JANUARY 2026

SUPERINTENDENT NEWSLETTER

"ENGAGE, EQUIP, ELEVATE TOWARD EXCELLENCE."

A MESSAGE FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Elmsford Community,

Winter has certainly arrived with enthusiasm following our recent storm. As we navigated school closings and delays, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to our families and staff for your patience and cooperation. While we can expect more winter weather in the weeks ahead, we can also take comfort in knowing that spring will, indeed, arrive.

I would also like to offer special recognition to our facilities team for their tremendous efforts in clearing snow and preparing our buildings, ensuring that staff and students were able to return safely.

The month since the new year began has been an especially busy and productive one. At Alexander Hamilton High School, students had the valuable opportunity to hear from alumni who returned to share insights about their college experiences. This meaningful tradition continues to be a highlight, and I am grateful to Guidance Counselors Monica Ahern and Stephanie Luccioni for organizing the event, as well as to our graduates who generously shared their time and perspectives.

Across the district, students remain actively engaged in their learning—conducting research projects, strengthening mathematical skills, creating works of art, and much more. It is always impressive to see the depth of knowledge and creativity our students demonstrate each day.

Equally important are the support programs in place to assist students who may need additional help or enrichment. Studentshave access to tutoring through after-school sessions at Grady and before-school opportunities at Dixson.

Earlier this month, we hosted two budget input meetings to provide community members with an opportunity to learn more about the 2026–2027 budget, understand the planning process, and share their perspectives. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the parents and community members who participated. I look forward to continuing this important conversation in the weeks and months ahead.

There is much to look forward to as we continue through the winter season.

Please be on the lookout next month for our College Information Night for juniors and remember that Winter Recess will be here before we know it!

Thank you, as always, for your continued partnership and support.

Susan Yom
Superintendent of Schools

Please see next year's calendar.
https://www.eufsd.org/calendar

WINTER RECESS

A gentle reminder, schools will be closed Feb. 16 through 20 for Winter Recess! We hope you enjoy a wonderful few days! Stay warm and safe!



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Home from Harvard on break, alum reflects on life in the Ivy League



One of Matteo Di Berto's biggest piece of advice for those heading to college in the fall, "bring snacks if you can."

It was advice given with a laugh, and an explanation which stated that even in the top tier schools, the food leaves something to be desired in terms of quality and time as the dining hall is not always open at convenient times.

"I am having a great time," Mr. Di Berto said, despite the food.

Mr. Di Berto graduated from Alexander Hamilton High School in June and is attending Harvard University on a full scholarship. He just completed his first semester and is looking forward to returning to Cambridge in mid-January to attend a conference.

When he first arrived on campus, he was not there long, as the freshmen are whisked away on a camping trip to New Hampshire. There he made friends and got to know his classmates before classes began and felt more comfortable navigating through his first days as a student.

Among the classes he took were writing, a general education philosophy class, and Harvard's infamous Math 55, one of the toughest undergraduate courses offered.

"It was very challenging," Mr. Di Berto said.

He joined the First-Year Social Committee, an organization that helps plan events for first year students as well as becoming a member of the Harvard Undergraduates in Asia Program, which will see him travel to Singapore in March for a conference

One of the biggest adjustments he had to make, Mr. Di Berto said, there is much more writing than he was used to.

"I thought writing one eight-page paper in the past was bad as a senior in high school," he said. "In college you write three of those in one semester, and most of them were 12 pages."

It also took some getting used being away from home where everything is familiar.

"It was a much nicer environment in terms of knowing everyone," he said of AHHS. "However, at Harvard, everyone is in the same boat," as freshman. You are able to talk to someone, but you spend time with people 24-7."

He said he is always surrounded by people, his roommates, in classes, at the library, which took some getting used to, but he has made a great group of friends and quickly settled into his new routine.

His advice to those looking to attend college is to take advantage of as many academic opportunities as you can. He took 17 AP tests while in high school, even though he had not taken the corresponding class.

He suggested too working hard to "maximize your stats," from being at the top your class (Mr. Di Berto was named Valedictorian of the Class of 2025), to SAT scores.

"You are being compared to students in other schools in Westchester," he said. "Basically, do as much as you can."

He also noted that one's personality is just as, if not more, important for being accepted into a college.

"The interview is a big deal," he said. "They want to see how you'll fit in. You want to be interesting and have a different perspective."

In the last few months, Mr. Di Berto has come to see he has changed as an individual after having gained college experience.

"I've become a lot more social," he said. "Because you must be, there's no room to be alone, even for a couple of hours. My taste in music and food has expanded, the amount of work I do has changed."

Mr. Di Berto is looking forward to getting back on campus for the spring semester. He'll be arriving a bit early to participate in a conference the Undergraduates of Harvard are hosting. He is also looking forward to his classes, including "From Quarks to Conciseness," an atomic physics class, a class he was pleased to get into. The General Education classes are done through a lottery, and it is not guaranteed that a student will get into the class of their choice.

Next year Mr. Di Berto is looking forward to being a member of the Peer Advisor Fellows, a mentor program where sophomores, juniors and seniors are paired with a freshman student.

One of the highlights was attending the Yale-Harvard football game, and he said, "It's like such a big thing, every student has to go," he said. "It's one of the main events."

Unfortunately, Harvard lost this important game the last several years in a row. "Next year, we've got it."

Alumni share experience with students ready to go

In an annual tradition, several Alexander Hamilton High School alumni gathered in their former auditorium with members of the current junior and senior classes. The panel discussed their personal college experiences, some who are freshmen, or seniors, all to help their peers feel more comfortable with what may come.

"It's a good opportunity to hear different points of view and may help guide you in your process," Guidance Counselor Monica Ahern said.

The alumni talked about the vibe at their respective colleges, what they like about their choice, how college differs from high school and the importance of developing good time management skills.

"UConn has a big sense of community," Phoenix Harper, a senior at the University of Connecticut said. "I love that. It's very diverse. The school is not boring."

The one thing that makes his school standout, is the fact that it is the oldest university in the country, a fact that attracts a lot of tourists to the Cambridge, Mass. campus.

"My favorite thing is it doesn't feel very stressful," Matteo Di Berto said being a freshman at Harvard University. "They limit you to four classes a semester, and its done so you graduate on time."

Twins Dean and Dylan Guerra both attend the University of Maryland. For Dean it was his top choice, and his brother Dylan said he really liked the campus.

Miguel Gonzalez stressed that once you leave high school you are on your own, which for him was a big change.
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"Everything is dependent on what you want to do," Mr. Gonzalez, who attends John Jay University, said. "If you chose to be involved in party life, that is your choice or if you want to be into your studies, no one is going to tell you that you are falling behind, if you don't do your work, that is on you."



For Ms. Harper the new sense of freedom she felt as a freshman was different from her high school days. She said the one thing that kept her focused was the fact that she was now paying for her education.

"You are wasting money if you don't take advantage of the opportunity to learn," she said.

Aurora Johnson, a freshman at the University of New Haven, encouraged students to be mindful of the free time they will have.

"I would say use it wisely," she said. "If you have homework, do it then."

The one thing that surprised her was how quickly time went by, and it's best to learn how to manage it well so you don't fall behind.

This freedom means that there is no one there to help you get up on time, or to be sure your work is being done.

"No one will hold you accountable," Mr. Di Berto said. "You really have to keep yourself on track."

For Sunjay Green, a senior at UConn, he encouraged students to say "hi" to everyone they meet, it is the best way to make friends.

"You will meet people from everywhere," he said. "It's all about networking for your future."

In terms of the work itself, Ms. Harper said one thing she would have liked to know ahead of time, was how challenging college courses were compared to high school. Fortunately, she said, professors are there to help and she encouraged students to take advantage of the office hours they have.

"Find a way to 'lock in,' you can't skate through college courses," she said.

Mr. Gonzalez noted too that finding a balance is important. He admitted that during his first semester he got involved in everything — clubs and sports. It just made him feel burned out.

"Find a balance," he said. "Definitely get involved but be sure to give yourself some time to yourself."

Mr. Di Berto encouraged students to not stress about what college they will

Continued on page 4

end up at, even if it's not their top choice.

"Wherever you go, you will be fine, have your life and enjoy it first," he said.

Mr. Green agreed.

"Stay on track, obviously, but take some of the pressure off of yourself," he said. "You don't have to have your whole life planned out. It's ok not to know."

For Mr. Gonzalez, who commutes to John Jay, said he enjoys it, being at home and saving money. However, it can be an impediment to being more involved on campus. He has found friends, however, and they take turns commuting together.

Several alums warned that living on campus has its plusses and minuses. The on-campus housing situation can vary not only from school to school but on campus as well. You could end up in one of the oldest dorms on campus or be lucky to live in a new one. With each year the situation and where you live can easily change and off campus housing could be an option too.

AHHS students were curious about how and when they eat while at college.

Each college is different, they were told, but many use a points system each semester and most offer a variety of food and even some have familiar restaurants on campus.

During the question-and-answer session, students asked about making friends, the social life and how to pick a major.

Ultimately, as Mr. Di Berto said, "you make friends the moment you talk to people."



A panel of former AHHS students speak to current juniors and seniors during the annual Alumni Panel Day.



Mr. Green shared his insights into being a college student.

Getting Creative

Third graders at Grady recently enjoyed time in art class with Ms. Sanft where they studied warm and cool colors and line formation!







AHHS students get creative with new art classes

The 2025-2026 school year brought with it several creative outlets for students in the form of new art classes. Students now have the option of taking Drawing and Painting as well as Ceramics, which is now possible with the installation of a new kiln late last year.

"Having these new options is important for students interested in art because it exposes them to artforms they may not have previously considered or been aware of," said art teacher Natalie Bolden. "Learning about ceramics may urge students to consider the complex processes involved in creating the bowls and mugs they use daily. Drawing and Painting may help to push the students' limits of what they considered possible of themselves as artists, teaching them that through practice, perseverance and resilience, they can achieve anything they put their mind to - in the art world and beyond."

The **Drawing and Painting** course builds upon the foundational skills learned in Studio Art and helps students to understand the world around them by learning to grasp visual relationships and interpret what they see. Drawing is an essential building block that will help Hamilton art students in all art related fields.

Additionally, through mediums such as watercolor, pastel and acrylic, artists will be able to explore color theory, become experts at mixing colors and, learn paint application techniques that create the illusion of form, space and light.

Ceramics introduces students to the ancient craft of working with clay. Students will learn the basics of ceramics, as well as the ins and outs of the chemistry involved in successfully forming, firing, and glazing ceramic pieces. Students will learn essential hand building techniques, including pinch, coil and slab. From there students have the freedom to choose the techniques they will use to design independent projects, projects inspired by nature, and projects that follow in the footsteps of contemporary ceramicists.

Two other new art related courses include Graphic Design and Photography, both taught by Joseph Cartolano.

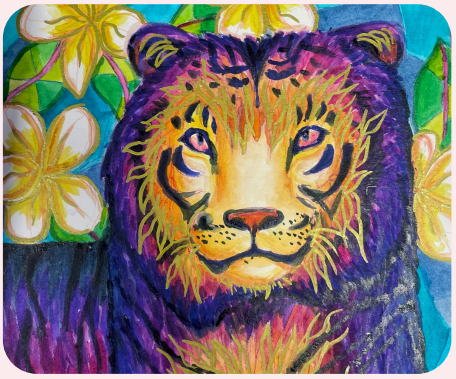
In **Graphic Design** students are learning how to create digital art using Procreate. Students engage with branding and typography to learn how to advertise, using logos and mockups to create digital products. Students analyze historical flags, cartoons, and pixel art to expand their skills in the art world.

"This course is designed to build skills to be used in real-world creative careers, from advertising to game design," Mr. Cartolano said.

In **Photography**, students learn the technical and creative foundations of camera use, including manual settings, composition, and perspective. Through learning about editing on Photoshop, students learn what makes a photo pop. The course emphasizes not only how to take a photograph, but how intentional choices enhance visual storytelling.

"Not every student connects with traditional art forms, and these new courses give students the opportunity to explore creative mediums they may never have been exposed to otherwise," Mr. Cartolano said.

"These new courses allow students to gain the understanding that art is not only expressive, but also a valuable skill set that can translate into future careers and a life of creating!"









AHHS 8th graders become stars in their own science music videos

Watermelon, watermelon, watermelon.

The word was continuously repeated by eighth graders, not as the latest phrase following, six . . ., never mind. Rather it's a common theater trick — when trying to look as if you are speaking real words, but in fact are not.

Students used the trick with a special project for their study of the solar system. Their assignment was to use AI tools to create a song and record a video of them "singing" it.

Working in groups of two or three, students in Rich MacLeish's class spun a wheel to see what planet or star they would need to research. They spun a different wheel to determine what genre of music they would use in their videos.

Once the research was done, students fed the information into an AI program, asking it to turn their words into a song that rhymed. Once they had the lyrics, they asked AI to create music using the genre that had been assigned to them.

Then it was time for lights, camera, action as they made a music video.

"It's better than country," Layla D. said with a laugh, having been randomly assigned G Funk for her project. "It's like Snoop Dog or Dr. Dre," she said, of the west coast hip hop sound.

She and her project partner, Louise A., were assigned to research the planet Mercury.

Louise said at first they were confused as to how to combine the two concepts — hip hop and the smallest planet in the solar system.

In the end, AI helped them out and they were able to create a music video of themselves driving a car on the planet.

"I learned I'm bad at singing," laughed Layla.

"I learned Mercury is kind of cool," said Louise.

For Allen D. and Jack R., the two had to research "Philadelphia Soul," just as much as they had to the Sun, which had been randomly selected for them.

The two admitted they would have preferred hip hop, but found the 70s genre, consisting of strings, horns and "funky rhythms," to be not too bad.

As to the science, Jack said he enjoyed learning about the solar flares and chemical reactions that take place on the Sun's surface.

To wrap up this creative assignment, the class was going to hold a video viewing party.











Grady Drama Club back in the spotlight, new production coming in the spring

After some time off from the stage, last year the Grady Drama Club returned with an amazing performance of "Disney's Finding Nemo, Jr."

Club organizers, Mary Potenza, Christine Budzynski and Kimberly Breen, felt that the time had come "to bring it back and re-create a space where students could connect, have fun, and express themselves creatively. "Disney's Finding Nemo, Jr." felt like a joyful, familiar story that helped reintroduce theater in a low-pressure, exciting way."

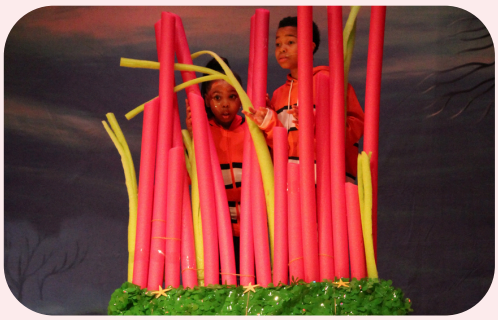
Theater at the elementary level helps students build confidence, teamwork, and communication skills at a formative age, they said. It gives students a chance to try something new and discover talents they may not even know they have yet. For many students, Drama Club is also a place where they feel a strong sense of belonging.

Drama Club is open to any 5th and 6th grader who is interested. Students do try out, but the goal is to include everyone in the production in some way. Parts are assigned with care so that each student has a meaningful role and a chance to shine, whether in a starring role or working together as part of the ensemble.

This spring when the curtain goes up, the audience will be treated to another production, "Disney's The Lion King Jr.," a fun, family-friendly show with a variety of roles, memorable music, and great energy.

"Drama club is about much more than putting on a show. It helps students make new friends across grade levels, learn responsibility, and celebrate creativity. We're so excited to see the program growing again and can't wait to see where it goes next," Ms. Potenza said.

Scenes from last year's performance of "Disney's Finding Nemo, Jr."



















Grady NEHS hosted a "Soup-er Bowl" for those in need

The National Elementary Honor Society at Grady hosted a "Souper-Bowl" Drive, collecting soup related items, such as canned or boxed soup, broth, rice, noodles, canned chicken and soup bowls. The items will be donated to Lifting Up Westchester to be distributed at local
soup kitchens.
During the January Fitness Friday, the class that donated the most to the collection was recognized with a trophy and a special treat!









Dixson introduces PBIS for some important learning

The children cheered when "Barkley" entered the room. Barkley, they learned was not a new student coming to Dixson school, rather the new mascot!

Barkley will be on hand to help students to behave properly at school and to help celebrate their success.

Barkley was introduced to students at a special assembly, launching a new PBIS initiative focused on helping students to BARK: **B**e Safe, Be **A**ccountable, Be **R**espectful and Be **K**ind! Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is an evidence-based, tiered framework for supporting students' behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health.

First Grade Teacher Courtney Velardo and Principal Deborah Earle demonstrated for students what some positive behavior and inappropriate behavior might be, like running in the hall, not helping to clean up the classroom or not paying attention to lessons being taught. After discussing why these behaviors may not increase time on learning, the two then demonstrated ways students could behave to create a better environment, such as walking in the halls and keeping their hands to themselves or helping their teacher to put classroom materials away.

As students go about their day, teachers and administrators will be watching for positive behavior. When they see someone demonstrating attributes of BARK, the student will earn "BARK Bucks." This goes for students not only in their classrooms, but while at recess or lunch or during one of their special classes, like art or gym.

"The BARK Bucks program was developed as part of our school-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) approach to teach and reinforce positive behaviors—Be Safe, Act Responsibly, Respect Others, and be Kind," said Ms. Earle. "The goal of the program is to create a welcoming learning environment where students are recognized for demonstrating expected behaviors, helping them feel successful, supported, and ready to learn."

When a student earns these special bonusses, they drop it in their classrooms BARK Bowl, a special container. At the end of the week, the classroom with the most BARK Bucks, will earn a special prize.

The bucks also can be used for school-wide events. When the assembly was over, each student in attendance earned a BARK Buck, and could drop it in container to vote if the schools as a whole should be given extra recess, have a special Pajama Day or select a student to help Ms. Earle say the Pledge of Allegiance one morning.













Below, AHHS Sophomores in Regents Chemistry recently spent a morning studying the properties of different metals!











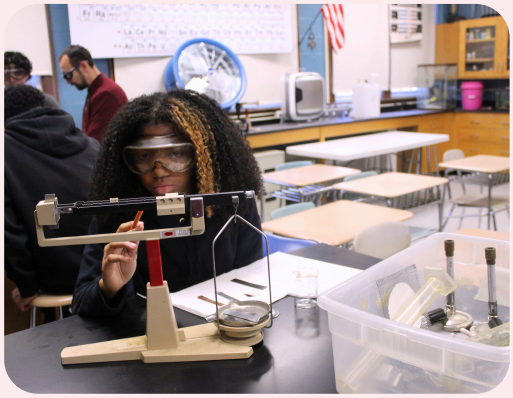


Go figure! Recently students, above, in Allie DeMorris' class at Grady spent the morning learning division strategies with multi-digit dividends and one-digit divisors!











At left, after getting some help logging in, kindergarten students in Ms. Young's class at Dixson settled in for an iReady assessment in Reading!

Investing in Structured Literacy Instruction

This month, all Special Education and Academic Intervention Services (AIS) teachers in grades K–7 participated in a three-day professional learning training in the Wilson Reading System®, a research-based structured literacy program grounded in the science of reading. Wilson supports students with dyslexia, language-based learning disabilities, and those who require intensive reading intervention through explicit, systematic, multisensory instruction.

Through this training, teachers strengthened their ability to deliver consistent, data-driven, individualized reading instruction. Expanding in-house expertise in Wilson Reading System instruction strengthens the district's literacy continuum and reinforces our commitment to helping all students build strong foundational reading skills.

Director of Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services Monthly Office Hours

To strengthen communication and partnership with families, Leah Zilich, Director of Special Education will be offering monthly, virtual office hours for parents and guardians. These sessions provide an informal opportunity to ask questions, seek clarification, and discuss general topics related to special education services and supports.

Office hours are open to all families and are not intended to replace CSE meetings or address individual student matters, but rather to offer guidance, information, and support in a welcoming setting.

These office hours will take place monthly from **5:00-6:00 p.m. on the first Monday of each month.** Please click THIS LINK to join, our first session will be **Monday, February 2nd.**

Board of Education Meeting Update: Special Education

At the most recent Board of Education meeting, the district shared an update on Special Education programming and the significant strides made thus far to better support students and families. The presentation highlighted progress in expanding in-district programs, strengthening instructional practices, increasing staff training, and building a more robust continuum of services to meet diverse learner needs.

The update also reviewed how data, professional learning, and collaborative planning are being used to improve outcomes. Check out the slideshow, HERE.

Annual Review Season is Coming!

The district will begin the Annual Review season for students who receive special education services. An Annual Review is a required meeting held at least once a year to review your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and make sure it continues to meet their needs.

At the Annual Review, the CSE (Committee on Special Education) team—which includes the parent/guardian, will:

- Review your child's progress on current IEP goals
- Discuss strengths, needs, and any concerns
- Consider updated information from teachers, service providers, and evaluations (if applicable)
- Decide whether any changes are needed to goals, services, supports, or placement for the upcoming year

What parents should know:

- You will receive a meeting notice in advance.
- Parents are encouraged to share input, questions, and concerns, your perspective is a critical part of the process.
- You may invite others who know your child well to attend.
- The goal of the meeting is to ensure your child continues to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment.

If you have questions ahead of your Annual Review or would like support preparing for the meeting, please do not hesitate to reach out to your child's Special Education Teacher or the Special Education Office. We value our partnership with families and look forward to these important conversations.

PTSA Launches Special Education Subcommittee (SEPTSA)

The PTSA is launching a Special Education subcommittee (SEPTSA) to support students with disabilities and strengthen collaboration among families, schools, and the district. All parents and caregivers are welcome to join, regardless of whether their child receives special education services.

SEPTSA will offer opportunities to share information, build community, and partner on inclusive initiatives that support student success. More details about meetings and how to get involved will be shared soon on ParentSquare, stay tuned!





Recently the Alexander Hamilton High School Spirit Squad participated in Peekskill's Annual "Battle of the Squads," and had so much fun!



UPCOMING EVENTS

Feb. 4, Board of Education Meeting, 7 p.m., AHHS Auditorium
Feb. 16-20, Winter Recess, Schools Closed
Feb. 26, College Information Night for Juniors, 6:30 p.m., AHHS Library
Feb. 27, Dixson Fitness Friday

The AHHS Student Government recently hosted a Rec Night, enabling students to enjoy some sports, games and snacks!











