



The Darien Difference

September 2026 - New Staff Spotlights

Dear Community Members,

Welcome to a new publication year of The Darien Difference - our District Newsletter that spotlights all the wonderful things that make the Darien Public Schools truly special. Each month we are taking a deep dive into an area within our schools that showcases 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. This year we will take a closer look at STEM, Visual and Performing Arts, School Counseling and we will even learn about some of the accomplishments of our alumni.

The September edition introduces the new faculty and staff across all of the Darien schools highlighting a bit about their background, what inspires them and what they love about working in the Darien Public Schools.

Please join me in welcoming all of our new DPS faculty and staff. In our October edition, we will learn all about STEM in the Darien Schools.

Sincerely,

Eric Byrne, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools



New Staff: By the Numbers

Central Services: 3

Darien High School: 11

Middlesex Middle School: 15

Hindley Elementary School: 3

Holmes Elementary School: 11

Ox Ridge Elementary School: 5

Royle Elementary School: 3

Tokeneke Elementary School: 7

Take a look through the next few pages to read more about our new staff throughout the district, the roles they hold, fun facts about them, and why they are excited to be in Darien!



Central Office



Name: John Shaughnessy

Role: Director of Security

Fun Fact: I play the bagpipes and have been playing them for 22 years!

What do you love most about working at

DPS?: I love the family environment that exists district wide!



Name: Caitlin Wardlow

Role: Director of Communications

Fun Fact: I have dual citizenship in Ireland and was a competitive Irish step dancer as an adult!

What do you love most about working at

DPS?: I love the supportive and welcoming environment that every school across the district has!



Name: Yailin Rojas-Mata

Role: Executive Assistant, Special Services

Fun Fact: I love to do Zumba!

What do you love most about working

at DPS?: The environment is very nice and the people I work with are awesome. I am learning so much that will help me grow in my career!

Darien High School



Name: Kaylee Cudjo

Subject at DHS: Special Education Teacher

Fun Fact: I am the first college graduate in my family.

What do you love most about working at DHS?: The community has been so welcoming and friendly, I felt accepted from day 1.



Name: Ember Parker

Subject at DHS: School Counselor

Fun Fact: I've played two very opposite sports competitively: golf and rugby! Now, though, I prefer the fine art of keeping plants alive, reading, water-coloring, traveling the world, hiking and spending as much time outdoors as possible.

What do you love most about working at DHS?: The people! Whether meeting new students, families, or fellow educators, my days are consistently made better by connections built in my office, at the football games, and in the halls. So far, DHS has been such a warm and welcoming place and makes me feel grateful to be here!



Name: Paige Sinchak

Subject at DHS: I am the Social Worker in the CORE Program

Fun Fact: A fun fact about me is that I am the first person in my family to have received, not one, but two college degrees.

What do you love most about working at DHS?:

It is a community of parents, students, educators, and support staff who deeply value student success. It has been wonderful to be part of this culture and to contribute to a school community that is so committed to helping every student grow, thrive, and feel supported. I look forward to continuing to build meaningful connections and support our students throughout the year.



Name: Mary Viggiano

Subject at DHS: Teen Talk Counselor

Fun Fact: I am a mom to three adult children and a very spoiled boxer (rescue dog).

What do you love most about working at DHS?: What I love most about being at DHS is meeting and connecting with the students.

Darien High School



Name: Abigail McPhillips

Subject at DHS: 9th Grade Special Education

Fun Fact: I have a Great Dane who is bigger than I am!

What do you love most about working at DHS?: The sense of community. I've felt so supported by the people around me, from fellow teachers and administrators to parents and students. I also love how much our students care about what they're involved in, whether that's academics, sports, or extracurriculars, and how willing they are to challenge themselves. It's really rewarding to be part of a school where everyone is invested in the students and wants to see them succeed.



Name: Matt Goodwin

Subject at DHS: 9th and 10th Grade History

Fun Fact: I used to host, edit, and produce a weekly podcast.

What do you love most about working at DHS?: The community that exists here.

Everybody has been welcoming and supportive including the students.



Name: Sarah Sanchez (Reed)

Subject at DHS: Chemistry

Fun Fact: I am a big University of Michigan sports fan. Go Blue!

What do you love most about working at DHS?: The students! Their dedication and passion makes my job very fulfilling, and I've really enjoyed getting to know them as the year has progressed.



Name: Daniel V. Kuzma

Subject at DHS: AP Psychology and American History

Fun Fact: I host a radio show on WPKN 89.5. I am also a dual French-American citizen, an amateur archaeologist, and my first teaching job was in a federal prison.

What do you love most about working at DHS?: I love how welcoming the families of Darien have been as well as the students and staff. It's great to be a part of a community that values education and excellence.

Darien High School

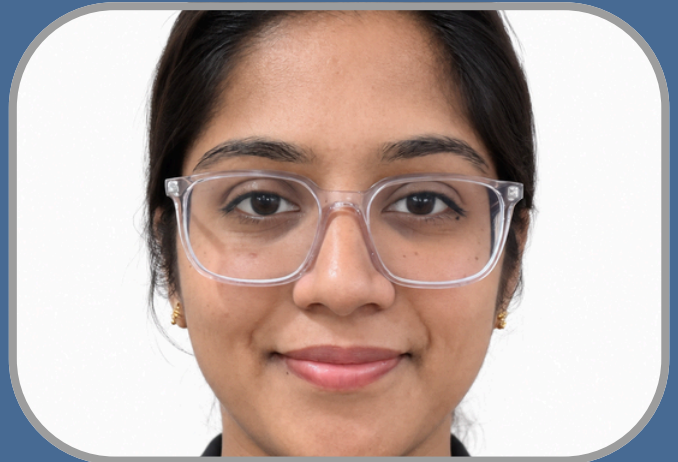


Name: Aristida Pllumaj

Subject at DHS: School Counselor

Fun Fact: I recently moved to CT from NY, so I'm always looking to discover the best places in Connecticut and everything CT has to offer!

What do you love most about working at DHS?: The strong sense of community and how supportive everyone is.



Name: Likhitha Aineri

Subject at DHS: Engineering, Computer Science, APCSP, Architecture

Fun Fact: I read a book every month.

What do you love most about working at DHS?: The students and their love for learning.



Name: Padraig Colligan

Subject at DHS: Assistant Athletic Director

Fun Fact: I hold the record for shutouts in a season at Greenwich High School Boys Soccer (11)!

What do you love most about working at DHS?: There is an incredible ecosystem of people who dedicate their time, money and resources to see their athletics succeed!

Middlesex Middle School



Name: Sebastian Novotny

Subject at MMS: 7th Grade Science

Fun Fact: I grew up in Germany and speak 4 languages!

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am looking forward to meeting all of the amazing students and faculty!



Name: Alexandria Tucci

Subject at MMS: Health

Fun Fact: I traveled to Indiana and worked with professional athletes to learn strength training and sports performance techniques.

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am excited to help my students reach all of their goals!



Name: Ryan Winkworth

Subject at MMS: Physical Education

Fun Fact: I have skied every mountain that can be skied in the state of Vermont.

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am excited to coach here at MMS!



Name: Christianne Lunquist

Subject at MMS: French

Fun Fact: I lived in China for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English.

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am excited to work with the other French teachers here in a dynamic and fun environment!

Middlesex Middle School



Name: Gabriel Wiersma

Subject at MMS: Social Studies

Fun Fact: My dad and I have attended a game at all 30 Major League Baseball stadiums.

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am excited to be part of such a welcoming and warm community!



Name: Jennifer Kruszewski

Subject at MMS: Special Education

Fun Fact: I speak Polish.

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am excited to be part of the community in Darien!



Name: Emily DeMasi

Subject at MMS: Art

Fun Fact: I was formerly a landscape architect and am a native plant enthusiast.

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am excited to be a part of the amazing, supportive learning community and the awesome visual and performing arts program!



Name: Jessica Fressle

Subject at MMS: Special Education

Fun Fact: I just got back from living in Ireland for four years and playing professional basketball!

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am excited to be a part of the culture that Darien has built.

Middlesex Middle School



Name: Dan Cooney

Subject at MMS: Art

Fun Fact: When I am not teaching, I am a professional comic book artist and illustrator. I actually got to intern at Marvel Comics in college!

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am looking forward to working with the students, making art and having a lot of fun!



Name: Sophia Cardamone

Subject at MMS: Special Education

Fun Fact: I was a math teacher for four years before moving to Special Education.

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I am excited for the community that Darien has!



Name: Gillian Mallick

Role: District Wide Multi-Lingual Learning Teacher (primary office is at MMS)

Fun Fact: I took my kids to London and Scotland this summer!

Why are you excited to be at DPS: I can tell the dedication the district has to its students.



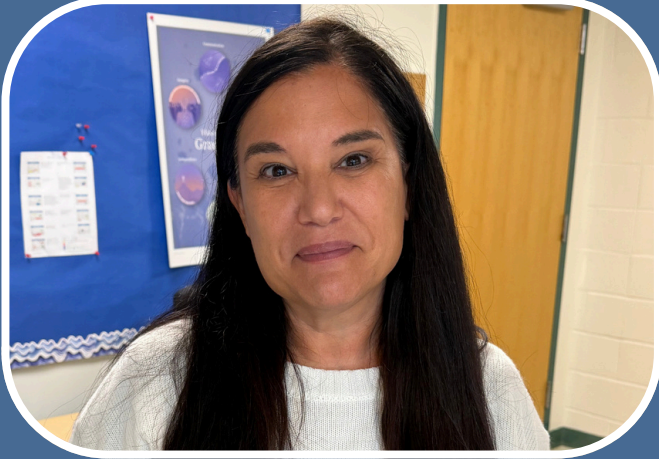
Name: George Conserve

Subject at MMS: French

Fun Fact: I coach middle and high school basketball.

Why are you excited to be at MMS: I am excited for the eagerness of the students to actually learn a language instead of just earning a grade. I am also excited to continue to hone my own French skills, as it is said that teaching is the greatest form of learning!

Middlesex Middle School



Name: Donna Coppola

Role: Attendance Office

Fun Fact: I love to ski!

Why are you excited to be at MMS:
I am excited to work with the kids!



Name: Sophia Lee

Subject at MMS: English

Fun Fact: I have had five other jobs before landing on teaching!

Why are you excited to be at MMS: I love the people, both students and staff!



Name: Ananda Jacobs

Subject at MMS: Math

Fun Fact: I can name all of the U.S. Presidents in order!

Why are you excited to be at MMS: I am excited to get to know all of the students.

Hindley Elementary School



Name: Erin Kenney

Role at Hindley: 5th Grade Teacher

One Thing You Hope Students Feel/Experience in Your Classroom:

I hope my students feel safe, supported, and excited to learn when they are in my classroom. I want each student to feel valued for who they are, confident in taking risks and making mistakes, and proud of their growth. Most of all, I hope they experience a classroom community where they feel a strong sense of belonging and know that their ideas, questions, and unique perspectives matter.



Name: Abigail Harbinson

Role at Hindley: Special Education Teacher

One Thing You Hope Students Feel/Experience in Your Classroom:

I hope that my students feel holistically supported when they are in my classroom. Whether they need emotional or academic support, I want my students to feel safe taking risks, asking questions, and exploring their interests and curiosities.



Name: Alyssa Peterson

Role at Hindley: Math Specialist

One Thing You Hope Students Feel/Experience in Your Classroom:

I hope that every student I work with feels comfortable, supported, and confident in their ability to learn and grow to their fullest potential. I want my students to see me as a valuable resource, not only when it comes to math, but also as a trusted adult in the building who they can turn to whenever they need support, encouragement, or someone to listen. I hope they feel that they are seen, valued, and capable when they are with me in and outside of my classroom.

Holmes Elementary School



Name: Tamra Bender

Role at Holmes: Physical Therapist

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

As a school physical therapist, the best day that can happen is the day a child is discharged from my services. For this to happen, I work to strengthen their posture, coordination, functional strength, and balance in a way that translates directly to their participation in the classroom, PE, recess, and navigating the Holmes campus. Physical Therapy translates to their academic skills, social emotional learning, and independence as they gain confidence, learn to advocate for their weaknesses and celebrate their strengths, and participate in their school day with the least physical limitations possible.



Name: Emily DiCostanzo

Role at Holmes: School Psychologist

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

I want to help students build the skills and confidence they need to navigate both the successes and challenges that come with growing up. Whether we're working through a friendship problem, learning how to handle a big feeling, trying something that feels difficult, or learning how to ask for help, I hope to give students the tools to become more confident and independent. I also want students to know that mistakes are okay and that asking for help is a strength.

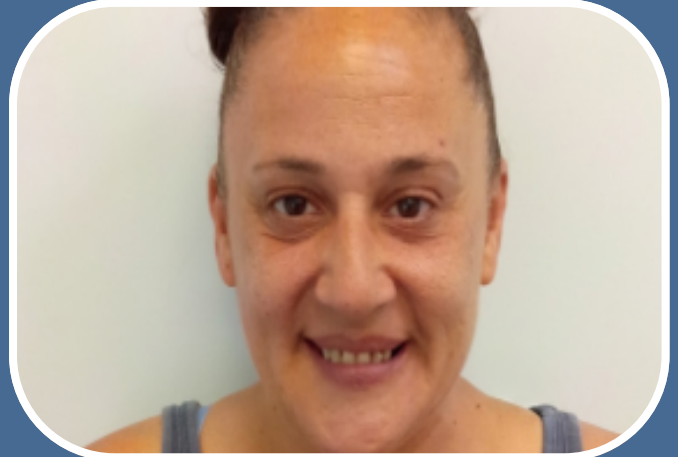


Name: Jayson Gold-Pambianchi

Role at Holmes: Student Teacher - Grade 4

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

In our classroom we paragon exploration of one's self and peers. Together, we can grow a more empathetic and creative classroom with group exercises, fun, exploration, and common loving support; both during lessons and in simple social activities!



Name: Michelle Grant

Role at Holmes: Lunch Room Monitor

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

To be a model in displaying these attributes and recognizing each child as an individual.

Holmes Elementary School



Name: Mya James

Role at Holmes: Building Substitute

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

I plan to encourage the children to ask questions and express themselves honestly. I also plan to model these attributes myself. Building a strong, bond with the children and being a role model yourself is a great way to foster skills and characteristics such as these.



Name: Kristen Schneider

Role at Holmes: Special Education Paraeducator

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

In my role as a paraprofessional, I believe that I can support our students in their journey by observing them to identify the ways that they may need to be supported in their own understanding of these critical attributes. By communicating these observations and collaborating with other Holmes professionals working with the student, I can help to identify the specific ways that they may be supported.



Name: Angela Muir

Role at Holmes: Kindergarten Teacher

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

I plan on helping my students in their journey with these attributes by engaging them in lessons that help them become kind people. Kindergarten is all about laying the foundation and I want to show the students in my class how to be good people.



Name: Juan Peralta

Role at Holmes: Building Substitute

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

By encouraging students to be empathetic and curious. This will allow students to create and foster meaningful relationships and to be always curious in learning new things.

Holmes Elementary School



Name: Lucia Rodrigues

Role at Holmes: Intern

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

I hope to help students understand these attributes by creating a classroom environment where they feel comfortable being themselves, making mistakes, and trying new things. I will encourage communication by listening to students and giving them opportunities to share their ideas, curiosity and creativity by allowing them to explore and think in different ways, and independence by encouraging them to take ownership of their learning. Most importantly, I want to model empathy and integrity in the way I interact with students and others so that they can see how important these qualities are in our everyday lives.



Name: Gianni Stella

Role at Holmes: Building Substitute

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

I want to help students grow, feel supported, and make a positive impact on their lives. I hope to encourage them to be confident, curious, and respectful while helping them become the best version of themselves.



Name: Nicole Viquez

Role at Holmes: Special Education Paraeducator

How do you hope to help students fulfill the district's Vision of the Graduate?

By modeling what the 6 attributes look like in everyday situations. Inevitably, children will make mistakes, and I believe those are vital for learning and growth. It's then my job to guide them to communicate, respond with empathy, and make independent choices. Through consistency and routine, children begin to understand what these qualities mean, what they look like, and the significance of each of them.

Ox Ridge Elementary School



Name: Jackie Morelli

Role at Ox Ridge: 4th Grade Teacher

What inspired you to become an educator?

I became an educator because I love connecting with students and watching them grow. It's so rewarding to see students discover new things, gain confidence, and realize what they are capable of.



Name: Robbi Zamora

Role at Ox Ridge: SLP

What inspired you to become an educator?

I was inspired to become an educator because of the many wonderful teachers and meaningful experiences I had throughout my own education. Those experiences showed me how much of an impact a caring and supportive educator can have on a child's confidence, communication, and love of learning. As an SLP, I hope to create those same joyful experiences by helping students find their voice, express themselves with confidence, and feel empowered as learners.



Name: Dorothy Dziedzic

Role at Ox Ridge: Literacy Interventionist

What inspired you to become an educator?

I had the privilege of learning from educators who made me feel supported and excited about learning. Their encouragement and belief in me shaped my own love of learning and inspired me to become an educator who can create that same sense of possibility for children.

Ox Ridge Elementary School



Name: Jessica Matloub

Role at Ox Ridge: 4th Grade Teacher

What inspired you to become an educator?

I've always loved working with children and have been drawn to opportunities where I can help others learn and grow. Growing up, I would sit with my brother, who is six years younger than me, while I did my homework and (attempt to) teach him everything from multiplication tables to paragraph structure! As I got older, I realized that teaching combines so many things I love: building meaningful relationships, being creative, and helping students discover their passions. It is so rewarding to watch a student realize that they are capable and watch their confidence soar.



Name: Morgan Olmstead

Role at Ox Ridge: Special Education Teacher

What inspired you to become an educator?

My own experience as a student helped inspire me to become an educator. Growing up, I had the opportunity to be part of inclusive classrooms, which gave me an early appreciation for how students with different strengths and needs can learn and grow together. That experience, along with the teachers who made me feel supported and encouraged, stayed with me and shaped the kind of educator I wanted to become. I especially love helping students find the strategies and support that help things finally “click” and watching their confidence grow along with their skills.

Royle Elementary School



Name: Meagan Harris (left side in picture)

Role at Royle: Kindergarten Teacher

A Little About Meagan:

I am originally from Centerport, a small town on the north shore of Long Island. I spent the past three years living and teaching in New York City before recently moving to Stamford. I went to Elon University. I am most excited about getting to know my students and the positive environment here at Royle!

Name: Danielle Tomanelli (center in picture)

Role at Royle: 1st Grade Teacher

A Little About Danielle:

I'm so excited to be joining the Royle community as a first-grade teacher! I grew up a few towns over in Weston, Connecticut, and have always loved working with young learners. I'm most excited to build relationships with my students and their families and become part of such a welcoming school community.

Name: Sara Collias (right side in picture)

Role at Royle: 5th Grade Teacher

A Little About Sara:

I am from Wilton, CT. I am most excited to build strong relationships with my students and become a part of the wonderful Royle community! I love spending time with my friends and family, going on runs, and reading. In the summer, I especially enjoy going to the beach and traveling. I am a loyal UConn fan and will be attending lots of football and basketball games this season, Go Huskies!

Tokeneke Elementary School



Name: Hannah Wilson

Role at Tokeneke: Occupational Therapist

When you're not at school, what are some of your favorite things to do?

I enjoy yoga and Pilates, walking my dog (a miniature dachshund named Zola!), trying new restaurants, and spending time with friends and family.



Name: Heidi Zentz Johnson

Role at Tokeneke: Music Teacher

When you're not at school, what are some of your favorite things to do?

I love jigsaw puzzles, fiction books, audiobooks, singing in my church choir and worship team, playing piano, and baking desserts. My absolute favorite thing, though, is going to Broadway shows! My niece and nephews are also a huge part of my life, so I love video chatting with the boys in Virginia and playing games with the teens in Connecticut.



Name: Sally Quesada

Role at Tokeneke: Secretary to the Principal

When you're not at school, what are some of your favorite things to do?

Paddleboarding, gardening, home projects, and spending time with my kids.



Name: Jami Morgan

Role at Tokeneke: 1st Grade Teacher

When you're not at school, what are some of your favorite things to do?

When I'm not at school I love trying new restaurants, going to Rangers games, and going to Block Island (in the summer). I really enjoy traveling and see new places I've never been to before. I also like taking walks and playing pickleball.

Tokeneke Elementary School



Name: Lily Graves

Role at Tokeneke: Student Teacher

When you're not at school, what are some of your favorite things to do?

When I'm not at school, I enjoy painting, hiking, cooking, and skiing. I especially love spending time outdoors and trying new recipes. I always try finding time to be creative through painting!



Name: Victoria Sarf

Role at Tokeneke: 3rd Grade Teacher

When you're not at school, what are some of your favorite things to do?

Some of my favorite things to do outside of school are reading, working out and needlepointing. I also like going into NYC to see Broadway musicals or take a walk in Central Park!



Name: Anna Miller

Role at Tokeneke: Kindergarten Teacher

When you're not at school, what are some of your favorite things to do?

When I'm not at school, I enjoy reading, cooking, playing tennis, and going on walks with friends. But above all, I love spending time with my family!

Looking Ahead:

October Events at DPS

Tuesday, October 13: Board of Education Meeting, 7:30 PM

Thursday, October 15: Parent University - “Navigating EduPlanet 21,” 6:30 PM, Middlesex Middle School Library

Tuesday, October 27: Board of Education Meeting, 7:30 PM

Thursday, October 29: Byrne’s Book Club, 7:00 PM, The Darien Depot

