THE DARIEN DIFFERENCE

School Spotlight December 2025 - Issue 4



Dear Community Members,

Welcome to the fourth 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.

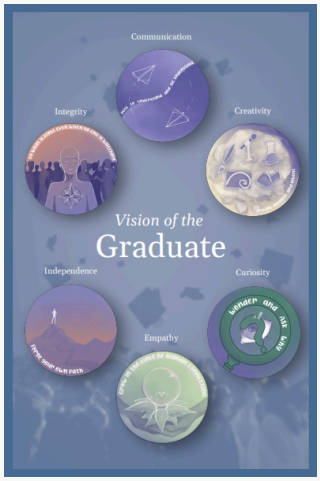
The December edition highlights the wonderful work happening at Ox Ridge Elementary School and the many ways that our students and faculty are living the Vision of the Graduate - every single day!

Ox Ridge second grade students experienced the world of music through an exploration of percussion. Students across the school experienced a wonderful spirit week and have a new approach to the school day - soft starts. Additionally, our youngest learners in ELP and Little Scientists made big discoveries in their exploration of the human body. Our faculty and staff showed great passion and dedication in their own learning in a variety of ways focused on MTSS, through Professional Learning Communities and participating in Instructional Rounds.

Please join me in celebrating what makes Ox Ridge School a wonderful learning community. In our January edition, we will learn all about the wonders of Royle School.

Sincerely,

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



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Vision of the Graduate

Principal's Perspective: Mr. Chris Melillo

What does the Vision of the Graduate mean to me in one sentence?

The Darien Vision of the Graduate is our promise to help every student grow into a thoughtful, confident, and compassionate young person who can contribute meaningfully to the world.

How does it come to life at Ox Ridge School?

The Vision shows up in the everyday moments of learning. You see it when students are engaged in rich discussions, when they collaborate to solve problems, and when they show kindness and empathy toward one another. It's woven into how our teachers design learning and how our students interact with their school community.

How do students develop some of these attributes at Ox Ridge School?

Students develop these skills and dispositions through the way we teach and the climate we create. They participate in discussions where their ideas matter, take part in inquiry and hands-on learning, and are encouraged to take risks and reflect on their progress. Just as important, they learn from the caring adults around them who model curiosity, perseverance, and respect every day.

Is there an example that I can share of students living the Darien Vision of the Graduate that made me proud?

A moment that really stood out to me was during our Veterans Day Program, when our fourth and fifth graders asked thoughtful, insightful questions that showed deep curiosity and genuine respect for our guests. Their ability to listen carefully, think critically, and engage in meaningful dialogue was powerful to witness. It was one of those proud principal moments where you think, "This is exactly what we hope to see."



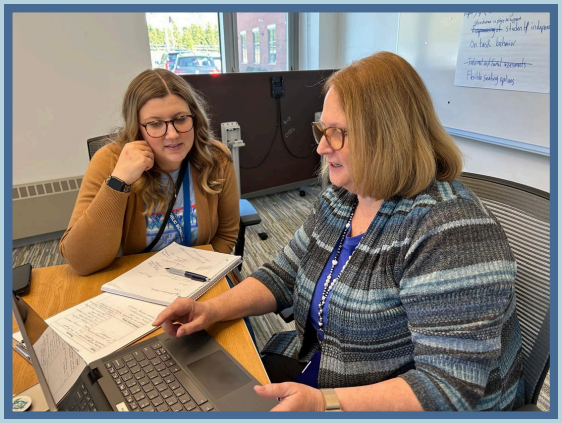
Growing Strong Learners

Every day at Ox Ridge, we have the privilege of seeing the thoughtful, powerful work happening across our school. When you walk into our classrooms, you see students engaged in learning that is purposeful and joyful, talking through their thinking with peers, taking risks, exploring new ideas, and celebrating their progress. This is learning that shapes not just academic growth, but the habits and mindsets outlined in the Darien Vision of the Graduate. Students imagine and invent as they solve problems with creativity. They communicate by listening to understand, speaking to be heard, and explaining their thinking with clarity. They show curiosity as they ask questions, wonder why, and push their thinking deeper. Our teachers and staff work intentionally to create environments where students feel confident, supported, and excited to learn, and that foundation shows in everything our kids do.

MTSS: Supporting the Whole Child



This year we have strengthened our MTSS (Multi Tiered System of Supports) structures to ensure we are meeting the needs of the whole child academically, socially, and emotionally. Grade level teams look at student work, common assessments, and classroom observations to guide instruction and plan support. When a student needs enrichment, targeted intervention, or a new challenge, our teams collaborate to move learning forward. This process encourages independence as students learn to forge their own paths, take ownership of their progress, and reflect on their goals. It also builds integrity as students work hard even when no one is watching, learning that effort and perseverance matter.



Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) play a key role in this work. Teachers meet regularly to ask: What do we want students to learn? How will we know they learned it? What will we do if they need more support? What will we do if they are ready to move ahead? These purposeful conversations are rooted in evidence, student growth, and collective responsibility. This collaboration models the same communication skills we expect from students listening, clarifying, and learning from one another and ensures our instruction remains focused, intentional, and responsive.

Growing Strong Learners (continued)

Instructional Rounds

Our teachers are growing alongside our students through instructional rounds. Based on the medical model, this practice allows educators to observe one another's classrooms to find new ways to spark higher-level thinking. By focusing on rich questioning and complex tasks, we are helping our students become deeper thinkers and more independent problem-solvers. This collaborative work ensures we are elevating the learning experience for every child in our building.



Soft Starts

Soft starts have also become a meaningful part of our morning routine. Instead of beginning the day with immediate academic demands, students ease in with purposeful choices like puzzles, building materials, drawing, card games, partner activities, and quiet talking with friends. These gentle beginnings support emotional regulation and set a positive tone for learning. They promote empathy through peer connection, independence through choice, and creativity through open ended play. Teachers are already noticing that students settle more quickly, focus more easily, and enter the day feeling ready and grounded.

Creating a Positive Culture

The heart of Ox Ridge lies in the warmth and connection found in our Morning Meetings, hands-on inquiry, and everyday acts of kindness. In our culture, empathy isn't just taught—it's lived through helping others and listening deeply. We are so grateful to our staff and families for the trust you place in us. Together, we are growing learners who think deeply, care wholeheartedly, and contribute meaningfully to the world. We are incredibly proud of the work unfolding here and excited for all that lies ahead.







The Spirit of Ox Ridge:

Spirit Week 2025

Spirit Week is a beloved tradition that brings our belief in community to life. While it may look like hats and sparkles on the surface, it is truly about strengthening relationships and ensuring every student feels they belong. It is an opportunity for students to express themselves, cheer for their classmates, engage in friendly competition and feel proud to be part of something bigger than themselves. This year's energy was incredible:

- **Monday, Dec 8: Hat Day & Door Decorating** Our Sunshine Committee kicked things off with a schoolwide contest. This wasn't just about decor; classrooms brainstormed and negotiated as teams, learning to problem-solve and collaborate toward a shared creative goal.
- **Tuesday, Dec 9: Twinkle Tuesday** The building was filled with glitter, lights, and bling. Whether wearing shimmering headbands or festive accessories, students aimed to bring joy to others and brighten our hallways.
- **Wednesday, Dec 10: Color Day** Each grade arrived in a designated color, turning Ox Ridge into a vibrant rainbow. It was a beautiful display of unity where younger students looked to their older peers with admiration and school pride.
- **Thursday, Dec 11: Pattern Party Day** From stripes to animal prints, this was a day for bold self-expression. Students loved the freedom to show their individual personalities while remaining part of our collective celebration.
- **Friday, Dec 12: Ox Pride Day** We concluded the week in a sea of Ox Ridge shirts and Owl spirit. It was a moment to celebrate the teamwork and kindness that define our culture before heading into the weekend with a sense of accomplishment.

Spirit Week reminded us that school is not just where we learn, but where we laugh and grow together. It was truly our most memorable one yet!







The Heart of Giving:
Ox Ridge in the Community

At Ox Ridge, we believe kindness and empathy are best learned through action. This holiday season, our students and families have shown incredible compassion by supporting those in need through three meaningful initiatives:

Holiday Hope Chest In partnership with The Family and Children's Agency (FCA), our families sponsored local children by fulfilling specific wish lists. From thoughtful gifts to $25 gift cards, your labeled and wrapped donations ensured that every child in the program felt the joy of the season.

Toys for Tots Our lobby boxes were filled to the brim thanks to your overwhelming generosity! These donations support the U.S. Marines' program, providing hope and encouragement to disadvantaged children year-round. Thank you for modeling community-mindedness and showing our students the lasting impact of a single gift.

Gently-Used Toy Drive Sponsored by our PTO Green Team, this collection (Dec 9–16) gave a second life to beloved toys. This initiative taught our students a powerful dual lesson: how to support families in need while practicing a zero-waste lifestyle that cares for our planet.

Thank you to our families and the PTO Green Team for your leadership and heart. Through your support, our students are learning that small actions truly do make a world of difference.

Celebrating Every Ability
Special Education Awareness Day

At Ox Ridge, we are committed to a culture where every student feels valued, supported and included. On December 2, our classrooms celebrated Special Education Awareness Day with hands-on activities designed to foster empathy and honor the diverse abilities within our community. Students completed a self reflection responding to prompts such as one strength I have, a way I can help others and a way others can help me to create "Everyone's Abilities Matter" displays highlighting the unique strengths and contributions of every student. Several other ways we celebrated included:

- **Inclusive Communication:** During Morning Meetings, students expanded their greetings by learning to say "Good morning" in sign language, recognizing that there are many beautiful ways to connect.
- **Building Empathy:** Through written reflections on "times we've felt left out," students engaged in thoughtful discussions about how to ensure everyone feels welcome.
- **Role-Play & Innovation:** Small groups acted out ways to support friends—such as offering extra time or using gestures—and even collaborated to design creative "fidget tools" that help with focus.

This day was a meaningful opportunity for our students to celebrate individual differences and build a stronger, more supportive Ox Ridge where everyone's abilities matter.

The Power of Fine Arts

Nurturing the Whole Child

Fine arts plays a vital role in a well-rounded elementary education. At Ox Ridge, music, art, and creative expression are not “extras”—they are essential opportunities for students to grow as thinkers and collaborators. A well-balanced education nurtures both academic skills and creative expression, helping students develop the critical thinking and problem-solving abilities they need to engage meaningfully with the world.

Our students recently put these skills into practice during a dynamic general music lesson led by Mr. James Allen. Working with Mrs. Battersby’s second-grade class, students explored the world of percussion to learn the following:

- **Rhythm and Cognition:** Students focused on identifying and moving to a steady beat, a foundational skill that supports both musicality and overall cognitive development.
- **Leadership and Listening:** By practicing leading and following complex drumming patterns, students reinforced essential habits of self-control, active listening, and peer cooperation.
- **Storytelling Through Sound:** Through hands-on exploration, students discovered how different drum tones can represent specific actions or emotions. This experimentation serves as a powerful introduction to musical expression and storytelling without words.

Lessons like these highlight why fine arts instruction is so important at the elementary level.

Students gain:

- stronger listening and focus skills that support academic learning
- collaboration and leadership opportunities through group music-making
- emotional awareness and self-expression, helping students articulate thoughts and feelings
- confidence and joy in learning, as every child can participate and succeed



Fine arts instruction at the elementary level complements reading, writing, and mathematics by fostering a unique kind of confidence. These experiences help students articulate thoughts and feelings, appreciate diverse perspectives, and find joy in the creative process. By engaging both the mind and the heart, we ensure our students are not only academically prepared but socially and emotionally equipped to thrive.

Little Scientists, Big Discoveries:
Exploring the Human Body in ELP

Our Early Learning Program (ELP) provides a robust academic foundation, fostering a love for discovery while building essential skills. Recently, Ms. Mullins's class dived into an exciting unit on the human body, turning their classroom into a laboratory for hands-on learning, through:

- **Inquiry & Cognition:** Our youngest learners investigated how the body works, learning to classify living things based on specific features. By providing evidence for their groupings, they are already strengthening the critical thinking and reasoning skills they will use for years to come.

- **Math in Motion:** Students brought mathematics to life by measuring body parts and comparing attributes. These activities taught them to count with one-to-one correspondence and connect abstract numbers to their own real-life experiences.

- **Language & Literacy:** The unit served as a "vocabulary boost," with students using complex words to describe their ideas. They also explored the "anatomy" of print, learning how letters group together to form the words that tell our stories.

- **Creativity & Connection:** Art was woven throughout the unit as students represented their findings through drawing and movement. This collaborative work reinforced social-emotional skills, helping children develop empathy and respect for their peers' unique ideas.

Through this comprehensive approach, Ms. Mullins's class exemplifies how our ELP offers meaningful, rigorous experiences that prepare our students to thrive as they move through the grades.







Looking Ahead



Monday, January 5
PLC- DHS Late Start

Thursday, January 8
Board of Education Special Meeting
Superintendent's FY27 Budget Presentation
7:00 pm (approximate time)
Central Office

Tuesday, January 13
Holmes Winter Chorus Concert
9:30 a.m.
Board of Education Regular Meeting
7:30 p.m. (approximate time)
Central Office

Wednesday, January 14
Byrne's Book Club
7:00 pm
Darien Public Library

Friday, January 16
No School for Students
Staff Professional Development

Monday, January 19
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
Schools and offices closed

Tuesday, January 20
Board of Education Special Meeting
7:00 p.m. (approximate time)
Central Office

Wednesday, January 21
Royle Winter Concert
1:45 p.m.

Thursday, January 22
Parent University
6:30 pm
Middlesex Middle School

Friday, January 23
Ox Ridge Winter Concert
1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, January 27
Board of Education Regular Meeting
7:30 p.m. (approximate time)
Central Office

Thursday, January 29 through Saturday, January 31
MMS Musical - *Bye Bye Birdie*
MMS Auditorium

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