

THE DARIEN DIFFERENCE



District Spotlight May/June 2026 - Issue 9

Dear Community Members,

Welcome to the ninth and final edition of The Darien Difference for this school year - spotlighting all the wonderful things that make the Darien Public Schools truly special. Each month we took a deep dive into one of our district schools and showcased 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 final edition of the school year highlights the wonderful work happening at all of the schools in the DPS and the many ways that our students and faculty are living the Vision of the Graduate!

We hope you have enjoyed learning about the amazing work of our students, faculty and staff across all of the Darien Public Schools. It has been fun gathering the content for each issue and sharing so many great examples of the Vision of the Graduate in action.

Please join me in celebrating what makes the DPS a wonderful learning community. Thank you for a wonderful school year, and we wish all of our families a safe and restful summer as we look forward to returning with our next edition this September. Have a terrific summer!

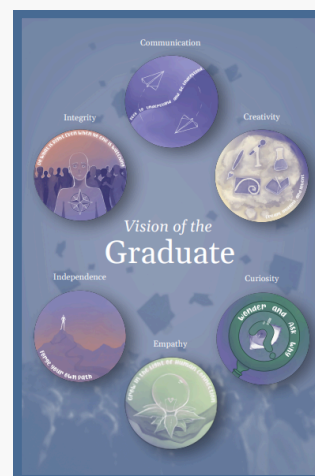
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric A. Byrne".

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

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Shining a Light Together:

DHS Hosts Connecticut's Only Student-Led "Out of the Darkness" Walk

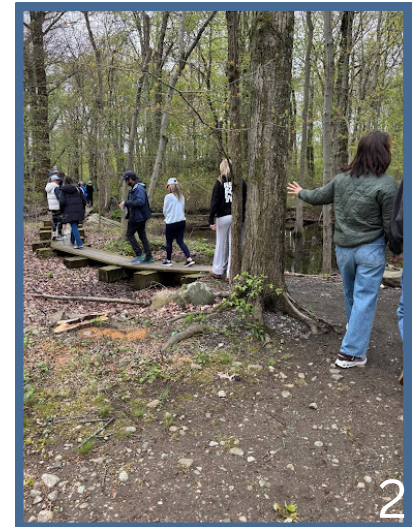
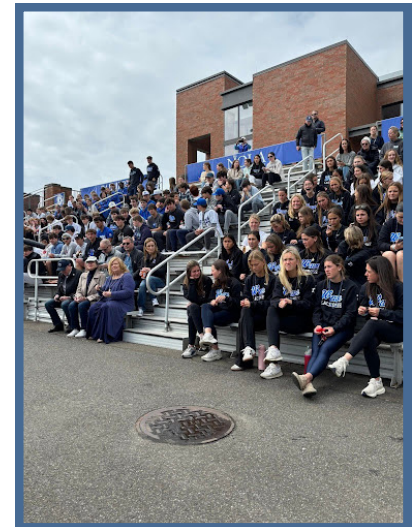
This year marked the fourth annual Out of the Darkness Walk at Darien High School, held in proud partnership with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP). Planned entirely by a dedicated student committee and supported by our passionate faculty, this event holds a distinct honor: it is the only high school Out of the Darkness Walk in the entire state of Connecticut.

The morning offered a vital opportunity for our Blue Wave family to come together as one community—honoring those we have lost, wrapping our arms around those who are currently struggling, and loudly de-stigmatizing the need for mental health care. DHS students took the lead on every element of the day, designing a moving ceremony that raised crucial awareness for suicide prevention while strengthening the bonds of support that unite our schools and towns.

Several hundred students, families, and neighbors gathered at the DHS Stadium Field to share in the experience. Before the walk, participants selected symbolic AFSP honor beads to represent their personal connections to the cause and added meaningful links to our growing "Why I Walk" paper chain. Attendees also explored a mental health resource fair featuring over fifteen community and school-based organizations. Following inspiring student speeches, a poignant message from the AFSP, and a "Shoulder Check Moment" where everyone committed to *reach out, check in, and make contact*, the talented Tudor Singers closed the ceremony with a breathtaking rendition of Billy Joel's "And So It Goes." The uplifting morning concluded with a community walk along the DHS cross country trail, where participants talked, shared, and left painted gratitude rocks along the path. Together, the community raised more than \$13,000 to fund vital AFSP research and programming.

A Special Thank You to Our 2026 Planning Committee

- **Student Leaders:** Lindsey Dauk, Lauren Erdlen, Hadley Hazelton, Mia Michaelson, Bridget Parr, and Elke Thorsen
- **Faculty Advisors:** Meghan Dube (Assistant Principal) and Judy Phillips (Wellness Center Coordinator)



Small Community, Big Horizons: Fitch Academy Celebrates the Class of 2026

Fitch Academy held its high school commencement on Wednesday, June 17, against the beautiful backdrop of Weed Beach. This year, six remarkable students graduated, marking a proud milestone for the entire Darien Public Schools community.

The intimate beachfront ceremony was a true reflection of the school's personalized approach to helping every learner become their best self. While the small, tight-knit community is sad to see these six graduates leave, there is immense confidence in the paths they have forged. Fitch Academy extends its deepest gratitude to the Class of 2026 for their unique voices, leadership, and the lasting contributions they have made to the school community. Congratulations to the graduates!





From the Science Center to the Stage: The Magical MMS Milestone Journey

At Middlesex Middle School, education extends far beyond the four walls of the classroom. Shared grade-level experiences are a vital thread in our school culture, designed to give students a collective milestone to look forward to each year. Our recent district-wide focus on expanding these curricular trips ensures that every single student journeys through a sequenced adventure of discovery—building from the scientific wonders of the CT Science Center in sixth grade to the lively pageantry of Medieval Times in seventh.

The ultimate finale of this journey took place on May 27, when over 300 eighth graders descended upon Broadway to experience the musical phenomenon *Hamilton*. It was a day defined by immense pride and collective excitement as our oldest MMS students represented our community in the heart of New York City, marking the grand finale of their three years of middle school growth.

The true magic of the experience was how beautifully it brought our *Vision of the Graduate* competencies to life. By connecting Social Studies inquiries into early American history with literary analysis in ELA and creative interpretation in Art and Music, students demonstrated incredible **Communication and Creativity**. They didn't just watch a show—they engaged with art as historians, critics, and creators. We are so proud of our eighth graders and deeply grateful to the MPA and our MMS families for partnering with us to launch this spectacular tradition into the future!



Feathers of Kindness:

How a Special Owl Mask Taught Big Lessons at Hindley K-2

On Tuesday, May 19, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade students at Hindley School were visited by Amanda Russel, an author and illustrator from Madison, Connecticut. Inspired by her own children, Russel writes books to promote empathy, understanding, and inclusion for children with special needs. Three of these books are *Jacob Learns to Fly*, *Jacob Loves Puddles*, and *Blaze Needs Berries*.

To promote an intimate setting, Russel engaged each grade level in their own thirty-minute assembly. During the assembly, she read her first book, *Jacob Learns to Fly*. In this book, readers meet Jacob, a special owlet who isn't interested in flying; he'd rather watch the water flow beneath his nest. His sister Geneva uses his love of water to help him learn to fly, modeling a gentle approach called the "Art of Joining." This story helps children to understand the unique challenges and strengths of their friends with special needs.

After the read-aloud, Russel dedicated time to questions and discussion about the book, and then she talked about her journey to becoming an author and illustrator. Finally, she provided a craft activity for students and teachers after the visit - an owl mask. Every student received an owl mask with precut feathers onto which students could add statements based on what they learned from the book. For example: I can smile at someone who is sad; I can be a good listener; I can help someone learn a new game; I can be supportive when someone is having trouble.



Vision in Action: Holmes Student Council Empowers Future "Upstanders"



When Holmes School Student Council members noticed a trend in their recent School Climate Survey—where students reported witnessing unkind behavior more often than experiencing it firsthand—they decided to take action. Partnering with their club advisors and School Psychologist Elizabeth Viducich, these proactive fourth and fifth graders set out to design a solution rooted in empathy and leadership.



On Friday, April 22, these student leaders stepped into the role of mentors, launching a specialized, 30-minute workshop for second and third graders titled "How to Be an Upstander." Bringing our *Vision of the Graduate* competencies to life, the council members used original skits and interactive, tabletop discussions to teach their younger peers how to safely intervene and support others when they witness unfair treatment.



The initiative was a resounding success, serving as a masterclass in public speaking for the presenters and a vital character lesson for the audience. "Our Student Council members showed genuine heart and empathy in the way they connected with the younger students," noted Mrs. Viducich. "They truly embodied kindness, and they were effective leaders of kindness as well!" The entire Holmes community is incredibly proud of these young leaders for stepping up and inspiring everyone to be the best kind of Upstander.





A Canvas of Belonging: Ox Ridge Celebrates Neurodiversity Month

April was Neurodiversity Month, a time dedicated to recognizing and celebrating the beautiful, natural variations in how we all think, learn, and experience the world. Rather than viewing different learning profiles—such as autism, ADHD, or dyslexia—as deficits, this month reminds us that neurodiversity brings incredible strengths, vibrant creativity, and unique innovation to our entire school community.

To bring this spirit of inclusion to life, Ox Ridge launched a special school-wide project titled, "I Am Awesome, I Am Me." Students and staff each created a personalized paper face highlighting a unique personal strength, favorite activity, or personality trait that makes them proud. These individual creations are being added to three large posters displayed prominently throughout the building. Over time, every single student and staff member will be represented, coming together to form a massive, colorful mosaic of the entire school family.

The true magic of the project has been the community interaction happening in the hallways every day. The posters have become a bustling gallery where students stop between classes to find their own faces, point out their friends' creations, and celebrate the diverse "superpowers" of their peers. This hands-on experience has provided a powerful visual reminder of how individual uniqueness strengthens the whole. It reinforces a positive school culture where every individual is valued, every voice matters, and together we create a space where everyone truly belongs.



Paws and Pause: Third Graders Welcomed Therapy Dog River to Royle School

As our third graders prepared for state testing this past spring, Royle School focused on creating a calm, supportive, and positive environment for our students. Building beautifully on our classroom work with Gizmo's Pawsome Guide to Mental Health, the third grade welcomed a very special guest in late April to help them hit the "pause" button and take a deep breath: River, a certified 4-year-old Golden Retriever therapy dog, for a comforting classroom visit!

River is an official member of the Pet Partners therapy animal team and was accompanied at all times by her trained handler, Mrs. Katy Rahe. Together, they followed all district and school safety guidelines to ensure a gentle and relaxing experience. The highly anticipated visit provided students with a joyful mental health break, helped reduce test anxiety, and promoted emotional well-being right when they needed it most.





The Tokeneke Difference:

Celebrating Full-Circle Growth

As the school year draws to a close, the Darien Public Schools mission comes to life at Tokeneke Elementary School through our culminating spring events. These milestones are vibrant celebrations of our district's Vision of the Graduate, showcasing how our youngest learners develop into independent, creative, and purposeful citizens.

Harmony through Creativity and Collaboration

Our recent spring concerts were a masterful display of creativity and teamwork. The advanced 5th-grade band, alongside our 4th- and 5th-grade orchestra and chorus students, delivered breathtaking performances for their families and peers. Watching these young musicians harmonize requires immense independence and dedication, proving that the successful pursuit of meaningful ideas is a journey that begins early in our schools.

Powerful Voices and Leadership

We were also deeply moved by the eloquent student speeches delivered by our Superintendent Award nominees. Standing before a community to share your vision takes incredible courage and fine-tuned Communication skills. These exceptional student leaders highlighted the power of original voice, reflecting deep Integrity and a commitment to lifting up those around them.

Coming Full Circle: The DHS Connection

Perhaps nothing illustrates Tokeneke's motto, "*Together We Can Make A Difference,*" more beautifully than the return of our Darien High School senior interns. These young adults sat in these very same elementary classrooms years ago, and they have returned to give back.

From assisting teachers to a talented senior who is currently painting a gorgeous mural in our building, these interns are living proof of what it means to "contribute to a community that provides all with a sense of belonging." They connect our past to our future, modeling Empathy and Social Responsibility for our current K-5 students, who look up to them with pride.

At Tokeneke, the end of the year isn't just about wrapping up chapters; it's about celebrating the confident, compassionate problem-solvers and leaders our students are truly becoming.



The Standard of Athletic Excellence: A Blue Wave Year-End Snapshot

True excellence is never accidental; it is the result of high intention, sincere effort, and the courage to strive for the absolute best—a philosophy the Blue Wave lived out every single day of the 2025–2026 season. The past school year highlighted the profound impact of high school sports in teaching the values of accountability, teamwork, and lifelong partnership. Wearing the blue and white meant understanding that no single athlete wins a game alone; whether on the field, the court, the ice, or the greens, success requires trust, communication, and a shared dedication to the person standing next to you.

This standard of collaboration was the driving force behind every milestone reached this year. Our teams pushed each other to grow, navigated and learned from setbacks and disappointments, and stepped into leadership roles that emphasized mutual responsibility above all else. This collective drive, combined with the phenomenal backing of Darien families and fans, made every season a celebration of unity. We are incredibly proud of our athletes not just for the titles they won, but for the exemplary teamwork, accountability, and sportsmanship they displayed every step of the way.

#RollWave

2025–2026 Championships

Fall 2025

- **Field Hockey:** Class L State Champions & FCIAC Champions
- **Boys Golf:** FCIAC Champions & Eastern Division Champions

Winter 2025–2026

- **Girls Ice Hockey:** CHSGHA State Champions & FCIAC Champions
- **Boys Indoor Track:** Eastern Division Champions
- **Girls Squash:** FairWest Champions

Spring 2026

- **Girls Lacrosse:** State Champions, FCIAC Champions, & Western Division Champions
- **Boys Lacrosse:** State Champions
- **Softball:** FCIAC Champions & Eastern Division Champions
- **Girls Golf:** Eastern Division Champions

The Standard of Athletic Excellence: A Blue Wave Year-End Snapshot cont.

