



Hastings Happenings

Hastings-on-Hudson Union Free School District

Welcome to our Winter Edition

We are a nurturing community of diverse learners who foster a just and compassionate society.

This belief fuels the energy that moves through Hastings-on-Hudson Schools each day. It is on full display—across classrooms, performance spaces, athletic venues, and community partnerships, students are engaging in learning experiences that reflect the heart of the **Portrait of a Hastings Learner**.

In these pages, looking back on the first half of the school year, you will see learners who are **bold** in sharing their voices and taking intellectual risks; **collaborative** as they work across grades, disciplines and teams; and **empathetic** as they deepen their understanding of one another and the world. You will meet students who are **empowered** to advocate for themselves and others, **inquisitive** as they explore new ideas and perspectives, and **inventive** as they design, create, and problem-solve in meaningful ways.

Together, these stories highlight a community energized by purpose—where thoughtful curriculum, musical and

theatrical expression, athletics, and student-driven initiatives come together to nurture each learner's growth. As you explore this edition, providing highlights of the year to date, we hope you feel the momentum, pride, and possibility that define Hastings: a place where energy is harnessed not just for achievement, but for building a more just, compassionate, and connected society.

I close with a note of appreciation for our Hastings employees, who make these stories possible. *Thank you for the professionalism, care, and dedication you bring to this work each day. The collective impact reflected here is a direct result of your commitment to our students and to one another.*

Sincerely,

Bill William S. McKersie, Ph.D.
Superintendent of Schools

CURRICULUM UPDATE: Ongoing Work Across Hastings Schools

The Hastings-on-Hudson School District continues to advance curriculum and instructional initiatives across all levels, with a focus on coherence, continuous improvement, and equity.

Districtwide Curriculum Work

Hillside Elementary School

At Hillside Elementary School, our English Language Arts work is grounded in strong practice and a continued commitment to excellence for all learners. The ELA Committee is developing a research-based strategic vision to guide growth over the next three to five years, while grade-level teams continue professional learning to strengthen literacy instruction in partnership with Hope Weinberg. Together, these efforts reflect Hillside's ongoing, student-centered approach to high-quality literacy instruction for every child.



Farragut Middle School

At Farragut Middle School (FMS), the Mathematics Department will partner with Anchala Sobrin from PNW BOCES for a yearlong professional learning initiative during the 2025–2026 school year, starting in February. This work includes a series of full-day sessions focused on visioning, action planning, defining pathways to Algebra aligned with the New York State Mathematics Standards, embedded coaching, and data

analysis. Also at the middle school, ELA inquiry work has been in progress since the start of the school year. Next steps include the development of pre- and post- assessment writing performance tasks for students.

Hastings High School

At Hastings High School, a new course in Eastern Literature has been developed and introduced to the program of studies for the upcoming school year. This new course was informed by advocacy from student affinity group leaders.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

To strengthen our Multi-Tiered System of Supports for Students (MTSS) FMS and HES are piloting Freckle, a mathematics and ELA intervention resource. Both buildings are also piloting Fastbridge as an MTSS data management tool. Introductory training for both resources has already taken place and a pilot is already underway.



Restoration of the Farragut Wing

After a year of restoration, the Farragut Wing is officially back up and operational, and once again filled with student voices, energy, and connection. Following extensive flood damage caused by a ruptured sprinkler system supply line on December 24, 2024, students were relocated to other classrooms and learning spaces throughout the Farragut Complex while comprehensive repairs were underway.

The district undertook a thorough restoration process focused on health, safety, and long-term functionality, addressing damaged flooring, walls, ceilings, and building systems through immediate remediation and renovation. That work is now complete, resulting in a fully revitalized 24,000-square-foot wing with refreshed, modernized learning environments.

Most importantly, students have happily returned to their classrooms and are enjoying their updated space, bringing the Farragut Wing fully back to life and marking an exciting new chapter for teaching and learning.



New Classroom Space



New Classroom Space



Classroom Prior to Flooding



Recovery Process

Imagination Playground: A New Creative Space Comes to Life, Thanks to HEF

In keeping with this year's district theme of "**Energy**," Hillside Elementary School has brought new life, movement, and excitement to a once-forgotten corner of the building. What is now our vibrant **Imagination Playground** began as something far less inspiring. For years after the bond, the space served every practical purpose imaginable, from a storage room, makeshift faculty lounge, and more. But Principal Amy Cazes, who never lets a good space go to waste, envisioned something different: a child-centered room pulsing with creativity, curiosity, and joyful energy.

With her vision in place, the Physical Education department jumped right in. Last May, Physical Education Teacher Robert McCann met with a group of fourth graders to brainstorm possibilities. Together, they explored creative concepts, discussed pros and cons, and ultimately landed on the perfect idea: **The Imagination Playground**, a space

designed to let students channel their energy into invention, collaboration, and play.

Over the summer, the room was transformed. Soft mats now line the floor, cubbies are ready for shoes, and the entire atmosphere invites movement and exploration. To build excitement, Physical Education Teacher Amanda Bassmann created an incredible unboxing video, unveiled to students, and thanks to Physical Education Teacher Matthew Adipietro, teachers now have a full collection of activities and games ready for immediate use.

What was once an overlooked storage space is now an energetic hub of creativity and discovery, all made possible by the **Hastings Education Foundation**, whose support turned a shared dream into reality. We can't wait to see what our students create in this inspiring new space!





HEF | Third Graders Explore the World Through Red Trunk Project Grant

Thanks to a generous grant from the **Hastings Education Foundation**, all six third-grade classes were able to embark on an exciting cultural adventure. Through the Red Trunk Project, organized by Phyllis Udice, students spent two weeks exploring a trunk from either Kenya or Oaxaca, Mexico, filled with authentic artifacts and immersive learning materials.

The Red Trunk Project centers on the idea of teaching children to **Respect Every Difference**, the “RED” behind the name. Each trunk contained dozens of cultural items such as traditional clothing, musical instruments, arts and crafts, currency, and everyday objects. Students engaged with short

documentary videos, stories about children in the featured culture, and hands-on lesson plans designed to deepen understanding. They were able to study how the lives of children are similar and different in global communities, which is part of the third grade curriculum. Students were also provided time to explore and discover the traditions, daily life, and stories of these vibrant communities.

This rich, experiential learning opportunity helped them connect with parts of the world they may never get to visit themselves, building empathy, curiosity, and global awareness.



Robotics - Bionic Buzzers Shift into High Gear for 2026

The Hastings Robotics Team, The Bionic Buzzers, has made remarkable progress entering the 2026 FIRST Robotics Competition season. After completing a successful rookie year in 2025, made possible through

generous support from the Hastings Education Foundation and the PTSA, students spent the past several months expanding their technical skills, improving their workflow, and preparing for their second year in the program.

One of the team’s major achievements has been the full implementation of a new swerve drive system, a highly advanced drivetrain that dramatically increases maneuverability and robot performance. With continued support from the PTSA, the team is also preparing to integrate top-of-the-line vision cameras to enhance autonomous and driver-assisted operation.

Students also took on the challenge of securing funding to support the team’s growth. Over the summer, they wrote multiple grant proposals and were fortunate to receive sponsorship from several organizations. NASA awarded the team a \$6,300 grant to fully cover the registration cost of their first regional event. The Gene Haas Foundation contributed \$3,000, and the Argosy Foundation provided \$2,500 to support robot materials and tools. The Hastings community likewise played a vital role, supporting two

DonorsChoose projects that funded upgrades to the team’s competition pit area and a new computer for the programming division. Thanks to these grants and a generous donation from a team parent, the Bionic Buzzers have secured enough funding to compete in two regional events this season: the Hudson Valley Regional and the Gotham Regional held in New York City.

Although only in their second season, the students are aiming high and hope to earn a place at the FIRST World Championship in Houston. Their continued progress reflects the hard work, creativity, and dedication of the entire Hastings Robotics community. Assistant Principal Ms. Ware noted, “I’ve been so impressed by the dedication of our students and teachers. They spend countless hours after school and on weekends to build this program, and the growth in their problem-solving, communication, and leadership skills is incredible.”

Team mentors Mr. Hills and Ms. Gagliardi added, “What makes this team special is that it is truly student driven. The students design the robot, write the code, and make the key decisions. We support them, but they are the ones doing the work and building this team from the ground up.”

To follow the team throughout the season, you can find them on Instagram at @hastingsroboticsteam.





Middle Schoolers Rock the Stage!

Our talented 6th, 7th, and 8th graders took audiences on a high-energy trip back to the 1980s with their incredible performance of *Rock of Ages: Middle School Edition!* Directed by **Lisa Levine** and choreographed by **Emily Isidori**, the fall musical was a fun, family-friendly show filled with music, laughter, and big hair. Bravo to our young performers for putting on a truly rockin' show!



Hastings High School Brings Clue to Life on Stage

The HHS Drama Department staged an outstanding production of *Clue: High School Edition*, the classic comedy whodunit inspired by the board game and 1985 film. Audiences followed six mysterious guests—Colonel Mustard, Mrs. White, Mr. Green, Mrs. Peacock, Professor Plum, and Miss Scarlet—as they navigated blackmail, mystery, and murder inside a remote mansion.

Liam Sexton, who played the Motorist, reflected on the production: “*Clue* was such a fun story for the audience because of its unpredictability. No one knew what to expect walking into the theatre, and that’s the beauty of a production like this. Our director, Rachel Wineberg, worked extraordinarily hard to leave elements up to viewers’ interpretation and imagination.”

The cast’s comedic timing, energy, and commitment brought this suspenseful and hilarious show to life. “*Dooreography*” is now a signature dance move for Hastings—as anyone who saw the show understands. Congratulations to the cast, crew, and production team on a fantastic performance.



Winter Concerts Celebrate Music and Community at FMS and HHS

The winter season came alive through music as Farragut Middle School and Hastings High School students took the stage for their annual Winter Concerts, showcasing months of practice, collaboration, and artistic growth.

Farragut Middle School’s Grades 7–8 Winter Concert featured performances by the Concert Band, FMS Selectones, Chorus, String Orchestra, and Jazz Band. Students impressed the audience with their range, confidence, and ensemble skills in a festive evening at the HHS Auditorium.

Later in the week, Hastings High School musicians followed with their own Winter Concert, highlighting the Band, Chorus, Orchestra, Jazz Band, and more. The program reflected the depth of talent across the high school music department and the energy students bring to their performances.

Together, the FMS and HHS Winter Concerts were a wonderful celebration of student musicianship and the joy of live performance, marking the season with harmony and holiday spirit, thanks to Eric Day and the Hastings music department.

FMS Art Students Collaborate with Hastings Historical Society

In an exciting partnership with the Hastings Historical Society, eighth-grade artists at FMS had the opportunity to share their creativity beyond the classroom and into the heart of the community. When the Historical Society reached out to Ezra Elliott for help enhancing its new exhibit on the 1960s, he knew our students would eagerly embrace the chance to contribute. "Using acrylic paints, students used vibrant patterns and psychedelic designs to decorate the passageway entering the exhibit. Students researched different design ideas, experimented with painting techniques and listened to some classic rock from the era including The Doors, Buffalo Springfield, Jefferson Airplane and Creedence Clearwater Revival," said Mr. Elliott.

This collaboration allowed students to apply their artistic skills in a real-world setting while enriching a community exhibit. Their work not only brightens the space but also celebrates the creative spirit and cultural history of the 1960s. The exhibit will be open until October of 2026 at the Historical Society, which is located in Draper Park.



HHS Recognized as School of Distinction

We're proud to share that Hastings High School has been recognized by NYSPHSAA for academic excellence! As a School of Distinction, 100% of our varsity teams earned the prestigious Scholar-Athlete Team Award. This recognition celebrates the hard work and commitment of our student-athletes, who continue to shine both on the field and in the classroom.



Winter Athletics Showcase: A Season of Growth, Grit, and Achievement

Hastings student-athletes have made an impressive impact across winter sports, demonstrating dedication, teamwork, and resilience throughout the season.

The boys basketball team has shown consistency and determination, competing strongly in league play and building momentum through teamwork and balanced contributions. Senior Dylan Heilakka has led the team offensively, while also anchoring the team on the boards alongside senior Michael Leyden, who has been a key presence in rebounding. The team has shown tremendous growth, with all players stepping up in key moments.

On the girls basketball side, the team's record does not fully capture the heart and perseverance displayed each game. Junior Izzy Doherty has led the offense, while the entire squad has continued to grow, setting a strong foundation for future seasons.

In ice hockey, Hastings is represented on the Mount Pleasant Ice Cats by senior Jack Reynolds and junior Jalen Pekkala-Bitterman. Both athletes have made significant contributions, with Reynolds earning Player of the Game honors early in the season and both players posting strong offensive numbers early in the season.

Indoor track and field has been a standout, with 50 student-athletes competing and dozens of personal records broken. The team also came away with 5 League J titles: Kai Ghalib in the

300 meter race, David Franco, Alexander Lai, Kai Ghalib, and Lachlan Muldoon in the 4x200 relay, Claire Grushko, Hanna Lambert, Hazel Kuniholm, and Sadie Knittel in the 4x800 relay, and Danae Morgan taking home two league titles in the shot put and weight throw. Danae also had an exceptional performance at the Millrose Trials, breaking a school record, ranking #9 nationally, and earned her a spot at the prestigious Millrose Games.

The skiing program, now in its third year, continues to grow and excel, with multiple athletes placing among the top finishers in early-season races. Through the first two races, Junior Andrei Zuk leads the boys team with two first-place finishes, while sophomore Georgia Schmit leads the girls with a first- and third-place finish, as the girls team also

secured a first-place victory at their January 20 race. With a strong group of new racers, the program continues to build momentum and depth.

Meanwhile, boys swimming sees Hastings represented on the merged AHEDI team by freshman Toby Chen, who has already amassed multiple first- and second-place finishes. Through 1/22, Toby has already made four Section 1 cuts and three NYS cuts!

Together, these programs reflect the strength, spirit, and commitment of Hastings athletics and its student-athletes.



Dylan Heilakka

Celebrating 10 Years of the Multicultural Book Fair!

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Multicultural Book Fair (MCBF), a beloved Hastings tradition that celebrates diversity, community, and the joy of reading. The fair was held at FMS and HHS on November 4 and 5, and Hillside Elementary School on November 6 and 7 for students to shop. It highlights stories with characters from diverse backgrounds and experiences, offering students and families the opportunity to explore a rich array of voices and perspectives. “As someone who orders books for Hillside, I am amazed at all the different authors, titles, and series that are being introduced to students and classrooms,” said Michele Keefe, Office Assistant.

On Saturday, November 8, the community came together to celebrate stories, creativity, and connection at the MCBF. The event featured a full day of engaging activities, including author and illustrator signings, live portrait demonstrations by Eric Velasquez, and author readings throughout the morning. Guests enjoyed “Draw Me a Story,” an interactive session where participants invented stories while an illustrator brought them to life, followed by a festive birthday cake celebration. The day concluded with an Author/Illustrator Panel Discussion, offering valuable insights into the creative process. From start to finish, the fair showcased the power of books and art to unite and inspire the community.

For the past six years, Hastings has proudly partnered with Word Up Community Bookshop from Washington Heights, a nonprofit, volunteer-powered organization that curates and staffs the fair to ensure a wide selection of diverse genres.

In addition to inspiring readers, the event supports educators through teacher vouchers and student scholarships provided by the Race Matters Committee and the support of the Hastings PTSA, helping to build classroom and personal libraries filled with inclusive, meaningful stories.



HASP Students Build Connections

Our HASP program recently enjoyed a fantastic day at the Taconic Outdoor Education Center in Cold Spring, where students had the opportunity to grow together through collaboration, communication, trust, and creativity.

Throughout the day, students engaged in meaningful team-building and problem-solving activities that encouraged them to connect with one another in new and positive ways.

The values of the HASP community, connection and engagement, were clearly reflected in every challenge and interaction.

Adding to the experience, the group was treated to a perfect fall day, surrounded by the beauty of New York’s natural landscape. It was a memorable outing that combined fun, learning, and community spirit.



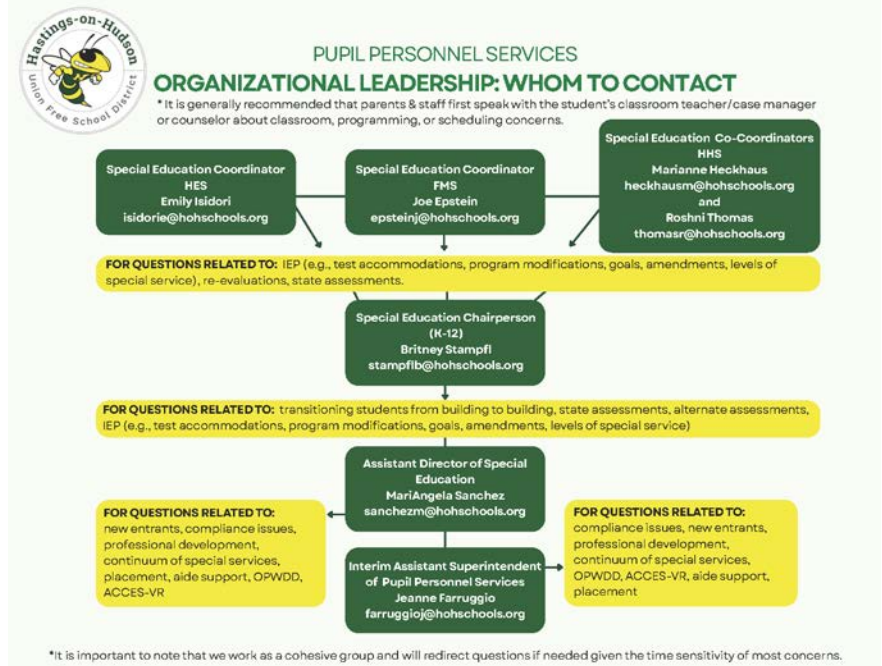
Pupil Personnel Services Update: Supporting Students and Families

The Pupil Personnel Services Department continues to strengthen support for students through professional learning, collaboration, and thoughtful planning.

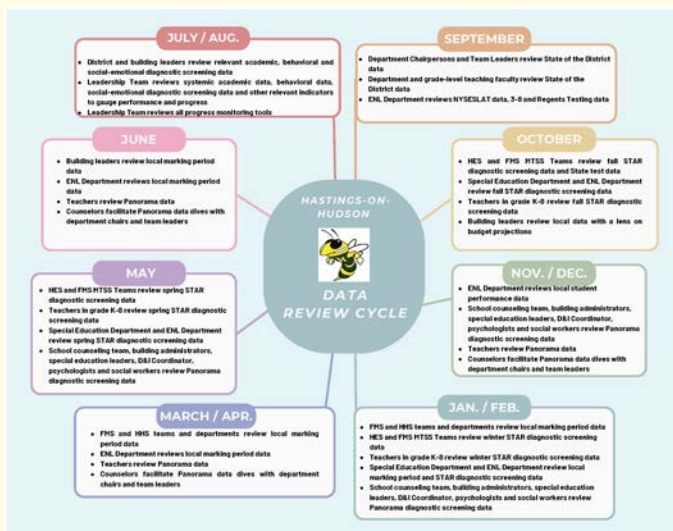
This year, teachers began training in the PAF Reading Program, with additional cohorts scheduled for January. The program includes ongoing coaching and support to help educators better meet students' literacy needs. Staff also participated in Nonviolent Crisis Intervention (CPI) training, ensuring safe and supportive learning environments across the district.

At the secondary level, co-teaching teams received instructional coaching, and middle and high school staff took part in training with ACCES-VR, which supports students with disabilities ages 14–22 in building skills for employment, career exploration, and postsecondary planning. Families will continue to receive information about these services at upcoming SEPTA events.

The department remains actively engaged in state reporting, annual reviews, evaluations, and budget planning while working closely with SEPTA to support students with IEPs. Together, these efforts help ensure that all learners receive the services and support they need to succeed.



Strengthening Instruction Through a Districtwide Data Review Cycle



Hastings UFSD has established and implemented a comprehensive data review cycle that brings administrators and key staff together to regularly examine different types of data with a clear focus on student proficiency and growth over time. Developed collaboratively with building principals, Special Education leadership, Guidance leadership, and ENL/Diversity & Inclusion leadership, this cycle promotes shared responsibility and coherence across schools. Through protocols and ongoing reflection, teams use data to identify trends, celebrate progress, and target instructional adjustments to better meet student needs. The data review cycle was highlighted as a springboard for discussion at the December 3 Board of Education meeting and reflects our continued commitment to informed decision-making and continuous improvement.

Districtwide Technology Planning

The District Technology Committee—comprising teachers and administrators from all three buildings, high school students, parents, the district data coordinator, and a Board of Education representative—has been actively developing three-year goals for the state-required District Technology Plan, due this spring. With support from Leslie Accardo of the Lower Hudson Regional Information Center, the committee analyzed recent technology survey data to draft three goals:

ensuring purposeful and effective use of technology to enhance learning; exploring the role of artificial intelligence while maintaining academic integrity; and strengthening home-school collaboration around healthy device use. These goals will be finalized in March, alongside the development of action steps that will guide professional learning, classroom practice, and student engagement with technology across the district.

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HHS Speech and Debate Team Finds Its Voice

Founded last year, the HHS Speech and Debate Team has already made a strong impact. The program was started by Chloe Spagna, who was surprised to find no debate team at the high school and decided to create one.

"I wanted myself and others to have the opportunity to debate in a fun, nonjudgmental, and safe environment," Spagna said.

In its first season, the team quickly built confidence and strong communication skills, which translated into competitive success.

"I have seen in myself and my teammates a tremendous spike in confidence and public speaking skills," she shared.

The year was highlighted by individual excellence, with Ariella Klugerman and Chloe Spagna earning individual speaker medals and placing among the top five teams in their division, while the team as a whole earned the top overall score in its division.

"Even though this is only our first year, we have certainly made an impact," Spagna added.

