

# the INDEPENDENT

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## School schedules will change slightly for 2026-2027

Last three blocks lengthened by five minutes, lunch moved

By Rosie Renehan  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Middle and high school schedules for the 2026-2027 school year will be aligned, but with a different schedule from this year.

The middle school wanted to have their 20-minute free period, ME Block, reintroduced, so a revised schedule option was created.

The 2025-2026 school year's schedule was intended particularly for teachers who had classes in both

the middle and high school, so that they would be able to teach all of their classes without any scheduling conflicts.

The school administration worked closely with the teachers' union to develop a new option for next year's schedule. If the new

schedule had not been approved, the schools would have returned to last year's schedule.

One reason that the default schedule, which students followed during the 2024-2025 school year, was considered if the new option was not approved was that middle school students were unable to have their ME Block this year.

The block allows middle school students to complete homework or get help from teachers, similar to the 50-minute high school U Block.

However, if the schedule had returned to its original format, teachers who taught both middle and high school classes would be unable to do so, since classes between the two schools would not align.

Changes made to the schedule for high school students due to the new 2026-2027 schedule are minimal. Every day's last three blocks will be made longer by

**'Now [middle school students will] have a ME Block for 22 minutes. So that's the biggest change for us.'**

- JULIE SGROI

### PROPOSED Manchester Essex Regional High School Bell Schedule

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
7:45-8:40 (55)	A	G	F	E	D	C	B
8:44-9:39 (55)	B	A	G	F	E	D	C
9:43-10:33 (50)	U	U	U	U	U	U	U
10:37-11:32 (55)	D	C	B	A	G	F	E
11:36-1:08 (62) 1st lunch: 12:06-12:36 2nd lunch: 12:38-1:08	E	D	C	B	A	G	F
1:12-2:15 (63)	F	E	D	C	B	A	G
	DROP C & G	DROP B & F	DROP A & E	DROP G & D	DROP F & C	DROP E & B	DROP D & A

COURTESY OF JULIE SGROI

The proposed Manchester Essex Regional High School Bell Schedule includes a five minute earlier start time for lunches and extended class time for the final three blocks of each school day.

about five minutes, and lunches will be moved to five minutes earlier, high school Principal Julie Sgroi said.

"Now [middle school students will] have a ME Block for 22 minutes. So that's the biggest change for us," Sgroi said.

She said ensuring that U Block was preserved for high-schoolers was a priority in addition to keeping class periods the right length

for all students.

High school counselor David Conwell said the schedule may become beneficial for teachers if they want to teach new courses in a different part of the building.

"Ms. Fortunato does that right now with French, so it just keeps those options open for us as we move forward," Conwell said.

Erin Fortunato, a teacher in the World Language department for

both middle and high school, said that was something that World Language teachers were "very excited about."

"Without the schedule change, we wouldn't be able to have the sixth-grade classes, so I think it's great," Fortunato said.

Previously, World Language classes for students in grades under seventh grade had been cut due to budget cuts.

## Former White House Chief of Staff educates students on 9/11

Andy Card worked under three separate administrations

By August Capotosto  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Former White House Chief of Staff Andy Card gave a virtual presentation to students regarding the vitality of remembering the events of 9/11 while also providing insight into his time in the White House.

Social studies teacher Jennifer Coleman said students knew Card for whispering, "A second plane hit the second tower. America is under attack," to President George W. Bush on 9/11.

On Tuesday, April 2, Card addressed high school students in the auditorium over Zoom.

The idea for the presentation was proposed by senior Nate Clements, whose grandparents are friends with Card, Coleman said.

"Nate approached me, saying Andy Card would love to speak to our AP Gov class, and I jumped on the opportunity," she said.

Clements said that over February break, he brought the idea to his grandparents, who put him in contact with Card.

He said that, while mainly a professor of political science, his grandfather, Charles Herman, worked at the White House, although under different administrations than Card.

Coleman said that Clements did most of the coordinating with Card's scheduler, deciding on a feasible date and time before Coleman took over communication.

"Once I figured out the timing and whatnot, they were like: 'How do we make the tech work?'," Clements said.

Card acted as President Bush's Secretary of State on 9/11, which has become a very important topic that he continues to advocate for the remembrance of today.

Coleman said that, leading up to the presentation, she hoped

Card would be able to provide students with an inside look at the executive branch and the president's powers.

"I was hoping he'd be able to give us some insight on how the executive branch functioned immediately after 9/11," she said.

Despite the time restraints that caused the presentation to run for only an hour, it was a valuable and engaging experience for those who attended, Coleman said.

"We weren't able to have all of our goals met, but he did an extraordinary job talking about his experiences on 9/11. He answered everybody's questions, and he did a really great job humanizing the presidents he worked with by answering questions about their musical tastes and their pets," she said.

Coleman said the most valuable part of the experience was connecting students to individuals who work in government.

**'It helped students feel more connected to the national government.'**

- JENNIFER COLEMAN



BISSY MITRANO PHOTO

Andy Card presents to high school students, detailing his experience as President George W. Bush's Chief of Staff on 9/11.

"When we teach AP Gov, we spend a lot of time talking about the president, who the students will never interact with in their lives ... To be able to have that one-on-one interaction with someone who was there and lived all the experiences we talk about in class, it helped students feel more connected to the national government," she said.

Junior Tyler Cummins said he found the presentation informative and allowed him to see the tragedy from a new perspective.

"It was a very tragic moment that we must never forget ... and for history in general we need to remember what happened in the past so we don't repeat our mistakes and can make better decisions in the future," he said.

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# Class advisers, officers finalize details for prom 2026

Event will return to Willowdale Estate for its third year

By Riley McKinnon  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Senior class organizers have begun finalizing their plans for the prom, which will be hosted at the Willowdale Estate in Topsfield.

The event will be hosted on May 21, with buses departing from Manchester Memorial Elementary School at 5:30 p.m. and the event itself lasting from 6 p.m. to 9:30 p.m., said senior class adviser Alicen Shaw.

Shaw said that her opportunity to work alongside the previous senior class's adviser, Barrett Alston, when he was planning prom last year, has benefitted her approach, as it is her first year in this role.

"It's really helped me to road-map Senior Week a little bit better than I think I would have been able to have done if it was my first time," she said.

Shaw said that some of her responsibilities include managing finances once a venue has been chosen, organizing the contracts, and scheduling the buses.

"It's very multifaceted," she said.

Senior class president Lila Brady said that Shaw has helped to



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Located at 24 Asbury Street in Topsfield, MA, the Willowdale Estate is a Craftsman and Tudor Revival Stone Mansion that was built in the early 20th-century. The property was renovated and opened to the public in 2007 and now hosts formal events such as weddings, showers, cooperate events, celebrations of life, and holiday parties. It was the venue for the Manchester-Essex prom the past two years.

guide the class officers throughout the organization process.

"Ms. Shaw actually does so much more of the work than she earns credit for," she said.

**'I'm really excited to return to Willowdale; they were great to work with.'**

- ALICEN SHAW

Senior class secretary Emma Brown said the class officers began planning during the fall of their junior year by brainstorming ideas

and later touring and finalizing venues between February vacation and March.

She said that over the summer she and the other officers re-

toured some of the venues and began getting to know people who would be assisting them with the planning process this year.

"We all kind of share [the responsibilities] equally," Brown said.

Brown said that she and Brady are set to meet with the coordinator for the prom to finalize the dinner menu and any additional details during the second week of April.

Brady said that the decision to return to the Willowdale Estate this year began when the officers split up the responsibilities of reaching out to venues for information.

The decision was narrowed

down to either Tupper Manor or Willowdale Estate, before choosing the latter.

"[Tupper Manor] was going to be really hard to make sure we weren't going to go over the amount of people, and tickets would probably have had to be a set amount," she said.

Shaw said Willowdale was a great option last year because of their lawn games and other activities for students to engage in if they weren't dancing.

"I'm really excited to return to Willowdale; they were great to work with," she said.

Shaw said the venue will be a good fit for the number of people who are attending based on data



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from previous years.

"They also have Shirley Temples, which I think is a huge plus for me," she said.

Brown said that the DJ and photo booth will be the same as last year, along with a few new decorations that will be added.

"I'm excited for the photo booth and DJ ... it's going to be very similar to last year, but everyone had fun," she said.

Brady said she looks forward to the dancing, socializing, and food.

"I think it's going to be a great experience, and I urge everybody to get into a conversation with someone you don't normally reach out to or talk to," she said.

## Class of 2026 makes plans for Senior Week

By Maddy Holsomback  
INDEPENDENT STAFF

Senior Week activities for the Class of 2026 include a senior trip, senior dinner, prom, baccalaureate, and graduation.

Each day of Senior Week has a different activity that is paid for and attended by the senior class.

Their first event is the Tucks Point dinner for seniors and families on Monday, May 25.

The seniors' cap and gown pick up and a Boston Red Sox baseball game, that is not school-sanctioned, will occur on Tuesday, May 26, and Wednesday, May 27 is the trip to Six Flags.

Baccalaureate and graduation take place on Thursday, May 28 and Friday, May 29., senior class adviser Alicen Shaw said.

"A fair majority of seniors [are participating in Senior Week events]. I believe right now, a rough count is about 81 or 89, so that's a really strong percentage," Shaw said.

Social studies teacher John Mullady will be giving the faculty address at Baccalaureate, a ceremony for seniors to celebrate the end of their high school career. The event includes musical performances by seniors.

Social studies teacher Jennifer Coleman will be the faculty speaker at graduation.

Both students and faculty expressed their excitement sur-



MARY BUCKLEY-HARMON PHOTO

Seniors at last year's Baccalaureate prepare for the candlelight procession. The ceremony includes a slideshow and performances.

rounding the Senior Week activities and the chance for the class of 2026 to have one last week together.

"[The Class of 2026] is a really good class, and I'm hoping that we can really bond over the activities because it is our final week of high school, so I'm hoping it brings people together," senior class secretary Emma Brown said.

Seniors currently are working at their SCORE internships, so they are not required to attend school unless they have an AP class.

AP tests will have taken place by the time of Senior Week so students, for the most part, will

not have to come into school, so seniors will only have to focus on the fun activities in their last week.

"I'm super excited to have one

**'I'm super excited to have one more week with everyone where we can just have fun and make memories.'**

- LILA BRADY

more week with everyone where we can just have fun and make memories, and it's cool too because everyone else is in school, and we get to just hang out and bond," senior class president Lila Brady said.

A large portion of events for Senior Week are traditions from past classes.

The Class of 2025 also had their senior breakfast at Tucks Point, followed by a Red Sox game, which was not run by the school, a trip to Six Flags, and



MARY BUCKLEY-HARMON PHOTO

The Class of 2025 celebrated their graduation by throwing their caps in the air. Graduation will take place on Friday, May 29 at 4 p.m. Social studies teacher Jennifer Coleman will be the faculty speaker.

baccalaureate and graduation.

"[We] made decisions about what days we're gonna put everything on and then what we want to do overall with what we have. Kind of just taking ideas from years past and scheduling them, and then after deciding all that, promoting it and making sure the class knows," Brady said.

It's entirely up to the class adviser and class officers to plan and organize the senior week events.

"Things like prom, a trip, a dinner, those types of things are really up to the officers and myself to

plan and facilitate. So it's my role as the adviser to make sure that we are budgeting, we're making sure that we do enough fundraising, and then doing all the planning that is involved with those events," Shaw said.

The class officers have planned all of the activities alongside Shaw.

"I think that they've done a great job dealing with different situations and coming together to make a plan on how to celebrate their end of high school experience, and I hope they enjoy it as much as they can," Shaw said.

# Spanish classes travel to Spain, experience different culture

11-day trip covers six cities, two countries by bus

By Bissy Mitrano  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Spanish teacher Robert Bilsbury led 37 students and five chaperones to a 11-day trip to Spain from April 17 to 27, visiting Barcelona, Valencia, Granada, Sevilla, Cordoba, and Madrid through Education First (EF) Tours. They also spent a day touring Gibraltar.

All students who attended were upperclassmen.

Bilsbury said the itinerary was more ambitious than previous trips he has led.

"I've never done this itinerary before in Spain. It was a pretty ambitious one. There was a lot of travel involved," Bilsbury said.

Bilsbury said, in Barcelona, the group visited La Sagrada Familia, the cathedral designed by architect Antoni Gaudí that has been under construction for roughly 200 years, as well as Park Güell, where Gaudí used natural elements to design a residential area.

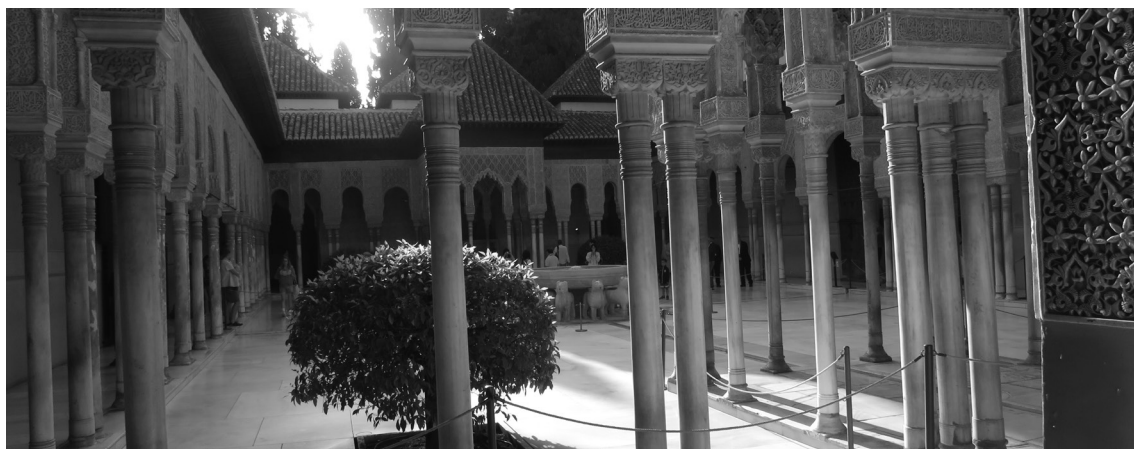
"It is a beautiful blend between the nature that already exists there and what he built," he said.

The group then traveled south to Valencia, where they stayed in a beachfront hotel and visited an arts and science complex designed by architect Santiago Calatrava.

From there, they traveled to Granada to tour the Alhambra Palace, then continued to Costa Del Sol before taking a day trip to the Rock of Gibraltar, Bilsbury said.

Bilsbury said Gibraltar, which is a British territory, allowed students to explore historical caves and see wild Macaques monkeys.

"You basically are going to England within Spain. ... There was a lot of English that was spoken in Gibraltar, which I thought was really interesting," he said.



BISSY MITRANO PHOTOS

**Students participated in a guided tour of the Alhambra, a 13th-century Moorish palace and fortress in Granada. Students also saw Europe's only population of wild monkeys in Gibraltar, where they took a bus tour after passing through UK customs. Additionally, they visited Sevilla, where they saw the Feria de Abril, and Cordoba, where they went to the Mezquita. The tour ended in Madrid.**

In Sevilla, the group coincidentally arrived during the Feria de Abril, an annual spring festival, which Bilsbury said was a highlight of the trip.

"It's almost kind of like being in New Orleans for Mardi Gras. The timing was perfect ... and it was a once in a lifetime opportunity for me to see that," he said.

While visiting Sevilla, English teacher Mary Buckley-Harmon was able to visit a caseta (a private social tent) and travel in a private coach at the Feria with her Spanish friend Teresa, whom she had not seen in 37 years. Buckley-Harmon, who met Teresa while studying in Madrid during college, said spending time with her

friend was a dream come true.

"I am still processing the excitement of seeing her again and experiencing la Feria with her. Our friendship is an example of how enriching foreign travel can be," she said.

The group also toured Cordoba's Mezquita, a mosque converted into a cathedral that Bilsbury said dates to when Cordoba was a center of Jewish, Arabic, and Christian cultural exchange in 711 A.D.

The trip concluded in Madrid, where the group visited the Prado Museum and the Royal Palace, enjoyed churros y chocolate, and ate a final dinner before flying home.

Senior Sydney Hemme said she enjoyed the trip overall.

"It was kind of chaotic going from place to place, but it was a very good experience to be a part of," Hemme said.

Senior Lila Brady said the trip was amazing and the weather was nice.

"It never rained. One of my favorite nights was swimming in the ocean. I wanted to experience that because it was so much warmer in the ocean," Brady said.

Bilsbury said the trip tour guide, Jaime, who is from Madrid, was central to the group's experience.

"I just thought it was a won-

derful combination of having a great journey director. Jaime's energy every day was super positive and kind and nice, and with him being from Spain, living in Madrid, he was able to really share his country with us," Bilsbury said.

He said the group walked approximately 75 miles over the course of the trip and faced some adversity when illness spread among them. EF Tours helped him manage the spread of illness by providing additional hotel rooms.

"We came out on the other side of that, and I just feel like we all really cared about each other," Bilsbury said.

## High school to offer female leadership trip to London in 2027

By Claire Masters  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

For the first time since 2013, the high school is offering a female leadership trip to London from Feb. 12 to 20, 2027, during the school's February break.

This trip aims to spark interest in international careers and leadership pathways abroad for the students attending, said math department head Courtney Brown, who is a chaperone on the trip.

"Immersing students in a different culture helps them practice adaptability, problem-solving, and decision-making, all of which are leadership skills," Brown said.

Students on this trip will meet with many women in leadership positions, including a scientist, an athletic trainer at a Premier League football club, and a member of the British Parliament, said athletic director Cameron Molinare, who is another chaperone on the trip.

"We'll be meeting a lot of female leaders abroad, which will hopefully inspire them to either get into international studies or assume more leadership positions as they go through their profession ... I'm just so excited to experience another culture with all of our students and to meet all of these different individuals," she said.

Students will be attending numerous workshops, including one at a women's charity and one with a women's suffrage expert, Brown said.

They will also be visiting many cultural sites in London, like

Kensington Palace, the Museum of London, the Royal Courts of Justice, a West End Theater performance, and the L'Oreal Young Scientist Centre at the Royal Institution, said math teacher and head organizer of the trip, Lauren Woodcock.

Students will be participating in global exchanges with students from a local girls' school and local athletes, as well as doing a London by bike tour to immerse themselves in British culture, Brown said.

Additionally, this trip will help students develop important life skills, Molinare said.

"They will hopefully learn some independence, leadership skills, accountability, and how to travel, which is a big one for some of our students who have never traveled outside of the country or flown on a plane. And then, responsibility overall as well, and self-advocacy," she said.

Woodcock said that this trip will hopefully open students' eyes to different career paths and help them learn all the different ways that females "rock the world."

This trip will also help students learn about different cultures, Brown said.

"Experiencing other cultures promotes empathy and cultural competency, which are qualities of leaders. It's not just about seeing London and getting to go to museums, and seeing shows, and doing all of the other cultural activities, but it's about creating potential future leaders who have those multicultural experiences," she said.

Molinare hopes that students on this trip will be inspired to either travel more, see different places, learn more about cultures, or become a leader.

The last school-sponsored trip to England was in 2013, when

students traveled with English teachers Allison Krause and Mary Buckley-Harmon.

Molinare said the trip is one more opportunity for students to travel abroad, and it's another chance for the school to develop young leaders in the community.

"I hope that this is something that we can continue to do and offer to more students in the future," Molinare said.

Next year's trip is open to current sophomores and juniors. Interested students can sign up until the October deadline.

Seventeen students are currently signed up, and they are excited for the various activities to come, said sophomore Maia Day, who is attending the trip.

"I am most excited to go to the L'Oreal Young Scientist Centre and see all of the sights. Half of my family lives in London, and I'm just so excited to go," Day said.

# Art teacher announces retirement after 30 years

Student, faculty reflect on her dedication to school community

By Riley McKinnon  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

After working in the district for 30 years, art teacher Tamera Burns plans to retire at the end of the year.

Burns began working at Essex Elementary School in September of 1996 before moving up to the middle school and later the high school, she said.

Burns said that she has found the world of teaching to have changed significantly with technology since starting.

“It was just a different time. It was before computers really lit up the world ... and here I am today, leaving in June, on the

cusps of AI. Very much going to change the landscape of teaching,” she said.

Burns said that what she will miss the most about teaching at the school is the students.

“I’ve always just really been happy to be part of that, of sup-

porting kids,” she said.

Principal Julie Sgroi said that she appreciates Burns for her dedication to her students and the art department.

“She’s influenced so many students on what it means to be an artist, and how to find their voice, and how to find the right way to express themselves,” she said.

Sgroi also said she is impressed by Burns’s ability to be so universal in what she teaches to her students.

“She works with ceramics, she works with the fashion side of things, she works with students who are painting or using different sorts of media. So, she’s just

reached and touched a lot of people,” she said.

Art teacher Andrew Lucas said he notices how devoted Burns is to being present for her job.

“I’ve been here for two and a half years. I think I saw her take

one sick day ... she’s a very hard worker, and, you know, that says a lot,” he said.

Lucas said that one of the best contributions that Burns has made to the art department is her ability to work with him on projects or AP classes.

**‘She’s influenced so many students on what it means to be an artist, and how to find their voice, and how to find the right way to express themselves.’**

- JULIE SGROI



RILEY MCKINNON PHOTO

Art teacher Tamera Burns started her career in education at Essex Elementary School before joining the middle school and eventually the high school, where she has inspired arts students ever since.

Recently, he and Burns worked together to plan an art exhibition in downtown Manchester and to collaborate between the school and 1623 Studios.

“She took on this big project, knowing it was her last year here,” he said.

Senior and president of the National Art Honors Society (NAHS) Megan Graeter has had Burns as an art teacher since her sophomore year.

“You can tell that she really cares about art, and she also cares about you ... she really wants people to be creative ... to experiment, and try new things, and really practice them,” she said.

Graeter said she hopes that

Burns will be able to spend more time with her family in retirement.

“I hope she enjoys it because she deserves it,” she said.

Burns said she looks forward to having a more relaxed schedule, getting to travel, play golf, and see her family during her retirement.

Senior Elsa Healey, who first had Burns as a teacher her freshman year and now takes her AP Art class, also wishes the best for Burns in retirement.

“I just wish her happiness, obviously, and I hope she gets more time with her new grandbaby. I hope she gets to enjoy the summer and all the seasons,” she said.

Senior and secretary of NAHS

August Capotosto, who has known Burns since her freshman year and took her AP Art class last year, congratulates Burns on this next chapter in her life after being a part of the district for so long.

“I hope that she can look back on the years that she taught here and reminisce, but I hope she can explore all new different facets of life without having to be in this building,” she said.

Burns, who has lived in Manchester for the last 50 years, reflected on how much she appreciates being in this area.

“I literally can’t drive down to Crosby’s without seeing students or people I’ve known forever here, so, you know, it’s really, it’s our home,” she said.

## Administrative assistant to retire after 35 years

By Riley McKinnon  
INDEPENDENT STAFF

After working at the school since 1991, Department of School and College Counseling administrative assistant Laurie Carlson will retire at the end of this school year.

Carlson said she began her training in June of 1991, after replacing Linda Tucker, who previously had the position.

“How I got the job was really quite something because it was difficult at that time. Jobs were hard to come by,” she said.

Before working at the high school, Carlson said she worked for the Department of Forensic Mental Health in Danvers, which she left when the organization had to relocate, and at the Twin Light Manor in Gloucester.

She said that she felt extremely welcomed to the school by two women in the building at the time, guidance secretary Bonnie Gray and staff member Betty Erkkila.

“I have kind of fashioned myself, or, you know, looked up to them and wanted to emulate them ... I want students to feel the way that they made me feel,” she said.

Carlson also said that through-

out her years at the school, she has found that her job duties have adapted to new policies.

Carlson said that one of her favorite accomplishments has been supporting students and watching them engage more with her as time goes on.

“There’s a part of us that we remember what it’s like to be the child ... we want to be that for you guys. We want to be the person who makes you feel seen,” she said.

Faculty members who have known Carlson since they were students in the building acknowledged the talent Carlson has with interacting with students.

“She contributes to the positive energy in the building. She’s such a big part of that; she celebrates people. She’s just someone who makes everyone in the building feel valued,” English teacher and former student Allison Krause said.

English teacher and former student Elizabeth Edgerton emphasized remembering Carlson for her theatrical abilities, particularly when she showcases them during faculty events, like retirement parties.

“She’s so warm and friendly, but then you put a microphone in her hand, and she does amazing things,” she said.

Learning Commons aide Gianna Baglioni, another former student, said she remembers Carlson’s kindness and how useful she was when Baglioni needed to get her high school transcripts when pursuing higher education years later.

“She welcomed me the same way she welcomes everyone,

which is open arms, open hearts, just the sweetest. It can be scary transferring to new schools, and she made that less pain-

ful,” she said.

Senior Violet Jakes also highlighted how Carlson has lent her a helping-hand in times of stress, particularly when she has needed assignments printed for a class.

“She’s never really made fun of me for needing everything last second. I really appreciate that,” she said.

School counselor David Conwell, who has worked with Carlson for eight years, said he will miss everything Carlson has brought to the building, along with her ability as a storyteller.

**‘She contributes to the positive energy in the building. She’s such a big part of that; she celebrates people. She’s just someone who makes everyone in the building feel valued.’**

- ALLISON KRAUSE



RILEY MCKINNON PHOTO

Administrative assistant Laurie Carlson said she would like to focus on her health, family and friends during her retirement.

“She has a lot of good stories from things that happened, here in the building back in the day, like wonderful, positive, funny stories,” he said.

Principal Julie Sgroi said that she is impressed by Carlson’s ability to remember information regarding the community.

“Ms. Carlson is a wealth of knowledge ... you tell her something, and she will remember it forever ... she has such an amazing work ethic and such an attention to detail that is just something you don’t see in many people,” she said.

Director of school counselors Samantha Buckner said she is grateful for the impression that Carlson has left on the school.

“[Her impacts are] going to be very hard things to replace, you know, potentially irreplace-

able ... while she won’t be here anymore, she certainly won’t be forgotten,” she said.

School counselor Gillian Polk has known Carlson since she began working for the district in Essex in 2000, later moving to the high school in 2013.

“I wish for her happiness, for the opportunity to spend quality time with friends, quality time with her mother,” she said.

Carlson said some of the activities that she is most looking forward to in her retirement are focusing on her health and her family, getting to spend time with friends, and going to the luncheons that other retirees organize.

“The more you’re aware of [retiring], and it’s coming, you kind of try to prepare yourself for that,” she said.

# History, sociology studies teacher returns from maternity leave

Donnelly enjoys seeing students, colleagues again

By Kiki Campbell  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Social studies teacher Abby Donnelly has returned after a seven-month maternity leave. Donnelly said becoming a mother to her daughter Georgia has been fun and has strengthened her relationship with her husband.

“I think I was worried that I would be really stressed and tired all the time, but mostly it’s awesome. The baby’s so sweet, and I would say what’s great is I have a really strong relationship with my husband, and it has strengthened the relationship. So it’s been really fun to kind of see the three relationships come together,” Donnelly said.

She said maternity leave gave her time to focus on things she needed to, and things were taken care of.

“It was nice because I could focus on learning what I needed to learn and taking really good care of the baby and adjusting to everything that was different now,” she said.

Donnelly said she is very happy to be back at school and to



ANNA GARTH PHOTO

Social studies teacher Abby Donnelly said she enjoyed her maternity leave with her daughter and husband. She said she is happy back at school, and everyone has been kind throughout her return.

see colleagues and students.

“It’s been really nice to meet all my new students and see a couple of my old ones. I love working with my department; we’re really good friends, so it’s nice to be back to see them and

hang out together,” she said.

Social studies teacher John Mullady said he enjoys Donnelly’s sense of humor and passion for education.

“[One] thing I really love and admire about her is her passion

for education. She really really cares about her students, and she cares about the way she delivers her instructions,” Mullady said.

Donnelly said returning has been a big change for her, but everyone has been very kind.

“It’s been a real change. Spending less time at home has definitely been difficult, and it requires a lot of organization. People have been really, really kind, and it has helped me appreciate the time that I have at home,” Donnelly said.

One of her current students, junior Izzy Hano, said the adjustment period switching between substitute David Stein and Donnelly was slightly difficult.

“The adjustment period was difficult in a way. This is because they both have different teaching methods and ways of helping students. I was personally able to adjust to her new way of teaching quickly,” Hano said.

Donnelly said during maternity leave, she was most looking forward to working with students, especially through this last quarter of the year.

The students tend to be more relaxed and get to do fun projects towards the end of the year, Donnelly said.

She hopes her students take a positive attitude and love for history and sociology away from her class this year.

“I hope that they walk away feeling that infectiousness of how enjoyable history and sociology can be and that they feel like they have one more adult in their corner,” Donnelly said.

# New cameras with increased resolution secure school building

Offer wider field of view, pan-tilt ability

By Charlie Baker  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Security cameras both inside and outside the middle-high school have been upgraded, Principal Julie Sgroi said.

She said the new cameras are just an update as the technology improves and are not a response to any specific concern or event.

District technology manager Don Skane said the new cameras feature much clearer 4K resolution footage, a wider field of view, and are pan-tilt, meaning they can move to change what angle it is showing.

Sgroi said that the administration has discussed adding

new camera locations, but as of now only existing cameras have been replaced.

She said the situations where the cameras are used are if someone

misplaces something, if a student needs to be located, or in a disciplinary scenario.

Skane said the primary purpose of the cameras is to protect school property, as the facilities and grounds are very exposed after hours when nobody is there.

The camera system provides

both a live feed and an archive of footage, which Skane said is large, with over a year of footage being stored at any given time.

Sgroi that the only place where there is a constantly monitored live feed is at the front office, so that the front desk can see and control who enters the building for security purposes.

Sgroi explained how she balances safety with student privacy.

“We make sure that only certain people have access to them, and we only use them when we need to use them,” she said.

Skane elaborated on this.

“All we can do is provide privacy in the bathrooms and locker rooms. But as far as the classrooms, hallways, outside on the grounds, you’re not going to have privacy, and you’re going to be filmed. And the only way we

can create the privacy is by limiting who has access to that video,” Skane said.

The people able to log in are administrators, facilities, technical sup-

port, and certain members of the Manchester-by-the-Sea police, school resource officer Andrea Locke said.

She said the police department has accessed the footage for investigative purposes, including two incidents roughly two years ago.



The school’s new security cameras, including the ones by the front entrance, above, and the student lot, below, were updated and have a live feed and an archive with over one year of storage.

The first incident was a hit-and-run on a dog that was being walked on Lincoln Street in September of 2024. Locke said the police weren’t able to identify the exact vehicle or the time of the incident using the old cameras, and “it might have been more helpful” if they had the new cameras then.

The second incident was a kidnapping in December 2024 following a domestic dispute over custody, where the subject hid with the child in the cemetery on Pleasant Street next to the school before being found and arrested by a state police canine unit.

“I think if the cameras then were the current cameras now, then it could’ve [been more helpful],” Locke said.



CHARLIE BAKER PHOTOS

**‘We make sure that only certain people have access to them, and we only use them when we need to.’**

-JULIE SGROI

## WINDBREAKERS



FREEPEOPLE.COM

Windbreakers are not only practical, but they are also trendy.

A spring athleisure staple is perfect for creating the ultimate capsule wardrobe.

Where to buy: LLBean, Dick's Sporting Goods, Free People

Free People sells over 10 color variations, for \$198.

An Alo Yoga windbreaker is listed on Depop for \$28, while Alo's windbreakers run at around \$100.

## CAPRIS



WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Capris were a trend of the 2000s, now making a comeback in jeans, cargo pants, and leggings.

These can be styled with a basic tank, a baby tee, or a more detailed blouse.

Where to buy: Anthropologie, Free People, Hollister

Hollister sells a few variations of cargo capris, including their Andi Adjustable Waist Baggy Lace-Trim Capri Pants, which retail for \$49.95.

Hollister cargo capris are listed on Depop for \$20.

## COLLARED TOPS



WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Collared shirts originally gained popularity for men's clothing over 50 years ago, and have now made their way into the women's fashion industry.

Where to buy: Ralph Lauren, Brandy Melville

Ralph Lauren sells women's polo shirts starting at \$118, with a multitude of fabric and color variations.

Brandy Melville sells their "Rue Top," a simple collared top, in many pattern and color variations for \$28.

On Depop, a Ralph Lauren polo top is listed for \$15, and a striped variation of the Brandy Melville Rue Top for \$11.

## SHIFT DRESSES



RESITOR.COM

It is the perfect simple, classy staple.

Where To buy: Mahi gold, Kiel James Patrick, Lilly Pulitzer, Abercrombie, Vestique

Vestique, a boutique based in North Carolina, carries the Dream Shift Dress for \$68, while more classic brands like Lilly Pulitzer and Kiel James Patrick sell shift dresses that run in the mid-100s.

On Depop, a Lilly Pulitzer shift dress is listed at \$29.

## TRENDY TIPS:

To keep fashion sustainable, circular, and less expensive, a recommended option for finding unique and quality clothing is through thrift stores or apps.

Depop, Curtsy, and Poshmark are popular choices for thrifting apps.

Buying clothing secondhand ensures that you can follow trends, create a more unique personal style, and shop from popular brands, while lessening the demand for fast fashion and spending less money.

# Artificial Intelligence

## Should AI be allowed in schools?

**Pro**

**Maya Chaghouri**

Considering the popularity and impact of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in everyday life, students need to learn how to use it correctly.

Allowing AI learning to be a part of a school's curriculum is fundamental to students' learning.

As AI develops and becomes even more prominent in industry, students must be given the opportunity to use it as a resource.

The use of AI can help teach students but also help spark their creativity.

The Office of Communications at the University of Illinois wrote, "Indeed, AI can be used to inspire and foster creativity, lend multiple perspectives, summarize existing materials, generate and reinforce lesson plans, and stimulate image creation."

AI can help many students when they are unable to reach their peak creativity.

Artificial Intelligence can also help personalize learning for each student.

"AI offers students instantaneous and detailed feedback on their work, helping them to see their strengths and weaknesses," the Illinois Office of Communications wrote.

Many students may not completely understand the way that their teachers explain certain concepts, so it is extremely helpful for them to have an alternative option for an explanation.

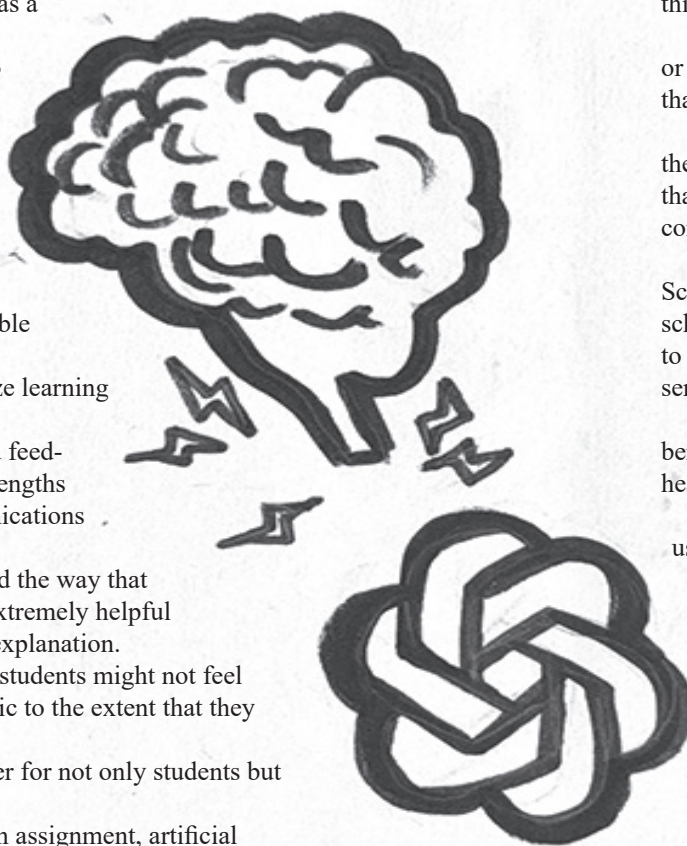
Along with difficulty of understanding, some students might not feel that their teachers have time to teach them a topic to the extent that they need.

Using AI as a tool to learn can make life easier for not only students but also for teachers.

"If a student feels 'stuck' while working on an assignment, artificial intelligence programs can provide immediate, helpful assistance if a teacher or caregiver isn't available" according to Walden University in the article "5 Pros and Cons of AI in the Education Sector."

Students mustn't take advantage of the assistance that comes with artificial intelligence because it might get in the way of their learning.

This resource should not be used as a cheat code that helps students, but as a tool for students to use alongside their learning. If AI is used as a way out of hard work, then no students will notice any benefit.



AUGUST CAPOTOSTO ILLUSTRATION

**Con**

**Maya Frangioso**

Artificial Intelligence tools like ChatGPT are becoming more common in classrooms, raising a debate among teachers, students, and researchers about whether they should be allowed in school settings.

AI should not be allowed in school because it weakens real learning, encourages academic dishonesty, and reduces students' ability to think independently.

While some people may argue that AI can be helpful for studying or brainstorming ideas, its use in classrooms creates more problems than benefits.

Instead of learning how to write, analyze, and solve problems on their own, students are increasingly relying on automated answers that do the work for them. School is meant to build skills, not let a computer generate answers instantly.

In the University of Illinois College of Education article "AI in Schools: Pros and Cons," experts emphasize the impact of AI in schools, noting that "generative AI has opened up a whole new world to administrators, educators, and students," but it also comes with serious concerns like cheating.

The article explains that while AI has potential benefits, those benefits are often outweighed by risks when students rely on it too heavily in their schoolwork.

BestColleges surveyed college students and found that 56% have used AI on assignments or exams, raising concerns about how often these tools may be used for cheating.

Another major issue is that AI can weaken deep thinking skills.

The Cornell University research article "AI in Education: Rationale, Principles, and Instructional Implications" shows that while these tools may provide helpful support, they can also reduce "deep learning if misused" and encourage students to depend on automated responses instead of developing their own understanding.

Additionally, AI tools can be unreliable and produce incorrect information, which can mislead students if they trust them too much.

According to Michael Healey in the Discovery Education article "The Pros and Cons of AI in Education: Benefits, Risks, and Real Examples," AI systems can generate "inaccurate or misleading outputs" that may sound correct but are not actually factual.

This is a serious problem in schools because students may accept AI-generated answers without checking them, leading to misunderstandings. Because of the many risks, schools should be cautious about allowing AI tools like ChatGPT in everyday classroom work.

## Vote against rent laws heading to ballot

**By Bissy Mitrano**  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Rent control is unfair for homeowners and landlords and has proven to be an ineffective way of creating affordable housing options.

With new rent control policies potentially on the 2026 ballot, voters must look at the history behind the problems these laws have caused for not only landlords, but also for tenants.

According to the National Apartment Association website, rent control, or rent stabilization, are government enforced laws that limit the landlord's ability to increase rent.

The problem with rent control is that if landlords cannot increase rents, then the buildings will deteriorate due to a lack of income for the property owners.

Building deterioration was evident in the 1970s and 1980s, when landlords could not keep up with the maintenance costs, tax increases, and water bills.

According to a Sept. 2025 article from Mass Opportunity

Alliance (MOA), in the 1970s, Massachusetts allowed cities such as Cambridge, Boston, Somerville, Brookline, and Lynn to adopt rent control laws, in hopes of creating more affordable housing.

However, these laws backfired. By the 1980s there were over 10,000 vacant properties, with new construction of buildings at a complete halt, MOA said.

These rental units were also not helping low-income residents, as they were mostly filled with higher-income individuals. Even the mayor of Cambridge, Kenneth Reeves, and the Prince of Denmark were living in these rent control units while studying at Harvard.

According to MOA, "Less than 10 percent of rent-controlled tenants qualified as low income."

Not only did rent control not benefit low-income households, it also made it even harder to find housing as the market declined.

According to the 1994 Rolf Goetze, PhD study surrounding rent control, Goetze found that

after examining cities in Massachusetts with rent control, the policy ultimately failed.

"Rent control induces housing shortages and a tight housing market. The control of rents induces housing providers to withdraw apartments from the market, discourages developers from creating new units, and increases the demand for lower-priced apartments," Goetze said.

Massachusetts is not the only state where these laws have failed.

According to Michael St. John's 1993 study, rent control in California represents another policy failure, where the number of rental units dropped by 10 percent. The number of low-income residents also dropped, while the number of higher-income residents increased.

Today, rent control continues to be implemented in states like Oregon, the first state to enforce statewide rent stabilization laws.

According to the 2026 Equity Advantage article by David Moore, Oregon has become complicated for landlords.



PIX4FREE.ORG PHOTO

### Rent control has failed in the past to create affordable housing.

"As operating costs rise and regulations evolve, investors are adjusting their approach. Insurance, property taxes, and maintenance expenses continue to increase, while rent control policies influence how landlords manage rent increases and tenant turnover," Moore said.

Moore said that it is also more complicated for citizens trying to find housing.

"These changes also affect the broader market. When development slows, fewer units are added. Over time, limited supply increases competition for available housing," he said.

Rent control is not fair for landlords as they may be relying on the building's rent as a primary income, leaving buildings

vacant.

"Some landlords of rent-controlled properties have low incomes but nevertheless bear the burden of rent control transfers," Goetze said.

Some may argue that rent control is the only option for affordable housing, which is a misconception.

The unaffordable housing is not due to the rental price of units, but the lack of housing at all price points.

There should be more advocacy for diverse pricing points rather than capping rents unfairly.

Affordable housing should not include laws that force landlords to give up their units for an unfair price.

## STAFF EDITORIAL

## Artemis II journey provides hope for future space exploration

In their 10-day journey around the Moon and back, Artemis II astronauts aboard the Orion spacecraft served as a symbol of hope for future space exploration, fostering unity, inspiration, and optimism amid global division.

This flight marks the first time humans have returned to the moon's vicinity in over 50 years, as well as surpassing the record previously set by the Apollo 13 crew in 1970 for the farthest humans have ever traveled from Earth, signaling a new era of lunar exploration.

According to NASA's website, the agency's Space Launch System rocket lifted off from its Kennedy Space Center in Florida on April 1.

On board were NASA astronauts Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover, and Christina Koch, and CSA astronaut Jeremy Hansen.

According to an article posted

on NASA's website titled "NASA Answers Your Most Pressing Artemis II Questions" by Cheryl Warner, the mission was a planned test flight to observe how the spacecraft's systems operate in a deep space environment.

Showcasing high-resolution imagery of the Earth and the Moon, the journey generated massive interest, hope, and social media engagement.

The mission has become popular due to the messages of hope and unity that the crew has expressed.

According to a Forbes article, "Artemis II Is Rekindling Hope During Humanity's Darkest Times" by Joe Sills, Glover told an audience on YouTube to remember the impact they can make in everyday life.

"Maybe the distance we are from you makes you think what we're doing is special, but we're the same distance from you. And I'm trying to tell you - just trust



NASA/FLICKR

Artemis II 10-day journey around the moon marks the first time humans have returned to the moon's vicinity in over 50 years. This trip's idea of collective effort represents hope and unity.

me - you are special," he said.

According to an NBC News article written by Francie Ebert and Denise Chow, the crew memorialized Wiseman's late wife, Carroll, by proposing to name a crater on the moon after her in an emotional moment captured on NASA's livestream.

NBC said that Hansen radioed to mission control on Monday,

six days into the journey, that the crew wanted to dedicate the honor to Carroll, who died of cancer in 2020.

The crew named the second crater "Integrity," in reference to the nickname they gave their Orion spacecraft. NASA's website wrote that the name "embodies the foundation of trust, respect, candor, and

humility across the crew."

The name is also a nod to the extensive integrated effort that was required to produce the mission.

This idea of collective effort showed the world a united front dedicated to working together toward a common goal, in contrast to the current volatile global political climate.

## Weight loss drugs promote unhealthy obsession with thinness

BY ANNA GARTH  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Celebrities who use GLP-1 drugs to lose weight, especially when it is not medically prescribed, promote an unhealthy lifestyle.

Although GLP-1 medications (like Ozempic) were originally developed to treat Type 2 diabetes, they became useful for people with medical obesity and anyone wanting to lose weight, a 2025 Columbia Surgery article said.

However, the drug's prevalence brings back the cultural obsession with thinness, a Dec. 2025 Rutgers article by Caroline Brobeil said.

"From a body-positive perspective, ... GLP-1s have intensified pressure on people, especially women, to pursue weight loss at all costs," Rutgers University psychology professor Charlotte Markey said in the article.

In the May 2025 Women article "12 Celebs Who Totally Transformed After Taking Ozempic Or Other GLP-1's" by Emily Hutchinson, Caroline Stanbury said she lost weight with Ozempic.

"I wanted to be me, but younger," she said.

Celebrities rapidly losing weight shows a shift in the body positivity movement. So, when celebrities change their body-positive message to conform to beauty standards, the people who once admired them can be affected.

The new acceptance of Hollywood beauty standards can make fans feel self-conscious about their own body. It is easy to think about "fixing" oneself if those in the media are saying they are more beautiful because they're thinner.

The National Alliance of Eating Disorders said in a June 2025 article on body image and soci-



FX PHOTO

Unhealthy habits promoted by celebrities using Ozempic can lead to a negative influence on youth. Society is beginning to obsess over skinniness again, which strongly affects body image.

ety that dissatisfaction with one's looks can lead to people trying to change themselves in unhealthy ways. Young people, especially, are harmed by the cultural shift towards the "thin ideal."

According to the National Association for Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, in 2023, 22 percent of youth had unhealthy eating behaviors (which can lead to or indicate

a disorder), and there was a 93 percent increase in youth eating disorder-related medical visits.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness said low self-esteem can also cause depression, anxiety, addiction, and poor relationships with others.

GLP-1 drugs' prevalence in modern culture pushes the narrative that skinnier is better. The body positivity movement, and

the celebrities associated with it, went back to viewing bodies as "good" or "bad" in part because of GLP-1 drugs. Now, people feel pressure to lose weight, even if it's unhealthy.

Confidence in one's body is very important to someone's overall well-being. Focus should not be on what the "ideal" body is, but on finding happiness outside of societal expectations.

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**INDEPENDENT**

The Independent is published monthly throughout the school year. It is a product of the Manchester-Essex Regional High School Journalism class.

We welcome letters to the editor from MERHS students, faculty, and community members. All submissions must be signed. The Independent reserves the right not to print letters and to edit the content for clarity and length. While letters can be critical of an individual's actions, they cannot slander or libel.

The staff editorial may be considered the opinion of the staff of The Independent.

By-line opinions are written by individual staff members and should not be considered representative of the entire staff.

The Independent staff hopes that all Manchester and Essex citizens will take advantage of this forum. The paper is meant to serve the school community, and we are open to suggestions to help it better serve its purposes.

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# Two seniors commit to Division I, Division III rowing

## Coaches have had big impact

By Sophia Eagan  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Seniors Violet Jakes and Abigail Aiello have committed to Hobart and William Smith College and Sacred Heart University for rowing.

Aiello will row Division I at Sacred Heart University and Jakes will row Division 3 at Hobart and William Smith College.

Jakes began rowing at the beginning of her freshman year, and Aiello began in eighth grade, they said.

Aiello said she continued to row and joined a club team by her sophomore year.

“From there, I continued exploring the sport of rowing by competing in Gig boat and Dory races, and by my sophomore year, I found a club crew team where I began to train and compete more seriously,” she said.

A key motivator for Aiello was her love for the sport, she said.

Jakes said the welcoming energy and kindness from her teammates made her love the



Seniors Abby Aiello and Violet Jakes were celebrated by their families and friends at the signing night on April 16 in the high school auditorium for students committed to play sports in college. Aiello's and Jakes's coaches have helped them succeed in this process.



COURTESY OF CAMERON MOLINARE

sport.

“When I started, everyone was super sweet and welcoming, and it was really easy to make friends quickly, so I stuck with it,” she said.

Jakes said the recruitment process consisted of many phone calls and a few visits to the schools she was interested in.

Aiello said that the recruitment process was very exciting, and she enjoyed getting exposure to

different rowing programs.

“I enjoyed meeting new people and learning about the unique aspects of each program,” she said.

A challenge Aiello faced was the physical endurance required for the 2,000-meter race, she said. A major challenge Jakes came across was a hamstring injury, she said.

“I had hamstring tendonitis, but I just went to physical ther-

apy, and I'm fine. It is chronic while I am rowing, so it comes back every so often,” she said.

Jakes is mainly excited for the training trips and meeting new teammates, she said.

Aiello's coaches and parents have helped her stay motivated, she said.

“My coaches have provided me with constant guidance, training, and encouragement. My parents have also supported my

goals by helping me train as well as providing me with unconditional support,” she said.

Jakes noted that a former coach of hers had a major impact on her rowing experience and was a key source of support throughout her high school career.

“I had this coach, Bob Sheets, and he was insane at rowing ... He taught me everything I know,” she said.

# Senior attackman commits to Roger Williams University lacrosse

## Will compete in Division III

By Maya Frangioso  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Senior Charlie Thurlow has committed to continue his academic and lacrosse career at Roger Williams University after a recruitment process that began during his junior year.

Thurlow reflected on how his path to play lacrosse at a higher level developed after his junior season.

“I wasn't sure if I wanted to play at the next level, but after my junior season, I felt a lot more confident that it was something I could do. Going into

senior year, I played club and went to numerous tournaments, including going down to Long Island with my family,” he said.

After the tournament season ended, several coaches reached out, and Kevin Gould, the head coach at Roger Williams University, invited him and his father to tour the school.

**‘Playing alongside [Charlie] makes it all the more fun and competitive.’**

- LUKE RENZI

Many factors led to Thurlow's commitment to play at Roger Williams.

“I wanted a smaller school in New England. The coach was also a big factor.

He sold the school to me very well and was extremely supportive during my commitment process. They have a great team, and the college is in such a great area,” he said.



COURTESY OF HEATHER BROADBENT

Senior Charlie Thurlow's consistency and work ethic make him stand out as a leader, lacrosse head coach Wesley Chittick said.

After receiving his offer, Thurlow said he “couldn't be more excited” about his decision.

He credited his high school coach, Wesley Chittick, for helping him collect film and reach out to college coaches.

Chittick said that Thurlow is

“very intrinsically motivated and does not need a coach to get him to practice hard.”

Senior Luke Renzi emphasized Thurlow's impact on those around him, both on and off the field.

“It's hard to compare Char-

lie's energy to anyone because it's just so genuine, and playing alongside him makes it all the more fun and competitive. There's no feeling like scoring a goal and seeing number 2 run straight at you, beaming with excitement,” Renzi said.

Thurlow said he has been playing lacrosse since the second grade and played club for two years with the New England Twisters.

Some of his favorite lacrosse memories include going to the Final Four last year, playing with his older brother his sophomore year, and taking the train with his friends to a Harvard lacrosse game.

As he prepares for college lacrosse, Thurlow said he is focused on continuing to improve and contribute to his future team at Roger Williams while finishing his senior year strong.

# Senior commits to Providence for Division I swimming

By Maya Chaghouri  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Senior Megan Graeter has committed to Providence College to join the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I swimming and diving team.

Graeter said she has swum for 12 years, and her favorite part of this sport is the friendships that it has given her.

Having to move from Lexington and make new friends through an entirely new team has been an obstacle for Graeter, but she has managed to stay close with past teammates while meeting new people.

“It's the people that make the sport what it is,” Graeter said.



COURTESY OF LAILA PAULSEN

Senior Megan Graeter has not swum for the high school since sophomore year, instead swimming for Charles River Aquatics.

Friends that Graeter has met through this sport consider her an extremely supportive teammate and strong leader.

“We were both captains together sophomore year, and I

think she did a great job with it,” senior Sydney Hemme said.

Junior Will Athanas says Graeter is a selfless athlete and makes swimming more enjoyable for those around her.

“She puts everybody before herself no matter her circumstances,” Athanas said.

Graeter has not participated in high school swimming since her sophomore year, but instead, she devoted her time to her club team, Charles River Aquatics she said.

Being part of a club team has allowed Graeter to travel for swimming, and she said those trips have left her with very fun memories.

“I think that travel trips are the most fun because you're without your parents and get to hang out with your friends,” Graeter said.

In order to figure out where she wanted to continue her athletic career, Graeter had to reach

out to multiple schools as part of her recruitment process.

She had been in contact with coaches since the end of her sophomore year and found it difficult to navigate her different options.

“It's a really long process, and it is very hard trying to guess what the coaches are thinking,” Graeter said.

Graeter said she learned more about Providence College when a family member who was an alumnus recommended that she tour the school, and she loved it.

Providence has always been interesting to her because of the multiple swim meets that she has had in Rhode Island, she said.

“It's a big commitment, but I am very excited because I think that it'll be fun,” Graeter said.

# Senior commits to Bowdoin to play softball at Division III level

## Utility player drawn to college's balance of academics, athletics

By Claire Masters  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Senior Anna Gardner has committed to Bowdoin College for NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Division III softball.

The recruitment process started during her sophomore year, Gardner said.

"I just went to a lot of camps and tried to get in front of as many coaches as I could, sent a bunch of emails, and just tried to put myself out there," she said.

This process continued into the summer of her junior year, she said.

"I continued to go to a lot of camps, I would email coaches and ask them to come to my games, and they would come watch me play, and then we just continued to talk, and then I

would get offers, and I eventually chose Bowdoin," she said.

Gardner noted that this process was tiring but worth it in the end.

Gardner labeled herself as a utility player, meaning she can play anywhere.

"For getting recruited, I'm going to be an outfielder and second base, but for high school, I pitch and play shortstop," she said.

She said she was drawn to Bowdoin for its high-level academics and athletics.

"I wanted to do what I love and play softball, but also get a really good education," she said.

Gardner, who has played softball since second grade, said her favorite part of playing the sport has been the team spirit and connection she has experienced.

"All of my teams were super

**'I wanted to do what I love and play softball, but also get a really good education.'**

- ANNA GARDNER



COURTESY OF DAVE PARMELEE

Senior Anna Gardner plans to continue her athletic and academic career at Bowdoin College where she will play in the outfield and at second base for the school's Division III softball team.

close. I really enjoy that and just like how you have to work together," she said.

Gardner also plays club softball for New England Unity, she said.

Gardner's high school teammate, sophomore Cordelia Riggs,

said Gardner has been an integral part of the team.

"Anna is the glue of our team. She executes in high-pressure situations and is an awesome leader," Riggs said.

DECA adviser and Gardner's former teacher, Barrett Alston,

said she is an "amazing" student.

"She is very determined in everything she does, and I'm excited to see where she goes next," he said.

In addition to her success in softball, Gardner is the salutatorian of the class of 2026.

# Senior commits to Roanoke College for Division III basketball

## Will play point, shooting guard

By Maddy Holsomback  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Senior Lily Oliver committed to play division III basketball at Roanoke College, while majoring in Health and Exercise Science and minoring in Spanish.

Oliver began her basketball career at a young age, and as she grew to love the sport, she never stopped playing, she said.

Oliver, who plays point guard and shooting guard, said she has enjoyed her time on the high school team.

"I would say that playing at



COURTESY OF LAUREN WOODCOCK

Oliver's talent, skill, personality, and sense of humor makes her stand out as a leader, Athletic Director Cameron Molinare said.

this school made a huge difference for me. The coach is amazing like all the people I met.

Playing basketball here grew my

love for the sport," she said.

Athletic director Cami Molinare said Oliver did not let the injuries she faced hold her back

from success.

"She's overcome a lot of adversity through overcoming some of the injuries and challenges she faced throughout her athletic career here, but she always had a positive attitude and did everything she could to get back out on the court," she said.

Oliver's leadership skills have been praised by Molinare and her coach, Lauren DuBois.

"She's always been a leader in her effort, intensity, skills, and attitude that she brings," DuBois

said.

Oliver mentioned the impact that her coach and teams have had on her basketball career.

"I wouldn't have been able to commit to Roanoke without Dubs," Oliver said.

DuBois expressed her pride in Oliver's growth as a leader and player.

"I think she left her mark and the legacy for the girls' basketball program here ... I'm just so proud that she's going to continue her athletic journey next year at Roanoke," DuBois said.

**'Playing basketball here grew my love for the sport.'**

- LILY OLIVER

## Second doubles team demonstrates chemistry, balances each other

By Kiki Campbell  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Senior Andrew Cahill has committed to University of St. Andrews for economics and psychology, and senior Ernest Taylor has committed to Colby College for economics. Both students are planning to continue playing tennis recreationally in tennis at college.

Cahill said he started playing when he was 13 years old; Taylor started at seven years old.

The second doubles partners on the boys' tennis team have a lot of team chemistry, they said.

"We have a bunch of team chemistry. We've been playing for like three years so we kind

of know what we're supposed to do," Cahill said.

Boys' tennis coach, Robert Bilsbury said Cahill and Taylor balance each other out when playing together.

"I feel like between each point, they're checking in with each other. They're feisty, and if someone hits a good shot, they kind of celebrate together in a good way," Bilsbury said.

Taylor has a lot of competitive energy in his game, Bilsbury said.

"Ernest brings an element of feisty competitive energy that comes out when he faces adversity. He usually raises his intensity level," he said.

Taylor said playing doubles is enjoyable because it is more of a teamwork-dependent game, different from singles.

"If you're playing singles, and you mess up, it's completely your fault. I feel like when you're playing doubles, it's more of a teamwork game, instead of just by yourself," he said.

Cahill brings a steady fight to the game, helps balance things out, and has a big serve, Bilsbury

said.

"... [he] has a hard solid first and second serve. His second serve is also a bit of a weapon for him, which helps because you're getting weaker returns back that Ernest can put away ... So I think their chemistry is like their biggest superpowerful," he said.

**'Playing doubles is enjoyable because it is more of a teamwork-dependent game, different from singles.'**

- ERNEST TAYLOR



COURTESY OF O'CONNOR STUDIOS

Senior Ernest Taylor exhibited resilience under pressure with a competitive edge on the court, tennis coach Robert Bilsbury said.



COURTESY OF O'CONNOR STUDIOS

Senior Andrew Cahill's first and second serves are key weapons in his game, tennis coach Robert Bilsbury said.

## 'Project Hail Mary' explores survival, connection in space

By Sophia Eagan  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Set in the vast emptiness of space, "Project Hail Mary" explores how optimism, courage, intelligence and friendship, even between different species, can overcome seemingly insurmountable circumstances.

Through Phil Lord and Christopher Miller's directing and the emotions conveyed by Ryan Gosling, the film demonstrates how humanity can find its way through collaboration and connection, even in the darkest of times.

The film opens with Ryland Grace (Gosling) waking up disoriented in a space station after suffering severe amnesia. Eventually, he pieces together his identity as a teacher-turned-astronaut who is tasked with saving humanity from extinction.

The cause of the threat stems from an alien microbe, which is referred to as an "astrophage," that is consuming the sun's energy and causing it to dim.

Through his ability to balance confusion, fear, and humor, Gos-

ling delivers a captivating performance as Grace making the situation feel both real and engaging.

These characteristics are amplified by the introduction of Rocky, an alien companion to Grace.

Grace and Rocky's journey from miscommunication to cooperation adds to the lightheartedness of the film while also building an emotional bond that feels genuine, even though Rocky is not human.

Initially, Grace is consumed by fear and uncertainty, causing him to focus mainly on self-preservation and the struggle to carry the weight of humanity's expense. However, as the film progresses, he discovers that companionship, specifically with Rocky, makes the extreme isolation of space travel manageable.

The directors' use of wide shots with negative space emphasizes the vast loneliness of space and intensifies Grace's psychological feelings of helplessness and despair. The use of flashbacks help reveal key moments from the past and allow Grace to decipher moments from his fragmented memory.

The film balances its scientific vocabulary with explanation and humor, making complex ideas comprehensible for the audience while not detracting from the film's science-fiction core.

The movie is based on an adaptation of Andy Weir's 2021 novel, which became a New York Times Best Seller and received two

awards from the Audie Awards in 2022.

'Project Hail Mary' has received the 2026 Heartland Film Truly Moving Picture Award and Critics Choice Seal of Distinction Award.

The film is PG-13 for thematic material and suggestive references.

**The film demonstrates how humanity can find its way through collaboration and connection.**



WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Ryan Gosling stars in the 2026 film adaptation of Andy Weir's 2021 award-winning novel "Project Hail Mary" as Ryland Grace.

## Zach Bryan releases sixth studio album, 25-track 'With Heaven On Top'

By Rosie Renehan  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Alt-country artist Zach Bryan released one of his best albums yet with his sixth studio album, "With Heaven On Top," through Belting Bronco Records and Warner Music Group on Jan. 9, 2026.

The one-hour and 18-minute album has standout tracks of different styles, but all still maintain the same cohesive themes of self-awareness, nostalgia, and love that Bryan brings to his music.

Fans have had mixed reviews about the album, according to a January article by Matt Mitchell of Paste Magazine.

"But there is a great record here, scattered across the bloated 78-minute runtime," Mitchell said, explaining his critiques such as the album having "flavor but no momentum."

Bryan tends to start his albums with a track of spoken word.

"Down, Down, Stream" sets the scene for "With Heaven On Top" by telling the story of how he



SPOTIFY.COM

The new album's cover features Bryan in the forest with his dog, showing a common theme of connection with nature in his music.

bought a house in New York, and what the former owner told him, with the lyrics reading, "Everything had gone

down, down stream from him / Like that cold water of his life had gone up his back, down his front, and around his legs / And before he

could drink any of it, it had already passed him by."

In the next track, "Runny Eggs," Bryan sings about traveling the world, performing his music, and finding God.

On this album, one song in particular has received backlash from online critics. "Bad News," a song about how Bryan sees the U.S. as losing its ideals, contains lyrics criticizing ICE and immigration policies, according to a January article from

Holler Country Music by Samantha Hall.

"And ICE is gonna come bust down your door / Try to build a house no one builds no more / But I got a telephone / The kids are all scared and all alone," Bryan sings in the heavily critiqued song.

Fan favorites include "Plastic Cigarette," with melancholic tones, "Appetite," which features trumpets, trombones, and saxophones, giving it strong instrumentals, "Say Why," which describes biblical references, and "Slicked Back," a song about his wife, Samantha Bryan.

He finishes the album with its title track, a reassuring, melodic song that features a more traditional country-style sound and acoustic guitar instrumentals.

"With Heaven On Top" is a reflective album with songs that encompass almost every aspect of life. Fans of Bryan as well as new listeners should give the album a listen..

Bryan is currently touring across the U.S. and Europe, and will be performing at Gillette Stadium on Oct. 2 and 3, 2026.

**"With Heaven On Top" is a self-reflective album with songs that encompass almost every aspect of life.**

## '27 Dresses' remains a heartfelt rom-com

By Maya Chaghouri  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

If you are in the mood for a cliché yet engaging rom-com, "27 Dresses" is the perfect movie to watch.

This movie, which was directed by Anne Fletcher, who also directed "The Proposal" and "Bride Wars," runs for a total of one hour and 51 minutes and was released on Jan 18, 2008.

Jane Nichols (Katherine Heigl) is in love with her boss, George (Edward Burns).

She holds herself back from

confessing this love, because she believes it will negatively impact her career.

Jane has always had a passion for weddings after visiting her first wedding as a young girl.

Since then, she has been dedicated to assisting her friends through the planning and hosting of their weddings.

An amazing friend and people pleaser, Jane, has been a bridesmaid in 27 weddings and feels content with her life.

When her sister, Tess Nichols (Malin Akerman) comes to

visit, she falls in love with George, and they begin planning their wedding rapidly.

Jane attempts to force herself away from the couple because of her inability to mask her feelings for George.

This falls apart when Tess asks Jane to help plan the wedding, and Jane needs to try to not destroy her sister's relationship.

This movie does a wonderful job of encapsulating a complex relationship between sisters in which siblings must navigate their underlying differences.

This movie also portrays unrequited love, as Jane spends the majority of the movie mourning her

love for George.

Although family relationships make up such a strong portion of the movie, what makes it so enjoyable is the complicated romance.

Wedding journalist, Kevin Doyle (James Marsden), is forced to write an article about the wedding of Tess and George, although he prefers to cover something more cutting-edge.

Kevin becomes close with Jane and writes his own secret article about her while writing the wedding article.

Jane considers Kevin to be cynical, while Kevin sees

Jane as someone who is unable to stand up for herself.

The closer they get, the more they are able to open up to each other about what holds them back in life.

"27 Dresses" shares an extreme range of different relationships and how love can be affected by conflict. "27 Dresses" is an extremely funny story because of its use of irony and personable characters, and it is the perfect example of a movie that shows the depth of its characters while also remaining cheerful

This movie is rated PG-13 because of alcohol use, sexual innuendos, and profanity..

# Arts festival fosters collaboration across middle, high schools

## MHS, NAHS present student artwork, music

By Anna Garth  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

An open mic night and a gallery of student artwork was featured at the arts festival, with performances coming from middle-schoolers, high-schoolers, and The Soundwaves.

It took place on April 30 in the learning commons.

The National Music Honors Society and National Art Honors Society worked collaboratively to organize the April 30 event.

Junior Simone Argento, the president of MHS and a

performer at the festival, said it's the first time these two groups have collaborated for something like this.

She said it's exciting to see the relationships formed between the two groups.

"We're all doing the same thing, it's just in different medias," Argento said.

She said she hopes the event

shows people that it's good to create art and to value it.

Tamera Burns, high school art teacher and the adviser of NAHS, also said that it's good to inspire students to create art.

"We want to make people feel that everybody has a role to play in fine arts; that it's not just a small select group, but it is really for everyone," she said.

The school feels more vibrant with events like this, Burns said, and they're important for making everyone feel included.

The goal was to provide a platform for student musicians

and artists, said senior and MHS member Luke Chrzanowski, who helped with tech support at the festival.

He said he hoped the

festival would provide a casual, low-pressure environment for students to come, perform, and appreciate artwork.

Chrzanowski also said more attention is brought to the MHS and NAHS with their collaboration. He said it's a good way to show all of the arts are connected.

"Music and drawing and

**'[Music and drawing are] both forms of human expression, and they can't exist without each other.'**

- LUKE CHRZANOWSKI



ANNA GARTH PHOTO

**National Art Honors members juniors Elsa Ballock, Miles Takayesu, and Riley Corrigan discuss their exhibited art pieces and why they picked them for the Arts Festival in the learning commons.**

painting are not completely separate entities because they're both, like, arts, they're both forms of human expression, and they can't exist without each other," he said.

The entry fee was \$5 for

students and \$10 for general admission. Snacks and drinks were also sold at a concession stand.

Argento said the money would go back to the MHS and NAHS.

She said they use it to buy instruments, go on trips, support

programs, and raise money for opportunities.

"It's cultivated a lot of collaboration with the two groups," she said. "It's been great to build a relationship with them and get to know all of them," she said.

## Art students produce short documentaries with local studio

By Charlie Baker  
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Art students made their own short documentaries in a collaborative project with 1623 Studios, a local media organization, art teacher Tamera Burns said.

She said the student documentaries focused on local history and were mostly around five to six minutes long, featuring still shots of photographs with voiceover narration by the students.

"It had to be local and personal. Something local, in your world here, and personal to you; something that was of interest to you," Burns explained.

For example, junior Thaddeus Bardsley said his group made their own documentary on the history of local shipwrecks, researching them for their script and pulling pictures from online.

Burns said that the 23 students participating in the project met as one group during U block once



COURTESY OF ANDREW LUCAS

**Erich Archer, principal at 1623 Studios, works with junior Nick Bock. Students and 1623 Studios collaborated to produce documentaries on history, such as shipwrecks in the area.**

per week, when people from 1623 studios would give lessons and help guide the short films.

"We were looking to flip the whole concept of taking our

students out on a field trip for instruction," Burns said.

She said that learning to use Adobe Premiere Pro was the most challenging part of the

project for students, because it is a professional-level program with a learning curve.

"I learned about the more technical parts, and I learned a lot about local history too," Bardsley said.

Photography teacher Andrew Lucas said that, considering

it was most students' first time working in the digital videography format, he was impressed with the videos.

"It's really about the story of the area. I mean,

that's what video documentary is all about. It's about telling a story. So there are some editing glitches that could be improved upon, but for the students who worked on it and put in all that effort, they came out fabulous," he said.

The final student documentaries were shown at 1623 Studios' location in Gloucester and are

available to watch on 1623s' YouTube channel.

Bardsley said he spoke with Lucas about doing the project again next year.

"I think if we could extend the project longer, I would love to do more cinematography and take actual videos with artistic

**'It had to be local and personal. Something local, in your world here, and personal to you; something that was of interest to you.'**

- TAMERA BURNS

motive behind them, but overall it was definitely beneficial for us all to collaborate with a local business," he said.

Burns said the proj-

ect gave students a chance at authentic learning and portfolio-building that they can apply to college or internships.

"Authentic learning isn't just cram for a test, take the test, and then the information sort of gets lost. This is hands-on, many times, learning that has an end product and can be presented," she said.

## Students, adults compete in library poetry competition

By Maddy Holsomback  
INDEPENDENT STAFF

Manchester's public library ran its third annual all-ages poetry competition, which is organized, planned, and judged by Manchester librarian Audrey Carman, head of youth services

at the library.

The competition is split up into several different age groups: kids, teens, and adults. There are 10 winners, and each winner reads their poem aloud in the library.

Carman said the goal of the poetry competition is "sharing art, creating a feeling of community, if just for one night, getting together and enjoying it."

A large part of the competition is writers sharing their work

with their friends, family, and community.

"The act of creation is always exciting when you get to share that, whether it's a poem or a piece of art, there's a lot of joy in that, especially when your audience is so appreciative," Carman said.

In the first year of the competition, there were about five to 10 participants, who were mostly children, but now there are about 10 to 20 people who

submit, ranging from children to adults, said Maddy Willwerth, head of adult services at the library.

"The really cool thing is that it's an all-ages event, so it's kids as young as their parents having to type it out because they can't do it ... to people who are in their 60s and above," Willwerth said.

Freshman Stella Langille was a winner of the teenage category with her poem "54321" about

mental health.

"I think [poetry] is a really beautiful way to express oneself," Langille said.

Between friends, family, and poetry lovers in the community, there were roughly 20 to 30 people who came to watch the poets read, Willwerth said.

"I think it's a really great opportunity for people who don't usually like to read out loud because it's a smaller, supportive space," Langille said.