its curriculum and co-curricular programs. The 2023-2024 budget season began in October, with an initial passing of a budget in February of 2024, and had to make required changes in May 2024 after a board of finance decision to cut two million dollars from the board of education's proposed budget for the 2024-2025 school year. Among the changes made that directly impacted Darien High School were the elimination of the world language department chairperson position and the combination of the existing K-12 art department coordinator (a teacher leader position) with the K-12 music department chair to create a new K-12 director of visual and performing arts administrative position. A K-12 teacher leader position in world languages was created to oversee curriculum and articulation across grade levels. The changes resulted in an additional assistant principal at Darien High School, which will improve the visibility of our administrators, create stronger connections with students and staff, increase opportunities for coaching of teachers to improve teaching and learning, distribute the increased responsibilities of planning and placement team administration, and foster relationships with families in our community. Community members have concerns that eliminating a department chair may foreshadow the elimination of others in this instructional leadership position. However, no such proposal has been made at this time. While students and teachers will still have adequate access to teaching and learning, some community members have expressed concern about the gap between what is requested or proposed to have the highest possible quality education and what some community members deem necessary or adequate. There is also a faculty belief that there is inconsistency in funding; Darien High School has strongly funded

athletic programs, while clubs and councils are not provided material or programming budgets beyond stipends for eligible student organizations. While the district maintains that this budget will not negatively impact teaching and learning, there is a sense in the school community that adequate funding is no longer a commitment that may be relied upon by the faculty.

# Commendations

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## Commendation

The holistic approach to student mental health through a multitude of social emotional learning initiatives

## Commendation

The student centered advisory and counseling programs which include innovative peer mentoring and other leadership opportunities

## Commendation

The feeling of safety and connectedness among students and staff

## Commendation

The commitment to the Understanding by Design (UbD) curriculum framework that allows for the development of a common pedagogical vocabulary alongside performance based assessments that support and complement traditional assessments

## Commendation

The wide variety of clubs aligned with interests, hobbies, activities, and passion projects that enhance the student experience and build relationships between students, peers, and staff

## Commendation

The dedication of staff and faculty to classroom climate and building relationships to support learning including the faculty's commitment to sharing best practices with colleagues

## Commendation

The faculty's dedication to helping students through tutoring, spending time outside of classroom hours working with students, and fostering relationships

## Commendation

The active library learning commons staffed by enthusiastic professionals

## Commendation

The dedication of the faculty and staff to rigorous instruction across many disciplines

## **Commendation**

The implementation of *Building Thinking Classrooms* across the mathematics department and its expansion into other content areas

The access to various technological materials and programs to support higher order and authentic learning experiences

# Additional Recommendations

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## Recommendation

Ensure the library learning commons facility meets current usage and staff/student needs by addressing limitations such as space for book displays, presentation areas, and instructional zones

## Recommendation

Provide targeted professional development to expand questioning strategies and implement intentional and pre-planned differentiation opportunities

## Recommendation

Examine and address facility constraints that limit the development of course pathways that lead to multiple and varied post secondary opportunities

# **FOLLOW-UP RESPONSIBILITIES**

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This Initial/Decennial Accreditation Report of the Visiting Team reflects the findings of the school's Summary Report and those of the visiting team. It provides a blueprint for the faculty, administrators, and other officials to use to improve the quality of programs and services for the students in this school. The faculty, school board, and superintendent should be apprised by the building administrators yearly of progress made in aligning with the Standards for Accreditation.

A school's initial/continued Accreditation is based on satisfactory progress implementing the school's improvement/growth plan based on the Priority Areas validated by the visiting team and recommendations identified by the Commission as it monitors the school's progress and changes which occur at the school throughout the decennial cycle.

To monitor the school's progress, the Commission requires that the principal submit a First Report of Progress and Planning and routine Three- and Six-Year Reports of Progress and Planning describing the school's progress implementing the Priority Areas as well as submitting an updated improvement/growth plan. The Commission may request additional Special Progress Reports if one or more of the Standards or Priority Areas for Growth are not being met in a satisfactory manner, if additional information is needed on matters relating to the school's alignment with the Standards for Accreditation, or substantive changes occur in the school.

To ensure that it has current information about the school, the Commission has an established Substantive Change Policy requiring that principals of member schools report to the Commission within sixty days of occurrence any substantive change which impacts the school's alignment with the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The Report of Substantive Change must describe the change itself and detail the impacts the change has had on the school's ability to meet the Standards for Accreditation. The Commission's Substantive Change Policy is included on the next page. All other substantive changes should be included in the Reports on Progress and Planning and/or the Annual Information Report (AIR) which is required of each member school to ensure that the Commission office has current statistical data on the school.

The visiting team would like to express thanks to the community for the hospitality and welcome. The school community completed a Self-Reflection that clearly identified the school's strengths and areas of need, hosted a Collaborative Conference, developed an improvement/growth plan, and completed a Summary Report. The time and effort dedicated to the Accreditation process, school improvement/growth, the Summary Report, and the preparation for the visit ensured a successful Initial/Decennial Accreditation visit.

# **SUBSTANTIVE CHANGE POLICY**

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## **NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS & COLLEGES Commission on Public Schools**

Principals of member schools must report to the Commission within sixty days of occurrence any substantive change in the school which has an impact on the school's ability to meet any of the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The Report of Substantive Change must describe the change itself as well as detail the impact on the school's ability to meet the Standards. The following are potential areas where there might be negative substantive changes which must be reported:

- elimination of fine arts, practical arts, and student activities
- diminished upkeep and maintenance of facilities
- significantly decreased funding - cuts in the level of administrative and supervisory staffing
- cuts in the number of teachers and/or guidance counselors
- grade level responsibilities of the principal
- cuts in the number of support staff
- decreases in student services
- cuts in the educational media staffing
- increases in student enrollment that cannot be accommodated
- takeover by the state
- inordinate user fees
- changes in the student population that warrant program or staffing modification(s) that cannot be accommodated, e.g., the number of special needs students or vocational students or students with limited English proficiency

# **Roster of Team Members**

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## **Chair(s)**

**Chair: Dr. Richard Sanzo** - South Windsor Public Schools

**Assistant Chair: Becky Pavia** - New Canaan High School

## **Team Members**

**Monila Ametli** - Wolcott High School

**Joseph Benenati** - Central High School

**Ann Buchanan** - Middletown High School

**Celina DaSilva** - Daniel Hand High School

**Gary Franklin** - Northwestern Regional High School

**Valerie McNamara** - Plainfield High School