



EAST ISLIP

UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT

WINTER NEWSLETTER 2026



East Islip High School's

New Courtroom Is Now in Session



East Islip High School held a pride-filled ribbon-cutting ceremony on Dec. 19 for the school's remarkable brand-new courtroom, a dedicated space for the mock trial team as well as the trial and debate class. Funded with the help of the For the Kids Foundation, the impressive project had been in the works for some time, inspired by the incredible dedication and success of the school's young lawyers, guided by coach Patsy Lester.

"The biggest motivating factor for creating this space was seeing our mock

trial team in action," Superintendent Paul Manzo said. "It was most definitely a powerful motivator. Their passion, preparation and commitment made it clear they deserved an authentic space that mirrors a real courtroom. At the same time, I was driven by the opportunity to create a flexible learning environment that supports all students and one that can be used across disciplines to promote engagement, critical thinking and real-world learning."

"I am excited for the mock trial team,

and I know that this space will turn out the next prosecutors, defenders and judges, and it will continue to fuel their passion for the law," FTK President Cheryl Pepe said.

"We are really honored that the district and FTK have given us this opportunity," senior and mock trial star Olivia Stepanenko said. "I've been in mock trial for four years, and this was always a dream for the whole team. I think this will really help us because we will be in an environment that looks like a courtroom."

Awards, Honors and Accolades

Students Earn High Praise

AP Scholars Named

The high school recognized 68 AP Scholars for 2025, 45 AP Scholars with Distinction, 21 AP Scholars with Honor, 20 AP Capstone Diploma recipients and nine AP Seminar and Research Certificate recipients.

These honors are based upon a student's performance on the Advanced Placement Exams. AP Scholar titles are granted to students who receive scores of 3 or higher on three or more AP Exams. AP Scholars with Honor awards are granted to students with an average score of at least 3.25 on all AP Exams taken and scores of 3 or higher on four or more of those exams. AP Scholar with Distinction honors are granted to students who receive average scores of at least 3.5 on all AP Exams taken and scores of 3 or higher on five of more of these exams.

Students who earn scores of 3 or higher in AP Seminar and AP Research and on four additional AP Exams of their choosing receive the AP Capstone Diploma. Students who earn scores of 3 or higher in AP Seminar and AP Research but not on four additional AP Exams receive the AP Seminar and Research Certificate.

To view the full list of this year's honorees, scan the QR code:



National Merit Commended Students



East Islip High School seniors Joesuf Ahmad and Liam Eichler earned national recognition as Commended Students in the 2026 National Merit Scholarship Program. They are among approximately 34,000 students across the country recognized for their exceptional academic promise, placing within the top 50,000 scorers nationwide on the 2024 Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test.

A National Top Student Attorney

East Islip High School senior and mock trial team member Olivia Stepanenko continued her award-winning ways this fall at the Empire Mock Trial World Championship in Chicago. Stepanenko was one of just 10 students out of over 600 competitors from across the nation who was honored as an Outstanding Attorney at the tournament. This award follows her honorable mention recognition at the 2025 Gladiator one-on-one tournament in Atlanta Georgia this past July, as well as her being named Countywide Outstanding Student Attorney by the Suffolk County Bar Association in May. Stepanenko plans to study law and politics in college, focusing on her career goal of becoming an attorney practicing international law.



Community Service-Minded Scout Project

Five members of East Islip's Cadette Girl Scout Troop 556 – including current freshmen Gianna Cappellino, Emma Gagliano, Abigail Humann and Anna Humann, along with former EI student Addison Weeks – recently earned the Girl Scout Silver Award, the highest honor a Cadette Girl Scout can achieve. To complete the award's required 50 hours of service, the troop dedicated its efforts to supporting the local nonprofit Hope for Youth. The girls raised nearly \$1,900 to provide gift cards for the organization's clients and completed a wide range of hands-on service projects.



WFTK Studios Brings Real-World Broadcast Experience to EIHS Students

East Islip High School's modern broadcasting facility, WFTK Studios, was created in 2018 thanks to a \$40,000 donation from the local For the Kids Foundation. Originally launched in 1989, the school's broadcast studio served students for decades before receiving this much-needed transformation. The upgraded facility introduced state-of-the-art cameras, production equipment and technology capable of broadcasting live video over the internet, bringing the high school into a new era of media production.

Today, the broadcast and video production program is led by technology teacher Bill Lackner, who has been teaching these courses for the past six years. Under his guidance, students enrolled in broadcast and video production classes are responsible for creating and producing the school's weekly news and sports news segments each year. These student-produced programs are shared with the school community through the EIHS News WFTK Studios YouTube channel and the program's Instagram page. The broadcasts cover a wide range of content, including school and community news, coverage of East Islip sports teams and local weather forecasts, giving students hands-on, real-world experience in modern media production.

"The studio is always improving," Lackner said. "Every year is a jump off from the last. It's incredible to see how far the program has come and how much pride the students take in creating the news for the school, each and every week."

Lackner also emphasized the lasting impact the program has had on students past and present.

"From students who helped build the program years ago to those currently producing content, they've all left a mark on this studio," he said. "Inspiring students to pursue futures in communications and seeing the work they continue to do after their EIHS careers is incredibly rewarding."

Senior Stephen Foray serves as WFTK's meteorologist, providing biweekly weather forecasts for the school. After taking on the weatherman role, he developed his own weather graphic, using the new green screen equipment to its fullest capacity. Foray believes his work at WFTK will serve as the perfect springboard for an eventual career.

"Being able to have the opportunity to stand in front of the green screen and make my own forecast each week, that's going to help me so much in the future and put me above any other

applicant for a job or college," Foray said.

Other students have found that participating in the program has sparked their creativity and enhanced their social skills.

"I wanted to do this because I love watching ESPN," said senior and head sports anchor Julani Ellis. "I love watching guys break down sports and talk about it. It's been a great experience so far. You get to be yourself on camera. It has really helped me become a more social person and to be more comfortable talking in front of a camera, knowing that it's going to be posted for everyone in the community to see."

"For the field I want to go into, the editing component is definitely going to be very helpful," said senior Aine O'Boyle, a news anchor and primary editor. "As Jelani said, I also feel like it's provided the opportunity for me to talk to many people I wouldn't have expected to talk to. I would have never thought I'd be an anchor, since I'm not someone to speak publicly or be outgoing like that, but it's been nice to be able to do that more often."

"When I started last year in video production, I really liked creating segments for people to watch and learning all the techniques and editing," said senior Chase Wulfken who serves as a news editor, producer and anchor for the station. "It has helped me to become a more creative person."

With continued support from FTK, the facility is set to receive additional upgrades in the future, including improved soundproofing and new lighting setups, further enhancing the learning environment for students.

"Technology and communications are advancing every day," Lackner said. "For our students to have the opportunity to be part of this kind of hands-on experience is invaluable. This is real-world learning at its best."

Through ongoing investment, community support and student creativity, WFTK Studios continues to grow, providing East Islip students with meaningful, future-ready experiences in broadcasting and digital media.



Instagram



Youtube



EI GOES ALL IN ON FORGING



FTK Donation Supports New HS Courtroom and Outdoor Classroom

The For the Kids Foundation presented the Board of Education with a \$64,000 donation check this fall to help furnish the high school's newly created courtroom and outdoor classroom, enhancing both learning environments for students. The outdoor space will provide a fresh, engaging environment that enhances creativity, collaboration and hands-on learning, while the new courtroom will provide a real-world setting for law, debate and civic education, helping students build confidence and critical thinking skills.

"These projects reflect our ongoing commitment to enriching educational opportunities for all students in East Islip," FTK President Cheryl Pepe said.

"This generous donation will be a wonderful addition to the high school that will benefit our students' education," Board President Stephen Ruland said.

Local Fire Departments Teach Fire Safety to Elementary Students

Connetquot and Timber Point were filled with excitement and hands-on learning this fall as East Islip's young students participated in Fire Prevention Week activities during memorable visits from the East Islip, Great River and Islip Terrace fire departments. The dedicated firefighters taught the students important fire safety tips, including what to do in case of an emergency, and helped them understand the vital role of our community heroes. The students also explored real fire trucks and equipment.



COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS



Tree Lightings Spread Holiday Cheer

Fourth and fifth grade choruses from JFK Elementary School spread holiday cheer at the East Islip Fire Department's tree lighting on Dec. 5, while RCK's singers performed at the Islip Terrace Fire Department's ceremony on Dec. 7. That same evening, the high school's Fermata Nowhere A Cappella Club added to the seasonal spirit by singing at the Great River Fire Department tree lighting.



HS Drama Club Brings Holiday Tradition to Life With 'A Christmas Carol'

The high school's Drama Club continued a beloved tradition, presented once every four years, with its December production of the holiday classic "A Christmas Carol," directed by Bethany Affelt and previewed at that month's Board of Education meeting.

"We are so proud of every student who was involved in this production," Affelt said. "The cast and stage crew worked tirelessly throughout a busy concert season to carry on this wonderful EI holiday tradition. From meet-and-greets with the original cast to the fifth grade field trip, we all had a wonderful time experiencing this first anniversary production of 'A Christmas Carol.' Our school's music teachers look forward to presenting this EIHS-exclusive version of a treasured holiday tale again in another four years."

"Congratulations to the Drama Club on a truly wonderful performance," Superintendent Paul Manzo said. "Their talent, hard work and dedication were on full display, bringing this classic story to life in a way our community won't forget."



EIMS Chorus and EIHS Chamber Orchestra Perform Holiday Concert for Momentum Residents

Students from the middle school's seventh grade Chorus Club and the high school's chamber orchestra paid a festive visit to the Momentum at South Bay for Rehabilitation and Nursing facility to perform a special concert of holiday songs for the toe-tapping enjoyment of the residents.

"Having the students share their talents with the residents made this visit especially meaningful and reinforced the importance of kindness, compassion and community," East Islip Middle School Principal Tara Scully said.





Holiday Celebrations Highlight Community Effort and the Joy of Giving Back

The high school held its most successful districtwide Thanksgiving food drive to date, collecting more than 200 turkeys and thousands of pounds of nonperishable food. Over 100 students from eight different clubs and organizations worked together on the two-part initiative, sponsored annually by the National Honor Society.

For Connetquot's joyful annual Turkey Trot, students learned about the meaning of Thanksgiving and created their own themed crafts before "trotting" around the building and placing canned or boxed goods into collection bins. This year, Connetquot

partnered with Branches of Long Island to distribute the donated food to area families in need, reinforcing the school's commitment to giving back to the community.

At Timber Point, families donated 105 brand-new pairs of pajamas for its annual Great Bedtime Story Pajama Drive. The donations go directly to families facing adversity, providing comfort and warmth during the holiday season. For every new pair of pajamas collected, partner Scholastic donates a book, giving children the gift of cozy sleepwear and a new story to enjoy.

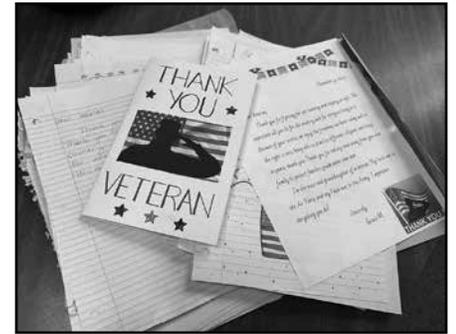




Honoring Veterans Across East Islip's Schools

Across the district's schools in November, students found ways to express deep appreciation for the service, bravery and sacrifice of the men and women who have served the nation. At Timber Point, students serenaded veterans with a song called "Thank You, Soldiers" and asked them questions about their time in the military, while at JFK's breakfast celebration with veteran

guests, students led a parade, made hundreds of thank-you cards and read poetry to express their gratitude and respect. At the middle school, students took time in their social studies classes to write heartfelt letters of thanks to our veterans. Through their messages, students not only honored our veterans but also reflected on the importance of gratitude and civic responsibility.



Unity Day at Schools Creates a *Stronger Community*

This year's Unity Day was a bright and meaningful celebration at both elementary and middle school levels, with halls filled with a sea of orange as students proudly wore the color to stand together for inclusion, empathy and unity.

Connetquot and Timber Point students learned about the power of kindness and community, each contributing a strip of paper listing one way they could show kindness to others. These messages were then linked together to form a colorful paper chain in both buildings. At the middle school, students wrote positive messages to one another during lunch, spreading kindness and

encouragement throughout the cafeteria. This activity emphasized the importance of being a good classmate,

showing respect and supporting one another.

In each school, Unity Day served as a wonderful way to

remind everyone that small acts of kindness help create a stronger, more inclusive school community.



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SUPERINTENDENT'S Message

Dear East Islip Community,

As we enter the second half of the school year, I am incredibly proud to reflect upon the exceptional opportunities we have provided for our students so far this year, many of which are highlighted within this publication. These opportunities do not happen by chance, but are rather the result of strong partnerships, thoughtful leadership and a shared commitment to excellence.

The unwavering support of our Board of Education, the collaboration of our community partners, and the expertise and dedication of our staff truly exemplify what it means to embrace our theme of “Better Together.” I am humbled by the work and commitment I witness daily across our schools and throughout our community. The dedication to our students and our community is exemplary. It reflects the deep sense of pride we all share and reinforces our collective belief

in the power of education to shape futures. Together, we will continue to create a district where students are supported, inspired and given every opportunity to succeed.

I look forward to continuing to celebrate the great successes our students and staff achieve, both in and beyond the classroom. As we celebrate these moments, I hope you can join us during some of the great events and activities we have planned for the coming weeks, a list of which can be found under the calendar tab of our website.

Thank you for your continued support of our East Islip school community.

Sincerely,

Paul Manzo
Superintendent of Schools

Full-Day UPK Program Continues in 2026-2027

The School District’s Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program, funded by New York State, will continue to operate as a tuition-free, full-day, on-site program for the 2026-2027 school year. The district will not offer a half-day option.

To be eligible, children must:

- Be district residents.
- Turn 4 years old on or before December 1, 2026.
- Be eligible for kindergarten in the 2027-2028 school year.

Enrollment is limited and determined by a lottery based on available seats. The lottery will be held on Friday, February 27, 2026 and will be conducted by the district’s internal auditors, Cullen and Danowski. Families whose children are selected will be contacted directly and provided with instructions for the mandatory registration process. Please do not complete online registration unless you are notified that your child has been selected.

Families interested in entering the lottery should visit www.eischools.org and follow the link for the UPK Lottery. All lottery entries must be submitted by Tuesday, February 10, 2026, at 3 p.m.

If you have questions, please contact the Office of the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction at 631-224-2015 or the District Registrar at 631-224-2043.

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This newsletter is published by the Board of Education as a community service to inform the public of school news and business. If you have any questions, please feel free to call 631-224-2000 or fax 631-581-1617.