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Front office changes with new administrative assistant

Adds aesthetic decor, updates sign-in, -out system

By August Capotosto
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

After working for seven years as a teaching assistant in the academic center, Catarina Angelou was hired as the new high school administrative assistant, bringing changes to the space and systems in the front office.

Angelou said that her prior experience in the school gives her a unique ability to connect with students.

"I've known students that I've worked with personally, but this role gives me an opportunity to meet the whole school community, and it's been really cool," she said.

Dean of Students Elisabeth Drinkwater said that she looks forward to collaborating with Angelou on finding ways to make the

front office run more efficiently.

"She brings such a nice, positive, energetic vibe to the main office. This has allowed [Principal Julie] Sgroi, Ms. Angelou, and myself to look at the office and make our own system of filings," she said.

Drinkwater said that since these three administrators, including herself, are all relatively new to the school system within the past couple of years, it has been refreshing to work together to figure out what makes sense for them.

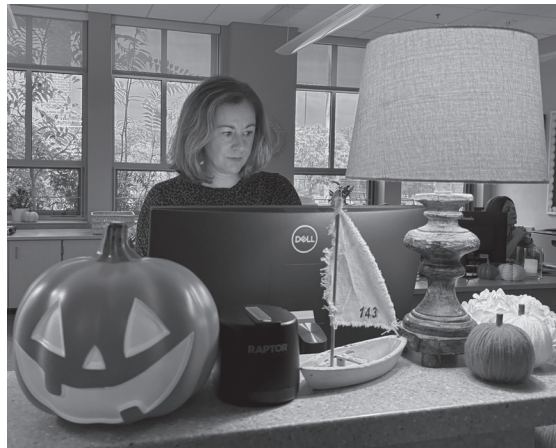
Angelou said that one of these changes has been the new approach to the high school sign-in and sign-out system.

The front office has posted a QR code next to its door that students can scan, leading them to a Google form where they choose from a list of options. These include signing out for a dismissal, signing in after a dismissal, and recording a tardy, she said.

Additionally, this form allows

'She brings such a nice, positive, energetic vibe to the main office.'

- ELISABETH DRINKWATER



AUGUST CAPOTOSTO PHOTOS

Main office administrative assistant Catarina Angelou put autumnal decorations in the front office.

seniors to be accounted for when they arrive at school early or late, using their senior privilege if their free block aligns with the first or last block of the day.

Angelou said that this form automatically feeds responses into a spreadsheet, which can be used to update Aspen as needed.

"It's been a useful tool in help-

ing us keep an eye on who is actually here and who isn't," she said.

Angelou said that other than changes to front office systems, she hopes to make the space a more welcoming atmosphere. She said she has enjoyed aesthetically improving the front office with seasonal decor from Home Goods and Target. For fall, Ange-

lou has begun adding Halloween-themed decorations such as plastic jack-o-lanterns, pumpkins, and ceramic ghosts.

"I want people to feel comfortable coming in to ask a question, even if it's just something silly. I don't want anyone to feel like they can't come in and approach the space," she said.

High school drops in U.S. News state rankings

By Charlie Baker
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

In the latest U.S. News and World Report Massachusetts High School Rankings, Manchester-Essex has fallen 37 spots, from 17 to 54.

Principal Julie Sgroi said that this drop is not a concern for her.

"I don't worry too much about rankings because rankings don't paint the appropriate picture of what goes on here. And what I don't like about rankings is it turns students into numbers," Sgroi said.

Superintendent Pam Beaudoin similarly said that it doesn't reflect everything the school does.

"I think there are a lot of strong indicators of where we can strengthen aspects of our academics, but I don't think it's encompassing all of the things that we're trying to accomplish or that we evaluate students on. There's not a lot of measure in there for the vision of the graduate components," she said.

Counselor David Conwell said he feels confident that colleges don't place much importance on rankings.

"We've asked a couple of reps that have come in just this past week [how much they look at these rankings] and they all said exactly what I thought, which is none or not at all," he said.

Conwell said as a counselor, he doesn't notice the rankings having any effect on the schools his students get into.

The school experienced a smaller drop in Boston Magazine's rankings, going from three to five.

The U.S. News rankings are based on the following formula: college readiness--30%, college curriculum breadth--10%, state assessment proficiency--20%, state assessment per-

'I don't worry too much about rankings because rankings don't paint the appropriate picture of what goes on here.'

- JULIE SGROI



TREVOR WELSH/COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

The high school ranks 54 among Massachusetts schools in U.S. News and World Report and ranks 5 in Boston Magazine.

formance--20%, underserved student performance--10%, graduation rate--10%.

The rankings are based on the previous year's MCAS scores for the state, Beaudoin said.

She said that the scores for that year were not as strong as previous years.

Sgroi said a factor in this going forward might be students placing less importance on MCAS now that

it won't be a state graduation requirement.

Conwell also said that he thinks the scores are impacted by students no longer caring about the yearly tests by the 10th grade.

"I think that's a big ask for a teenage student who's thinking about everything in their own life ... so to ask a teenage student to care a lot about MCAS because ... this could hurt our ranking, or it could hurt the district in some way; I think most kids aren't going to care," he said.

Another factor in the lower test scores is the legacy of COVID-19, Sgroi said.

"I know that we want to all

pretend like COVID didn't exist, and we're all sick of talking about it, but my son is currently in fifth grade, and he started kindergarten online. And I think until that grade graduates high school, every one of those classes are affected in some way or another," she said.

The pandemic caused nationwide standardized test scores in fourth graders to drop five points in reading and seven points in math, according to nationsreportcard.gov.

Those 2020 elementary schoolers now take high school MCAS.

Beaudoin noted the decrease in enrollment as a potential reason for the drop.

"We've shrunk quite a bit over the past few years. We were almost 500 students at one point," she said.

Sgroi said the school district is still a point of pride for the community.

"People move to this community for the schools ... We do have great schools regardless of where we're at with U.S. News. We're still one of the best schools in the state, and this state is the best state in the country for education," she said.

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New science teacher brings prior knowledge of marine biology

Worked at local research agency

By August Capotosto
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Anjali Bhardwaj, who has joined the high school science department, said she has been using her prior knowledge of marine biology to offer new and refreshing approaches to classic courses.

In the high school, Bhardwaj teaches College Prep Chemistry, Honors Biology, and Anatomy and Physiology.

Bhardwaj graduated from Reading Memorial High School in 2013, completed her undergraduate degree at Jacksonville University in 2017, and received a Master of Science in Biology from Boston University in 2020.

Bhardwaj has been teaching mainly at the college level.

Since 2021, she has been working as an adjunct faculty member at Cornell, teaching marine environmental science, she said.

Bhardwaj said this course allows students to get field experience through examples such as banding tern chicks and going shark fishing to catch and release for scientific research.

She said she hopes to carry over this dynamic of students conducting their own independent research culminating in scientific papers.

Additionally, Bhardwaj said she is a part-time faculty member at Tufts University, where she has begun her third year as a lecturer for marine biology.

Bhardwaj also taught chemis-

try, biology, and a marine biology elective that she implemented at Austin Preparatory School from 2020 to 2022, she said.

“Because of high enrollment [in the marine biology elective], I was able to just teach that course,” she said.

From 2024 to 2025, Bhardwaj worked for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a U.S. scientific research agency, where she set catch limits and regulations for commercial and recreational fisheries.

Science department head Kristin Umile said that having a teacher with collegiate experience is a great asset to the department.

“She has a very different background with her marine science expertise, and personally, it’s been great to have another female

representative of science working with the students,” she said.

Umile said that though students are initially less receptive to having a new teacher, stu-

dents have been responding positively to her teaching style.

“Every class I see, she has hands-on activities going, and she’s very excited about what she’s teaching,” she said.

She said Bhardwaj has incorporated her passion for marine biology into the Anatomy and Physiology courses she teaches by highlighting comparative anatomy. Bhardwaj said to do this, she began her classes by stating that all life began in the ocean.

She said her classes have begun reading “Your Inner Fish”



AUGUST CAPOTOSTO PHOTO

Science teacher Anjali Bhardwaj is teaching students in her anatomy and physiology classes about osteoporosis through interactive labs. She uses her experience at NOAA throughout her lessons.

by Neil Shubin, a book about the discovery of the first fossilized Tiktaalik, the fishapod from which evolved human life.

Bhardwaj said that while students learn about the skeletal system, this pre knowledge has allowed them to make connections between homologous traits of different species.

“For example, we’ve looked at otoliths, fish ear stones, which are similar to our own,” she said.

Bhardwaj said the main difference is that much like rings on a tree, otoliths can be aged under a microscope.

“The students were really good at it ... some of them got every single age right,” she said.

Senior Charlie Thurlow said that the hands-on labs in anatomy and physiology are helpful for students.

“I like them since it’s not as much note-taking. I think she does a really good job,” he said.

Bhardwaj said that she has felt welcomed by students and staff.

“The students are all so eager to learn, and it’s such a great community that I’m excited to be a part of,” she said.

FUN FACTS

- She’s a “big bird nerd”— especially when it comes to seabirds, with gulls being her favorite.
- Last fall, she spent 18 straight days at sea to collect data on species abundance, distribution, feeding ecology, size, and age composition.
- She enjoys baking and said her best recipe is probably her blueberry dessert bars.
- The best class she has ever taken was marine geology. She said the worst class was organic chemistry 1, but that 2 was actually fun.
- Before and during graduate school, she worked at the New England Aquarium as a penguin aquarist. If you ever go to the aquarium, her favorite African penguins are Good Hope and Pip. Good Hope has a blue and white bracelet on his left wing, and Pip has a pink bracelet on his left wing.

New math teacher receives positive feedback

Teacher implements ‘Purple Thursdays’

By Bissy Mitrano
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Math teacher Michael Orié began teaching high school courses after educating middle school students for three years.

Orié has been teaching for 21 years and worked for 17 years at Landmark High School as the assistant department head and math teacher.

“I left [Landmark] when they offered me the department head position. I realized I didn’t want to keep moving up the corporate ladder. I just wanted to keep teaching,” he said.

Orié graduated from Gordon College, majoring in mathematics and education, and earned his master’s degree in special educa-



BISSY MITRANO PHOTO

Math teacher Michael Orié helps freshman Stella Langille. Orié said he is excited for his first year teaching in the district.

tion at Simmons University.

Orié said he wants to focus on the high school curriculum rather than the middle school

“High school students are easier to relate to as human beings. Middle-schoolers still have a block against teachers ... It is a lot easier to teach high school students because their frontal lobes are more developed,” he said.

Orié applied for the position at the high school because of its location and reputation.

“I have wanted to work in Manchester for the last four years because it is close to where I am and has an excellent reputation for being amazing to both students and staff,” he said.

Orié said he looks forward to experiencing what the school has to offer.

“[I look forward to] everything ... This is the most challenging year because it is the most different type of content that I have taught,” he said.

Junior Chloe Psalidas said Orié makes class enjoyable and that she has learned a lot.

“We usually start class with a warm-up, and he usually gives us time to start our homework,” she said.

Psalidas said Orié does “Purple Thursdays,” where the class estimates how many items are in a sum. For example, students estimate how many tissues are in a tissue box, she said.

“He wears purple, and you get a sticker next to your name when you get the closest estimate. You [also] get a stuffed animal unicorn to sit with in class,” Psalidas said.

Freshman Abby Borgerson said Orié does activities such as algebraic games, and coloring graphs to better understand the content.

“I really like the class. Also, Purple Thursdays are the best,” she said.

FUN FACTS

- His favorite color is purple.
- He has eaten live termites.
- His favorite place to go is Scotland.
- He plays guitar.
- He has a dog and chickens.
- Pie Day is his favorite holiday.
- He loves singing and dancing.
- He has a wife and two daughters.

Courtney Brown becomes new math department chair

Colleagues enthusiastically support promotion

By Riley McKinnon
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Math teacher Courtney Brown is the new math department chair.

Brown, who began as a student teacher from Endicott College, has worked at the high school for eight years.

She learned that she was hired for the position while on maternity leave last spring.

“I felt somewhat discon-

connected ... it was nice to have that confirmation in early summer so that I knew what coming back to school was going to look like,” she said.

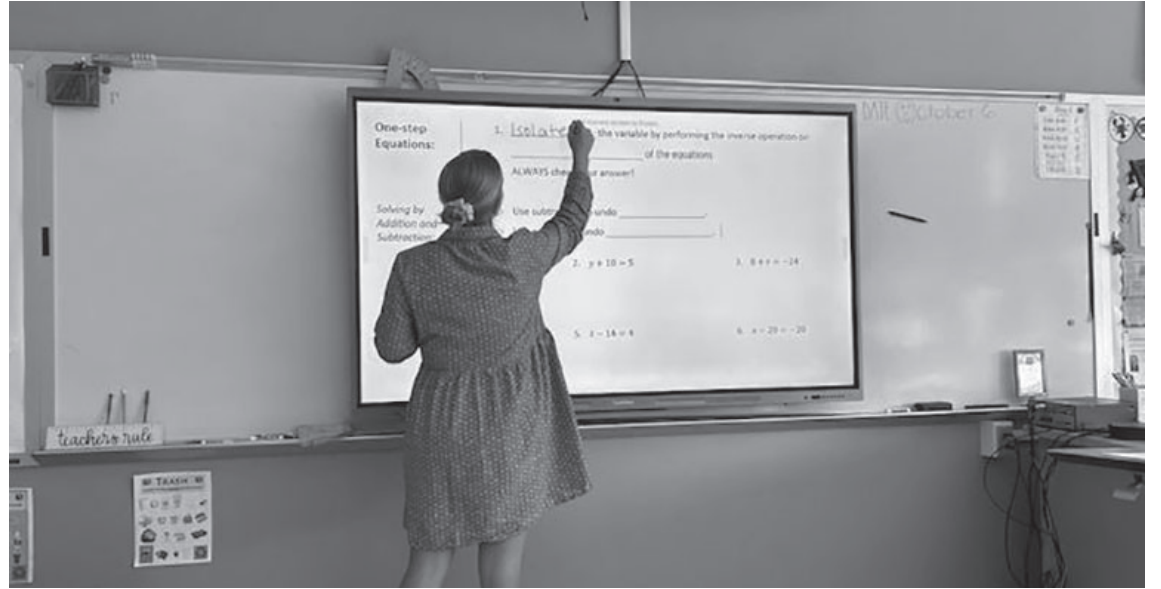
As department chair, Brown

will observe all members of the math department in both the middle school and high school, run monthly department meetings, and work on the new curriculum review.

“My personal goal is to go on math-related field trips and have more professionals come in and talk about their careers involving math. Also, continuing to motivate students to take math classes ... and making courses something students will look forward to,” Brown said.

Brown’s colleagues are enthusiastic about her being promoted including math teacher Lauren Woodcock.

“Ms. Brown was a wonderful choice because she is a great leader, gets along with everybody, and is great at problem-solving and troubleshooting,” she said. Woodcock said she, and the



COURTESY OF STELLA GARFIELD

Department chair Courtney Brown, who assumed the leadership position this year, teaches an Algebra I math class. Brown will be leading the math department in a curriculum review.

rest of the math department, encouraged Brown to apply last year.

“She gives 110% every single day ... we will support her as she transitions into this role,” she said.

Previous math and science department chair Kristin Umile also encouraged Brown to apply.

“I knew that she was going to be an outstanding addition to the supervisor team ... she has great communication skills, is super organized, and the kids and faculty love her ... it was a no-brainer to have her take over that role,” she said.

Umile has been the math and science departments chair for the

past three years, this being the first recent year that the departments are split.

“[When being the department chair] it’s important to remember being a classroom teacher and how hard and demanding it can be. It helps you stay connected with your department members ... and I think she will,” she said.

New Student Council class officers elected



President Lila Brady



Vice President Bissy Mitrano



Secretary Emma Brown



Treasurer Addison Lai



President Charlie Athanas



Vice President Ellie Virden



Secretary Cate Vendt



Treasurer Alex Hatfield



President Rhys Kiester



Vice President Saskia Kuehnmund



Secretary Rosie Renehan



Treasurer Keira Flynn



President Harper Hemme



Vice President Quinn McLain



Secretary Stella Langille



Treasurer Freddy Jakes

STAFF EDITORIAL

Threats to freedom of speech are on the rise

Freedom of speech is a fundamental value in the United States that sets us apart from authoritarian countries. The First Amendment grants citizens the right to challenge ideas, voice opinions, and prevent the abuse of power.

Freedom of speech has come under attack recently due to political dissent leading to violence, which is alarming for the United States.

A nation that prides itself on free expression betrays its own ideals when an individual is killed or punished for exercising this fundamental right.

Charlie Kirk, a conservative activist who toured universities to engage in debate with young voters, was assassinated on Sept. 10, 2025.

The parents of the assassin, Tyler Robinson, a 22-year-old man, said in an ABC interview that their son said, "There is too much evil and the guy [Charlie Kirk] spreads too much hate."

An individual or political figure has the right to voice their

opinion and should be protected from violence and firings at their place of employment.

According to the Sept. 2025 New York Times article, ABC suspended the Jimmy Kimmel show after Kimmel said, "The Maga Gang is desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything

other than one of them" about Kirk's assassin.

Conservatives believed his objective was to mislead the public. This sparked controversy over

the need to protect free speech.

According to a Sept. 2025 NBC News article, Kimmel returned to his show on Tuesday, Sept. 23, because of the public pressure on the network to protect freedom of expression.

The traditional role of a late-night host is to entertain and provide social and political commentary through humor, without spreading misinformation.

Another threat to the First Amendment rights is the government's recent attempt to censor journalists from reporting at the

Journalists serve as independent reporters to accurately inform the public and should be free from government influence.



HEUTE.COM

Jimmy Kimmel gives his controversial monologue during an episode of "The Tonight Show."

Pentagon.

Journalists serve as independent reporters to accurately inform the public and should be free from government influence.

According to the Sept. 2025 Washington Times article, "The Pentagon's sweeping new rules for journalists — including the demand that reporters sign a pledge to not release any 'unauthorized' information or risk losing access to the Pentagon grounds — would deeply erode news coverage of the nation's

military."

Major news outlets such as CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox News refuse to sign Pentagon's press rules that threaten to remove press passes from journalists who publish information that is unauthorized for release by the Pentagon.

According to the Yahoo News Oct. 2025 article, "The three major networks ... banded together on Tuesday to reject the Pentagon's new press rules, which the outlets said threaten 'core

journalistic protections' in a joint statement."

Having the ability to voice opinions is not only necessary in the public arena but also critical in schools.

Activities such as the Debate Team, Mock Trial, and student government encourage students to participate in discussions about controversial topics.

If freedom of speech continues to be threatened, the fundamental principals of democracy will be endangered for all US citizens.

WNBA deserves more exposure

League plans to add more teams as it becomes increasingly popular

By **Maddy Holsomback**
INDEPENDENT STAFF

Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) players and teams deserve more exposure, especially with rising the rising popularity of womens' basketball.

The WNBA is planning to expand to other cities in and out of the US.

Cleveland, Ohio, will be getting a team. The city had one in 2003, but it disbanded due to declining popularity. Detroit, Michigan, is receiving a team after their 2009 team was sold

to Oklahoma after winning three championships.

The league will also expand to Philadelphia, Portland and Toronto.

They plan to have 18 teams by 2030.

Toronto's team, the Toronto Tempo, will be arriving in the 2026 season as Canada's first WNBA team and will play home games in the new Coca-Cola Colosseum.

The newest team, the Golden State Valkyries, introduced in the 2024-2025 season, claimed the record for the most fans overall (18,064) and the most fans attending a single game (396,408). The team also sold out all 22 home games they had this season, even quickly selling out their TD Garden game earlier this season for the second year in the row.



SANDMANSPORTS.COM

The WNBA plans to expand to Cleveland, Portland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Toronto in the wake of its rise in popularity.

Boston Celtics minority owner Steve Pagliuca has offered to purchase the Connecticut Suns WNBA team, proposing that the team play at the TD Garden in Boston. The Suns are currently Connecticut's only official professional sports team.

Getting league approval

has proven difficult for Pagliuca. He has placed a historical \$325 million offer on the table, the most anyone has ever paid for a WNBA team.

The league has significantly grown in popularity, especially because of the more widespread teams across cities and the af-

fordability of the tickets, making it easier for fans to attend games more often for a more reasonable price.

The overall viewership of games is about 57% male and 43% female.

"More than a dozen games topped 1 million views - a number the league has not reached in the previous 16 years. [Caitlin] Clark's debut also coincided with a 35% increase in boys watching the games," New York Times author Heather Knight wrote.

Salary negotiations began in August for WNBA players. The latest offer is a \$1 million salary average as opposed to the current \$249,244, with both fans and players arguing that the players should be benefiting from the increased viewership the league has received. With the increased viewership and overall interest in the league the players and teams deserve more exposure and higher pay.

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the
INDEPENDENT

The Independent is published monthly throughout the school year. It is a product of the Manchester-Essex Regional High School Journalism class.

We welcome letters to the editor from MERHS students, faculty, and community members.

All submissions must be signed. The Independent reserves the right not to print letters and to edit the content for clarity and length. While letters can be critical of an individual's actions, they cannot slander or libel.

The staff editorial may be considered the opinion of the staff of The Independent.

By-line opinions are written by individual staff members and should not be considered representative of the entire staff.

The Independent staff hopes that all Manchester and Essex citizens will take advantage of this forum. The paper is meant to serve the school community, and we are open to suggestions to help it better serve its purposes.

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