

# THE DARIEN DIFFERENCE

## School Spotlight March 2026 - Issue 7

Dear Community Members,

Welcome to the seventh edition of The Darien Difference - spotlighting all the wonderful things that make 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 March edition highlights the wonderful work happening at Tokeneke Elementary School and the many ways that our students and faculty are living the Vision of the Graduate - every single day!

Students in all grade levels at Tokeneke participate in Class Buddies - a way to build greater connections, foster school wide community and collaborate to support those in need. Another opportunity for Tokeneke students to build community is through Student Council where all students have representation and a voice. Additionally, our Tokeneke fifth grade students exemplify leadership in the traditional Pumpkin Carnival. Our faculty and staff show great passion and dedication in their own learning in a variety of ways in Professional Learning Communities, Instructional Rounds, and participating in the Faculty Book Club that has focused on building greater student independence.

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

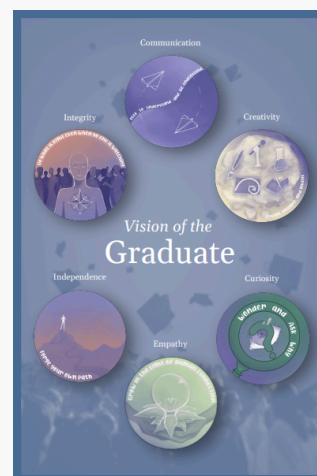
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric Byrne". The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

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

## INSIDE

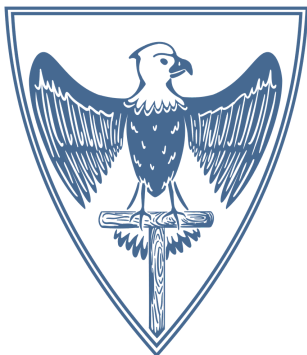
- Principal's Perspective
- Better Together
- Student Voices Leading the Way
- Cultivating Character
- A Tokeneke Tradition
- Modeling the Vision
- Looking Ahead





# Vision of the Graduate

## Principal's Perspective: Mr. Ryan Betts



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

It is our district-wide commitment to intentionally develop the mindsets and competencies our students need to leave Tokeneke, and ultimately Darien, ready to change the world for the better.

### How does it come to life at your school?

The Vision of the Graduate comes to life at Tokeneke in every interaction, from small morning high-fives to school-wide leadership. Each day begins with staff and peer greetings at the door and during Morning Meetings, teaching students how a simple smile helps everyone feel connected. This foundation of **empathy** extends to recess and lunch,

where students practice active listening and collaboration to find common ground whenever conflicts arise.

In our classrooms and the Library Media Center, **curiosity** and **creativity** are always on display. Whether they are rehearsing in the band, coding robots, or analyzing complex themes in literature, our students are constantly inspired to explore. As they dive into focused work, they build true **independence** by choosing their own problem-solving methods and learning to self-advocate when they hit a roadblock.

Finally, we see **integrity** in action through our fifth-grade Safety Crew. By guiding younger peers and assisting staff during arrival, these student leaders model the responsibility and care that define our school community. At Tokeneke, the Vision of the Graduate isn't just a goal—it's how we grow together every day.

### How do students develop some of these attributes in elementary school?

Each school year begins with students co-creating "class constitutions." These shared agreements outline the conditions necessary for everyone to learn at their optimal level, from ensuring every voice is heard to fostering mutual respect. By establishing these norms, our students actively practice **integrity, communication, and independence** from day one. When challenges arise, we move beyond simple rules to a focus on accountability. Students learn to listen to how their actions impact others and work together to repair harm—a process that builds profound **empathy** and a sense of shared responsibility.

Academically, we fuel **curiosity** by teaching students to lead with their own rich questions. Our goal isn't just to find the right answer; we challenge students to explain their thinking, provide evidence, and create models so others can learn from their reasoning. To nurture **creativity**, students study the techniques of master artists and writers, experimenting with those same methods to find their own original voices. By encouraging them to find patterns and make innovative connections across different subjects, we ensure that the Vision of the Graduate is at the heart of every lesson.

### Is there an example you can share of students living the Vision of the Graduate that made you proud?

Two examples immediately come to mind, and both highlight our fifth graders—who are truly the culmination of our community's collective, nurturing efforts.

The first is the incredible leadership they demonstrate during our annual Pumpkin Share prior to the carnival (which you will read more about later in this issue!). The care they put into organizing the event and mentoring our younger students—especially our newest kindergarteners—will absolutely melt your heart. Watching them take ownership of the event and ensure every young student has a magical time is a beautiful display of both **independence** and **empathy**.

The second example takes place during our Kindergarten Meet and Greet in the spring. During this event, our fifth graders step up to serve as official tour guides for the families of incoming kindergarteners. As they show families around our common spaces and special areas, they exercise exceptional **communication** skills—sharing personal stories, helpful tips, and heartfelt anecdotes about what makes Tokeneke such a special place to learn. Serving as ambassadors for our school requires immense **integrity**, and the glowing feedback we receive from these new families is nothing short of incredible. I could not be prouder of how these student leaders represent our community.



# Better Together

## The Power of Tokeneke Buddies

One of the most special aspects of the Tokeneke community is our intentional focus on cross-grade connections. We believe that learning shouldn't happen in a vacuum, which is why every single class is paired with a "buddy class" in a different grade level. Throughout the year, these partnerships bring our older and younger students together to build a deeply interconnected school community.

These buddy pairings are the Vision of the Graduate pillar of **empathy** in action, allowing students to "grow in the light of human connection" while developing healthy, kind, and meaningful relationships. Whether they are gathering to read aloud to one another or collaborating on shared writing activities, these moments of connection are highlights for both the older and younger students.

The buddy system truly shines around the holidays through shared projects. Just before Thanksgiving, our fifth graders team up with our kindergarteners for the beloved Kindergarten Balloon Parade. Acting as engineers and mentors, the fifth graders help the younger students design and build their own magnificent balloons—similar to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade!—before the kindergarteners proudly march them through the halls. In December, this mentorship continued when older students traveled to primary classrooms to help their younger peers build LEGO hearts for the global #buildtogive initiative, demonstrating what it means to create with purpose.

This spirit of mentorship extends beyond special events and right into daily routines. In Physical Education, our fifth graders frequently volunteer to assist in the younger students' classes, patiently helping to introduce new games and activities. By stepping up to support their younger peers, these older students are actively living the VoG pillar of **integrity**, learning what it means to "serve as a leader and role model in my community." Interestingly, our fifth graders also benefit from this exact type of mentorship themselves! Earlier in the fall, Darien High School students visited Tokeneke to teach our oldest elementary students about being "upstanders." By learning from high school role models and then turning around to mentor our kindergarteners, Tokeneke students are participating in a beautiful, district-wide cycle of leadership and care.



# Student Voices Leading the Way: The Tokeneke Student Council

At Tokeneke, student leadership is a driving force. Our Student Council representatives do more than just hold a title; they are tasked with finding meaningful ways to enhance our school culture and support the broader community. By mobilizing their peers to get involved, these young leaders practice the Vision of the Graduate pillar of **integrity**, learning firsthand what it means to serve as a role model for others.

One of the most visible ways the Council leads is by organizing our school assemblies. These events are intentionally designed to foster **communication** and a deep sense of belonging. Whether they are delivering supportive messages with confidence or curating "Shout Out" segments to celebrate the diverse talents of their peers, our representatives ensure every student feels seen and valued. These moments perfectly capture the heart of the VoG: growing through the light of human connection.

Beyond our school walls, the Student Council takes social responsibility seriously. From winter coat drives to the "Treats for Troops" collection, our students and families rally behind these efforts to practice active citizenship. By celebrating each other's successes and rallying the community around causes greater than themselves, these young leaders prove that you don't have to wait until graduation to live the Vision of the Graduate.



# Cultivating Character: Tokeneke's Marigold Tradition

In gardening, the marigold is a "companion plant" that protects the soil and helps everything around it grow stronger and more resilient. At Tokeneke, we spend the year looking for our "human marigolds"—students who naturally support and nurture their peers.

Established in honor of our beloved former Vice Principal, Kathy Schultz, the Marigold Recognition celebrates students who embody the Vision of the Graduate in its purest form. When the district asks students to grow through "human connection" or "serve as a role model," they are describing our Marigold recipients. These students don't just succeed on their own; they actively make their classmates kinder and more confident.

This tradition culminates during our fifth-grade graduation. After the fifth-grade teachers recognize their grade's recipient, that student "pays it forward" by officially announcing the younger Marigold recipients from kindergarten through fourth grade. It is a profound annual reminder that at Tokeneke, true achievement isn't just about how tall you grow, but how much you help those around you bloom.



# A Tokeneke Tradition: The Pumpkin Carnival & 5th Grade Leadership

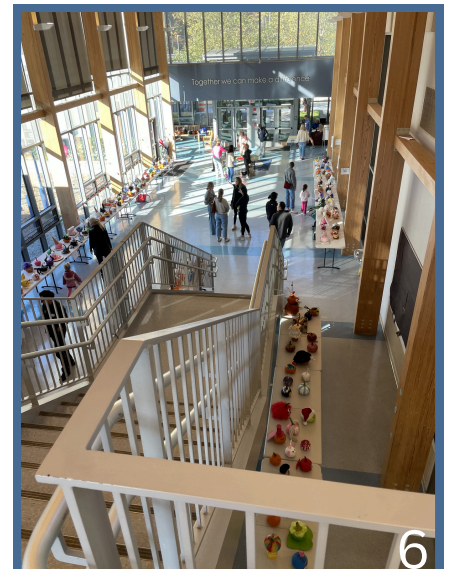
Every year, as the leaves begin to change and the crisp autumn air settles in, the Tokeneke community gears up for one of its most beloved and long-standing traditions: the annual Pumpkin Carnival. Far more than just a weekend of fun, this highly anticipated event is a cornerstone of our school community and a shining example of the Darien Vision of the Graduate in action.



The excitement begins with the "Pumpkin Share," a creative showcase where decorated pumpkins fill the Great Hall. Bolstered by an energizing school-wide Pep Rally, the true magic lies in the leadership of our fifth graders. Challenged by the Vision of the Graduate to "**serve as a leader and role model**," these students formally apply for leadership "jobs." On the day of the Share, they visit primary classrooms to read fall stories and patiently guide younger peers through the patches to select their perfect pumpkins.



This mentorship carries directly into the Carnival weekend. Working in close partnership with our incredible PTO, fifth-grade leaders are the engine of the event—running game stations, collecting tickets, managing supplies, and supporting parent volunteers. By stepping into these authentic roles, our students move from being participants to being the stewards of their school's traditions. At Tokeneke, the Pumpkin Carnival is more than a fall festival; it is a masterclass in citizenship where our oldest students learn that true leadership means lifting up their entire community.



# Modeling the Vision:

## A Culture of Continuous Professional Learning

At Tokeneke, the Vision of the Graduate isn't just a framework for our students—it is a standard embraced by our entire faculty and staff. We firmly believe that to cultivate these attributes in our children, we must actively model them ourselves, particularly through our commitment to continuous learning and professional growth.

Our teachers regularly model **communication** and collaboration through our Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Within these PLCs, classroom teachers and special education staff work closely across grade levels to design dynamic units and lessons tailored to the needs of all learners. Together, they plan purposeful learning progressions and carefully monitor student progress. By constantly reflecting on the impact of their teaching, our educators support one another in differentiating instruction. If a teacher encounters a roadblock in helping a student succeed, grade-level colleagues and specialists are immediately there to help identify new, effective strategies. This collaborative environment ensures we are constantly growing our practice to support every child throughout the year.

Another incredible avenue for professional growth at Tokeneke is our teacher-led faculty book clubs. Driven by a shared sense of **curiosity**, teams of educators voluntarily gather to study and discuss educational best practices. In recent years, our staff has explored topics such as highly effective math practices to elevate the level of learning and achievement for all students.

This year, our book clubs took a deep dive into strategies that explicitly support the VoG pillar of **independence**. Teachers read and collaborated on evidence-based approaches to help students develop self-regulation, emotional resilience, and practical problem-solving skills. Rather than simply managing classroom dynamics, our staff studied how to equip students with the personal toolkits they need to independently and confidently navigate both academic and social challenges.

By continually growing their own professional practice, our teachers ensure that Tokeneke remains a place where every student is understood, supported, and empowered to succeed.



# Looking Ahead



## **Wednesday, April 1 through Thursday, April 30**

K-12 Art Show  
Darien Library  
Darien Town Hall

## **Thursday, April 2**

K-5 Literacy Early Dismissal

## **Friday, April 3**

Good Friday  
Schools and offices closed

## **Wednesday, April 8**

Darien Young Composers Concert  
6:30 pm  
DHS Auditorium

Board of Education Special Meeting  
7:00 pm (approximate time)  
Central Office

## **Friday, April 10**

Hindley, Holmes, and Royle Early Dismissal

## **Monday, April 13 through Friday, April 17**

Spring Recess  
Schools closed

## **Monday, April 20**

PLC - DHS Late Start  
Hindley, Holmes, and Royle Late Start

## **Wednesday, April 22**

Spring Fireside Chat  
7:00 pm  
DHS Library

## **Tuesday, April 28**

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

## **Wednesday, April 29**

Arts Commitment Ceremony & Tri-M Senior Recital  
6:00 pm  
DHS Auditorium

## **Thursday, April 30**

MMS Spring Orchestra Concert  
7:00 pm  
DHS Auditorium

**See you next month! Up next, Hindley Elementary School!**