THE DARIEN DIFFERENCE

School Spotlight October 2025 - Issue 2

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Dear Community Members,

Welcome to the second edition of The Darien Difference - our new District Newsletter that spotlights all the wonderful things that make the Darien Public Schools truly special. Each month we are taking a deep dive into one of our District schools and showcasing how the Vision of the Graduate is in action every single day and how it contributes to truly setting Darien apart from other Districts in Connecticut.

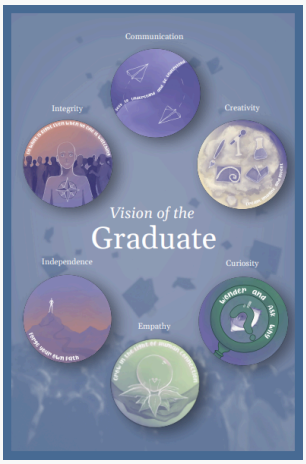
The October edition highlights the wonderful work happening at Holmes Elementary School and the many ways that our students and faculty are living the Vision of the Graduate - every single day!

From celebrating our school construction workers during Construction Appreciation Week to sharing a school-wide book, students are finding new ways to connect and foster community through communication. We even welcomed Maisie, a new honorary staff member, to our family! The spirit of creativity also extends right into our classrooms. Students are exploring their artistic side by producing sea shanties and even tackling grammar in a fun, new way. Forget worrying about hackers—our students are 'hacking' sentences to learn grammar like never before!

Please join me in celebrating what makes Holmes Elementary School a wonderful learning community. In our November edition, we will learn all about the wonders of Middle School through a close look at Middlesex.

Sincerely,

Eric A. Byrne, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools



Vision of the Graduate

Principal's Perspective: Mrs. Paula Bleakley

Holmes

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

The Vision of the Graduate outlines the attributes our community believes every child should strive toward in order to grow into an inquisitive, independent person who lives one's life in caring, meaningful and ethical ways.

2. How does it come to life at Holmes School?

From our students to our staff to our families, the Vision of the Graduate comes to life in every aspect of our work together. **Communication** is practiced through activities like Morning Meeting, "turn and talk" discussions, and offering "glow and grow" feedback. **Creativity** is fostered via play-based learning, collaborative problem-solving, recess games, and original art and music projects. We find ways to encourage students' **Curiosity** by presenting them with inquiry lessons and asking questions like, "What do you notice? What do you wonder?" while providing time for exploration. **Integrity** is taught intentionally due to its abstract nature. Students first identify their values by creating Class Charters that define how they want to feel and the actions required to achieve that. When mistakes occur, adults guide students to see how their actions are misaligned with their values, admit their mistakes, and repair the harm, ultimately learning to "do the right thing even when it is hard."

*Art Link - Mural created by Mr. Zachary Crawford's First Grade Class

3. How do students develop some of these attributes from Kindergarten to Grade 5?

We guide students on a journey from natural self-focus to genuine empathy. This path starts with teaching them to identify and manage their own emotions. They then apply this understanding to literature, analyzing how characters feel, and to social interactions, reflecting on how their actions impact others. By 4th and 5th grade, students lead community efforts through programs like Safety Patrol, Student Council and Kids Care Club, putting empathy into action and inviting our Holmes Community to think and act in ways that have a purpose beyond themselves.

We also help them build toward **Independence.** Our goal is for students to become independent, responsible learners. We partner with families to build this skill through managing tasks independently at home, holding classroom and community jobs at school and using checklists and tools to solve problems self-reliantly. As students grow, they take on more responsibility through homework, band, robotics, and other leadership opportunities, fully preparing them for their next steps.

4. Is there an example you can share of students living the Vision of the Graduate that made you proud?

There are so many! One that comes to mind is a schoolwide event where our children came together to celebrate our Construction Workers. During Construction Worker Appreciation Week, our students thought about the long, exhausting days that our Construction Crew engage in while adding on to and renovating our school. They **communicated** their **empathy** by writing them notes of thanks for their hard work and by bringing in snacks and drinks to keep them going. They demonstrated **creativity** in building a playlist to keep them motivated and by designing posters to honor each of the different trades involved in our project. As they made their posters, they displayed **curiosity** in seeking to understand how each trade impacted the different parts of our school and **integrity** in making choices that honor the beautiful new spaces within which they are now learning.



Honing Communications Skills:

Holmes School Celebrates Construction Appreciation Week

Holmes School was buzzing with extra excitement as students and staff celebrated **Construction Appreciation Week** from September 15-19. This special week was dedicated to showing our immense gratitude to the hardworking construction crews who are busy renovating our school!

Students worked on their communication skills throughout the week, starting with the creation of a large banner that was displayed out in front and will soon be moved to their construction trailer as a lasting thank-you and reminder of our gratitude. Throughout the week, students participated in several other activities to show their appreciation:

- **Monday, 9/15**: The week kicked off with a delicious **breakfast** provided to the construction crew by our generous PTO and Kids Care Leaders.
- **Tuesday, 9/16:** Students brought in **pre-packaged, single-serving snacks**, each attached with a personal note of appreciation.
- **Wednesday, 9/17**: The crew received **single-serve drinks** from students, also accompanied by heartfelt thank-you notes.
- **Thursday, 9/18**: Our classes showed their artistic thanks! Each of the 20 classes created and presented a unique **poster** honoring an assigned trade (like electricians, plumbers, and carpenters).
- **Friday, 9/19**: To end the week on a high note, the classes presented the crew with a special **Spotify playlist titled "Rock While You Renovate,"** featuring songs chosen to honor and thank them for their work.

It was a wonderful way for our school community to recognize the amazing team working to improve our building. A huge thank you to our construction crew, and check out the Spotify playlist if you're interested.





Exploring Creativity in Our Brand-New Music Room!

After learning the history and meaning of a sea shanty (which is a type of folk song originally sung by sailors to coordinate heavy, rhythmic work on a ship), Holmes fourth graders composed their very own! The shanties had a call-and-response template, where the response had to be the same every time and the call could be different. The students were able to choose their own topics and work in groups to compose the lyrics, and then they added instruments to highlight the importance of the steady beat. Finally, they performed their compositions for each other to showcase what they came up with! The themes varied and included favorites like ice cream and baseball, but overall highlighted their creative abilities with the lyrics and instrumentation they created themselves. Thank you to our music teacher, Ms. Madi Aug, for bringing this fun and engaging idea to our students to help them embrace their musical side of creativity!







Our Year-long Reading Adventure is Underway!

We are on an incredible school-wide reading journey at Holmes! Each month, every single classroom at Holmes is diving into the same book, sparking one giant conversation that connects us all. These aren't just stories; they are springboards for big ideas. Through lively, interactive read-alouds, our students are developing important skills as students and as people, by:

- **Mastering essential reading skills** to become stronger, more insightful, and more curious readers.
- **Exploring how the characters they get to know** demonstrate our District's "Vision of the Graduate" in action—discovering characteristics including **Empathy, Creativity, Integrity,** and more!

This is more than a reading list; it's a shared adventure into powerful ideas, strong character, and the magic of a community that reads together.

📚 **Our 2025-2026 Books of the Month:**

September: *Giraffes Can't Dance* by Giles Andreae

October: *Exclamation Mark* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal and Tom Lichtenheld

November: *Say Something* by Peter Reynolds

December: *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson

January: *One Plastic Bag* by Miranda Paul

February: *I am Human: A Book of Empathy* by Susan Verde

March: *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Pena

April: *The Boy Who Harnessed The Wind* by William Kamkwamba

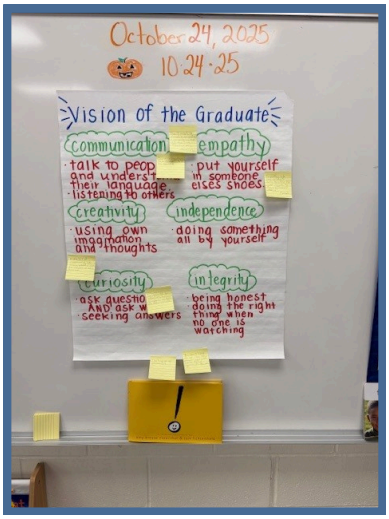
May: *A Hen for Izzy Pippik* by Aubrey Davis

June: T*he Word Collector* by Peter Reynolds









Wellness at Holmes:
Building Empathy and Independence

Holmes School is so excited to welcome Maisie Carney, a certified therapy dog, as our new honorary staff member this year! Maisie is trained to sit with children while they read or practice skills (like solving a math problem), helping them build confidence in a calm, non-judgmental environment.

Maisie is an approved District visitor and part of the Pet Partners organization. "Tuesdays with Maisie" is now underway, and she visits every Tuesday morning for 45 minutes, where pairs of students have 10-minute sessions to read or teach Maisie. Each week, a Holmes staff member and Maisie's handler, Leslie Carney, supervise the visits, and all participating students are taught how to safely and respectfully interact with Maisie.

While participation is optional, the response has been incredible, and our students, teachers, and staff have loved welcoming Maisie to our community!



4th Grade Spotlight:
Holmes 4th Graders Are Hacking Grammar!

"Visibly random groupings" and "vertical non-permanent surfaces" might sound like math buzzwords, and they are! They come from Peter Liljedahl's revolutionary book, *Building Thinking Classrooms*. But this year, Holmes' 4th-grade team is brilliantly using this math framework to transform... grammar!

So, what does this look like? It's like turning a traditional lesson on its head.

Take last week's comma lesson in Ms. Tate's class. Instead of getting a list of comma rules, students were tasked with finding them and assigned to random trios to seek out information on whiteboards around the room. Together, they analyzed sets of sentences, discussing and debating until they figured out why the commas were there. You'd even see an idea from one whiteboard pop up on another as knowledge spread through the room!

After a quick "gallery walk" to see each other's work and a class discussion, students realized they had successfully discovered and named the four main comma rules all on their own—right before they were shown the official reference chart!

The 4th-grade teachers are thrilled. Mrs. Robbins says students are "actively engaged," and Ms. Walton adds that kids love the random groups because "it's fun to hear what others are thinking!"

This approach does more than just make grammar fun. It shifts students from being passive learners to active, independent thinkers. By collaborating and taking risks, they aren't just memorizing; they're truly understanding. While the thinking classroom approach helps to strengthen student ownership of learning and deepen understanding of concepts, it also fosters the essential attributes of our District's Vision of the Graduate:

Communication: Students share responsibility for learning by actively listening, questioning, and clarifying to ensure everyone is on the same page.
Creativity: Open-ended tasks encourage diverse approaches, pushing students to apply knowledge in new and inventive ways.
Curiosity: Engaging tasks, collaborative spaces, and teacher prompts foster exploration and intellectual risk-taking.
Empathy: Working in random groups helps students understand and value the diverse perspectives, strengths, and thought processes of their peers.
Independence: Students take ownership of their learning, viewing peers as valuable resources rather than relying solely on the teacher for answers.
Integrity: Students focus on the process of justifying their thinking, not just finding answers. This builds honest self-reflection and values effort over the solution.

All Tricks, All Treats, All Together: Holmes' Halloween Happenings!

Spooky, cute, cuddly, funny … the Holmes School Halloween Celebration was a dazzling explosion of creativity and festive spirit!

Our Kindergarteners were bubbling with excitement, having prepared for their big debut for weeks. They mastered monstrously fun Halloween songs and ghoulishly good dance moves to dazzle their families at the much-anticipated Kindergarten Share. After careful consideration, they each stepped out in spectacular costumes to march with pride in the Annual Kindergarten Parade!

Not to be outdone, the older grades (first through fifth) unleashed their own Halloween magic! They arrived dressed in their absolute best—from the wonderfully whimsical and delightfully hair-raising to the trendiest characters of the year. They lined the parade route, cheering for their younger friends before heading back to their classrooms for more magical Halloween fun.

The crowd itself was a boo-tiful brew of proud families, cackling witches, enchanted princesses, mighty superheroes, and even the coolest numbers around: 6 and 7!







Looking Ahead



Tuesday, November 4
No School for ELP, K-8 Students
DHS - Early Dismissal (11:00 am)
Staff Professional Development

Thursday, November 6
DK-12+ Art Show Opening
4:00-6:00/All month
UCBC

Thursday, November 6
Tenor/Bass Showcase Concert
7:00 p.m.
Middlesex Middle School Auditorium

Tuesday, November 11
Board of Education Regular Meeting
7:30 p.m. (approximate time)
Central Office

Wednesday, November 12
Fireside Chat with Dr. Byrne
7:00 p.m.
Holmes Elementary School

Thursday, November 13 through Saturday, November 15
Theater 308 Fall Production - *Almost, Maine*
DHS Auditorium

Friday, November 14
PLC- DHS Late Start

Thursday, November 20
DHS Band Concert
7:00 p.m.
DHS Auditorium

Tuesday, November 25
Board of Education Regular Meeting
7:30 p.m. (approximate time)
Central Office

Wednesday, November 26 through Friday, November 28
Thanksgiving Recess
Schools and offices closed

See you next month! Up next, Middlesex Middle School!