



THE DARIEN DIFFERENCE

School Spotlight September 2025 - Issue 1

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Dear Community Members,

We are so excited to launch our first edition of The Darien Difference - our new District Newsletter that will spotlight all the wonderful things that make Darien Public Schools truly special. Each month, we will feature one of our seven schools to showcase how the Vision of the Graduate is in action every single day and how that contributes to truly setting Darien apart from other Districts in CT. We do this by striving for excellence and fostering student-centered environments, strong academic support, and a focus on holistic development.



First up - **Darien High School**.

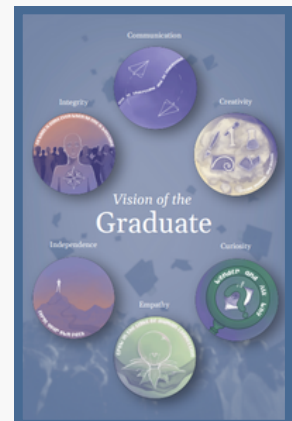
It was a big month at DHS! Classes for 1,353 students are in full swing and there was no shortage of activity and Blue Wave Pride! Once again, I was in awe of all that our students are able to accomplish, but also of their commitment to one another.

From the energy and excitement of Homecoming where we cheered on many of our student athletes throughout the week, to Friday Night Lights community gathering and the homecoming dance - our school spirit was contagious. There was also an impressive club fair featuring 84 clubs and ways to get involved. We saw Senior leaders raising awareness for a rare genetic condition affecting two fellow students, and even had a visit from a former Japanese exchange student who graduated from DHS 70 years ago!

Take a look and join me in celebrating what makes DHS truly different and one of the very best high schools in CT. And maybe the next time you run into a DHS student, teacher or staff member, you'll join me in telling them what a great job they're doing. **#DarienDifference #BlueWavePride**

Sincerely,

Eric Byrne, Ed.D.
Interim Superintendent of Schools



Vision of the Graduate

Principal's Perspective: Mrs. Ellen Dunn



1. What does the Vision of the Graduate mean to you in one sentence?

The Vision of the Graduate provides a north star to which we all aspire in our shared purpose, our learning and our relationships to one another.

2. How does it come to life at DHS?

The Vision of the Graduate is purposefully written to our students rather than about them. It comes to life in the daily interactions in the classroom, on the field and on the stage. Our students are asked to think critically, wonder about all that they observe, give shape and voice to their ideas and

inspire one another through their compassion and sense of shared responsibility for our entire community.

3. Why is it important for our kids to know about the Vision and how is it reinforced?

The Vision of the Graduate is the foundation upon which we build an ever evolving learning environment. It anchors us to our beliefs and defines the competencies we value in ourselves and the students we nurture. It is reinforced through the exploration of our curriculum, through the community and school climate we create and through the examples we set for our students.

4. Do you see a difference between the freshman and the seniors about realizing the vision?

The journey from ninth grade to twelfth grade spans only four years but covers a vast distance along the developmental continuum. It is one of the greatest joys for a principal to see seniors, who once entered the high school with some trepidation, confidently cross the graduation stage ready to step into their next adventure.

5. Is there an example you can share of a student living the Vision that made you proud?

There are many examples of students embracing the Vision of the Graduate at DHS. One such example is the Homecoming fundraising event brought to life by Ryan and Chris Thurlow to honor their childhood friends, Jeremy and Miles Clark. The Thurlows brought our school and the Darien community together to celebrate the Clarks strength and courage, while raising over \$18,000 to support the Dravet Syndrome Foundation. Two sets of twins, linked to one another through common experiences and deep friendship, have clearly made all of the difference in each others' lives, teaching and modeling loyalty, kindness, gratitude and resilience. I can't think of a better expression of the Vision of The Graduate!



Homecoming: School Spirit in Action*

Blue Wave Pride was electric and could be felt throughout the community as Darien High School celebrated Homecoming the week of September 15th! Students participated in a variety of Spirit Days led by none other than school mascot, Riptide! Activities throughout the week included dressing up for Pajama Day, USA Day, Country vs Country Club Day, Jersey Day and Blue Wave Pride Day and a pep rally generated excitement and fostered community. The **strong student athlete-teacher bond** was also on display with student athletes giving their favorite teacher or administrator their jersey to wear - check them all out [here](#).

Nine Varsity teams including Boys Golf, Boys & Girls Soccer, Girls Volleyball, Boys & Girls Cross Country, Girls Swim and Dive and Field Hockey all **hosted home games throughout the week**, with the Varsity Football team shutting out Brien McMahon in a huge Friday Night win with a **big and energized student section** and huge community turnout! The longest kick contest at half time was a treat to watch with some impressive distances recorded - thank you to our DJFL volunteers and Assistant Athletic Director, Justin Warzoha, for your enthusiasm and emceeing talent!

To cap it all off, the 2nd annual **Hoco Dance saw 792 students** in attendance! Many took a shot at the mechanical bull and participated in a variety of activities including foosball, ping pong, shuffleboard, pop a shot, photo booth, poker, corn hole, or hung out in the outdoor lounge to relax and maybe take in some college football! Hoco was definitely a week our students and school community will not soon forget!



Annual Club Fair: Opportunities Abound*

On Wednesday, September 24th, Darien High School hosted its annual Club Fair - a time for Darien High School students to **explore their curiosity**, peruse and consider 84 different clubs and ways to get involved! The options are truly endless - with clubs that span a wide variety of interests. Everything from **Academic and STEM clubs** - like the Aerospace Club, Robotics Club and Women in STEM Club, to **Humanities Clubs** such as the Debate Club, World Awareness Club, Sports Marketing Club and Theatre 308, to **Community and Culture Clubs, Mental Health and Relationships Clubs, Honor Society Clubs**, and even **Fun and Games Clubs** - Fencing or Pickelball anyone?

Check out the full list of clubs [here](#)



Wellness at DHS: A Daily Student Sanctuary**



Now in its third year, the DHS Wellness Center under the full-time direction of Judy Philips, has become a vital part of the DHS community and an example of our **school's commitment to mental health**. Serving over 200 students daily, it's a **tech-free sanctuary** where students can find **support** away from academic and social pressures and de-stress with therapy animals and mindfulness exercises, connect with friends over board games and puzzles, or simply recharge by coloring, listening to music, or watching a relaxing zoo cam.

We've also seen the entire school community come together to share their goals for the new year with our "wishing wave" initiative and **spread encouragement** through a fun "duck hunt" that left **messages of affirmation** around the school. The program even supports academics, with senior health classes visiting the Center to discover the real-world wellness benefits of great planning and time management.

The work being done through the Wellness Center, and the way it has grown over the last three years, is a visible reflection of how highly we **value mental health and wellbeing** as a school community.



Student Spotlight: Stepping Up for Each Other*

There is nothing more beautiful than seeing our **students support one other**. We see this in a variety of ways every day throughout our community, but on Sunday, September 21st, two Darien students and twin brothers - Chris and Ryan Thurlow - took this to a whole new level organizing a Campus Walk and Fundraiser for fellow DHS classmates and lifelong friends, twin brothers Jeremy and Miles Clark, who suffer from a severe form of medication resistant epilepsy called Dravet Syndrome.

On this beautiful Sunday afternoon, the Thurlow brothers and the Clark brother's Mom, Lindsey Clark, educated hundreds of DHS students, teachers and administrators about this rare condition and the challenges that the Clark brothers face every single day. There was also a short walk around the campus and a fundraising component which involved a challenge among organized teams who participated. The Blue Wave Varsity football team also donated a percentage of their carwash sales to the efforts which in total has **raised \$18,000 to-date!** All funds will be donated to the Dravet Foundation to support their work seeking new treatments and a cure. Following the presentation and walk, Darien Unified Sports took on high school students in a fun soccer game in the gymnasium. All-in-all, **it was a beautiful display of empathy and community that we should all be proud of.**



A Blast from our Past: A Very Special Alumnus Returns**

On Monday, September 22nd, DHS was honored to welcome Yoshiyuki “George” Takamatsu, a proud member of the Class of 1956, back to campus. Mr. Takamatsu first came to Darien as an **international exchange student**, traveling from Japan to spend a year at DHS during a time when global exchange programs were still rare. Fun fact: the high school where Mr. Takamatsu attended is now the Darien town hall!

Mr. Takamatsu was accompanied on his visit by his grandson, Hayato, as well as his longtime friends and fellow members of the Class of 1956. He had not returned to Darien since his graduation.

During his visit, he toured the school and reflected on his experiences as a DHS student nearly seventy years ago, sharing stories about both the school and the Darien community during that era. In speaking with students, he recalled memorable moments such as attending prom and how, as a young student still learning English, he **overcame the language barrier** by “continuing to smile.”

Mr. Takamatsu also visited classrooms, including Ellen Ruberry’s American History class and Colby Blake’s American Literature class, where he engaged students in conversations about his life and the importance of cultural understanding. In a special and meaningful moment, he presented Principal Ellen Dunn with a beautifully crafted, handmade samurai helmet as a **gesture of gratitude and a symbol of connection between cultures**.

His visit offered students a rare opportunity to connect history and literature to real-world experiences, hearing firsthand from an alumnus who not only lived through profound moments in both local and global history but also represented the **spirit of international exchange and friendship**.

His visit is a wonderful example of the lasting bonds formed within our school years. We are deeply appreciative for Mr. Takamatsu’s time and let us all be reminded by his words and those of motivational writer and poet, William Arthur Ward, that **“a warm smile is the universal language of kindness.”**



Beyond the Canvas:

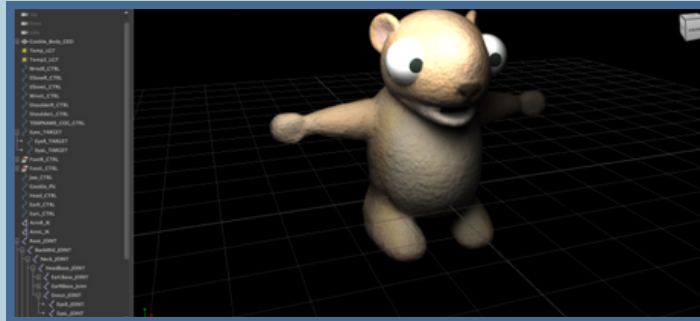
How DHS Artists Are Bringing Visions to Life**

What does it look like when **creativity**, technology, and vision collide? Look no further than the halls of Darien High School, where students in the AP Art and Design program are not just making art—they're building new worlds. This college-level course **embodies the "Creativity" tenet of Darien's Vision of the Graduate**, pushing students to generate novel ideas, embrace trial and error, and give form to their unique visions.

A Studio of Innovators 🎨

Taught by Jaclyn Sammis, AP Art and Design: 2D and Drawing is an inquiry-based course that functions like a **collegiate art studio**. Here, students don't just follow instructions; they **lead their own creative journeys**. They develop a central question and spend the year conducting a "sustained investigation" to answer it through practice, experimentation, and revision. The goal is to build a stunning portfolio of work that skillfully blends materials, processes, and ideas.

Student Spotlight: Meet Gooble McDooble!



To see this in action, meet senior James Powell and his original character, Gooble McDooble—an American pika with a deceptively sweet face and a mischievous personality. For his investigation, James dove into the world of digital animation, using industry-standard software like ZBrush and Autodesk Maya to sculpt and animate his creation.

James' process began with digitally sculpting the character. He then built a complex skeletal "rig" of about 25 joints, each with carefully planned controls to ensure Gooble McDooble's movements look fluid and natural.

"You can't animate if you don't have anything to animate," James explains. "Designing and rigging a character is one of the first steps an animation studio needs to do."

His ambitious project, honed by his experience at a pre-college summer program at the prestigious Ringling College of Art and Design, is a perfect example of what the DHS arts program fosters. It's a **brilliant fusion of artistic creativity and technical problem-solving**, preparing students for exciting futures in animation, digital design and other innovative fields. James' work shows that at DHS, art is not just about what you can draw—it's about where your imagination can take you.

Looking Ahead



Thursday, October 2

Yom Kippur
Schools and offices closed

Tuesday, October 7

Board of Education Special Meeting
7:00 p.m. (approximate time)
Central Office

Friday, October 10

PLC- DHS Late Start
K-5 Literacy Early Dismissal

Tuesday, October 14

Board of Education Regular Meeting
7:30 p.m. (approximate time)
Central Office

Tuesday, October 21 through Friday, October 24

Elementary Parent Conferences
Elementary Early Dismissal

Thursday, October 23

DHS Chorus Fall Concert
7:00 p.m.
Darien High School Auditorium

Monday, October 27

DHS Orchestra Night Concert
7:00 p.m.
Darien High School Auditorium

Tuesday, October 28

Board of Education Regular Meeting
7:30 p.m. (approximate time)
Central Office

See you next month! Up next, Holmes Elementary School!

***Photos courtesy of DHS senior Andrew Hershey**

****Photos courtesy of DHS**

Thank you!