

# THE DARIEN DIFFERENCE



## School Spotlight April 2026 - Issue 8

Dear Community Members,

Welcome to the eighth edition of The Darien Difference - spotlighting 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 April edition highlights the wonderful work happening at Hindley 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 Hindley participate in *Husky Hangouts* - a way to foster greater connections and build community. In the brand new *Global Learning Commons*, students experience design thinking through coding and robotics lessons and experiences. Another opportunity for Hindley students and families to build community is through *Hindley Heritage Night* where all students and their families have representation and a voice through a celebration of the many cultures that make up the school. Additionally, our Hindley fifth grade students exemplify leadership through their important roles that they fill in the school community.

Please join me in celebrating the vibrant learning community that makes Hindley Elementary so special. In our final edition this May, we will broaden our focus to explore all schools across the district, including another look at the community at Fitch Academy.

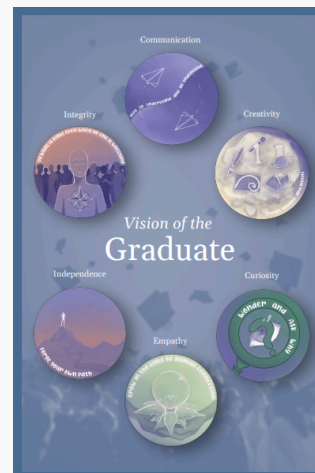
Sincerely,

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

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

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# Vision of the Graduate

## Principal's Perspective: Mr. Ross Cooper



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

The Vision of the Graduate is a vehicle that can be leveraged by everyone in Darien to promote student agency and to help to make our schools more about the students we serve, each and every day.

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

Educational researcher Dylan Wiliam famously noted that “pedagogy is curriculum,” reminding us that how we teach is just as vital as what we teach. At Hindley, the Vision of the Graduate acts as our North Star, shifting the focus from rote facts to the art of teaching—placing students at the center of every learning experience and empowering them as active participants.

We see this vision in action through two key pillars: **Independence and Empathy.**

Last year, our teachers engaged in "instructional rounds," visiting each other's classrooms to objectively analyze learning in real-time. We centered our work on a single inquiry question tied directly to student agency: “How are students overcoming obstacles or challenges?” This process allowed us to refine our practice, ensuring we are intentionally building the **independence** students need to navigate complex problems.

This year, we are leveraging **empathy** to drive our schoolwide professional learning. We have dedicated much of our focus to Restorative Practices—an approach that prioritizes community building, relationship-mending, and accountability over simple punishment. By focusing on healing and connection, we ensure that the foundation of our school is built on the very **empathy** we hope to see in our graduates.

At Hindley, we don't just talk about these values; we live them through community building every single day!

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

At Hindley, the Vision of the Graduate isn't "one more thing" on a checklist; it is the very fabric of our culture. These attributes *are* the learning. By embedding them into the daily student experience, we move beyond special events and into intentional, everyday growth. In this edition, you'll see this integration across all grade levels and settings:

- **Kindergarten & Play-Based Learning:** Through this statewide initiative, our youngest learners develop core attributes naturally through exploration, proving that these skills take root from day one.
- **The Global Learning Commons (GLC):** Our new library serves as a hub for innovation, where students engage in makerspace activities and robotics to build technical and creative problem-solving skills.
- **Community & Leadership:** From the high expectations set for our fifth graders to the spirit of the charity basketball game and the cultural connection of Hindley Heritage Night, these attributes come to life in every corner of our school.

These examples showcase our commitment to ensuring our students are not just learning facts, but developing the character and skills that make our school community so exceptional. At Hindley, these attributes aren't just part of the curriculum—they *are* the learning and the very heart of our culture.

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

At Hindley, we are most proud of the ongoing camaraderie and collaboration that define our student body. These relationships and the sense of belonging they foster are intentionally cultivated during our Husky Hangouts—weekly mini-assemblies where grade levels gather to learn, connect, and grow.

This year, our first round of Hangouts focused on schoolwide commitments for lunch, recess, and the bus. Rather than simply following rules, students actively contributed to these standards, which are now displayed throughout the school as a reminder of our shared responsibility.

Beyond following protocols, we are especially proud of how our students are developing the skills to navigate conflict. Through the combination of Husky Hangouts, Restorative Practices, and daily classroom work, we provide safe spaces for students to work through disagreements together. By learning to navigate these complex social situations with empathy and accountability, our Huskies are living the Vision of the Graduate every single day.





# Global Learning Commons (GLC): More Than Just a Library!

At Hindley, we are currently in our second year of a two-year construction project. This project encompasses our new fine arts wing, which opened to students this school year and includes our Global Learning Commons (GLC). The transition from our old library (which was just knocked down to make way for a courtyard) to the GLC marks not just the move to a new space but also somewhat of a shift in our approach as we look to meet the needs of our modern learners. Books and literacy are still a focal point of what we do, and we are also incorporating hands-on and minds-on experiences through makerspace activities.

Some of these makerspace activities include the inclusion of robotics and engineering across all grade levels, through such means as Sphero indi and the LEGO BricQ Motion. Academic standards from math and science are used, which helps to blur the lines between what is learned in the GLC and what is learned in our classrooms. In addition, we are intentional about integrating the Vision of the Graduate into these experiences in ways that are authentic and purposeful. For example, prior to tackling a design challenge, Mr. Duff (our inspiring library media specialist) may tell the students to design while also being intentional about their communication with one another. At that point, the students examine what the success criteria for communication looks like within the context of the design challenge, and then students design with this criteria in mind. Then, at the conclusion of their work, the students not only evaluate how well they did with the challenge, but they also peer and/or self-assess the extent to which they were able to successfully communicate. Overall, this is just one example that illustrates how the Vision of the Graduate continues to be embedded within the GLC.

Last school year, to lay some of the groundwork for what is currently being accomplished, additional library time was added to the beginning of the school day for students to voluntarily sign up to engage in designing and engineering. This school year, we are experimenting with additional processes for delivering makerspace instruction and free tinker time. One way is by offering this program as a recess alternative for our students. At the same time, we are committed to intentionally balancing books and literacy with experiences that involve makerspace, robotics, coding, and more!



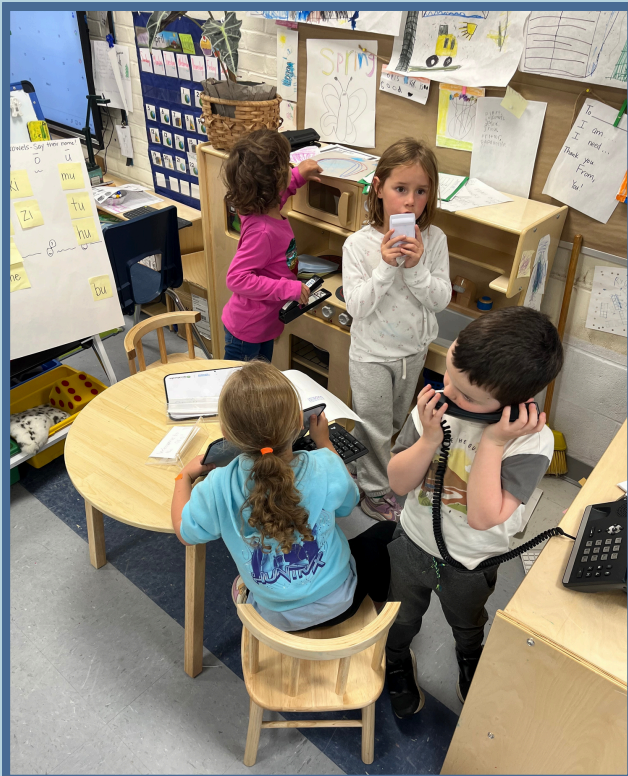
# ★ Kindergarten Spotlight: Learning Through Play

Play-based learning is a fundamental part of the instructional day here at Hindley School. By integrating structured play into the daily curriculum, teachers are honoring a child's natural inclination to play. We are not just making school more enjoyable; we are building stronger, smarter, and more capable learners.

One of the most effective forms of play-based learning is dramatic play. Rather than keeping the play corner the same, teachers periodically transform it based on students' interests. Recently, one kindergarten class turned its dramatic play area into a fully functioning office. The process included student-led research and execution:

1. **Research:** Students visited the school's main office to observe real-world professionals.
2. **Design:** They collaborated to decide what their version would look like.
3. **Collection:** With help from parent donations, they gathered supplies such as phones, computers, staplers, and mailing envelopes.
4. **Implementation:** Students engaged in high-level role-play, fielding phone calls, taking messages, and writing letters.

To support this growth, our well-rounded kindergarten classrooms utilize a variety of play areas, including blocks, manipulatives, sensory play, and creative play.



# ★ The Grade 5 "Leadership Year"

## Ambassadors in Action

At Hindley, fifth grade is more than a final year; it is a Leadership Year. Our oldest students step into vital roles that model school spirit and responsibility, setting the standard for our younger students to follow. Key traditions include:

- **Husky News:** Working as a professional newsroom, fifth graders brainstorm, report, and produce video editions that cover school and global headlines. Under the guidance of Program Director Dee Attisani, students master the essentials of journalism and teamwork.
- **Gold Key Members:** These essential office helpers manage the daily rhythm of Hindley by handling "Lost and Found," delivering items to classrooms, and assisting with lunch counts and attendance.
- **Library Ambassadors:** Working with our Library Media Specialist, students ensure our collection remains organized and accessible by managing book bins and reshelving titles for the next reader.
- **Field Day Helpers:** In a true display of sportsmanship, fifth graders facilitate our year-end Field Day. By running stations and cheering on younger peers, they ensure the day is a success for the entire community.

We are incredibly proud of the leadership and dedication our Grade 5 students demonstrate every single day!



# Hindley Heritage Night

## Embracing Differences through Shared Experiences

Hindley School's Heritage Night, held on March 26th, is now in its fifth year running. This initiative started at Hindley has been adopted by other elementary schools across the district. This DEIB - Diversity Equity Inclusion and Belonging Committee event, led by Stephanie Rodousakis and Brittany Erickson, continues to encourage the Hindley community to embrace different cultures through meaningful exposure and shared experiences. The evening brought the school community together to celebrate the many backgrounds that make Hindley unique.

Families and staff played a central role by hosting tables that highlighted their heritage, with 29 tables offering a wide range of cultural displays, foods, and traditions. Each table provided students with a "passport" experience, allowing them to visit, learn, and engage while collecting stamps along the way. From interactive presentations to thoughtfully prepared dishes, the event created an engaging and educational environment that reflected the richness of the community.

The success of Heritage Night was made possible by the dedication of volunteers and organizers who worked tirelessly to coordinate the event. With careful planning, from worksheets and student activities, the event welcomed nearly 160-190 students. More than just a celebration, Heritage Night fostered curiosity, respect, and a deeper appreciation for the diverse perspectives within the Hindley School community.



# Coming Together For One Of Our Own: The Power of Community

The Faculty vs. Darien Police Department charity basketball game, held on March 12th at DHS, was more than just a spirited competition - it was a meaningful community event, organized to support two causes. The Darien Police Department supported the Special Olympics, while the faculty rallied behind a cause close to home: Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD). Proceeds from their efforts went toward helping a young Hindley student through Charlie's Cure, an organization dedicated to fighting DMD. Mental health organizations, Wave Strong and Shoulder Check, were also present and the event showcased how collaboration between schools, families, and local law enforcement can create real change.



## *Rallying for Charlie*

The heart of the night was Charlie, a resilient Hindley third grader who was diagnosed with DMD at a young age. Despite the challenges of this progressive condition, Charlie's resilience and spirit inspired the entire community. Charlie was a key part of the event's success, building excitement through school announcements, selecting the music, and even addressing the crowd of hundreds during the game.



The morning after the event, Charlie led the school in singing "You Can Count on Me" by Bruno Mars—a perfect tribute to the support he received. As his mother, Jennifer Handt, shared: "The sound of that packed gym chanting Charlie's name will forever echo for us. It was an absolute embodiment of what makes Darien such a special place." The event left a lasting impression on everyone involved, highlighting the strength of a community united behind one of its own.



This special event was not just about raising funds - it was about coming together, lifting each other up, and showing that no one fights alone. There was tremendous Hindley Pride that came through in supporting our staff athletes and Charlie. If you want to learn more about and support Charlie's Cure, please see [here](#).



# Looking Ahead



**Monday, May 4**

DHS Spring Orchestra Concert  
7:00 pm  
DHS Auditorium

**Wednesday, May 6**

DHS Spring Chorus Concert  
7:00 pm  
DHS Auditorium

**Thursday, May 7**

MMS Spring Chorus Concert  
6:30 pm  
DHS Auditorium

**Tuesday, May 12**

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

**Wednesday, May 13**

Holmes Spring Concert  
7:00 pm  
Holmes Common Room

**Thursday, May 14**

DHS Spring Band & Jazz  
Ensemble Concert  
7:00 pm  
DHS Auditorium

**Friday, May 15**

PLC - DHS Early Dismissal  
K-5 Literacy Early Dismissal

**Monday, May 18**

MMS Spring Band Concert  
7:00 pm  
DHS Auditorium

**Tuesday, May 19**

DHS Art Show  
5:00- 7:00 pm  
DHS Cafeteria

**Wednesday, May 20**

Ox Ridge Spring Concert  
7:00 pm  
Ox Ridge Stage

**Thursday, May 21**

Tokeneke Spring Concert  
7:00 pm  
Tokeneke Common Room

**Thursday-Friday, May 21-22**

Theatre 308 Student  
Productions  
7:00 pm  
DHS Little Theater

**Monday, May 25**

Memorial Day  
Schools and offices closed

**Tuesday, May 26**

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

**Thursday, May 28**

Royle Spring Concert  
7:00 pm  
Royle Common Room

**See you next month! Up next, District Wide Issue!**