

THE DARIEN DIFFERENCE



District Spotlight February 2026 - Issue 6

Dear Community Members,

Welcome to the sixth 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 February edition highlights the wonderful work happening at all of the schools in the DPS and the many ways that our students and faculty are living the Vision of the Graduate - every single day!

At each school, our students are living the Vision of the Graduate and demonstrating the attributes that are so important for success in life. I am constantly awed by the amazing philanthropic work of our students such as the Souperbowl and the Atria Partnership. I also am struck by the focus on community as demonstrated in Town Hall Takeovers and Husky Hangouts. As always in the DPS, the creative voices of our learners come through in performances such as *Bye Bye Birdie* and the *Gift of Words* project. Lastly, the DHS Capstone projects and the personalized approach at Fitch Academy truly demonstrate our focus on helping every learner become their best selves.

Please join me in celebrating what makes the DPS a wonderful learning community. In our March edition, we will learn all about the wonders of Toekeneke School. In our April edition, we will learn all about the wonders of Hindley School.

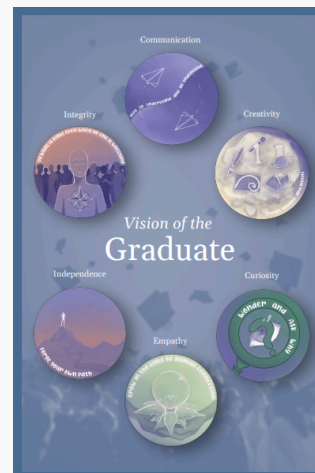
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Eric Byrne'.

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

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Hindley Husky Hangouts: Building Community & Belonging

On a weekly basis (typically Thursdays), to build community and belonging, we hold a Hindley Husky Hangout - a mini-assembly in our common room, one or two grade levels at a time with each grade participating in about seven of these gatherings/lessons throughout the year. Here is a look at our journey so far:

- **September (Schoolwide Commitments):** Our first round of Husky Hangouts, facilitated by Hindley Administration and staff, established schoolwide commitments for lunch, recess, hallways, and the bus. Students contributed to these shared expectations, which are now displayed on posters throughout the building.
- **October (Kindness & Wellness):** School Psychologists Ms. Chokshi and Ms. McGrath used the book *How Full Is Your Bucket?* to teach students how kind words and actions increase happiness for both the giver and the receiver.
- **November (Safety & Security):** Ms. Attisani and Officer DiPane (SSO) met with K-1 students to discuss the "why" behind school drills. Students watched Officer Buckle and Gloria and shared their own safety tips for the hallways and classrooms.
- **December (Health & Hygiene):** Nurse Lisa taught Grades 2-3 how to be "Germ Busters" during flu season. Students played Germ Bingo and learned that being healthy is a key part of being a successful student.

Our latest round of Husky Hangouts, facilitated by Hindley Administration and the fifth-grade team, focused on the layers of community. Students explored how they contribute to their school environment through three specific lenses:

- **Building Community in the Classroom:** Following a reading of *This Is a School* by John Shu, students discussed how their classrooms serve as unique spaces for sharing, helping, and coming together.
- **Building Community Across Classes:** Ms. Bras Taylor led a "Find Another" icebreaker, helping students discover shared interests—from favorite sports to favorite foods—with peers from different classrooms.
- **Building Community as a School:** Mr. Cooper introduced strategies for expressing feelings through community circles. These circles are used proactively to share highlights or restoratively to resolve disagreements and repair harm.

We look forward to continuing these meaningful gatherings with all our students!



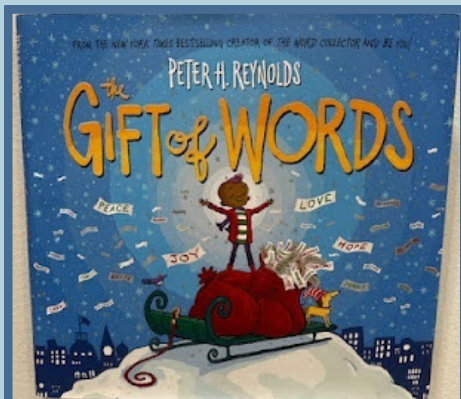
A Vocabulary Voyage: 2nd Grade Plants a "Gift of Words" at Holmes!

Our 2nd-grade explorers in **Mrs. Vunk's, Ms. Weissert's, Mrs. Shea's, and Ms. Novotnik's** classes recently embarked on a "Vocabulary Voyage." Inspired by Peter Reynolds' beautiful book, *The Gift of Words*, and their Social Studies lessons on community helpers, these young scholars decided to become helpers themselves—using the power of language!

Armed with **curiosity**, the students asked themselves a big question: *How can we make our community feel seen and celebrated?* By practicing their **Vision of the Graduate** skills, they used empathy to brainstorm words that would act as "gifts" to anyone walking through our doors.

These weren't just your everyday words! Our 2nd graders showed incredible **creativity**, hunting for "unexpected" vocabulary to surprise and delight their audience. From "Exuberant" to "Kindness," every leaf on our new display was chosen with a specific person in mind.

The result of this journey is the **Colorful Word Tree** now blooming at our main entrance! It's a vibrant, welcoming display that reminds us all how a single, thoughtful word can brighten a day.



Ox Ridge Town Hall Takeover: Students Lead the Way!

At Ox Ridge, our School Code - Kind, Accepting, Honest, Responsible, Safe, Peaceful, and Respectful to All - isn't just a list on a wall—it's a living, breathing mission! Once a month, our **Town Hall Meetings** transform the gym into a hub of leadership, where students step up to actively teach, model, and celebrate the behaviors that help make Ox Ridge a welcoming and supportive place for everyone.

Through high-energy skits, original chants, and catchy songs, each grade level brings our core values to life for the whole school in their own, unique way. When students see their peers demonstrating what it means to be responsible, kind, or respectful, the message feels authentic and relatable. This shared experience builds a common language across grade levels and helps students understand how our expectations connect to real situations in classrooms, hallways, recess, and beyond.



The Trek So Far:

- **5th Grade** kicked us off by exploring **Acceptance**.
- **4th Grade** shone a spotlight on **Honesty**.
- **3rd Grade** recently took the lead on **Responsibility**, using their "student voice" to show how our choices shape our community.

The Road Ahead: The adventure continues! Get ready for **1st Grade** to tackle **Safety**, **2nd Grade** to bring the **Peace**, and **Kindergarten** to show us all what it means to be **Respectful to All**.

These meetings do more than just teach—they build a common language that follows our students from the classroom to the playground. When kids lead the way, the message sticks!



Royle's "Souperbowl" Post-Game Report: Empathy in Action!

On Friday, February 6th, the Royle community tackled hunger with our annual **Jersey Day and "Souperbowl" Collection!** Our hallways were a sea of team colors as students and staff sported their favorite athletic apparel to kick off the big weekend. But the real "MVP" performance happened in our hearts and our front lobby!

This was more than just a food drive; it was a powerful exercise in **Empathy**, a key component of our **Vision of the Graduate**. Our students didn't just drop off cans—they took the time to consider the needs of others in our community. By focusing on "most-needed" items like hearty soups, protein-packed tuna, and shelf-stable milk, our young leaders demonstrated a deep understanding of how their actions could provide comfort and support to their neighbors. Thanks to the incredible generosity of our families, we filled our donation bins to the brim for **Person to Person**.

While the collection was the main event, students who brought in donations also cast their official **Super Bowl Predictions**, adding an extra layer of excitement to our lobby throughout the week.

A massive thank you to our Royle families! Your support proved that when we lead with empathy, everyone wins.

The Tokeneke Difference: Purpose Beyond Ourselves

At Tokeneke, our motto is simple but profound: "Together We Can Make A Difference." This February, our students turned that mission into a grand expedition of the heart, proving that even our youngest explorers can navigate the world with Integrity, Empathy, and Purpose.

A Heart for the Community: The Atria Partnership

In a purposeful collaboration with State Representative Tracy Marra, our K–5 students focused their "explorer's lens" on our neighbors at Atria Senior Living.

- The Mission: To ensure every senior feels like a valued member of the Darien community.
- The Vision in Action: Teachers framed this as a quest in **Empathy**. Students learned that being an "upstander" means reaching out to those who might feel unseen. By crafting heartfelt cards for neighbors they may never meet, our students practiced "honoring the humanity of each person"—a core milestone in our **Vision of the Graduate**.

A Culture of Connection: Kindness Week

Partnering with the Tokeneke PTO, we launched a week-long journey to strengthen the bonds within our own school walls. This wasn't just a series of events; it was a collective trek toward a more positive community.

- Self-Assessment: Students used **Independence** to celebrate their "unique talents and thinking," recognizing the strengths they bring to the Tokeneke team.
- Building New Bridges: Through **Communication**, peers used shared interests to spark conversations with students they might not otherwise interact with. By "listening with a discerning ear," they found common ground and practiced **Integrity**—doing what is right and kind even when no one is watching.

The Ripple Effect: Making a Difference

The true discovery of this month? When our students learn to look outward with **empathy**—whether responding to a state representative's call to service or cheering up a senior at Atria—they are training themselves to look at their own classmates with that same inclusive spirit.

By learning how to make a neighbor feel "seen," our students are ensuring that every person in our own building feels supported, valued, and included. That is the true power of the Tokeneke community: proving every day that when we work together, we truly make a difference.

MMS Players Take the Stage:

A Record-Breaking Run of Bye Bye Birdie Jr.

The Middlesex Middle School stage was alive with energy from January 29–31 as the MMS Players presented four sold-out performances of *Bye Bye Birdie Jr.* The run kicked off with a special dress rehearsal for an audience of Theatre 308 members, faculty, and families, setting the stage for a weekend of packed houses and standing ovations.

True to the mission of the MMS Players, this year's production was a model of inclusivity. With a "no-cut" policy, the program ensured that every student who wished to participate found a home. The result was a massive collaborative effort featuring over 100 students across all grade levels in both the cast and crew.

Mentorship Across the District

The production also served as a bridge between schools, showcasing the talent within the Darien community. While the student choreographer is a current DHS senior, several other high school students returned to MMS to collaborate with Jeff DeMaio on light and sound management.

This spirit of legacy was especially meaningful for Director Erika Flynn. An MMS alum herself, Flynn dedicated this year's production to the late Dr. Stevan Levinson. Dr. Levinson directed Flynn in the same musical at MMS back in 2002, and today, the school's auditorium proudly bears his name.

A Team Effort

A production of this scale succeeds through the dedicated support of parent volunteers and a diverse team of MMS faculty members, including:

- Kat Kelly (Producer)
- Eleni Rosenboom (Assistant Director)
- Sarah Young (Production Stage Crew Manager)
- Greg Carnevali (Set Designer)
- Karla Greto (Choreographer)
- Kathy Knapp (Music Director)



While the curtain has closed on *Bye Bye Birdie Jr.*, the MMS Players are already looking forward to their spring drama workshop, which will feature an in-depth scene study of *Little Women*.





Voices of Impact: The DHS Senior Capstone

At DHS, Senior English Capstone is designed as a meaningful bridge between secondary school and life after, whether that be post-secondary or career aspirations. In the course, students seek to understand the course's essential questions "What does it mean to be educated?" and "How do we become educated?" After discussing these questions broadly, students will then look back at their own educational journeys and research on the nature of education, eventually turning their attention **toward understanding the process of learning and the necessity of passion and curiosity as they articulate and pursue an independent Capstone project of their choosing. Through this project, students will understand with depth and nuance the types of thinking educated people participate in to succeed in life.**

Here are wonderful examples from two of our DHS Class of 2026 Seniors:

Lilly Davenport

It was her second day on the job, and the chefs were already whistling every time she walked into the kitchen. Lilly Davenport's capstone essay starts at her first waitressing job, where what looked like friendliness quickly revealed a deeper pattern of gender bias and imposter syndrome. Through Bonnie Garmus' *Lessons in Chemistry*, an interview with her aunt who advocates for domestic violence survivors, and research on the "Matilda Effect," Lilly builds the case that women's self-doubt isn't a personal failing. It's the predictable result of a culture that still undervalues them.

Click [here](#) to read Lilly's full essay.

Jack Marisca

What happens when the crowd is deafening but your mind goes quiet? Jack Marisca chases that question through his capstone essay on flow states and self-mastery. It starts on the ice during the high school hockey state championship, where pregame anxiety gave way to a calm he traces back to his late mother's presence. From there, Jack pulls in neuroscience research, David Goggins' philosophy of mental toughness, and an interview with a former Syracuse lacrosse star to make the case that flow isn't luck. It's earned.

Click [here](#) to read Jack's full essay.

Getting to Know Fitch Academy: A Personalized Path at DHS

Fitch Academy is an alternative program designed to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of Darien High School students within a smaller, more nurturing environment. At Fitch, our mission is to foster not only academic growth, curiosity, and achievement, but also overall emotional wellness and self-knowledge.

While Fitch is an option for all DHS students, it is specifically tailored for those who thrive in a community-oriented space with smaller class sizes and more personalized instruction.

Whether due to the intensity of a larger high school environment, health and personal challenges, or a simple preference for a non-traditional path, Fitch serves students for whom the standard DHS setting isn't the right fit. Fitch is a supportive and encouraging environment providing:

- **Academic Rigor:** We offer the same core courses required for graduation and college readiness, including Honors and AP-level classes.
- **Diverse Electives:** Curriculum is often driven by student interest, with recent offerings ranging from Marine Science and Philosophy to Investing and Digital Photography.
- **A Supportive Team:** Our staff includes a full-time Program Coordinator, school psychologist, and special education teacher, alongside faculty who bridge both DHS and Fitch.
- **Community Focus:** We meet twice every eight-day rotation to focus on essential life skills such as resilience, empathy, and ethical decision-making.

Fitch Academy currently accommodates up to 24 students. If you believe your student might be interested, please encourage them to complete the interest form on our website. For more information, parents may contact Program Coordinator Matt Pavia at mpavia@darienps.org.

Looking Ahead



Friday, March 6

PLC- DHS Late Start
K-5 Literacy Early Dismissal

Wednesday, March 11

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

Wednesday, March 18 through Friday, March 20

Elementary Parent Conferences
Elementary Early Dismissal
(March 26- Snow Date if needed)

Thursday, March 19 through Saturday, March 21

Theater 308 Spring Musical - *The Lightning Thief*
DHS Auditorium

Tuesday, March 24

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

Friday, March 27

PLC - DHS Late Start

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