

the INDEPENDENT

Volume XXXIII Number 1

Manchester Essex Regional High School 36 Lincoln Street Manchester, MA 01944

October 19, 2026

School weighs cellphone policies as state debates ban

Administrators consider Mass. laws, student needs

By Sophia Eagan
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Students at the high school must keep their cellphones in classroom holders during classes, U-block, and first lunch as administrators prepare for a possible state-mandated bell-to-bell ban.

According to the Western Mass News article “Massachusetts lawmakers debate bell-to-bell school cellphone ban” by Madison Lisowski and

Ryan Trowbridge, Massachusetts lawmakers have passed separate bills that would prohibit students from using cellphones bell-to-bell, but the House and Senate have yet to agree on the details.

School districts will have three options for implementing the restrictions: secure storage bags, geofencing technology that makes phones inoperable on

school grounds, or an alternative plan submitted for state approval, Lisowski and Trowbridge said.

In anticipation of the state ban being passed, the school is navigating how to implement new restrictions while addressing the needs of students and teachers.

The former policy required students to keep their phones in classroom holders during classes, while the new policy extends restrictions into U-block and first lunch, with phone collection being more enforced than last year,

Principal Julie Sgroi said.

English teacher Allison Krause said that teachers have also discussed the possibility of collecting phones during first

block and keeping them in lockers for the entire day.

Students have given mixed feedback on the new policy. Sophomore Annie Kent expressed her dislike of the policy and its effects on communication with her family and her ability to complete schoolwork.

“It is bad, and I need my music to do work. I also need it to text



SOPHIA EAGAN PHOTO

Freshmen Karis Bennett, Ellaina Camp, Ian Burke, and Zara Brown put their phones away in English teacher Mary Buckley-Harmon’s U block in compliance with the school’s new phone policy.

my mom during school,” she said.

Conversely, junior Abby Zagrobski said the new policy is irritating, but she recognizes its potential benefits.

“It’s kind of annoying, but I guess I can see how it would be less distracting to have our phones away. I know in U-block

it’s really tempting to go on my phone, but now I can’t,” she said.

Prior to the school’s introduction of the new policy, cellphones were a major distraction in classrooms, DECA adviser Barrett Alston said. English teacher Allison Krause said that cellphones used to be an annoyance, but the

new policy has created a sense of consistency and order that has decreased the usual pushback from students.

“I just felt like last year it didn’t become automatic in the way I wanted it to. I think this year, because the restrictions have just

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New U Block regulations enforced

Student hall pass system brought back

By Rosie Renehan
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

U Block protocol changed this year in an effort to better track students’ whereabouts.

Teachers typically maintain a spreadsheet system, but this year, school administration made the decision to add new regulations.

These regulations include paper hall passes that students must have their U Block teacher sign, students only being allowed to go to other teachers’ U Blocks for academic purposes, and students having certain times for going to the cafeteria, Principal Julie Sgroi said.

Sgroi said there were similar rules in the past, but teachers were not as strict on their enforcement.

“They’re not necessarily new regulations. It’s just that we’re enforcing what’s already been in

place. U Block was designed to be an academic time for students to get what they needed to get done,” Sgroi said.

Before becoming principal at the high school, Sgroi was assistant principal at Danvers High School. Danvers had a similar system to U Block, called “community block,” which was “more structured,” she said.

Community Block at Danvers meets every day, with class meetings some days and free time to complete homework other days.

English teacher Elizabeth Edgerton said teachers used a pass system for U Block before Sgroi became principal.

“A couple years ago, especially for the ninth grade, we had a pass system.

And we would have different passes for each teacher, and so if a freshman wanted to come and meet with me, they would have to get my pass before U Block, and then bring it to their teacher and sign it.

It worked well for freshmen, but it was a lot of housekeeping, and it was a lot for teachers to keep track of,” Edgerton said.

She agreed with Sgroi that this year’s “new” regulations still existed in recent years but were not enforced.

“They’re not necessarily new regulations. It’s just that we’re enforcing what’s already been in place.

U Block was designed to be an academic time for students to get what they needed to get done,” Edgerton said.

She said that if any changes were to be made surrounding U Block’s regulations, she would propose elimination of the school’s spreadsheet system and conversion entirely to the paper hall pass system.

Clark School, a middle-high school in Rowley, had a similar system, new art teacher Brittney Carbone said.

“I worked at the middle school for 10 years, and both the high



ROSIE RENEHAN PHOTO

Math teacher Lauren Woodcock writes a hall pass for a student.

school and the middle school had something called ‘Win Block,’ so it was very similar to U ... We weren’t necessarily assigned kids, but we could offer enrichments or have an intervention block [if kids needed] to make up a test,” Carbone said.

At the high schools Carbone worked at, written hall passes had always been the rule.

“If [students] were leaving,

[they] had to have a pass. And they would question if you didn’t have a pass-- ‘Where are you supposed to be right now?’” Carbone said.

Lexington High School had roughly 2,000 students when Carbone worked there, and she said that may explain why more regulations were put in place regarding moving about the school’s

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District faces continuing trend of low enrollment rates

Higher number of students leaving for Essex Tech

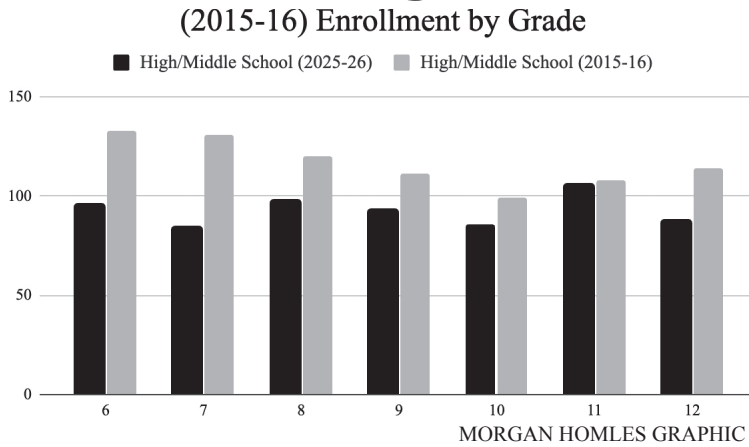
By Morgan Holmes
INDEPENDENT STAFF

Public and charter high schools across the state have experienced a student population decline in recent years, according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The total enrollment statewide for this past year was 900,487 students, while the 2015-2016 school year was 953,429 students, according to their enrollment by grade report.

This year, the high school freshmen class has 81 students, the sophomore class has 90, the junior class has 80, and the senior class has 98 students, said director of school and college counseling, Samantha Buckner.

The 2015-2016 high school freshmen class had 111 students, the sophomore class had 99, the junior class had 108, and the senior class had 114 students, middle school Assistant Principal Joseph Janack said.

Part of the decrease in the



The high school has decreased from 350 students 10 years ago to 432.

student population is due to increased enrollment at Essex North Shore Agricultural & Technical School, which has implemented a state-mandated lottery system in their admission process to guarantee fair acceptances, according to their admissions fact sheet.

Janack said he noticed an increase in applicants this past year because the admissions process is less intense.

This change in the admission process has allowed a greater number of students from the high school to get accepted to Essex Tech, guidance counselor David Conwell said.

“We would have two, three, or four students go to the tech per

year. This year, it was over 10. And when a class is kind of small anyways, that’s a big chunk of the class,” he said.

Principal Julie Sgroi explained that Essex Tech offers more of a technical and hands-on education for students.

“We live in a community where we have these opportunities, not only just from our socioeconomic standpoint, but just from the location,” Sgroi said. She explained that when students get to high school, they like to explore who they are a little bit.

Conwell said he thinks athletics is the leading reason for students transferring in high school while Janack noticed more of a

social or emotional trend in students transferring during middle school.

Sgroi said that declining school population rates all around is a topic that comes up in her principal group.

“A large part of it is that people are having smaller families. I think there is something too, of young families being unable to afford a house in these districts. So, they are moving toward other districts where there is an affordability factor,” she said.

Sgroi discussed other factors that may have played into the declining student population in recent years.

“I think COVID-19 shifted families’ perspectives as to what education can look like for their child. Some people moved towards homeschooling,” she said.

Sgroi discussed the schools’ current state in the midst of declining trends all around.

“For good or bad reasons, we

already went through our unfortunate situation with budget cuts, so we kind of already shouldered that burden, and I think for other schools it’s looming and it’s coming down the line,” she said.

Sgroi, Conwell, and Janack agreed that the goal is to focus on the maximum amount of opportunities for students. Sgroi said it would be a shame to see programming get cut due to numbers, not because students are not interested.

“We do co-op with athletics, so we can start to look at that for other things too, like some extracurricular things we can co-op,” she said. She also explained that looking more at dual enrollment courses could be attractive to some students as well.

While some students leave, the school welcomes or welcomes back some kids as well, Sgroi said. This year, the school welcomed seven new freshmen, two new sophomores, and three new juniors.

‘Sgroi said it would be a shame to see programming cut due to numbers, not because students are not interested.’

Learning commons makes changes; new aide hired

By Charlie Baker
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Changes to the learning commons include the hiring of a full-time aide, limits on phones and food, and a new carpet, Dean of Students Elisabeth Drinkwater said.

New learning commons aide Caden Dubiel, who grew up in Swampscott and graduated from Plymouth State University two years ago, said he came to the school as an assistant football coach before adding the learning commons position.

“I’ve gotten to know [football head coach Nick Broughton] throughout the years when I was in high school, and that’s how

they recruited me to Manchester Essex. So I’m actually enjoying it and it’s been a blast so far,” he said.

Dubiel said this is his first time working in education, but he is excited for it.

“I love working with young adults,” he said.

Drinkwater said that after the departure of former learning commons aide Gianna Baglioni, the school posted an opening for the position but was not able to fill it for the first month of school.

During that time, the role of monitoring the space fell onto the rest of the staff, who signed up for individual blocks through an online calendar and were paid an hourly rate on top of their salary.

She said it was all hands on deck when there were unfilled blocks on the schedule.

“I’ve been trying to come up here, or I ask [teaching assistant Owen] Donnellan Vallade, or [director of counseling Samantha] Buckner and the counseling department have also helped out,” she said.

Math teacher Lauren Woodcock, who is one of the teachers who volunteered as a monitor, said that losing prep time could be frustrating.

“To be honest, it kind of stinks,” she said. “As class adviser and union treasurer, I’m often running through the building doing different things, so I have to carefully plan and make sure I’m not needed elsewhere.”

While teachers must collect phones in the classroom, Dubiel said that he does not plan on collecting phones at the start of the

block.

“You guys are between 14 and 18 years old. I trust you guys can be responsible with your phones and use them for educational purposes only. But if, you know, it wasn’t being used for educational purposes, that’s probably when I would collect a phone for the period,” he said.

Senior Tyler Cummins expressed a similar opinion, saying he would rather it be left up to the students.

“I think the learning commons should be a student space where if students choose to use their phones, they should be able to,” he said.

The final change to the space is that students are no longer allowed to eat or drink in the learning commons in order to protect the new carpet, Drinkwater said.

“It’s not that we don’t want you to all be nourished and hydrated;

we just want to try and keep the rugs as clean as possible for as long as possible, and the custodial staff had said that the carpets really take a beating from coffee stains and things like that,” she said.

Students can still eat at the tables outside the learning commons, Drinkwater said.

Cummins said the new policy comes with both advantages and drawbacks.

“While it is nice to eat and drink while working, and it can maybe make some people be more productive, the ban has also made the learning commons a cleaner place and, in that way, nicer to work in,” he said.

The change has also affected the noise level, Cummins said.

“I think it’s a little quieter... well, definitely quieter during lunch because there just aren’t as many people there,” he said.

CONTINUATIONS PHONE BAN CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

been really enforced across the board, consistently, I haven’t been fighting the battle every day,” she said.

Alston said he has noticed an increase in overall student focus and productivity with the new policy.

“I think that the kids have done a much better job at just coming straight to class and getting their work done. Before, they usually ended up getting to it, but it took a couple minutes of scrolling first,” he said.

In creating a new policy, the school must consider the needs of the students, teachers, and the state, Sgroi said.

The school has reached out to nearby districts, she said.

“We’ve talked to Ipswich;

we’ve talked to Hamilton-Wenham about their policies, and I want to make sure we’re doing what makes the most sense for us,” Sgroi said.

Special features of the schedule, such as the waterfall structure and U-block, separate the school from Ipswich and Hamilton-Wenham, making the school’s needs different from theirs, she said.

Krause said the bell-to-bell state ban will most likely become law, prompting teachers to discuss possible approaches. One option would be having students hand in their phones to U-block or first-block teachers before storing them in lockers for the rest of the day, she said.

Class officers will also have an opportunity to represent the student body on the matter of cell-phones, Krause said.

“I know that Mrs. Sgroi is planning to, actually now that elections have happened, she’s going to start talking to class officers as representatives of the student body to get their opinions,” Krause said.

Some students have contacted Sgroi with respectful and concise reasons for wanting access to their phones, Sgroi said.

“I haven’t received a single communication that just says, ‘Hey, I want my phone just because’ or ‘you’re terrible for doing this.’ Everyone that has sent me something has had pretty solid reasons why they should have their phone on them,” she said.

Administrators are waiting for further instruction and final requirements from the state, Sgroi said.

“What I want to know, and what I’m interested in seeing, is

what do [state lawmakers] expect us to do with those devices? Are we expected to collect them, or is the expectation that the students will have them, but they are off and away?” she said.

Sgroi said she wants the school to settle on a policy quickly so administrators and teachers can shift their focus back to education.

“Let’s quickly come up with a solution and move on, because what I think is happening is we are spending so much time talking about what we’re going to do, and we’re not focusing on the teaching and the learning that is happening,” she said.

U BLOCK CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

buildings.

She also said that the new statewide cell phone policy may have added some difficulty to the

implementation of the U Block guidelines this year.

“Change is frustrating. I think [we should be] giving things a chance for some time, and then reevaluating later, and [seeing] how it goes. You can always get a student voice with that later, [after seeing] how things go, but I think just because we don’t like something, we have to have reasons [for] what’s actually the problem with it,” Carbone said.

Sgroi said that U lock at the high school is unique.

“Some schools have it some days, some schools have it with fewer minutes, some schools do it in different ways, but I don’t know of a single one that does it every single day, and it’s school-wide. We want to make sure we preserve that. It’s something that I think makes us unique, and it’s a very positive thing,” Sgroi said.

Working artist brings professional experience, creativity to classroom

Teacher shares her mixed media skills with students

By Stella Langille
INDEPENDENT STAFF

Brittney Carbone, the high school’s new art teacher, is both an experienced art teacher and a working artist.

She teaches AP Art and Design 2D All Media and Digital, AP Art and Design 2D Drawing, AP Art and Design 3D, Portfolio, Studio Art, Art Lab, and Ceramics Foundations.

Carbone said she has been interested in arts since she was in high school at Woburn Memorial. She earned her bachelor’s degree in painting, two-dimensional studies and art education from UMass Dartmouth before earning her bachelor’s degree in art education from Boston University, she said.

For the majority of her career, from 2014 to 2024, she worked in Lexington Public Schools.

During her time at Lexington High School, Carbone taught an illustration class and a painting foundations course, which is similar to the high school’s Art Lab, she said.

In 2024, Carbone decided to take a sabbatical. She lived in Woburn, Massachusetts, her whole life, and wanted to see what life outside of it was like, she said. She moved to North Carolina and lived there until 2025.

“I chose to come back to Massachusetts because I missed New England,” Carbone said.

When Carbone returned to



STELLA LANGILLE PHOTO

Art teacher Brittney Carbone helps freshman Ruby Sullivan with her ceramics project during class. Carbone encourages students to experiment with different materials and techniques creatively.

Massachusetts, she was a long-term substitute at Woburn elementary schools: Mary D. Altavesta Elementary and Shamrock Elementary for one year.

She said she chose to apply for the high school art position in the school district for three main reasons:

“[Manchester Essex] is an excellent district, and it is very similar to Lexington in many ways. Academically it’s very similar,” Carbone said.

She also wanted to work with high school students, something she hadn’t been able to do much of.

So far, she loves the high school and its smaller class sizes,

she said.

“I have fewer students, which means I can connect with them sooner, faster, have stronger relationships with them, and be able to help them more,” Carbone said.

Junior Abby Zagrobski, who is taking AP Art and Design 2D Drawing, said that she has a smaller class, which makes her feel more connected to Carbone.

Carbone said she feels a large sense of community and warmth at the high school. She said she hopes to make her classroom feel just as welcoming.

Her classroom displays motivational posters, colorful decorations, and her own artwork.

In her own artwork, Carbone

said, she uses multiple materials to create her pieces, such as epoxy, watercolors, and components from model train sets. She said she hopes to add more of a mixed media approach to the curriculum.

She wants her “students to not just think so much about one particular material but ways that they can experiment with it,” she said.

AP Art and Design 2D Drawing is already experimenting with mixed media.

“She makes us explore different medias that we haven’t really used before,” said Zagrobski, who is completing a project using graphite and colored pencils.

Similar to her students, Carbone is also producing her own art. Outside of school, Carbone creates art for commissions and exhibits and teaches workshops.

FUN FACTS

- She has a love-hate relationship with her favorite material: epoxy.
- She was on the Woburn Memorial High School track team as a mile runner. Her best mile time was 5 minutes 27 seconds.
- Her horoscope is a Taurus sun, Libra moon, and Cancer rising.
- She is captivated by the moon and always photographs it.

“The fact that she’s still engaged in professional work, really speaks highly to her, her ability, [and] also all the skills she can bring to our students,” said Harry Wagg, chair of the art and music department.

Carbone showcases her epoxy relief artwork, often featuring New England and the ocean, on her website, Brittney Carbone Art. The most frequently seen medium on her website is epoxy, which she said she uses to create relief pieces, where elements come off the surface.

New assistant joins school counseling office

Builds connections with students, staff

By Freddy Jakes
INDEPENDENT STAFF

School counseling administrative assistant Juliana Marin has taken over for Laurie Carlson, who served in the position for 35 years.

Marin was born and raised in Medellín, Colombia, which has high temperatures all year round, in contrast to the weather of the Northeast, she said.

She said she studied psychology at Colombia’s University and Institution of Envigado before choosing to pursue the opportunities in Boston after visiting the United States several times.

“I’m the type of person that doesn’t want to stay in one place ... I like moving around to try new things,” Marin said.

Prior to working at the school, she had a variety of jobs after her move into the United States. One of her past jobs was being an assistant at the now-closed Law Office of Molly McGee in Revere.

“I don’t know why, but life put me on the path to do assistant work ... when I started at the legal

office,” she said.

To shorten her commute, she transitioned to the legal office after being recommended by somebody she first met at her previous job in a spa in Boston, she said.

The transition to the legal office was made smooth using the managerial experience she gained at her previous jobs. Her responsibilities included managing timelines, reaching out to associates, and other responsibilities that later became key points of her job as a school counseling administrative assistant, she said.

Marin began to interview at the school for a shorter commute and a better, less stressful environment after the legal office had closed, she said.

After a series of interviews at the school carried out by Principal Julie Sgroi and Director of School and College Counseling Samantha Buckner, Marin said she was excited to receive the position of administrative assistant because of the shorter commute and the school’s welcoming environment.

“The faculty staff, it’s like a family,” she said after seeing how tight-knit the environment really was.

She noted how many teachers have been here for more than 20



FREDDY JAKES PHOTO

Juliana Marin joins the high school counseling team.

years, helping build familiarity among the staff. Marin also noticed that some staff members stay after work to spend time together.

Similar to how she described the staff, she described the students as being welcoming and friendly even as she replaces a veteran. She said every day she is visited by students on their way to their school counselors, and she receives a warm reception whenever they enter the office.

One of the people she was first introduced to, and she said she already misses, is Carlson, who was a supporting figure for Marin as she helped her better understand the workings of the department of

school counseling.

Main office administrative assistant Caterina Angelou has helped Marin learn how things operate at school. Her assistance ranges from helping manage the purchases made for the department of school counseling, helping look up and change student schedules, and viewing attendance records, said Angelou.

Although Angelou said she did not make the final hiring decision, she said the staff agreed Marin performed well during the interview process.

“She’s probably going to help put in a lot of cool changes into effect ... we will see a lot more ... technological outreach with her,” Angelou said. Marin will help shepherd better technology use, said Angelou.

School counselor David Conwell held a similar belief regarding his expectations; she will help with student outreach and listening to the students, he said.

“It’s kind of tough to follow up somebody who had been doing it for so long and ... she handled it so well,” Conwell said. She has been doing a great job managing the duties she was given so far, he said.

Staff members and some of the student body recognized Marin’s aptitude for the job.

“She is really kind and has

made sure that the office is really inviting for students whenever I am around,” sophomore Annabelle Kerivan said. Marin has managed to help create a welcoming environment that is ready to support students, she said.

The welcoming atmosphere of the department of school counseling is something she aims to cultivate each day for all students, said Marin.

FUN FACTS

- She enjoys making candles in her free time.
- She has an orange cat named Zeus.
- She likes to go fishing in Ipswich with her husband.
- Her favorite book is “Harry Potter,” and her favorite genre is fantasy.
- She enjoys cooking to help relieve stress.

School introduces marine science class

Course covers underwater biodiversity, oceanography

By Claire Masters
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

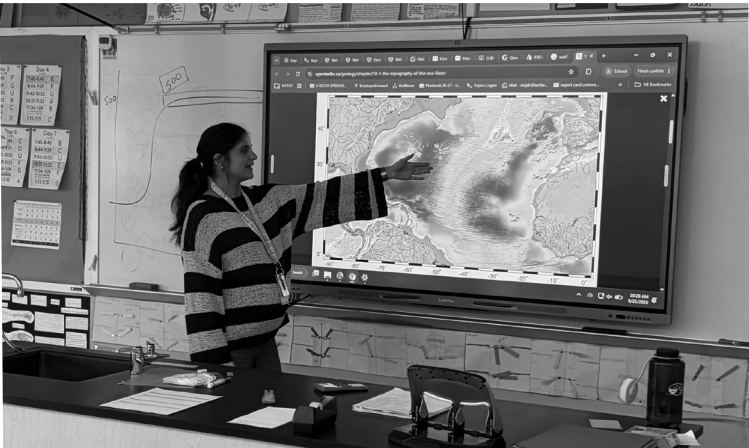
This year, science teacher Anjali Bhardwaj is teaching a new marine science class, which is a full-year honors class that covers oceanography and underwater biodiversity.

“We start with oceanography -- a lot about the seafloor, topography, currents, waves, seawater composition, different features on the seafloor,” Bhardwaj said.

Then the class will shift their focus to different underwater organisms and human involvement, she said.

“Everything from oceanography influences the biology and biodiversity of what can live there, so starting with the oceanography is really important, but then we get into our different taxonomic groups, human impact, ecosystems, and all of the really fun stuff towards the middle of the year,” Bhardwaj said.

Science department chair and science teacher Kristen Umile said the original idea was to split the marine science course into two classes, one college prep and one honors. The college



CLAIRE MASTERS PHOTO

Science teacher Anjali Bhardwaj displays a topographical map, exploring the connection between geography and marine biology.

prep class would be offered as a half-year class, while the honors would be a full-year, research-focused class.

“Unfortunately, because of the way the schedule worked, we could only run one version of it, which is the honors course, and it is open to sophomores and up,” she said.

14 students are enrolled in the class this year.

Bhardwaj said she hopes that this class gives students a newfound appreciation for the ocean.

“Trees often get most of the credit, but most of the oxygen we breathe is due to phytoplankton in our oceans. We wouldn’t even be here without our ocean, so protecting it is just really important,” she said.

Umile said it has been a highly

requested course for years.

“I hope that it will help kids appreciate the local environment that they are in. I hope that it can bring some knowledge of the impact that we have on the environment, the outcomes of warming seas, and pollution. So I’m kind of hoping for that whole environmental awareness,” she said.

Senior Molly Shimpf said she loves how spirited Bhardwaj is.

“I really like how it’s so clear that she loves this topic and loves marine life because it’s so much easier to be engaged and to like a class when a teacher clearly gets the material,” she said.

Bhardwaj leaves in December for maternity leave, and the school has not found a substitute.

“I should be back by early April,” she said.

English adds public speaking elective

Course offered both semesters, enhances presentation skills

By Lily Berkowitz
INDEPENDENT STAFF

The English Department now offers Public Speaking class taught by English teacher Angie Rice, who has expressed excitement about the new elective.

English teacher Angie Rice is teaching the newly offered English department elective.

“I love teaching this class because ... I get to sort of create it from the ground up,” Rice said.

The class will be offered both semesters this year and is open to all students, she said.

Students are also looking forward to different parts of the class. Sophomore Nell Taylor is looking forward to going to the elementary school and speaking to younger students, she said.

Rice is also looking forward to practicing her skills in a real-life environment and getting students comfortable with oral presentations, she said.

Students said they have enjoyed this class so far. Sophomore Maddie Jay said the class has made her more comfortable in public situations.



LILY BERKOWITZ PHOTO

English teacher Angie Rice watches students apply classroom strategies to deliver oral presentations with ease and confidence.

“My favorite part about the public speaking class is probably how casual it is and easy to talk,” she said.

These are the exact skills that both Rice and Debra Isensee, the English department chair, are looking to improve throughout

the student body, both Rice and Isensee said.

A major aspect of the ability to speak more confidently in front of audiences.

“Definitely preparing for the future and just in life, being able to speak confidently,” Isensee said.

With the rise of AI use, teachers are moving to more speaking-based assignments because of students’ AI use in writing, she said.

“In college, they’re doing a lot more presentation-based assess-

ments. So definitely preparing [students] for the future,” Isensee said.

Rice added that she wants to help prepare students for more oral presentations in the future due to the impacts of AI on literacy.

“Public speaking is the most human thing we can do,” Rice said.

When it comes to college and job interviews in students’ futures, Rice and Isensee both agree that the class will help with students’ abilities to go into an interview more confidently and hopefully do better because the class helped them with skills in public speaking.

Jay said the class has already helped to shape her skills of speaking in front of others.

“It’s made me more comfortable in public situations where I’ve had to talk and more relaxed when I’m talking,” she said.



Freshman Frankie Muniz:
“My favorite scary movie is probably ‘Scream’ because it gives like fall vibes, and I like the characters.”



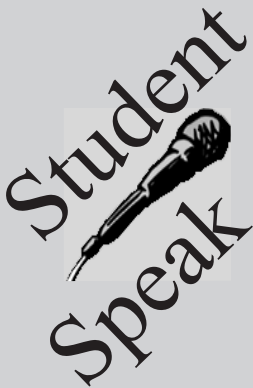
Freshman Scarlett Chobanian:
“I like ‘Scream’ because It’s not too scary, but it’s also good enough because there’s jumpscare.”



Sophomore Jeremy Cheever:
“‘It,’ I just like clowns.”



Sophomore Amy Bischoff:
“My favorite scary movie is ‘Obsession.’ I think it’s pretty good.”



What is your favorite scary movie?

Junior Cody Mears:
“‘Obsession,’ I watched it with a close friend of mine, and I really got into it. I don’t really watch scary movies because I don’t really like jump scares, but it wasn’t really like jump scares; it was interesting.”



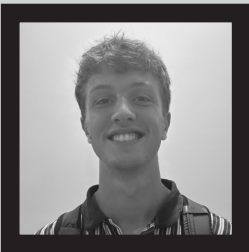
Junior Keira Flynn:
“The ‘Smile’ movie because it’s really scary to me how there’s not a physical monster; it’s a mental thing, and the people who are infected with the demon, no one believes them. I just think that’s very spooky to me.”



Senior Logan Rushing:
“‘Creek,’ it’s about this guy who finds people online, they come into his house, they make a documentary about him, and he ends up killing them. It’s really scary, but it’s also really funny.”



Senior Grey Brooks:
“I like ‘Obsession’; it’s pretty scary. It wasn’t super gruesome or any of that, but it messed with your mind, kind of freaks you out a lot.”



Was Math Discovered or Invented?

How did mathematics come to be?

Discovered

Maya Frangioso

Numbers, patterns, and relationships exist whether humans recognize them or not, making mathematics something discovered rather than invented.

Consider a right-angled triangle. The relationship between its sides does not become true when a mathematician proves it. The relationship exists whether anyone recognizes it or not.

Adam French, head of the mathematics department at Ipswich Grammar School, explored this question in his June 5, 2025, article, “Was Mathematics Invented or Discovered?”

French argues that some mathematical relationships exist independently of humans. The Pythagorean theorem, for example, describes a relationship between the sides of a right-angled triangle that remains true regardless of who observes it.

The same reasoning applies to π , a number used to calculate measurements involving circles. Humans created the symbol used to represent it, but they did not create the relationship it represents.

Mathematical relationships can also exist beyond the way humans think about them.

Fine, a professor of philosophy and mathematics at New York University, examines whether mathematical objects exist independently of human thought in “Mathematics: Discovery or Invention?” published by the Royal Institute of Philosophy.

Fine describes philosophers who compare mathematical knowledge to knowledge of the physical world. They argue that people can recognize mathematical relationships in a way similar to how they observe physical objects.

The relationship exists first; humans develop ways to understand and describe it.

Robert Matthews makes a similar point in a BBC Science Focus article titled: “Was Maths Invented or Discovered?”

Matthews explains that mathematical truths existed before mathematicians discovered them.

“The fact that 1 plus 1 equals 2, or that there’s an infinite number of primes, are truths about reality that held even before mathematicians knew about them,” he said.

Matthews distinguishes between discovering a truth and inventing a way to prove it.

A proof gives humans a way to demonstrate that a mathematical relationship is true, but it does not create the relationship itself.

Invented

Claire Masters

Mathematical principles were invented over time by humans in order to explain the natural world. Mathematicians developed formulas and equations to describe, calculate, and make predictions about life around us.

Math teacher Lauren Woodcock said she believes that throughout history, people would create mathematical terminology for things they didn’t understand.

Occurrences in nature, for example, the path of the sun, have existed since the beginning of time, but math itself was created as a way to describe this path.

The formula for altitude:

$\sin-1(\cos\phi\times\cos\delta\times\cos\omega+\sin\phi\times\sin\delta)$ was not discovered by mathematicians, but rather created to describe the already existing phenomena of the sun.

In the article, “Reinventing the Wheel: A Design History of the Circle as a Visual Metaphor for Information,” from The Marginalian, a science and philosophy newsletter, the circle is a naturally occurring shape, but the mathematical formula for the circumference of the circle, πd , was created by Greek mathematician Archimedes around 250 B.C., Bulgarian essayist Maria Popova said.

The circle has always existed, but the formula used to calculate the circumference of the circle was intentionally invented.

In the article, “Whose theorem is it anyway?”, the Pythagorean theorem was invented by the Babylonians between 1900 and 1600 BCE to calculate the sides of right triangles. Though triangles naturally exist in nature, the mathematical principle itself did not sprout up naturally, Rachel Horsman from Cambridge Mathematics said.

The natural world was discovered throughout history, and mankind created the mathematical language to make sense of it.

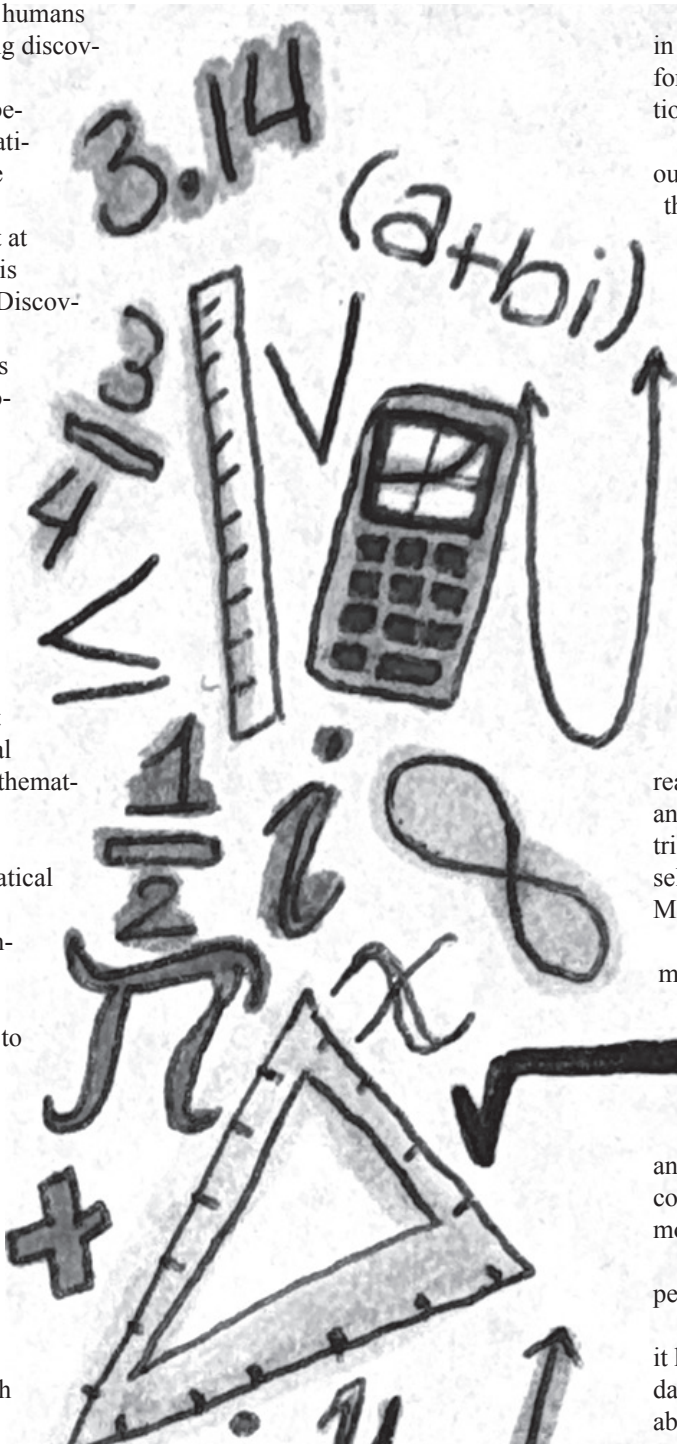
Junior mathlete Ava Dickerson said that this discussion helps bring the math community together.

“When you think about it, the invention of math makes it so that you can always continue to invent. And there’s always this drive to continue to invent new math equations and more mathematical problems that we can solve together as a community. And it brings up questions of how we can do that in a more organized ... and community-focused way,” Dickerson said.

No matter what your stance is, this discussion helps bring people together, math teacher Alicen Shaw said.

“It gets students thinking about math in a different way ... and it kind of just starts a conversation outside of what we do in our day-to-day math classes because math is everything, and if we are able to talk about it, that’s great,” she said.

Whether you believe math was discovered or invented, this argument helps make the math community stronger since everyone is inventing together.



ROSIE RENEHAN ILLUSTRATION

American literacy crisis worsens for children, adults as fewer people read

By Rosie Renehan
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

America’s literacy crisis continues to fester – and why should it not? Americans automatically give social media precedence over reading.

A 2026 survey from reviews.org of 1,000 Americans shows the average smartphone screen time is 4 hours and 5 minutes per day. Meanwhile, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ survey shows that the average American over 15 years old spends about 16 minutes a day reading for pleasure.

The conclusion of a literacy crisis isn’t only brought about through a lack of hours spent reading, though: the National Literacy Institute says, as of 2025,

54% of American adults have a literacy level below a 6th-grade level, showing not only the importance of education but also of reading for personal enjoyment.

While Massachusetts has the highest child literacy rate of all U.S. states, New Mexico, Louisiana, and Mississippi consistently rank among the lowest.

When comparing child literacy rates to public education rankings by state, low-ranked public education systems emerge as an influence on low child literacy rates: New Mexico has the United States’ worst public education system, and Louisiana and Mississippi are also in the bottom 75% of the U.S. for public education.

In addition to these generally

low literacy rates, the number of adults and children who read for pleasure has greatly declined. A September 2026 Time article by Veronique Greenwood cites a study of 10,000 children in the U.S., in which it was found that “kids who started to read for pleasure early in life were better adjusted later, regardless of their socioeconomic background,” and an iScience study by Bone et al. is also cited, which states that the percentage of adults who read for pleasure is 16%.

This small percentage of adults reading for pleasure is irrational when one considers the many benefits for both mind and body that reading brings, which are mentioned in Greenwood’s article. These include feeling



ROSIE RENEHAN PHOTO

The learning commons offers a small selection of books to students.

less lonely and less stressed after reading, effects that are supported by neuroimaging studies.

Compared to reading, common hobbies today are extremely paywalled, with what seems to be a new trend (from crochet to mahjong to needlepoint) circulating every few months.

Society promoting these expensive hobbies that may not even have much impact on human mental and physical health is nonsensical, especially when reading clearly benefits the mind and body.

Libraries are commonplace in America, and Little Free Libraries are becoming more concentrated as well, with 200,000 registered book-sharing boxes across all 50 U.S. states, according to the Little Free Library website. The majority of American society pursues pay-to-play hobbies over reading for pleasure, which is senseless.

Before the literacy crisis worsens, Americans must invest more time in their physical and mental health – as well as in their education – and read.

STAFF EDITORIAL

Put human creativity first, use original ideas over generative AI

Every time a student opens a chatbot to brainstorm an essay, a question follows: Are they building an idea or borrowing one?

AI can help students improve their work, but students should develop their own ideas before turning to AI. If AI creates the first idea, students will rely on the chatbot instead of doing the creative thinking themselves.

The June 2026 Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab study “AI’s impact on cognitive ability: MIT study reveals more troubling data” examined how artificial intelligence affects people’s ability to identify misinformation.

Researchers tracked 67 participants for four weeks as they evaluated news headlines and images with and without an AI chatbot.

Participants were 21% more accurate with AI assistance, but researchers found no lasting

improvement in their ability to identify misinformation independently.

Co-lead author of the study, Anku Rani, said the results reflected misplaced trust in AI.

“Users get excited about these ‘magical’ LLMs [large language models], but forget that they’re just statistical models that predict the next ‘token’ in a sequence,” Rani said.

The same problem can apply to creative work. If students let AI generate the first idea, they may spend more time choosing from a chatbot’s

suggestions than developing an idea of their own.

In Georgetown University’s July 2026 article “AI is Creative. But Can It Replace Human Creativity? Maybe Only If We Let It,” psychology professor and neuroscientist Adam Green examined AI’s effect on human creativity.

Green and his colleagues



MAYA FRANGIOSO PHOTO

Senior Keegan Brooks generates an image for his sustained investigation in his AP art class to extend the idea he had already created. Students increasingly use AI to assist with their school work.

examined more than 370,000 college admissions essays written before and after ChatGPT’s release in 2022. Essays written after its release used a greater diversity of words but often contained fewer original ideas.

Outside experts rated those essays as more creative, even when the ideas were not necessarily original.

Green said AI draws from one shared system, while people draw from their individual experiences.

“What’s lost is the human diversity of ideas,” he said.

That matters in school because students bring experiences, opinions, and perspectives that a chatbot cannot personally have.

A Sept. 16 OxJournal literature review titled

“The Rise of AI-Generated Media: Threat, Opportunity or Collaboration for Human Creativity?” by Sereyvolaphea Chau and Andres Quintana examined AI’s role in creative industries.

AI should help finish creative work, not start it. Keeping the first ideas human protects the originality of human works that makes creative work meaningful.

Humans damage wildlife by overly loving them

By Kiki Campbell
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

When we prioritize our affection towards wild animals over their natural characteristics, environment, and lifestyle, we are actually putting them in harm’s way.

Wildlife tourism is also a main concern for the welfare of the animals because they are being photographed, handled, and overfed.

According to an article titled “Wildlife Tourism: Perilous or an Opportunity to Aid Conservation,” written by Yashaswi Rao, repetitive contact and interactions with humans can result in behavioral changes in the creature.

“Research suggests that wild animals exposed to tourism are under greater physiological stress, reflected in increased glucocorticoid (a stress hormone) levels in regions with higher

tourist movement,” Rao said.

Shark Diver Magazine (SDM) addresses this issue in its article about ecotourism. The author, Eli Martinez, calls our overbearingness over wildlife the “double-edged sword of ecotourism.”

Martinez explains that it funds conservation efforts; however, the result on the wildlife itself can be illustrated in changes to their feeding, migration, mating patterns, and increased stress.

Another key issue is that when animals become habituated to humans in their habitats, the creatures can lose a sense of fear when presented with a harmful encounter with a human.

“Some [animals] even become habituated to humans, which can put them at risk of harm or conflict,” SDM said.

According to a blog by Wildlife Welfare, when people feel the need to get up close and touch a wild animal, this can be very damaging to the organism if



RAY IN MANILA/ FLICKR.COM

A wildlife safari tour group in the Maasai Mara interrupts a lion pack. Maasai Mara is a national reserve known for lions, leopards, and cheetahs. Animals’ natural instincts are being disregarded.

it is not what the creature wants.

“People may feel the desire to get up close and personal to a species in order to touch or interact with it. This can be detrimental to that animal’s well-being, and the people involved might forget to question whether the animal would choose this interaction for itself or not,” Wildlife Welfare, the blog explains..

The animals do not get to

choose who comes into their environments, and we should be conscious of this as we enter into their habitats and natural ecosystems.

The caretakers of these creatures need to stop neglecting the needs of the animals in spite of humans’ enjoyment.

Wildlife Welfare reminds readers to be more aware of their actions when in the presence of

wildlife.

“That strong affinity that you might feel when being near an animal may be your heart talking, but listening to your head can have a much more positive impact on animal welfare,” the blog said.

This issue is not irreparable. If we put the animals’ best interests as a priority, we can avoid the destruction of natural instincts.

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The
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.
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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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Starting quarterback injured at Newburyport game

Junior, freshman step into position

By Kiki Campbell
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Junior starting quarterback Nick Glass was injured during the football game against Newburyport on Friday, Sep. 11, taking him out of the lineup for the season.

Glass said the injury occurred while he was playing on defense.

“Someone from the other team came in and slid under my leg, and I broke my tibia,” he said.

Junior Anton Gilson and freshman Porter Valeo have been standing in for Glass as quarterback. Valeo said he is happy to get to play but sad about the circumstances.

“It’s been fun to play but also not the way I wanted to get minutes this year,” he said.

Valeo said the team has been really supportive of him stepping up.

“They’ve just been helpful, like, giving me confidence and stuff like that,” he said.

Senior Conrad Garfield saw



COURTESY OF NOAH COHEN

Junior starting quarterback Nick Glass was playing on defense during the first game of the season on Sep. 11 against Newburyport when someone slid under his leg and broke his tibia. Glass said he will be in the process of recovering over the next five months.

Glass’s accident firsthand on the field. He said this was a sad moment for the team as a whole to see their star player down.

“Everyone was just struck with this sadness because Nick is a role model and a leader on the team, and seeing somebody that you look up to and that’s a leader down, injured, it’s never what you want to see,” Garfield said.

Glass said he will be recovering for five months. He is now out of his wheelchair and will be on crutches for two months, he said.

Head coach Nick Broughton said the transition has been tough for the team.

“It’s obviously a major adjustment based on the planning of the season, to come in with an

upperclassman who’s got to run the offense through the summer and learned a lot about it, to transition the whole offense to Porter as a freshman who’s one of the most mature and knowledgeable kids on the team, luckily. It’s just not the same as having someone who’s had varsity experience out there,” Broughton said.

Garfield said Glass is still ac-

tively participating with the team as much as he can and bringing positive energy to the sidelines.

“He’s also just a very positive person and brings the whole team up, hypes the team up before games, and he is still now participating in hyping the team up and stuff on the sidelines, which is great and awesome,” Garfield said.

Two field hockey players commit to play Division III in college

Players will miss strong team bond

By Ema Mustafa
INDEPENDENT STAFF

Two field hockey seniors, Katie Crompton and Kiernan Day, committed to play Division III field hockey at Union and Connecticut College, respectively.

The field hockey program often sends players to compete at the college level; however, the main priority in recruitment is always the players’ happiness, head coach Courtney Brown said.

“If a player wants to play in college, they need to be happy at that school,” she said.

For Day, an offensive captain,

balance between academics and athletics was an important factor in the commitment process.

“I wanted to balance picking a school that I could play competitive field hockey at but also be academically challenged at the same time, and Connecticut really offered that balance,” Day said.

Crompton said academics mattered to her as much as team spirit.

“I picked Union after I saw the team environment and coaching style; the academics are also strong,

and they offer what I want to major in, which is psychology,” she said.

Crompton finalized her decision to pursue collegiate-level



Seniors Katie Crompton and Kiernan Day said head coach Courtney Brown helped them through the recruitment process.

play during her junior year when she began to get stronger, she said.

“I definitely got faster, and my endurance grew; I felt more comfortable on the ball and knew I could succeed,” Crompton said.

Brown said both girls each play a significant role on the



COURTESY OF BIANCA TORRI

cess, Day tried to make her name known in coaches’ scouting and credited Brown for her leadership in guiding her throughout the process, she said.

“I did the recruiting process solo; everyone goes in completely blind because everyone has their own pathway that they take to get recruited, and Ms. Brown was constantly there as kind of a guide to help start me off on the right track,” Day said.

Day said she will miss a lot of things about field hockey, especially the close team bond.

“There’s not one relationship I have with someone on the team that’s the same as another, so I really value those relationships and maintain them,” she said.

Crompton also said she will miss the environment of the team.

“Playing for Ms. Brown and the school team made me fall in love with field hockey,” she said.

Athletic department assistant to coach girls’ soccer

By Erika Kozyrev
INDEPENDENT STAFF

After being part of the athletic department for four years, Aaron Millman is now the varsity girls’ soccer head coach.

Millman, who played soccer throughout high school, said he has been passionate about soccer his entire life.

His coaching career began at his old high school, Oliver Ames, where he coached both the boys’ and girls’ soccer teams.

Millman also spent four years working part-time with the New England Revolution, a professional men’s soccer



EMA MUSTAFA PHOTO

Sophomore Nell Taylor said new head coach Aaron Millman’s coaching philosophy has led to a more positive team environment.

team. During his time there, he managed game-day workflow for soccer matches and served as the primary liaison for visiting teams

and referee crews.

Millman has been part of the athletic department as an operations administrative assistant for

about four years. He oversaw athletics, facilities, and transportation, he said.

Millman coached the girls’ soccer team last year as an assistant coach, while working in the athletics office.

The varsity girls’ soccer team experienced a coaching transition this summer, athletic director Cameron Oringer said.

“The end of July is when we found out our returning coach, Scout Grifoni, had resigned to pursue a different teaching position in Winthrop,” Oringer said.

Upon hearing the position was open, Millman applied for and received the job.

He said one of the main parts

of his coaching philosophy is for athletes to put forward their best efforts and to work hard.

“If you work hard, then that’s all that matters to me. I always tell the players that at the end of the day, we might win, we might lose. But if we work hard, I can live with the result,” he said.

Millman also recognizes that each player learns differently, and he has adapted his coaching style,” he said.

“One thing as a coach is you always have to be adaptable. It all depends on the players you have,” he said.

Sophomore Nell Taylor said there has been a difference in the recent play of the team due to Millman’s new coaching philosophy.

Rehearsal for school musical, ‘Les Misérables,’ begins

Performances
to take place on
Nov. 20-22

By **Maddy Holsomback**
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

“Les Misérables: Teen Edition” will be performed by the drama department in November with the help of students, parents, director Tyler Garofalo, and music director Ben Icenogle.

“Les Misérables” is a drama-filled musical following the life of a formerly imprisoned man, Jean Valjean.

“The whole musical will follow Jean Valjean and his journey in saving people and discovering what a good person should be. Is it somebody who follows the law? Or is it somebody who breaks the law a little but to help people?” said senior Simone Argento, who will play the character of Fantine, a poor factory

worker who dedicates her life to taking care of her child, Cosette.

The drama department has grown since last year, and this year, parent organizers will help outside of the show with concessions and raising money, said freshman Isaac Collins, who is playing Valjean.

“That’s something we didn’t have last year, and it’s designed to take weight off the directors who are already doing so much for us,” Collins said.

The play is more serious than in years past, but the students are looking forward to the challenge, Argento said.

“I’m really excited that we’re doing a more dramatic musical because I know in the past we’ve done a lot of comedic plays and

especially for me I have played a lot of comedic roles,”she said.

Students are looking forward to seeing how the play comes out.

“I’m excited to see it come together, see all the parts, and have fun,” said junior Gavin Bolduc, who will play a foreman, tailor, and a member of the chain gang.

This year, the actors are focusing more on the songs while rehearsing. “We’re spending a lot more time doing the music for this musical because it’s very vocally challenging; it’s basically opera,” Argento said.

Rehearsal has already begun for the performances on November 20-22.

‘We’re spending a lot more time doing the music for this musical because it’s very vocally challenging; it’s basically opera.’

-- SIMONE ARGENTO



MADDY HOLSOMBACK PHOTO
Students begin to learn the music for this year’s school musical, ‘Les Misérables: Teen Edition,’ in the chorus room.

“I’m really excited to learn all the music, get to know my character, have a good time with my fellow peers, and do the show as best I can. I can’t really ask for

much more than that,” Collins said.

The musical “Les Mis” originally premiered in Paris in 1980 and in London in 1985.

Monsters don’t scare us, real-world horrors do

Films reflect societal fears of their time

By **Sophia Eagan**
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Society’s fears have drastically changed through the years. What once terrified audiences, such as a haunted hotel or a cursed small town, may not have the same power as the fears that dominate modern horror.

Yet beneath every monster, serial killer, or supernatural creature lies something more familiar: a reflection of what society fears.

Horror allows filmmakers to turn real-world anxieties into cinematic metaphors. The film “The Purge” turns fears of social disorder into a world where crime becomes temporarily legal, while “Get Out” turns fears of racism into a world where prejudice hides beneath seemingly friendly interactions.

According to the 2024 article,

“Be Very Afraid: How Horror Movie Trends Reflect Societal Fears” by Skye Sheehy, historical events can influence horror movies.

Fear surrounding nuclear weapons after the atomic bombings of Japan contributed to a wave of “nuclear” monster movies in the 1950s and 1960s, Sheehy said.

Movies such as “Godzilla,” “Them!” and “The Fly” reflect fears surrounding dangerous experimentation.

Similarly, widespread UFO sightings in the 1950s prompted a trend of alien-centered horror movies such as “The Blob” and “War of the Worlds,” Sheehy said.

Aaron Balick argues in his 2026 analysis, “The Psychology of The Shining: The terror of family dysfunction” that the movie’s true horror comes from what is familiar.

“The Overlook Hotel is merely the catalyst that allows



WIKIPEDIA.COM

‘The Shining,’ pictured above, is an example of how current events and societal fears impact the themes of horror movies.

the real horror to emerge; the supernatural is like the enabler for the alcoholic,” Balick said.

Jumpscare, ghosts, and supernatural creatures can create temporary shock, but what sticks with the audience is the fear of something that could exist in their personal lives.

“The Shining” includes ghosts, visions, and psychic energies, but the film does not rely on them to instill fear. Instead, Jack Torrance’s growing aggression towards Wendy and Danny shows how someone

meant to protect a family can be the source of danger. Hence, the hotel’s supernatural tendencies amplify this sense of terror rather than creating it.

In her 2026 Glasgow Guardian article, “The Horror of ‘Obsession’ is the Loss of Body Autonomy,” Yvonne Ling argues that the horrors we find most compelling are the ones that showcase real fears.

What the film “Obsession” does well is that it highlights fears especially relevant to modern female viewers, such as

male violence and the loss of autonomy, she said.

““Obsession” tells us that not only is a woman’s horror the forfeit of autonomy, but a man’s horror is the confrontation of this power grab,” Ling said.

What contributed to the box office success of “Obsession” and made it so horrifying was its reflection of a relevant fear in modern society: losing one’s autonomy and having someone else take advantage of that vulnerability. While Nikki’s supernatural behavior creates an unsettling atmosphere, her inability to control her actions, and Bear’s exploitation of that, are what hit close to home for viewers.

Movies like “The Shining” may not affect audiences today the same way they did in the 1980s, not because they are poorly made or lack modern special effects, but because the fears they target no longer resonate with us.

Horror reflects the anxieties of the time, and the scariest part may not be the monsters themselves, but the reality hiding beneath them.

Music department schedule changes

By **Maddy Holsomback**
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Band, chorus, and jazz band classes are now treated as normal classes that follow the school’s usual schedule.

In prior years, band and chorus were during U Block, and jazz band and contemporary music were after-school classes.

“You know, at a certain point, it becomes preventative to not have your U Blocks, and we were hearing that as a reason a lot of students didn’t take chorus and band, so we wanted to eliminate that possibility,” chorus director Ben Icenogle said.

Jazz band is now in U Block instead of after school on Wednesdays.

“When it was after school, it was two hours, and now it’s two or three times a week but only for 50 minutes. I actually think it’s a beneficial thing, because playing for two hours straight was pretty hard, but playing for 50 minutes two or three times a week is a lot easier,” senior Peter Langendorf said.

Feedback from teachers has been overall positive.

“I think our performing arts should have opportunities that are taken just as seriously as any

other discipline, whether that’s if you’re doing AP US history or if you’re playing varsity sports, we should have a spot where you can excel,” band director Harry Wagg said.

Students involved in the change have expressed mixed reviews.

“I think it’ll be beneficial in the long run, but at the moment it kind of hurts, because as a senior, I have a lot of classes that I want to take, so moving it to a block during the day kind of interrupts that,” Langendorf said.

While students have had

While students have had mixed feelings about the change, teachers had little negative feedback.



MADDY HOLSOMBACK PHOTO
Students in chorus, which is now offered during the school day instead of in U Block, hear a presentation by Rockport Music.

mixed feelings about the change, teachers had little negative feedback.

“Last year there were no classes scheduled up against chorus and band, so there weren’t any classes to conflict. This year some kids are having to choose between that and other classes,” Icenogle said.