



Blackcat News

Mission Statement:

"Educating Today for a Better Tomorrow"

VOLUME 30 ISSUE 94

SCHOOL YEAR 2025-2026

November 20, 2025



Pictured: Willow Jakubs, Jaxon Jakubs, and Makayla Martin.

Herculaneum High School's Wildlife Wing

The science wing of the high school isn't just filled with desks, laptops, and lab equipment. It's alive with the sights and sounds of a remarkable collection of creatures. There are the warm-blooded ferrets, cold-blooded reptiles, moist-skinned amphibians, and hard-shelled insects. This isn't show and tell, but a living laboratory that sparks curiosity and wonder in students every day.

The idea of housing wildlife didn't come from a committee or focus group. It started with the science teachers. Mrs. Holly Dow was persuaded to adopt ferrets from a teacher in another district who was changing positions and would no longer have a classroom. That started the ball rolling. Junior Dane Dixon decided that what they really needed was a bearded dragon. He did the research and

obtained the necessary approvals. Dixon used money from his part-time job to pay for the lizard. He persuaded his parents to donate a terrarium, lighting, and food. Junior Jaxon Jakubs grabbed a 5-gallon bucket to collect wildlife. He caught toads near lawns with water sprinklers. He says they absorb water through their skin. His sister, Willow, played a supporting role in their collection efforts, which included a box turtle and tree frogs. Mr. Jeffery Jennings, whose background includes etymology, brought in his African Hissing Cockroaches. The third science teacher, Mrs. Ladonna Feldhake, has a more common pet on her desk. It's a goldfish named Bubbles.

Principal Stephanie Dix recognized the magic unfolding in her school and gave her blessing to the collection. She says, "It's therapeutic for the students, gives them ownership, and shows them how to care for something." Senior Makayla Martin says, "I see people walking into Mrs. Dow's room, and they're so excited. It makes people look forward to coming to school as they get to have fun experiences with the animals." Not all of the creatures get the same amount of attention. Willow Jakubs says, "Some (students) don't like the toads, but most will hold them and pet them. A fan favorite in Puck, because he's the biggest one." One of the toads doesn't like to be held, and he's appropriately named Terrified Tim. The orange-colored bearded dragon is named Cheeto, and the turtle is Michelangelo.

The living laboratory has brought a renewed interest in the science wing at the high school. Mrs. Dow says the wildlife's most significant benefit is lowering anxiety levels in science classrooms, but they will play a greater role. She says the animals will complement their upcoming lessons in biology, anatomy, and physiology. Mr. Jennings's goal is to get students to ask questions and think critically. He says, "Science doesn't happen in this classroom. Science happens out there. So, we need to bring some of it into here." The number of creatures may grow in the days ahead. There is an empty saltwater tank along the wall, which foretells the addition of ocean dwellers. Mr. Jenkins says the tank is being prepared for sea urchins.

For updates and District news,
including inclement weather, school closing
information,
follow Communications Director
Matt Lichtenstein on Twitter:
@BlackcatMatt



Message From Board President

As the leaves change and we settle into the rhythm of fall, I want to take a moment to share how proud the Board of Education is of the strong start to the 2025–2026 school year across the Dunklin R-5 School District.

The first few months have been filled with energy, smiles, and so many reasons to be proud. We have had our ribbon-cutting for the new gym. If you haven't had a chance to see the new gym, I invite you to attend one of our upcoming basketball games or wrestling matches. Our students have jumped right into learning, our teachers are doing amazing work in their classrooms, and our staff has helped everything run smoothly behind the scenes. You can really feel the sense of community in our schools.

This season has also brought opportunities for connection and celebration. We cheered on our teams under the Friday night lights, enjoyed concerts and performances in our newly renovated theatre with updated lighting and sound system that showcases our students' talents, and come together for

community events that remind us what makes being a Blackcat so special.

On behalf of the entire Board of Education, I would like to extend our gratitude to our families, educators, and community members for their ongoing partnership and support. It takes all of us working together to help our students thrive.

As we move through the rest of the fall semester, we look forward to continuing this momentum—supporting academic growth, celebrating achievements, and ensuring every student has the opportunity to succeed. Look for opportunities to donate to families in need for both Thanksgiving and Christmas. Our students and staff always go above and beyond to help those in need.

Here's to a great year ahead!

Tammy Heidland
School Board President, Dunklin R5

Dr. Freeman's Message

Blackcat Community:

As we settle into the new school year, I want to take a moment to celebrate the tremendous successes we have achieved together. The data from the last academic year, along with the improvements to our facilities, are clear indicators of what is possible when our students, staff, and community work toward a shared vision of excellence. The dedication shown across our district is translating directly into historic gains, both academically and structurally.

Bond Issue Success: Promises Kept!

We are thrilled to announce the successful completion of all projects funded by the 2023 Bond Issue! This achievement is a direct result of the community's investment and trust in our students' future. The completed projects have significantly enhanced security, modernized learning environments, and improved the operational efficiency of our entire district.

Highlights of the Bond Projects Include:

- Enhanced Security: Safe and Secure entrances at STMS and Pevely Elementary
- Upgraded lighting and sound systems in the Herculaneum High School Theater.
- New Turf Football Field
- State-of-the-art Competition High School Gym.
- New building to house our IT and Food Service Departments

Thank you to every Dunklin R-5 taxpayer for making these critical, long-term improvements a reality.

Our students and educators have demonstrated commitment, leading to extraordinary leaps in key academic accomplishments. These gains are a testament to the rigorous instructional programs and supportive environment that have been established throughout the district.

Our commitment to ensuring every student crosses the finish line has paid off! The Dunklin R-5 Graduation Rate has climbed from 86% to an incredible 98% This means nearly every student who enters our high schools is now successfully earning their diploma, ready to face their future careers or higher education.

More Dunklin R-5 students than ever are getting a head start on college! The percentage of students taking college-level courses while still in high school has dramatically increased from 37% to 63%. This

allows our students to save thousands in tuition costs and build confidence in a college-level curriculum, better preparing them for success after graduation.

Student presence is the first step to student success. Through collaborative efforts involving our counselors, teachers, and parents, we have successfully improved student attendance across the district: Student Attendance has increased from 78% to 84%. Better attendance directly correlates with higher academic achievement and stronger student-teacher relationships. We will continue our efforts to celebrate consistent attendance and provide resources to those who need support.

The progress we've seen this year—from major facility improvements to historic academic gains—is truly inspiring. We are proud of our students, grateful for our dedicated staff, and thankful for the continuous support of the Dunklin R-5 community. We look forward to building on this momentum in the next quarter!

Visit our website at www.dunklin.k12.mo.us for the latest information. You can also follow us on Facebook at Dunklin R5 School District and me on "X" at @DrClintFreeman.

I am wishing you a safe, joyful, and restful holiday season. May it be filled with laughter, peace, and quality time with loved ones. Happy holidays!

Dr. Clint Freeman
Superintendent of Schools



The fall musical is this weekend, starting at 7 pm on Friday and Saturday. The Sunday matinee starts at 2 pm in the Dunklin R-5 Theatre.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to our HHS Thanksgiving Food Drive. Several local families will enjoy a great meal thanks to your generosity this holiday season.

Alumni Wrestling Night is Dec. 1st, immediately following the dual meet, at approximately 7:30 pm.

The Twin City Christmas Parade is on Dec. 1st, and the Herculaneum-Pevely Christmas Parade is on Thursday, December 4th. Look for the HHS Marching Band in both parades.

HHS and STMS Choir performances are on Dec. 11th in the Dunklin R-5 Theatre.

Dec 19th (Friday) is an early release day. Winter Break is Dec. 22nd-Jan. 5th. The first day back for students is Jan 6th.

Exotic travel is available to our students. (England, Ireland, Costa Rica) Check out the Facebook page called Blackcats Worldwide.

Project Prom thanks everyone who purchased a flavored soda during our home football games. They raised \$1,400 from the soda and \$800 from the 50/50 drawings.

Thanks to Joe's Pizza in Herculaneum. They let our 5th-graders make their own pizzas! It was the conclusion of their farm-to-table lessons.

DUNKLIN R-5 SCHOOL DISTRICT

497 Joachim Avenue ▪ Herculaneum, MO 63048 ▪ (636) 479-5200

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Dr. Joe Willis, Assistant Superintendent

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GO BLACKCATS!

Board Meetings are Open to the Public

The Dunklin R-5 Board of Education meets on a regular basis on the third Tuesday of each month. The meetings are held at 7:00 pm. Check the website for the location. The meetings are open to the public. Patrons may view agendas and items from the meetings by going to our website www.dunklin.k12.mo.us, and clicking on the Board of Education tab.

Dunklin R-5 School District is an equal opportunity employer





Homecoming King and Queen

Pictured: King Jackson LaPlante and Queen Zoey Embree



Pictured: Freshman Olivia Tippetts

Tippetts' Inspiring Journey

JV Volleyball Player Olivia Tippetts was flown to Texas to meet with some of the best collegiate volleyball teams in the nation. As a former patient at Shriners Hospital, she became an ambassador, meeting with the players and coaches at the Shriners Children's Showdown. Tippetts visited with Kentucky's head coach and strength coach. She says, "I talked to them about what I can do to really improve and maybe one day make it to their level." She also met the University of Texas team, saying, "They were all just so nice. It was just an amazing experience."

Tippetts was born with a genetic condition that affected the development of her hands. She had her first surgery at Shriners Children's Hospital when she was a toddler. The ambassador says, "I really enjoy going to Shriners. Everyone treats you like you're a star. When you're in the hospital, the focus is on you." Over the years, Tippetts underwent eight additional surgeries, with the surgeons prioritizing function over cosmetics. Today, a few faded scars are the only clues to her history. Typically, I have to point out to people that I've had surgery on my hands, says Tippetts.

The most striking thing about Olivia Tippetts is her perspective. There's no bitterness when she recalls her experiences, just her natural, effervescent personality. The ambassador thanked the high school administrators for allowing her to go to Texas and trusting her to catch up on her assignments. She says, "I love being able to represent my hospital because they have done so much for me. Because of them, I can hold a pencil. Because of them, I can play volleyball."

Follow us on



Dunklin R5 School District
Herculaneum High School
Senn-Thomas Middle School
Pevely Elementary School
Taylor Early Childhood Center

"Dare To Dream" Musical - See Page 8



Pictured: Superintendent Freeman with members of the Lil Cat Running Club.

New Shoes, New Confidence for Lil Cats Runners

Do you remember the thrill of getting a brand-new pair of sneakers as a kid? The bright colors, clean laces, and springy soles made you feel unstoppable. Your old shoes, which seemed fine that morning, suddenly felt like relics of the past. That same excitement filled the faces of the Lil Cats Running Club when Superintendent Clint Freeman handed them brand-new running shoes.

For weeks, Dr. Freeman had quietly collected small donations to make the gift possible. The 20 members of the club had shared their shoe sizes, so they knew something special was coming—but they didn't know just how special it would feel.

On September 24, boxes of black and red Under Armour sneakers were handed out like trophies. The girls eagerly slipped off their worn-out shoes and laced up their new ones. The reviews came quickly. "I can run faster—my other shoes weren't that fast," said third-grader Ava Robertson. Fourth-grader Daisy Martin added, "They don't hurt your feet, and it's easier to run." Dr. Freeman asked if the girls could outrun Coach Cappozzo. The challenge was all they needed—the Lil Cats were off in a burst of energy and laughter.

The 12-week running club wraps up with a two-mile fun run this Saturday, marking the end of another fun season. In the spring, a new group of girls will join the club. Dr. Freeman has already begun collecting donations, ensuring that more young athletes can experience the same spark that comes with lacing up a brand-new pair of shoes—and running toward their goals.

HHS Blood Drive

Students in the National Honor Society took the lead in organizing Herculanum High School's October blood drive. They greeted donors, staffed the snack table, and encouraged participants to enter a raffle. When asked about donating blood, many students didn't hesitate. They had already considered the pros and cons and decided that giving blood was a simple yet powerful way to help others.

For some, donating blood isn't easy—it's uncomfortable and can even be intimidating. For senior Sophie Grill, this year's drive marked her fourth attempt to donate. Her first try as a freshman didn't go as planned when her vein collapsed. "I couldn't go through with the donation because they weren't able to get enough blood," she recalls.

Determined not to give up, Sophie returned the following year. "It wasn't that bad," she says. "It may have hurt a little bit, but it's for a good cause." After learning to stay hydrated, she successfully donated as a sophomore. Last year, dehydration struck again, but this time Sophie came prepared. She drank plenty of fluids and was able to give a whole pint of blood.

By the end of the day, the Red Cross had collected 36 units of blood—enough to potentially help more than 100 people. In gratitude for the school's support, the Red Cross will donate scholarship funds back to Herculanum High School.

Another opportunity to give back will come in the spring, when the HHS Student Council sponsors the next blood drive.



Sophie Grill

How Others See Us

A letter to the high school principal

Hello Principal Dix,

Our son Steven has played football at the varsity level for four years at John Burroughs School. This was his senior season, and his game against your Black Cats on Friday night was the last game of his high school career. To say that the loss was heartbreaking is an understatement. (After all, the game was WILD! What a contest!) But harder than that was having to leave the field one last time after years and years of giving it his all. He has loved the sport, and it is crushing to all of us for this part of his career to be over.

But as tough as Friday night was, there were definitely bright spots — and I have to credit your players and your community for many of them.

First, our Bomber players were truly blown away by the kindness of your Black Cat players. On Saturday morning, I was with many of our senior Bombers, and each one of them told me how welcoming, kind, easygoing, and fun your Black Cats were to them on the field. Our guys were actually shocked by the Black Cats' behavior, as in our Metro League, to quote our guys, "Everybody hates each other and trash-talks and bullies the whole time during games." Not your Black Cat guys. Your guys were the opposite. That's AMAZING.

And as if the Black Cat behavior during the game wasn't impressive enough, immediately upon the game ending, many of your players hugged many of our players. I watched it happen, and it made me start crying. I was so thankful for these acts of kindness. As a senior mom, I know how crushing it is to lose your final game and to be done forever with your high school sport you loved so much. I can't tell you how touching it was to see your players reach out in kindness and courtesy at this moment. As a mom, it meant the world to me — and our players appreciated it so much too. To quote them, "Here we just lost and the game's over, and these guys are sticking around hugging us while we are crying. It was so nice, we didn't even know what to do." Truly amazing.

Last but definitely not least, my husband and I — and other parents on our side of the field — were also really touched by how kind your community members were to us. From the woman at the gate processing our entrance fee to the concession's salespeople to the PA announcer to just random fans we chatted with in the bathroom — EVERYONE WAS NICE. And not only were they nice, they went out of their way to be nice, striking up conversation, or thanking us for a good game. Let me tell you, this is NOT the way it is in the Metro League stands.

You have so, so, so much to be proud of in your Black Cat community. In a world where unkindness, judgment, division, and cruelty are flying around in the air constantly, your people engage in none of that AND actually practice the opposite. What a gift the Black Cat kindness, sportsmanship, and overall community was to us on Friday night. I am so glad that it was at your school that my son's high school career ended, because I get to remember that he was surrounded by good humans who cared.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. Whatever you all are doing in Herculanum, keep it up. Know that it matters to strangers, and that no act of kindness is too small or goes unnoticed. It all matters.

THANK YOU,
Amy Rush



STMS Dig Pink Game

The Blackcats and the Hornets put aside their competitive spirit for a greater cause during the Pink Out game at Senn-Thomas Middle School. While they faced off on the volleyball court, both teams joined forces to honor those who have bravely battled cancer. Between matches, a touching tribute took center stage, where small gifts were presented to cancer survivors in the audience. It reminded everyone of the strength and resilience of those fighting cancer. After the final whistle, the spirit of camaraderie continued as players from Senn-Thomas and Crystal City gathered around the donation table. Leading up to the event, the athletes had eagerly collected canned goods, and the community showed its support by bringing in donations on game day. Together, they collected 1,000 canned goods for the Ozark Food Pantry, showcasing the heart of both teams and their commitment to making a positive impact.



Blake Daugherty Gets Sample

Students Shape the School Menu

"Oh, I love it." That was 8th-grader Aiden Pruitt talking about an oven-baked turnover filled with mozzarella cheese, tomatoes, and seasoning. He was taste-testing a Cheese Pizza Calzone from Albie's Food Products. Spokesperson Kimberly Westcott says, "The kids are our customers, so we want to make sure they like our new products." The small company based in northern Michigan specializes in school meals. Albie's Kristen Ortmann says we allow students to vote on the samples. Ultimately, we hand the tally sheets over to the food service director so she can see firsthand what students think.

The votes were easy to tally. Almost everyone gave the calzone a thumbs-up. Isabella Sorden (6th) says, "It was really good." Leela Hattermar (6th) went a step further by saying, "It was absolutely mesmerizing." Food Service Director Nicole Arnold loves having students try new products, and she takes pride in the quality of food served at our schools. Arnold oversees a team of 17 cooks that serve over 1,000 meals in an hour and a half. In September, we served 20,723 meals or 1,039 each day. When working with such large numbers, it is essential to focus on personnel, equipment, preparation, and deliveries. Having students vote on a new menu item is a nice bonus.

A New Home For Blackcat Pride



Dunklin R-5 School Board President Tammy Headland cuts the ribbon on the HHS gym. The gathering includes an architect, administrators, current and past board members, students, and Blackcat fans.

The Dunklin community came together on October 2nd to celebrate the ribbon-cutting of the brand-new Herculanum High School Gymnasium. Following the ceremony, families, students, staff, and alumni gathered for a reception to explore the impressive new space and share in the excitement. The two-story gym seats 800 spectators and includes a 400-foot walking track that circles the court. At 23,322 square feet, the project represents a significant investment in the district's future. The total cost of \$9,954,280 was funded through a no-tax-increase bond issue overwhelmingly approved by voters in April 2023—a true testament to the community's ongoing

support of our local schools.

The volleyball teams had the honor of being the first to play in the new facility, kicking off a season full of energy and school spirit. The student section came alive during those first games, and that enthusiasm promises to carry forward into the upcoming basketball seasons. The gym features state-of-the-art sound and video systems, a scoreboard that plays commercials, and a modern, clean concession stand. Together, these features create a welcoming and vibrant space for students, families, and fans.

Elementary Choir Concert



Pevely Elementary students had a choir concert on October 28th for students in kindergarten, second, and fourth grades. There will be another Choir Concert for students in the first, third, and fifth grades on December

2nd in the Dunklin R-5 Theatre. The start times will be 5:15 p.m., 6:00 p.m., and 6:45 p.m., respectively. Join us for these free performances.





(Back Row) Coach Jim Kasten, Coach Kyle Davis, Claira Davis, Chloe Cox, Kate Kasten, Kaylee Wood, Erin Graham, Lydia Hollingsworth, Coach Lance Hyde,
(Front Row) Rylie Pruett, Finley Hamtil, Emerson Reeves, Amaya Ferguson, Brylee Wishard, Aubri Shadowens, Khloe Black



Back Row) Coach Jim Kasten, Coach Kyle Davis, Darrin Schmitt, Finn Weatherholt, Ethan Grosbauer, Brendon Ivie, Andrew Appelbaum, Coach Lance Hyde.
(Front Row) Austin Baer, Joe Stahl, Preston Wallman, Noah Fitzgerald, Nathan Clampet, Owen Davis, Brandon Marshall.

Cross Country State Championships

Both the boys' and girls' cross country teams brought home some hardware from the state championships. Herculeaneum's boys and girls each placed third in their respective races at the Class 3 State Championships on November 7 in Columbia, Missouri. The strong finishes came just a week after both teams captured district titles, setting high expectations heading into the final races of the season.

Coach Kyle Davis was thrilled with his athletes' performances. "The boys had a phenomenal race," he said. "Probably the most I have ever seen any of my teams grow in the course of a season." Davis praised freshman standout Noah Fitzgerald for his composure and speed throughout the race.

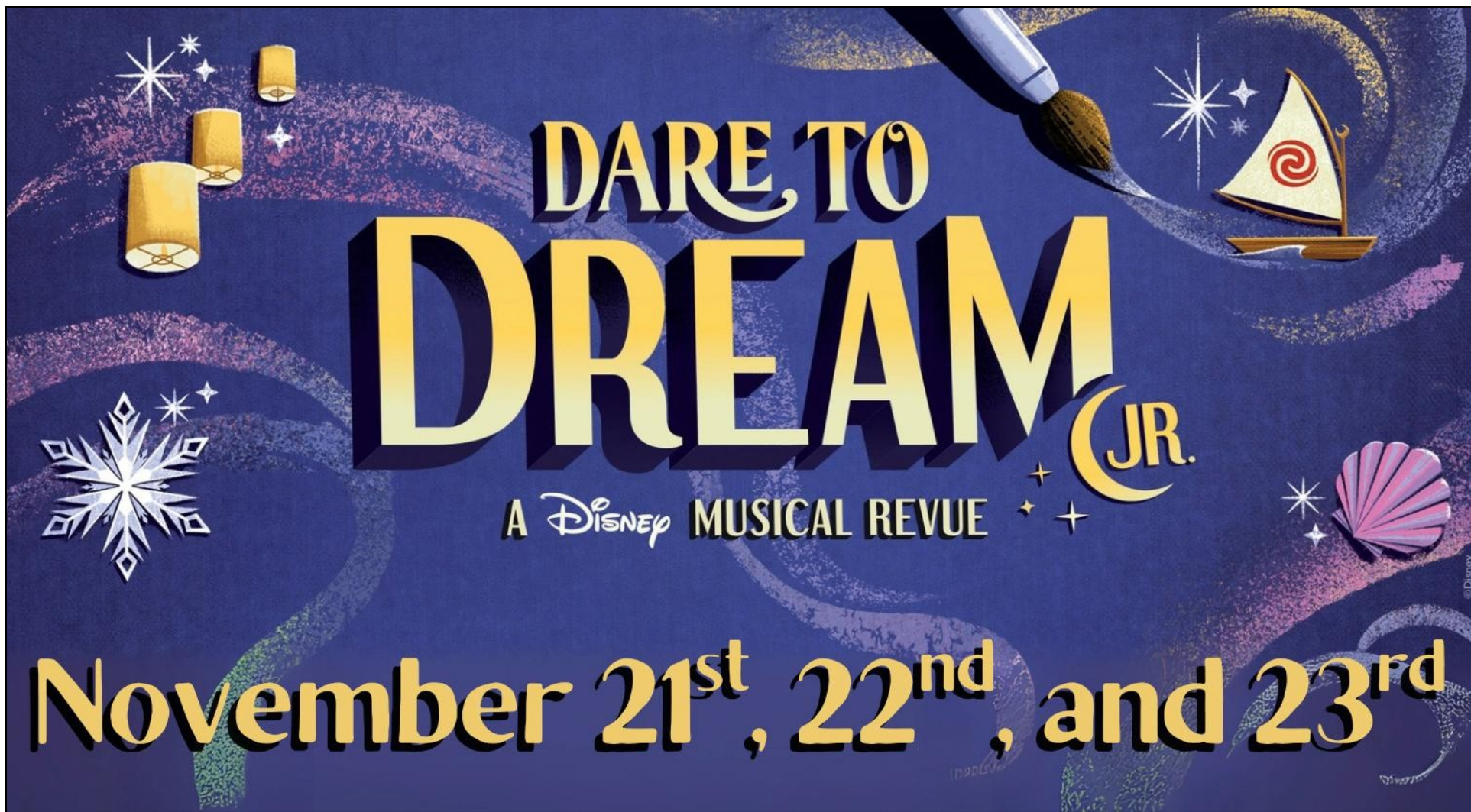
Although the girls also placed third, they had been aiming even higher. "Our girls were a little off today, and it got them," Davis admitted. "You have to be on here. There are no guarantees." One of the teams they had beaten at districts edged them out this time, but Davis was proud of their resilience. "It's an honor to have an off day for the girls and still be on the podium."

Sophomore Amaya Ferguson once again earned all-state honors, marking her second consecutive year on the podium. She's now halfway to the rare accomplishment of earning all-state recognition all four years of high school.

As the races concluded and the buses were loaded, conversations quickly turned to next season. The girls' squad will return nearly intact—only senior Claira Davis, sidelined by injury, will graduate. The returning group will be bolstered by incoming freshman Adysynn Gonzalez, who finished second out of 52 runners at the JCAA Conference Meet as an eighth grader.

The boys' team will graduate several key runners, including Nathan Clampet, Brandon Marshall, and Joe Stahl, who were our second, fifth, and sixth fastest runners at state. But the future looks bright. A talented trio of middle school runners—Sam Laupp, Tristan White, and Jacob Milton—finished second, third, and fourth at the JCAA Conference Meet and will join the high school ranks next fall.

They'll reunite with Fitzgerald, who ran an impressive 16:20 at state to finish 12th overall in Class 3. If you combine this group with returning high school runners like the persistent Preston Wallman and the speedy Owen Davis, next year's teams are already setting their sights on even greater success.



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social media.



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Dr. Willis @JoeFWillis
Matt Lichtenstein @BlackcatMatt

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Pevely Elementary @MsKatieDunlap

Taylor Preschool @DunklinTaylor



Dunklin R5 School District
Herculaneum High School
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CALENDAR HIGHLIGHTS



GO BLACKCATS!