

Seniors solidify post-graduation plans, decisions

Will study at various domestic, international schools

By Summer Demeo
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

As graduation approaches, seniors have confirmed their post-graduate plans in various fields.

Senior Lily Stefanovich plans to attend the University of St. Andrews in St. Andrews, Scotland, where she will double major in economics and management, she said.

She said she has always been interested in business but wasn't sure if she wanted to focus more on economics or management, which is why she decided to double major.

"I'm excited, because I feel like it gives both sides of business, and you can do a lot with it," Stevanovich said.

She said she chose to attend the University of St. Andrews because she wanted to get a different experience and travel easily while still being academically challenged.

"You're challenged rigorously with academic courses, but

you're still able to explore different ways of life, countries, and traditions. I think that's what I'm really excited for," Stevanovich said.

Others, like senior Nicholas Haley, will be staying closer to home. Haley said he will be majoring in theatrical production and design with a focus on lighting at Emerson College in Boston.

He said he has been interested in lighting design since he was in fifth grade and has been designing the lighting for the high school's plays since he was in seventh grade.

In college, Haley said he is looking forward to meeting people who share his interests.

"I feel like there's no one else here that has that interest, so I think it'll be cool to get to know people that are all in that realm and interested in lighting," he said.

Senior Robert Silverstein said he plans to continue his passion for cooking at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York, where he will earn an associate degree in culinary arts.

As a child, he said he helped his father at work as a chef at the



COURTESY OF ANDREW LUCAS



SUMMER DEMEO PHOTOS



COURTESY OF MADI COOK

Seniors Nicholas Haley (top), Lily Stefanovich (bottom left), Robert Silverstein (bottom right) and Madi Cook (right) have committed to attend Emerson College, the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, the Culinary Institute of America, and the University of Southern Maine, respectively.

Singing Beach Club, doing small tasks in the kitchen, but only recently found his passion for cooking.

"I really knew that I was interested in cooking not that long ago, probably when I was 16, and I knew that was what I wanted to do," Silverstein said.

Seniors Charlotte Crocker and Madi Cook both plan to continue their academic and athletic careers at the Division III level.

Cook said she plans to major in athletic training while playing soccer at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, Maine.

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Students compete at DECA district competition in Danvers

DECA district size increases from 800 to 1,000 students

By Bissy Mitrano
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) attended their annual district competition at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel in Danvers.

The competition was on Tuesday, January 7. Students were excused from their classes to attend the event.

DECA adviser and business teacher Barrett Alston said students participating in the competition must perform a roleplay or complete a project in a specific business field.

Within the Manchester Essex DECA chapter, 68 students qualified for the next level of the competition, which is the state competition at the Boston Convention & Exhibit Center in Seaport, from February 27 - March 1, he said.



SUMMER DEMEO PHOTO

Juniors Kacey O'Connell, Violet Jakes and Anna Gardner prepare for their events at DECA Districts on Tuesday, Jan. 7.

"For us, the district competition went very well. It was our district's first time being at [the Danvers DoubleTree], and there were some general managerial and scheduling issues, but for us, our students did very well," Alston said.

This year, the designated DECA district is bigger with

To prepare for the upcoming state competition, Alston said he will touch base with as many students as possible to gain feedback. He said this would help him improve next year's curriculum and overall preparation.

"This was the first year I newly started to do a couple projects as opposed to roleplays. I look forward to seeing how those went [at districts], as many qualified for States," he said.

Junior Emma Brown said she felt Alston always touched base with her when preparing for the competition.

"I was in one of the groups [that] did a project, and I felt well supported in the process. I thought Districts were so fun and stressful at times, but I am just very happy I made it to States," she said.

Brown said she enjoyed the district competition but found it a little stressful due to the judges being behind.

"My original time was at 12:10, but I did not actually get to perform my event until 1:10, which also caused the buses to fall behind and students to feel stressed," she said.

Junior Anna Gardner said she felt the competition was a little chaotic since all students were

'For us, the district competition went very well. It was our district's first time being at [the Danvers DoubleTree], and there were some general managerial and scheduling issues, but for us, our students did very well.'

- BARRETT ALSTON

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Door decoration, food drive competitions promote school spirit

Polar Express-themed door wins competition

By Isabelle Donnellan Valade
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Introduced last year by world history teacher John Mullady, the U block door decoration competition brought students together, junior Izzy Zagrobski said.

Zagrobski is in English teacher Mary Buckley-Harmon’s U block, which won the competition for the second year in a row.

Buckley-Harmon’s senior U block last year decorated an Elf

on the Shelf scene, while this year her U block recreated the Polar Express, she said.

“I had a lot of fun watching them take it so seriously, and I was really impressed at how they used different supplies to help shape their creation,” she said.

Zagrobski said she was excited that her U block won.

“We went in very confident, and we were just hoping for the best because we put a lot of effort into decorating,” Zagrobski said.

Mullady brought bagels and cookies from New York to the winners, and the students got to sign the trophy, an elephant plant stand statue, Buckley-Harmon said.

“It was fun to get to do something with my U block students and get to know them better, and I’m grateful to Mr. Mullady for working to bring the community together,” she said.

Mullady introduced the tradition last year because a school where he taught previously held a similar competition.

“I thought it would be fun to bring [the competition] here from my old

school. Then there was a positive reaction, and students seemed to enjoy it, so I thought we’d try to do it again this year,” he said.

Mullady said six other U blocks competed in the challenge, such as world language teacher Erin Fortunato’s U block, who decorated their door with “Peanuts” characters.



COURTESY OF MARY BUCKLEY-HARMON

The winners of the door decorating competition, English teacher Mary Buckley-Harmon’s junior U block, created a Polar Express-themed door. They won a trophy and a New York bagel breakfast.

Mullady said improving the school’s community through events like this is important for students.

“Getting a chance to slow down and remind ourselves that we work and go to a very special place, and just getting a chance to ...celebrate [the] ... community is really great,” he said.

Running simultaneously to the door decorating competition was a food drive organized by the peer mentors.

Peer mentor adviser and school counselor David Conwell said the drive was put together to

help people in need.

Peer mentor senior coordinator Libby McKinnon said they organized the drive to increase involvement within the community.

“We wanted to help others through donating and giving back, especially during the busy holiday season,” she said.

Despite the efforts put into the food drive, it was not as successful as they hoped, McKinnon said.

“I feel like the timing and communication brought up difficulties ... as I think it was crammed

in,” she said.

Conwell said the drive was still impactful.

“We raised 23 pounds of cereal that was delivered to their food pantry on December 19, and [Beverly Bootstraps] really appreciated it,” he said.

Conwell said helping out a community really brings the student body together.

“The peer mentors want to help the school community, we want to help students ... why not expand that from time to time to do something greater than ourselves?” he said.

FY26 proposed budget includes 5.5 percent growth due to rising cost of healthcare, personnel

Towns may vote for override to pay for budget

By Stella Straub
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

After the first presentation of the FY26 budget on Jan. 21, the budget will now be presented at the Feb. 4 School Committee meeting during a 7 p.m. public hearing at Essex Elementary School.

Superintendent Pam Beaudoin said she works to craft a budget that meets a broad spectrum of needs while trying to target 3.5 percent as the growth rate.

She said that this year, a 3.5 percent budget was not attainable.

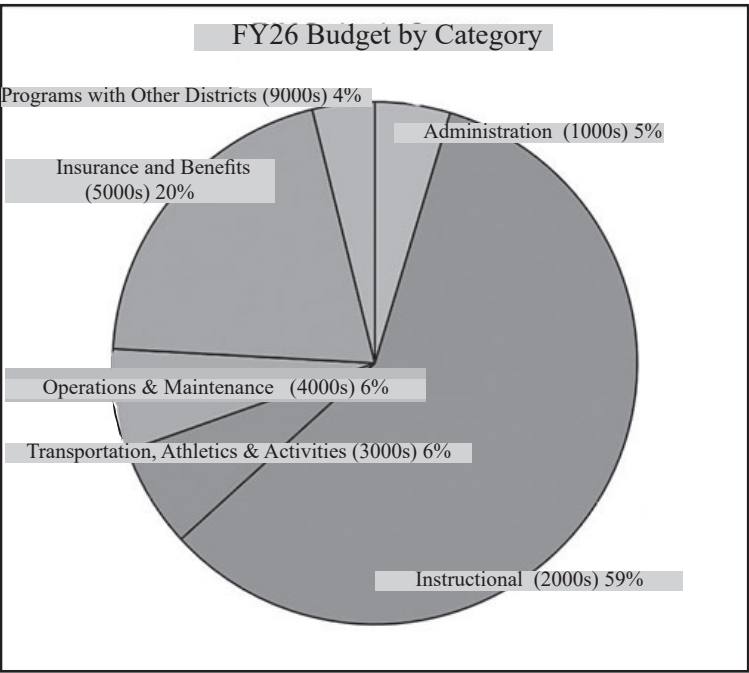
Beaudoin said she landed at a budget with a 5.5 percent growth rate and brought it to [the School Committee] as the proposed budget.

“It’s a little higher than normal, but it still has some cuts in it, because to get to the normal number, we have to really get into more reductions across the board,” she said.

Beaudoin said the prospect of more significant cuts sparked the School Committee to think about asking the towns to pay more.

“If they land on that in March, that means the towns might have to pursue an override to pay for [the budget],” she said.

Beaudoin said the towns will



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The proposed budget allocations are divided into six categories.

not know for certain until later in the spring exactly how much revenue they have.

“[The towns] might have enough ... revenue in the year to meet the bill. Essex has been signaling in earlier meetings that they won’t have enough,” she said.

Beaudoin said the main difference between this year’s budget and last year’s is the cost of healthcare and personnel.

“Last year, [healthcare] was pushing us up, but we could make a few proposed cuts to come down to get it to that normal range. This year it’s so high, you

can’t get anywhere near the normal range,” she said.

Beaudoin said that the proposed cuts in the FY26 budget are primarily based on shifting positions.

“[Middle School Principal] Joanne Maino told us she was retiring. The plan would be not to rehire that position for next year ... But we have to figure out how to distribute the work. We’re also looking at reorganizing facilities and maybe going without a facilities manager for next year,” she said.

Beaudoin said that one retirement from the high school would

result in the FTE (full-time equivalent) being moved to Manchester Memorial Elementary School.

Additionally, if the middle school and high school schedules align, world language faculty would be shared, she said.

If not, she would ask high school Principal Julie Sgroi to assign one of the world language staff members to the middle school, she said.

Beaudoin said that in this budget season, she is trying to move away from the use of reserves.

Director of finance and operations Michelle Cresta said that money in the reserves comes from several different locations, one of which is school choice tuitions, which are added to the Stabilization Fund.

The Stabilization Fund has a total balance of \$1.5 million.

“We reserve those [funds] for capital projects, so bigger facility upgrade needs,” she said.

Cresta said that each year, about \$300,000 in reserves comes in.

“When we use more than that for the budget, we’re using more than we’re bringing in,” she said.

Cresta said that main influences on the increase in the budget are healthcare costs and inflation.

“Every retirement then means adding another person to the [healthcare] plan if we replace the teaching or administrative position,” she said.

School Committee Chair Chris Reed said that budgeting principles dictate that reserves are used for unforeseen expenses and that using reserves to cover operational costs is generally a bad

practice.

Reed said that one of the main reasons why the budget process is challenging is because of Proposition 2 ½.

“Prop 2 ½ was a law that was passed in the state of Massachusetts back in the 1980s, when people’s taxes were going up at exorbitant rates, sometimes 10 or 15 percent a year,” he said.

Reed said Proposition 2 ½ was a citizen ballot initiative that dictates that a town, municipality, or city is unable to raise taxes above 2 ½ percent, including new growth.

“Now, what needs to happen is that in order for the town to [raise taxes more than 2.5 percent], they need to vote for an override ... which is challenging ... You’re asking people to go vote to pay more in taxes,” he said.

Spanish teacher Robert Bilsbury said that if communities have to stay at 2.5 percent, it becomes untenable for the school to continue to provide services.

“We used to have a K through 12 foreign language program that’s been cut. Then the next thing to go was middle school foreign language,” he said.

Bilsbury, who lives in Essex, said he understands the pressure of inflation.

“We have a lot of things on our financial plate,” he said.

Bilsbury said that by staying under 2.5 percent, the school will erode and lose essential programs.

“It’s our job as our community to give a school what it needs to give the education that the community children need,” he said.

New Raptor visitor security system installed at high school

District aims to increase, improve school safety

By Whitney Turner
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

In order to bring added security to the middle-high school building, the school implemented a new visitor screening system in January, Principal Julie Sgroi said.

The district’s director of facilities, Jason Waldron, said he and the district’s safety committee chose the new Visitor Security System from Raptor.

Sgroi said the safety committee includes the district principals, the superintendent, the district business officer, the facilities director, the fire and police chiefs of both Manchester and Essex, the school resource officer, and the regional 911 coordinator.

Waldron said the system costs the district an annual license fee of \$600 per building.

The security system was first installed at Memorial Elementary School at the beginning of the year, he said.

“We started at Memorial as a test site, pilot site. I think the reason being there is we just didn’t want to have it in all four schools and have any problems or issues,” Waldron said.

Sgroi said she has experience with the system at past districts she worked at.

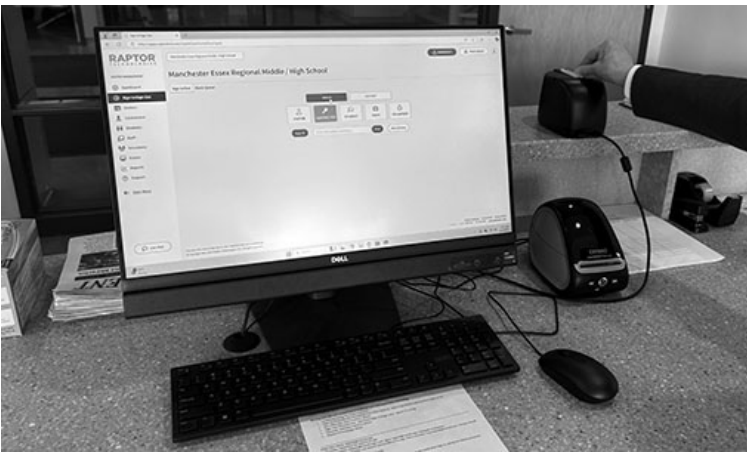
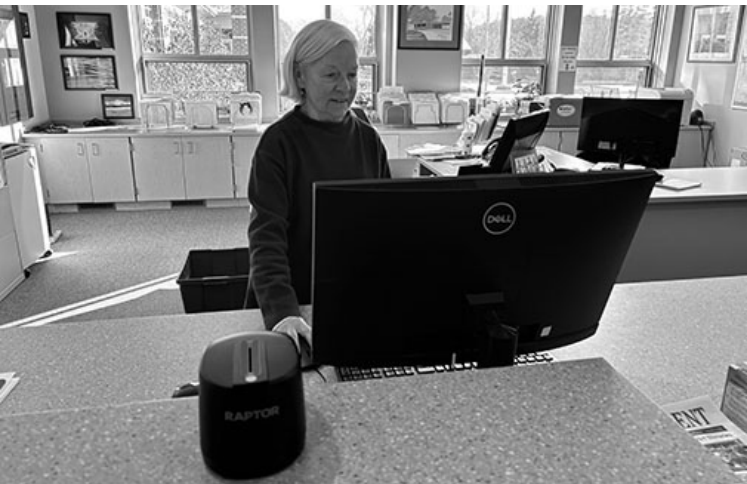
“It’s something that is used widely in a lot of other districts at this point,” she said.

Main office administrative assistant Mary Lumsden said that when visitors arrive, they will proceed to the main office, where they will insert their license into a device that will scan their identification. Then, the system will print a badge for visitors that includes their name and photo.

The system will run a background check on visitors, Waldron said.

Sgroi said the system will clearly keep track of visitors to the school and ensure there are no problems with their identification.

“It’ll help bring attention to



Main office administrative assistant Mary Lumsden uses the Raptor security system to scan visitors’ licenses, run a background check, and print a visitor pass when they enter. A sign outside of the school’s main entrance announces to visitors that the Raptor security system is in use and gives instructions. The system was implemented at the high school in January but was originally installed in Memorial Elementary School at the beginning of the year. The system is part of the district’s plan to improve security in all schools.

who’s a visitor, ... and the technology does scan for people that should not gain access into the building,” she said.

Sgroi said that safety and security have been a district priority, and the new system should help increase safety.

Before the Raptor system was installed, Lumsden would decide if visitors should gain access to the building, Sgroi said.

“Previously, if someone was coming in and staying in the building, we [had] visitor badges, and they would sign in with Mrs. Lumsden, but there was no photo identification required,” she said.

If the Raptor system denies entry to the building for a visi-

tor, Sgroi, Waldron, and Dean of Students Elisabeth Drinkwater will be notified via email and text, Sgroi said.

Sgroi said she would then speak to the visitor to determine why they are there and if they should leave the building entirely or if they could be escorted through the building, for example.

“I would, in a private and respectful way, have a conversation with someone and just figure out what the problem is, be upfront about it, and just see how we can best serve that person,” she said.

Sgroi also highlighted that the system flags individuals using

their name, so there may be instances where a visitor is initially denied access to the building, but the system can be manually checked to ensure the system is identifying the correct individual.

Because she has worked with the Raptor system at other schools, Sgroi said she has experience dealing with this situation in the past.

School Resource Officer Andrea Locke said that currently, she is not on the list of personnel who will be notified if a visitor is denied entry. She said she was not involved in the implementation process of the security system.

Sgroi said she recognizes that the layout of the building does pose challenges to the effectiveness of the system.

“This technology has definitely brought up some of our weaker spots, and we’ve brought up potential solutions for that,” Sgroi said.

The system relies on visitors

reporting to the office to check in, so the administrative assistants will buzz visitors into the school and watch to ensure that they report to the office, she said.

If they go past the front office, Sgroi said, she would direct them to return to the office to sign in.

Waldron said visitors received email communication about the procedure, and the school posted signage at the door to remind visitors of the change.

The main entrance does not receive many visitors on a regular basis, Lumsden said. Most contractors enter via other entrances to the building.

Sgroi added that visitors mostly include caregivers who have conferences in the building and facilities workers who are met by staff and escorted.

“It’s a great safety measure, but the beauty of us being a small school is we don’t have people running in and out all day long,” she said.



WHITNEY TURNER PHOTOS

CONTINUATIONS

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She said she has wanted to play college soccer from a very young age.

“I’m really excited for soccer. I’m super excited to compete at the next level. It’s always been my dream,” Cook said.

When she visited the University of Southern Maine, she said it “felt like home,” and she liked that it had her major. Cook said she has been working with the high school’s athletic trainer, Anna Perrotti, this winter and also plans to complete her SCORE project with Perrotti in the spring.

“I’ve always wanted to be able to help people, and as someone that’s been hurt before, not being

able to play, I know how hard it is,” she said.

Crocker said she plans to play lacrosse at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York.

She said part of the reason she chose a liberal arts college is because she is unsure exactly what she wants to major in, but she is interested in business. She also said she liked the balance of academics and athletics.

“The lacrosse team there is pretty good, and they get treated pretty well because the boys’ team is [Division I], so the girls’ team gets all of the [Division I] benefits, but you don’t have as much of the commitment,” she said.

Crocker also said she is excited to branch out in college and meet

new people.

“I’m most excited ... to experience new things and make my own identity,” she said.

DECA DISTRICTS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

placed into one room. However, she still had a good experience.

“I felt very prepared at Districts, but all 1,000 students being placed into one room for many hours was not my favorite part. It was also extremely hot and loud,” she said.

The rise in participation has caused it to be more difficult to make it to States, Alston said.

“So the fact that we still did pretty well even though our district was bigger, speaks well of our chapter,” he said.



SUMMER DEMEO PHOTO

Senior Emilia Kirkpatrick studies key DECA concepts before performing her roleplay at the annual DECA district competition at the DoubleTree by Hilton in Danvers on Jan. 7.

Calculus students design math-related shoebox dioramas

Class will display projects at STEAM Showcase

By August Capotosto
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Students of Advanced Placement and honors Calculus classes created shoebox dioramas that are visually represented by a relative rates problem, calculus teacher Alicen Shaw said.

She said the concept of related rates is an application of derivatives in calculus that states that as one quantity changes, it has an impact on another quantity.

At the end of this unit, students were assigned to create or design their own related rates problem in a shoebox diorama. They then had three other individuals solve the problem to prove that it made sense.

“It’s a little bit of creativity

and a little bit of peer-to-peer interaction,” Shaw said.

She said the students started their projects in early December and completed them before winter break.

“To be able to show them off, I have hopes to increase the quantity that we can display at the STEAM showcase. In past years, I’ve only been able to show a handful,” Shaw said.

This year, she took pictures of each diorama and emailed them out to faculty and staff in a Google form, asking them to choose their favorite.

‘It’s a little bit of creativity and a little bit of peer-to-peer interaction.’

-ALICEN SHAW

“It was cool to see them pick their favorite without any necessary knowledge of calculus, so we could find out which context and presentation they enjoyed the most,” Shaw said.

She said that with a majority vote of over 50 percent, senior Sabine Cooper, who takes AP Calculus, won the competition.

Cooper said that her project



COURTESY OF ALICEN SHAW

Senior Sabine Cooper’s winning calculus diorama received 50 percent of the faculty votes. Cooper created her project to show how a toilet paper roll’s radius decreases when it is pulled.

represented how the radius of the white part of a toilet paper roll decreases as it’s pulled.

“I made a diorama of a bathroom with all sorts of amenities such as the interactive toilet paper roll. One main part was that I used real caulk to attach tiles to the bottom of the shoebox,” she said.

Senior Charlotte Donnellan Valade, who is in honors calculus, chose to do her project on the rate of change of the triangular prism that is formed between the pages turning in a book.

“Since I enjoy reading, I thought it would be a unique approach to the prompt as well as an interesting representation

of my interests outside of math class,” she said.

Shaw said that the dioramas tend to be more eye-grabbing than presenting a math problem by itself.

“I hope to keep working on this project to make it more interactive and exciting for [calculus] students,” she said.

A World of Difference, SCAR attend Inspire conference

By Gwendolyn Berger
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Twelve students from A World of Difference and Student Coalition Against Racism (SCAR) attended the Inspire leadership conference on Jan. 16 in Worcester, said A World of Difference adviser and social studies department chair Lauren DuBois.

A World of Difference adviser and social studies teacher Jessica Tran said the conference provided an excellent learning opportunity for members.

“We [were] excited to go to this conference where students gathered to learn how to be leaders at the school and pursue these ideas around social justice and activism,” Tran said.

Senior Aisling Twombly, who attended the conference, said it

was very informative.

“The conference was really inspirational ... the NEA [National Education Association] president had a really good speech in the beginning,” she said.

Twombly said her favorite part of the conference was the performances of Dec-1, a rapper.

“[He] opened up the day with fun raps to keep us engaged and active,” she said.

Tran and DuBois brought the A World Of Difference to the school in 2018, DuBois said.

“Our A World of Difference student group was founded with the intention of making our school a more accepting and welcoming place where everyone feels comfortable,” she said.

In the past, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) sent out trainers to the school, who



ISABELLE DONNELLAN VALADE PHOTO

A World of Difference and SCAR attended the Inspire leadership conference in Worcester to learn about social justice and activism.

conducted two full-day sessions with members of A World of Difference, DuBois said.

Tran said that this year, however, the club has to make changes. In the spring, the ADL informed the school that they would be ending their high-school program, she said.

Tran said the news has been both a challenge and an opportunity. DuBois and Tran worked with the school administration to gauge how A World of Difference would function moving forward without the ADL trainers, she said.

In the past, A World of Differ-

ence trained students in anti-bias education with the ADL leaders, DuBois said. Then, DuBois and Tran split up the students into groups, she said.

The club members taught the freshmen what they learned in their training sessions, focusing on identity, the languages of bias, and strategies to improve the school, DuBois said.

Without the ADL trainers, the club is changing tactics.

DuBois said the club plans to have older A World of Difference members train new members. Then, instead of doing four sessions with the freshman classes, the club plans to do two to three-hour workshops, she said.

“We also want to invite SCAR, GSA, or any other groups that share our goals and values to collaborate with us in running these workshops,” DuBois said.

A World of Difference still needs to release applications for new members and finalize dates, she said.

History substitute makes recent career change

By Bissy Mitrano
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

United States history substitute teacher Joshua Martel began teaching honors and college preparatory classes in December of this past year, covering for Nicole O’Rourke, who is on maternity leave.

Martel is from Hopkinton, Massachusetts, where he attended Hopkinton High School.

He graduated from the University of Rhode Island in 2020, with degrees in political science and psychology, and earned

his master’s in education from UMass Lowell in 2024, he said.

Martel was a technical recruitment manager in Boston for several years until he realized he did not enjoy working in sales, he said.

“I decided I wanted to make a change. So, I quit my job, started up my master’s, and just started teaching ... and so far, it’s been really good,” Martel said.

He said he enjoys sharing relevant topics that he finds interesting with his students.

“If I find something interesting ... and maybe you don’t appreciate it as much [as me], but at least if you can appreciate it, then I think I have done my job well,” Martel said.

He said he completed his student teaching in December of



BISSY MITRANO PHOTO

Joshua Martel is covering Nicole O’Rourke’s classes.

2024 at Hopkinton High School, which has a similar academic environment to Manchester Essex.

“Here it is really interesting because the school is so small. One of my classes has eight people, and in Hopkinton, the entire school has about 1300 stu-

dents ... but I really like it here. Everyone is really polite, and everyone says ‘thank you’ when I give them a test, which I think is really funny,” Martel said.

Sophomore Greta Omari said his class is her favorite class this year.

“I’ve learned a lot in Mr. Martel’s class ... and his teaching style makes it easy to stay interested,” she said.

Omari said his teaching style is group work, which is then followed by class discussions to clarify the material.

Another one of Martel’s students, sophomore Hazelle Steriti, also said she appreciates Martel’s teaching style.

“He is very good with explaining a problem when someone has a question,” she said.

FUN FACTS

- He studied abroad in New Zealand.
- He was a DJ in college.
- “Top Gun” is his favorite movie.
- He can cook ratatouille.
- He worked on a worm farm.
- He was a Boy Scout.

Former special education aide rejoins school in learning commons

Creates welcoming work environment for students

By Stella Straub
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Since rejoining the high school this past November, learning commons aide Gianna Baglioni has worked to create a safe and inclusive environment for students in the learning commons, she said.

Baglioni, who graduated from MERHS in 2006, said that when she worked at the school previously she chiseled out the structure and idea of the learning commons aide role but then moved to the special education department when the pandemic hit.

She said that when she originally came back to the school, she planned on returning part-time, as she is caring for her grandmother, but once she arrived, she felt that she should be here as much as she possibly could be.

“What [the school administration] expressed was that they needed someone to change the culture in [the learning commons] and to kind of take over. I love creating moods and spaces and vibes ... I felt like my community needed some consistency,” Baglioni said.

She said she is also getting her bachelor’s degree in psychology through full-time online classes at Southern New Hampshire University.

Senior Nick Brown said Baglioni has made the learning commons a more relaxing environment for students.

He said he would describe Baglioni as a bubbly person with a lot of energy.

“For a job where she deals with students all day, like, and all different types of students, I think that’s a great way to do it. You know, be bubbly, be energetic, be positive,” Brown said.

Senior Oliver Rodi said that the learning commons has a warmer atmosphere since Baglioni has arrived.

“She’s changed the space to be



STELLA STRAUB PHOTO

Current learning commons aide Gianna Baglioni sits at her desk as she enters attendance sheets into Aspen. Baglioni has added plants and Scandanavian lighting to create an inviting atmosphere.

more homey. The new lamps and the plants have been really, really nice,” he said.

Rodi said that the only thing he would like to change in the learning commons is the addition of blankets.

“Let’s say it’s lunch block, and I’ve had a long day, and it’s my free block, and I just really need to take a nap. I could lay down, but then my feet are cold, or I could take off my sweater, but

then my arms are cold,” he said.

Special education teacher Adam Katz said Baglioni used to work with him in Learning Strategies and was also in general education courses.

Katz said that Baglioni is genuinely interested in the people around her.

“She really is supremely interested in what kids have going on, both in school and out of school ... she can really have a conver-

sation with any kid about almost anything, which, I think, again, is pretty unique and pretty rare,” he said.

Baglioni said that she has decorated the learning commons with soft, amber lights, which are used in Scandinavian countries to help build a cozy atmosphere.

She said that while academics should come first, she wants the learning commons to be a place where students can relax.

Mobile game Block Blast gains popularity among students

By Annie Pinkin
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Block Blast, a free mobile puzzle game, has grown in popularity across the high school.

“It’s the best game in the entire world, and no other mobile game can compete with it,” junior Violet Jakes said.

The game is similar to Tetris. Instead of falling blocks, players pick a block out of three options and place it where it can fit on the grid.

According to the “About this game” section for Block Blast on Google Play, “Block Blast not only provides a relaxing and cozy puzzle gaming experience

but also enhances your logical abilities and trains your brain.”

The game, released on Sept. 23, 2022, was created by Hungry Studio. Block Blast does not require wifi or internet. It includes two modes, “Classic Block Puzzle” and “Block Adventure Mode,” as well as in-game advertisements.

Jakes said students frequently play the game in their downtime and work to beat the scores of their friends.

“I’d say at least 35% of MERHS students play Block Blast,” she said.

She said she thinks the competitive aspect is a reason for its popularity.

‘It’s the best game in the entire world, and no other mobile game can compete with it.’

- VIOLET JAKES

Beating one’s own score also contributes to the game’s acclaim, junior Penelope Riggs said.

Riggs has played the game since before it took over the school, she said. Her high score is 96,290.

Sophomore Maggie Olson said that, while challenging, Block Blast can be rewarding for players.

“I get very frustrated when the



ANNIE PINKIN PHOTO

Two high school students compare video game scores while playing the free mobile puzzle game Block Blast in the front hall.

block doesn’t fit how I want it to fit, but once it’s like a perfect fit, it’s very satisfying,” she said.

Students often play Block Blast after tests and in between study sessions as a way to relax, Spanish teacher Robert Bilsbury said.

“It definitely is a stress reliever, but at the same time you have to balance it out with the

other things that you’re doing,” he said.

Bilsbury said that while playing is appropriate during a study break, it’s important to focus during class time.

“I kind of feel like you should not be playing any of these games during class because they take away from the reality that’s surrounding you,” he said.

ME TV Instagram account connects with students

By Annie Pinkin
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Instagram account, ME TV, @manchester_essex_news, was started by juniors Jack McCavanagh, Chris Glass, and Owen Olivier-Meehan last spring and has gained the attention of the student body.

“It’s kind of just to keep people throughout the school updated on either extracurriculars, sports, the seasons, and what’s going on around the school,” Glass said.

The account features a wide range of content including interviews, athletics features, trick



COURTESY OF ME TV

Junior ME TV creators Owen Olivier-Meehan, Chris Glass, and Jack McCavanagh smile for a holiday Instagram post on Dec. 25.

shots, and more, he said.

ME TV currently has 291 followers with 25 posts.

The idea originated last year in Photo II class, McCavanagh said.

“We were watching Triton [High School], actually, and we saw them on YouTube, and they

had their own TV covering all things Triton,” he said. “And so we came up with the bright idea to make it ME TV.”

The juniors’ plan was approved by Dean of Students Elisabeth Drinkwater, Principal Julie Sgroi, and Athletic Director Cameron Molinare, he said.

Glass said that he is proud of the account’s success, especially considering the effort he, McCavanagh, and Olivier-Meehan put in.

“With a couple of steps, and if you really put thought into your ideas, you can bring them to fruition,” Glass said.

ME TV started by posting weekly interviews, and while they still post weekly, the content now covers a variety of school happenings. After featuring trick shots in the third video, the channel began to create separate videos for junior Zach Hurd’s apple trick shot, he said.

Hurd said that each Friday, he attempts to throw an apple from the outdoor section of the cafeteria into the trash can at the bottom of the stairs by the turf.

“I started doing the apple trick

shot every Friday because [Ms.] Drinkwater limited it to one day [a week],” he said. “This year I think it took me five attempts.”

ME TV also posts grilled cheese updates.

“The grilled cheese has been a staple food of Manchester-Essex in the past,” he said. ME TV posted an announcement before the high school lunch periods to inform the students of its return and compared it to last year’s, McCavanagh said.

Glass said that through ME TV videos like this, he hopes to connect with students.

“I want [ME TV] to affect the student body by getting more people involved and updated with things going around the school, sharing positive things, and making the overall school experience better,” Glass said.

Student Speak: What is your favorite rom-com and why?

Rhyse Kiester, freshman



“My favorite rom-com is ‘Robin Hood: Men in Tights’ because it’s very romantic and funny and makes me laugh every time I watch it.”

Eggie Guntas, junior



“My favorite rom-com is ‘Love Actually’ because it’s pretty funny.”

Bianca Torri, sophomore



“I think ‘When Harry Met Sally’ is the best rom-com because it’s one of the original friends to lovers trope.”

Keira Flynn, freshman



“My favorite rom-com is ‘10 Things I Hate About You.’ It’s really funny, and I like the couples, and I just think the way they get together feels very organic. It’s just an overall very good movie, and all the characters are very likeable and have great personalities.”



Hayden Remington, senior



“My favorite rom-com is ‘10 Things I Hate About You’ because it has a very good feel-good vibe to it, and it also has a really, really good soundtrack. It’s an easy movie to watch, and it’s fun.”



Chris Glass, junior



“My favorite romantic comedy is ‘10 Things I Hate About You’ because I really like the character development and the character arcs. It’s a very well-written movie, and I think it’s a cool setting as well, and I really enjoyed watching it.”

HANNAH DAVIS, FLICKR.COM/HUTSON HAYWARD, FLICKR.COM/RON COGSWELL, PRINTerval, WIKIPEDIA PHOTOS

Flirting Advice from the Journalism Staff



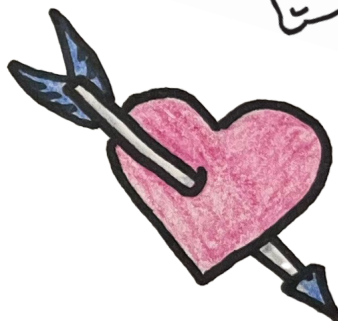
Sabine Cooper, senior:
“Send a lot of photos of your cat to your crush.”



Whitney Turner, senior:
“Make sure to always pass by their house while you’re out for a run.”



Hannah Davis, senior:
“Impress them with your Block Blast! high score.”



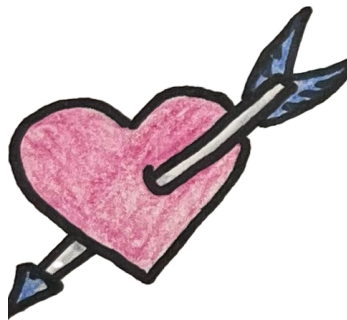
Sam Heanue, senior:
“Make sure they know your music is better than theirs.”



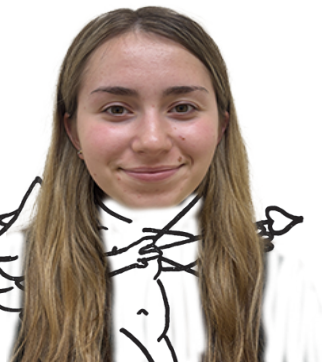
Stella Straub, senior:
“Recite the ‘Gettysburg Address’ to wow them with your historical knowledge.”



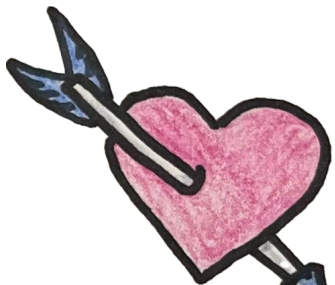
Summer Demeo, senior:
“Be nonchalant.”



August Capotosto, junior:
“Mansplain your Spotify Wrapped to them relentlessly.”



Gwen Berger, senior:
“Go all out. Embarrassment is a mindset.”



Annie Pinkin, junior:
“Let them come to you.”



ALESSIA OMARI ILLUSTRATIONS
HANNAH DAVIS PHOTOS

Jennifer Michaud, Social Studies



“I was with my first boyfriend. It was Christmas Eve. He had come over to my house to help decorate cookies. We baked, decorated the cookies, and it was cute. When it was time for him to leave, we went outside, and he kissed me.”

Elizabeth Edgerton, English



“I was in fifth grade, and I had a very serious fifth grade boyfriend. We were in a play together, and we were backstage. We were playing husband and wife in the play. There’s nothing special about the kiss itself, but that’s what happened.”

Teacher Speak: What was your first kiss story?

Caroline Coshow, World Language



“It was a disaster! I was 16 or 17 years old, and I was on vacation with my best friend, who has been my best friend since the 9th grade. Suddenly, during the vacation, full of hormones, we decided to kiss. It was horrible, disgusting, and I was thinking, ‘Why do people do this?’ Conclusion, never kiss your best friend.”

Angie Rice, English



“I was 16. I was in the school play, [my crush] was in the play, we really liked each other, and we decided to kiss! It happened outside of the script.”

STAFF EDITORIAL

US must include cancer risk on alcohol warning labels

Congress should vote to update warning labels on alcohol to contain information about the increased risk of cancer that comes with consuming alcohol in any capacity.

On Jan. 3, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released an advisory that highlighted an evident connection between increased risk of cancer and alcohol consumption.

In their article from Jan. 3, “U.S. Surgeon General Issues New Advisory on Link Between Alcohol and Cancer Risk,” the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) wrote that drinking increases one’s risk of cancer for at least seven different types of cancer.

“For breast cancer specifically, 16.4% of total breast cancer cases are attributable to alcohol consumption,” HHS wrote.

Failing to update warnings on alcohol bottles would be deliberately depriving Americans of information that could be vital to their health.

This change would be beneficial because few average citizens

are aware of the risks of alcohol consumption.

“Less than half of Americans recognize it as a risk factor for cancer,” HHS wrote

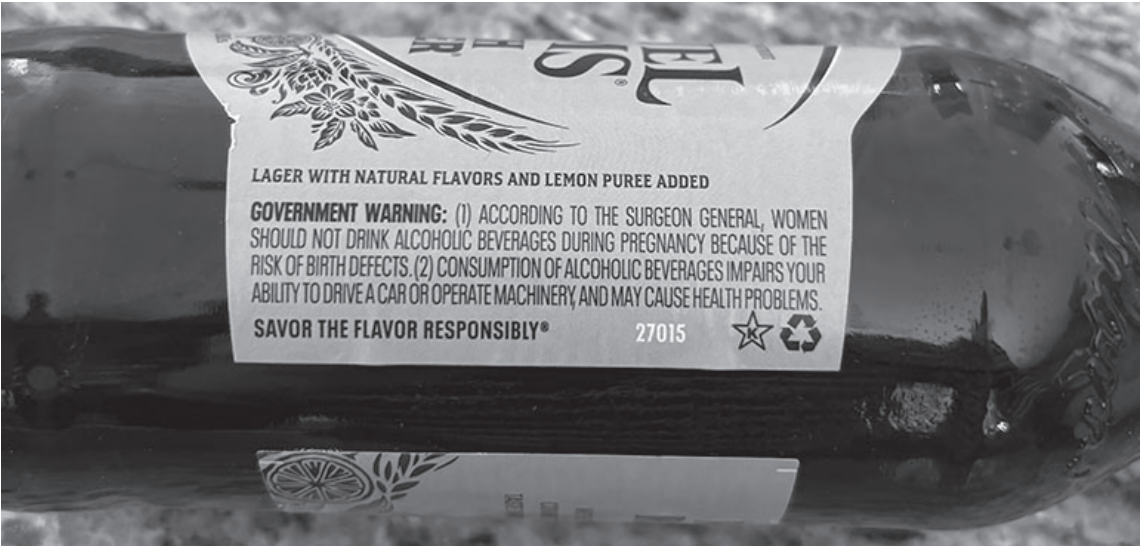
Americans should be able to decide for themselves whether to incur the risks of consuming alcohol but only after they have been made aware of those risks.

Additionally, alcohol warning labels have existed since 1988.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau’s “Distilled Spirits Labeling: Health Warning Statement” said the government warning on alcohol labels has not changed since its creation in 1988.

“(1) According to the Surgeon General, women should not drink alcoholic beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects. (2) Consumption of alcoholic beverages impairs your ability to drive a car or operate machinery, and may cause health problems,” the warning reads.

These warnings should be updated to include new information that the medical and scien-



WHITNEY TURNER PHOTO

All alcohol sold in the U.S. should include an updated label that warns about the increased risk of cancer from its consumption. Congress must vote to enact this change to protect citizens’ health.

Few average citizens are aware of the risks of alcohol consumption.

tific communities now know of.

If it is acceptable to warn mothers about risks to their pregnancies that come from alcohol consumption, it should also be acceptable to warn the population about the risk for cancer.

Cigarette warning labels have also existed for decades.

According to the FDA’s webpage, “Cigarette Labeling and Health Warning Requirements,” cigarette packages must contain warnings about diseases and cancer linked to smoking.

If cigarette packages contain

explicit warnings about health risks for consumers, alcohol packages should as well.

In the Jan. 3 CBS article, “Does alcohol cause cancer? Will warning labels be updated? And more questions, answered,” reporters Sara Moniuszko and Sarah Lynch Baldwin write that the responsibility of changing the warning label rests on Congress.

In her Politico article, “Surgeon General’s call for alcohol warning label likely to fall flat in Congress,” Chelsea Cirruzzo writes that the strongest op-

ponents to the change are those in the alcohol industry, which donates to political candidates.

The alcohol industry and politicians receiving money from the industry will profit from keeping outdated labels. We cannot allow profits to come before the health and well-being of our citizens.

The government has a responsibility to provide Americans with information that could prevent unnecessary health problems and deaths, and they should update the pre-existing alcohol warning labels.

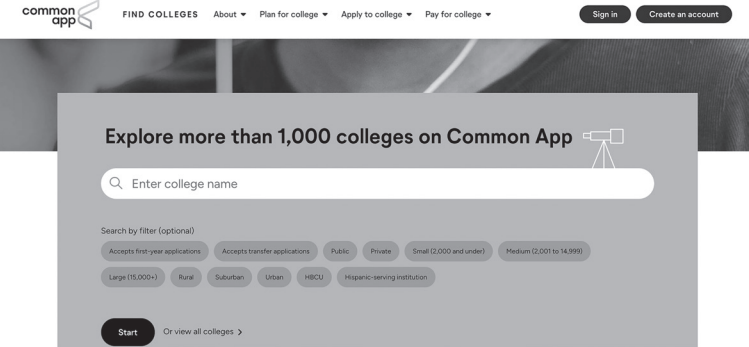
US should limit number of schools students can apply to in order to benefit applicants, colleges

By Summer Demeo
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

In order to decrease academic and financial pressure on students and make admissions less competitive, the US should use a single system to apply to colleges with a limit on the number of schools to which students can apply.

Currently, students can apply to 20 schools on the Common App and to an unlimited number of schools on the Coalition Application. They can also apply directly to schools.

Limiting the number of applications students can submit would decrease the pressure on students to apply to as many schools as possible, which has also been driving down acceptance rates at top schools.



COMMONAPP.ORG

Common App limits students to 20 or fewer college applications, but other platforms do not, causing more competitive admissions.

According to a 2022 research brief published by the Common App organization, the number of applications per applicant increased from 4.63 in the 2013-2014 application season to 6.22 in the 2021-2022 season, a 34% increase.

While the majority of appli-

cants still apply to five or fewer schools, the percentage of applicants applying to 10 or more schools has increased from 8% to 17%.

Unless they have a fee waiver, students must also pay between \$50 and \$100 per application. Students without fee waivers and

without the money to pay over \$1,000 in application fees are automatically disadvantaged.

The number of students admitted through early action or early decision applications has also increased.

Early decision is binding, meaning students admitted to a school through early decision must attend that school and withdraw their applications from all others.

With fewer applicants, schools can be more certain that their applicants actually wish to attend and may not be as reliant on the yield they receive from early decision. Elite schools may eliminate early decision.

“Until 2003, the U.S. News & World Report rankings placed great weight on ... “yield” – the percentage of admitted students who actually enroll,” Evan Mandery and Michael Dannenberg wrote in the 2022 opinion on cnn.com titled “Early decision

programs openly stack the college admissions deck.”

Early decision also primarily benefits affluent students because they can commit to a school without financial aid concerns.

According to Scott Jaschik’s 2023 Inside Higher Ed article, “Early Decision Continues to Attract Students,” schools previously used early decision to admit a small number of students but now use it to fill a much higher proportion of each class.

Limiting the number of US colleges and universities applicants can apply to will benefit students by relieving pressure to apply to a large number of schools and limiting concern about financial aid packages with early decision.

It would also benefit schools by allowing them to evaluate fewer applications and helping them determine which students are likely to attend without early decision.

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

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

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Boys’ basketball aims to strengthen play for state tournament

Team chemistry grows throughout season, players connect during games

By August Capotosto
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

With an overall record of 11-3 in the regular season and 9-0 in the Cape Ann League (CAL), the boys’ basketball team aims to have a strong season and a deep run in the state tournament, head coach Timothy St. Laurent said. Junior captain Jake Zschau said that at the start of the year, the team was less coordinated due to not having played with each other before. “We all have figured out our roles, and now that we understand each other, we are firing on all cylinders,” he said. Senior captain Milo Zeltzer

said the team’s chemistry has been integral to the team’s success. “It doesn’t feel like I’m playing on a team; it feels like I’m playing with a group of my friends,” he said. Zeltzer said the team’s highest scorers are junior captain Johnny Chareas, sophomore Graham Luis, and sophomore Alex St. Marie. “They’ve been doing a great job securing points and connecting everyone on the court,” he

said. On Fri., Dec. 20, the team beat Milbury High School. “This was the same team that knocked us out of the state tournament last year, so for us to beat them really motivated the players,” St. Laurent said. Zelter said the team played three out-of-league games against teams from Boston. “These are the kinds of teams we’re going to see in the tournament, so it’s perfect to help us prepare,” he said. Zeltzer said the team has been focusing on scouting and watching film to give them an advantage in their games.

‘Now that we understand each other, we are firing on all cylinders.’

- JAKE ZSCHAU



COURTESY OF RICK WILSON

Senior captain Milo Zeltzer prepares to take his foul shot in the Manchester Essex home game against Lynnfield on Jan. 15.

St. Laurent said in preparation for playoffs, the team has been focusing on improving their mindset as well as their game-play. “It’s not about the mistakes we make in the games; it’s about the mistakes we don’t want to make going into the state tournament,” he said.

Girls’ basketball recovers after slow start

Team seeks to enhance performance before Cape Ann League State Tournament

By Charlie Baker
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

With a record of 5-8 halfway through the season, the girls’ basketball team looks to end strong and continue to the playoffs, senior captain Tess Carpenter said. Coach Lauren DuBois said the team, which finished as Cape Ann League (CAL) Baker co-champions for two seasons in

a row, has faced a very difficult schedule. Senior captain Ella Arntsen said that they are currently on pace to make the playoffs, but that they are right on the cusp. Playoff qualification is decided by a power ranking formula that weighs score differential and strength of schedule, DuBois said. The team went through a slump that included a 51-33 loss to their rival, Georgetown, the team that they have shared the CAL Baker championship with for the last two years, Arntsen said. “It started off as a close game,



COURTESY OF JEFF VALADE

Senior captain Tess Carpenter drives by her opponent during the Hornets’ away game against Lynnfield on Jan. 15.

but we sort of fell off in the third quarter, which is what we tend to do when we lose; we dip down in the end of the second, start of the third, and we can’t dig ourselves out of that hole,” she said. Carpenter said the team has started to pick up the pace after their slow start with wins against Triton and Hamilton-Wenham. DuBois said that in their 47-25 win against Triton, they played

the best they have all season. “I thought we played exceptional defense, which was exciting. It was a fun game to coach,” she said. The team’s most impactful players have been Arntsen, Carpenter, senior captain Isabelle Donnellan Valade, junior captain Lily Oliver, and juniors Penelope Riggs, Anna Gardner, and Kacey O’Connell, DuBois said. Carpenter said everyone is very positive and contributes to team spirit. “The bus rides home after a win are great. The Donnellans bring desserts; we’re all singing and having a good time ... I think, honestly, the bus ride home is one of my favorite parts,” she said. DuBois said the team’s goals are to keep getting better and to make the playoffs.

Indoor track creates unity

By Isabelle Donnellan Valade
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Despite a slow start to the season, the indoor track team has hit their stride, senior captain Henry Stevens said. “I feel like at first I was trying to get kids to learn the basics, and now I’m working to push the team further and push these

kids towards their personal bests and toward qualifying times for States,” he said. The boys’ team has a 0-3 record, while the girls’ team has a record of 1-2. Junior captain Cia Donohoe said she is working hard to make the sprints, mid-distance, and distance teams come together. “The other captains and I have really good communication. We’ve been stretching together and incorporating the entire team so there’s no separation between

each group,” she said. Head coach Brian Davis said the captains have done well at taking on team responsibilities. “The captains have been doing terrific. It’s a big team, we have ... 40 kids, and the captains have been doing a great job stepping in, leading the workouts, and getting people organized,” he said. Davis said the entire team has done well at being versatile in the events they do, making it difficult to select one player who has had the biggest impact.

“All of the runners have been very willing to try new events. They’ve all hit personal best in their events. So it’s hard to single anyone out ... Overall, everybody’s really performed and improved so much,” he said. Donohoe said Stevens has brought the most team spirit. “I would say that Henry Stevens brings the most energy to the team because he’s always so happy to be at practice, and he’s always bringing up team members and being excited about the

outcome of their races,” she said. The coaches, Davis and distance coach Kim Latons, have also been communicating and working with the captains to improve the team, Stevens said. “There’s definitely an organized aspect to the team that we have this year that we didn’t have in the past, which is really helpful for everybody. They’re great at staying on top of things, and they’re such encouraging and hard-working coaches,” he said.

Alpine ski overcomes low participation

By Sam Heanue
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

As they prepare for the post-season, the alpine ski co-op with Essex North Shore Agricultural and Technical School (ENSATS) continues to struggle with low participation, head coach Jerry Murphy said. With a record of 3-9, the boys’ team will finish the regular season on Feb. 4 against Hamilton-

Wenham and Masconomet. The girls, with a record of 0-8, will have their senior night on Feb. 5. Both teams will compete in the North Shore Ski League Championships on Feb. 12. Murphy said the teams’ records do not reflect their work and are a result of low participation, particularly on the girls’ team. “At the beginning of the season, we thought we would have a strong girls’ team, but we ... just lost people to other sports. But they’re still strong; there just aren’t enough of them,” he said. Despite the participation problems, Murphy said he is excited

about the new strategies he has implemented this year. “We’ve started doing yoga; we’ve started thinking about the warm-down. I’ve been having them stay quiet during practice, thinking about what it’d be like out there on the course,” he said. Murphy said the captains, seniors Caroline Willwerth and Celia Mannal, have done well. Willwerth said despite not having the best record, they are still working hard to improve. “The season has been going okay, sort of on track for what we expected because of our numbers. We’re definitely reaching our individual goals,” she said.

Gymnastics improves scores

By Sam Heanue
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

After defeating rival Winthrop, the co-op gymnastics team with Hamilton-Wenham prepares for the postseason, junior captain Amelia Franklin said. With an overall record of 7-2 and a league record of 5-2, the team will compete in the Cape Ann League championship on Feb. 8. Franklin said the team is satisfied with their season so far and

has scored higher than in recent years. “We’ve won all our competitions except Masco, ... and we’ve been scoring 136, 137 points, which is higher than we’ve ever scored since I’ve been on the team,” she said. Franklin said she has enjoyed being more influential on the team this year, competing in three events at each competition. Teams compete in four events: the uneven bars, balance beam, vault, and floor routine. “I like [the floor routine]. I’ve spent a lot of time working on [it], and it’s been fun to be a bigger part of the team,” she said.

Boys’ hockey looks to increase ranking before playoffs

By Sabine Cooper
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Halfway through the regular season, the boys’ ice hockey team, a co-op consisting of Rockport, Hamilton-Wenham, Gloucester, and Manchester-Essex, hopes to qualify for the state tournament and improve their record, head coach Garrett Stevens said.

He said the team has a record of 2-15, but many close games against strong opponents have actually boosted its MIAA power ranking.

For example, Stevens said the team lost to Newburyport High School 5-4 but still improved their ranking because Newburyport is out of their division.

Similarly, the team’s loss to Dracut High School by three goals also helped improve their ranking, senior captain Luke Holmes said.

Despite this, the team will need to win several more important games in order to advance into the postseason, Stevens said.

“We are very aware of our record, but I think there’s some quiet desperation in our room that’s going to translate well into our game,” he said.

With three games left, Holmes said the team has made significant progress in working together and strengthening their strategies and systems.

“I believe everybody’s gotten mentally stronger, and our systems have gotten tighter, like our power play, penalty kill, defense, and offense,” he said.

Certain players like freshman Hayden Wood and junior Matt DeOreo have been important players, Holmes said.

“Hayden and Matt are super strong options on the power play and have been pretty key in high-pressure situations against other



COURTESY OF ZAC CARVALHO

The co-op boys’ program with the Rockport Vikings hosts the Bedford Buccaneers in a preseason scrimmage. Senior captain Luke Holmes protects the goal against Bedford. The Vikings fell 1-5.

teams,” he said.

Additionally, Holmes and the other goalkeepers have kept the team in the running over the season, Stevens said.

“[The goalkeepers] have been tremendous. They’ve seen 40, 50, 60 shots a game on average, and they give us a chance every

single game,” he said.

One of the team’s goals was to continue developing the underclassmen skills, which Stevens said they have succeeded in doing.

“It’s so important that these underclassmen are learning what it’s like to play in these high-

pressure situations,” he said.

Off the ice, the team has been working hard to maintain a supportive and cooperative team atmosphere, Wood said.

“We’ve grown closer as a team by doing team dinners and going bowling, and that’s helped,” he said.

Girls’ hockey strengthens chemistry, builds camaraderie

By Summer Demeo
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

After starting their season with a record of 7-8, the Gloucester girls’ hockey team is focused on reaching the MIAA Division II state tournament, coach Rob Parsons said.

The team is currently ranked 32nd in the MIAA Division II. Parsons said his goal is for the team to end with a winning record in order to improve their place in the power rankings at the end of the season.

The team has many young players, which he said is both a strength and a weakness because they have new talent but lack the experience that returning athletes have brought to the team..

Parsons said he has enjoyed seeing the juniors and seniors connect with younger players and establish connections.

“I think they’ve done a good job including the younger players to be part of a high school team, which with that big of an age gap, is not always an easy thing,” he said.

Parsons said Gloucester junior captains Kaydin Cusumano and Elliana Parsons have been important in building camaraderie on the team, especially with younger players.

He said some of the most impactful players this season have been Gloucester senior captain Halia Taylor and Gloucester junior captain Keegan Jewell.

“Halia Taylor as a senior this year has really stepped up her game,” Parsons said

Having players from Manchester-Essex join the team’s co-op program with Rockport has been beneficial this season, he said.

Elliana Parsons agreed and



COURTESY OF ZAC CARVALHO

Junior Teyah Fleming moves at the puck in an early season game against Shawsheen Valley Technical at the Dorothy Talbot Rink.

said she has enjoyed having new Manchester-Essex players on the team.

“I like that we have a lot of

new players, especially from Manchester, but also younger people too ... I feel like I’m making more friendships with

them than I had before,” she said.

She said they have created a positive team environment, which helps their performance during games.

“I do think the positive team dynamic is definitely a strength. When everybody roots for each other and keeps each other up, it definitely contributes,” Parsons said.

Freshman Melanie Earl also said the team has improved its connection on the ice since the start of the season.

Elliana Parsons said it took the team some time to find who played together best and who had the best chemistry because they have so many new players.

“It was hard to work with people that you’ve never really played with because we had so many new people, but I do think we improved on working together,” she said.

Swim co-op program sends five athletes to state meet

By Hannah Davis
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

During their first season as a co-op team with Hamilton-Wenham, the swim team has found success both individually and as a team due to team-building activities and collaboration, head coach Angela Ceriello said.

The team finished second in the Cape Ann League, and five swimmers qualified for the state and sectional meets.

Ceriello said she is proud of the role the captains have played in team-building throughout the season.

“We’ve been really trying to focus on doing a lot of out-of-the-pool activities for the kids, and the captains have really worked hard to bring everyone together,” she said.

Senior captain Colin Conway, who qualified for the sectional and state meets for the 100-yard breaststroke on Jan. 27, said he is happy with how swimmers from both schools have stepped out of their comfort zones.

“I think we’ve done a good job getting the two schools together and getting people to meet new people and to swim under one name,” he said.

Senior captain Libby McKinnon said the team’s success has also been due to all the swimmers working hard in practices and meets.

“Our practices are super organized, and ... we know that when we arrive, we have to put in the work to prepare for competitions,” she said.

Going into the postseason, Ceriello hopes the team will continue to support each other and work hard.

“I think we want to keep our positive energy going and the team momentum going ... We’ve had just a handful of kids qualify for Sectionals and States, so I think even though the season will be over for many of the kids, I’m hoping they’ll remain part of the team and encourage their team-

mates,” she said.

Ceriello said she is proud of many different swimmers who have developed their skills throughout the season.

“I would say the most improved kids this year, who came in with no competitive swimming experience at all, are [seniors] Emilia Kirkpatrick, Summer Demeo, Aisling Twombly, and Fiona Flynn. I think they’ve really grown as swimmers over the last eight weeks,” she said.

Junior captain Sydney

Hemme, who qualified for the sectional and state meets for the 100-yard breaststroke on Jan. 27, said although the team was successful this year, she thinks having a bigger team next year will help lead to more success. in the regular and postseason

“I want to work on recruiting more people to the team. Because we’re graduating eight seniors, which is a lot. So I want to get a lot of freshmen onto the team,” Hemme said.

‘I think we’ve done a good job getting the two schools together and getting people to meet new people and to swim under one name.’

- COLIN CONWAY

School Committee explores arts graduation requirement

Seeks input from community

By Whitney Turner
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

In hopes of encouraging students to engage with art at school, Principal Julie Sgroi said she has proposed that the School Committee adopt a new visual and performing arts requirement for graduation from the high school.

Sgroi said the proposal would require students to take a two-and-a-half credit, or one semester-long, arts course during their four years in high school.

She said many courses would fulfill the requirement.

“That includes our courses in visual arts: photography, ceramics, foundations, all of those courses, and also any of the courses that we offer in band and chorus,” Sgroi said.

She said the requirement could also be met with one of the two newly proposed courses, Instrument Lab and Contemporary Music Ensemble.

Instrument Lab would broaden the existing Piano Lab, and Contemporary Music Ensemble would offer a band option outside of concert band, Sgroi said.

Art teacher Tamera Burns said she thinks having a broad choice of classes is good for students.

“Not everybody wants to take Photo, or not everybody wants to take Intro to Contemporary Music, but there’ll be something in there for everyone, which I think is really, really great,” she said.

Sgroi said that surrounding schools have similar arts requirements.

“In the [Cape Ann League], we are the only school besides Ipswich that doesn’t have an art requirement,” she said.

Sgroi said she heard feedback from the community, including the Friends of Manchester Essex Performing Arts, that this change would be welcomed.

“Some of the teachers came forward, but the community also came forward saying they would like to see an arts requirement, just to give a little bit of a nod to the importance of having visual and performing arts in the schools,” she said.



WHITNEY TURNER PHOTO

Freshmen Joss Twombly and Annie Prinn take notes in Art Lab. This course, among others, would satisfy the proposed graduation requirement that students take a half-year art elective.

Approximately 75% of students are enrolled in an arts course this year, so the change would likely not be disruptive to students’ schedules, Sgroi said.

“It is my hope that it doesn’t affect the students much at all, because at some point during their four years, they were likely to get placed in an elective where it would check this box off,” she said.

Burns said that exposing students to an arts education ensures that they are well prepared for life.

“This is something that I feel

is really necessary as part of sending our students out after graduation,” she said.

School Committee Chair Chris Reed said he hoped the requirement would encourage students to take different electives.

“Our intent is to encourage and memorialize this so that it is top of mind for students,” he said.

Reed said that at the School Committee’s meeting on January 22, the committee voted to gather input from the community before deciding whether to adopt this change.

The vote was postponed until

the next meeting on February 4, he said.

“There was just some questions around the verbiage and how we were going to actually update this, and we wanted to get a bit of community input if anyone felt strongly either way about it ... we wanted to give the community a bit of time to hear from them if there was something that maybe we hadn’t considered or thought of yet,” Reed said.

If adopted, the change would be effective for the incoming class of 2029, Sgroi said.

Film ‘It Ends With Us’ depicts resilience against abuse

By Isabelle Donnellan Valade
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Adapted from Colleen Hoover’s best-selling novel, the new film “It Ends With Us” explores the themes of love, abuse, and resilience.

The movie, released in theaters on Aug. 9, follows Lily Bloom (Blake Lively) as she navigates her turbulent relationship with Ryle Kincaid, played by director Justin Baldoni.

Lively captures Lily’s internal conflict and growth as she faces an abusive relationship and tries to break the generational pattern she has found herself in.

Baldoni is a compelling actor, drawing Lily to him through his charisma. His character’s development supports the multifaceted nature of toxic relationships and the difficulties of escaping one.

This is shown through Ryle’s emotional manipulation, as he

displays a loving and caring side until a switch flips and he becomes abusive toward Lily. Lily can recognize that she is being abused, but her love for the kind side of Ryle overcomes her common sense until she finally recognizes she must leave.

Supporting characters include Atlas Corrigan (Brandon Skenlar), Lily’s childhood love, as well as Allysa (Jenny Slate) and Marshall (Hasan Minhaj), Ryle’s sister and brother-in-law.

Lily and Atlas’ childhood love story is told through flashbacks to their younger selves, played by Isabela Ferrer and Alex Neustaedter.

Their gentle, forbidden childhood romance is an intense contrast to Lily’s adult relationship. When Atlas and Lily reunite in their adult lives, the viewer sees how deep his compassion and love go, contrasting with Ryle’s controlling and abusive love.

The film is well-paced, offering moments of levity to contrast with the emotional weight the intense scenes hold.

The cinematography complements these shifts, with softer lighting and intimate close-ups to accompany the lighter, romantic scenes, while darker and sharper filming styles show the disorientation a victim of abuse faces.

The film addresses the curse of generational trauma. Lily’s mother (Amy Morton), was in an abusive relationship throughout her childhood, and Lily faces the struggle of placing self-preservation over her relationship.

The message the film tries to send has been undermined through Lively and Baldoni’s behavior and conflict throughout the filming and release of the movie.

Lively’s media presence overshadows the importance of the topic, as she used the movie’s platform as a way to endorse



NETFLIX.COM

Blake Lively and Justin Baldoni co-star in “It Ends With Us,” which has been overshadowed by legal drama between them.

her hair and skin products over discussing the emotional intensity and message of the film.

In addition, Lively and Baldoni have been in opposition since the filming of the movie. They are now locked in a legal dispute due to their behavior regarding the movie and filming.

The conflict between Lively and

Baldoni has received a significant amount of media attention, which draws away from the movie’s important messages

Despite this setback, the movie successfully conveys the message about the complexities of love and relationships, as well as the strength it takes to break free from a toxic cycle.

Students make use of music practice room

By Alessia Omari
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Located in the music hallway, the practice rooms act as a space that students can go to throughout the school day to play music, band teacher Henry Wagg said.

“Students tend to go to the practice rooms during lunch

blocks,” he said.

The practice room is beneficial for all musically-inclined students, allowing them to further improve upon their interests, Wagg said.

“Just having isolated spaces for students to work independently allows students to work effectively and take more chances that they might be afraid to take in front of other people,” he said.

Senior Brian Rosen, who is not involved with high school band or chorus, said the rooms have acted

as a convenient practice area for him whenever he wants to sing or play piano.

“I feel like there aren’t many other places for me to do that, so it’s nice to be able to use the practice room and not have to worry about other people hearing,” he said.

Senior Charlie Langendorf said he occasionally uses the practice rooms to practice playing the guitar with his friends.

“It’s super nice to have the practice room available whenever

we want to play music without disturbing other classes with the noise,” he said.

Chorus teacher Ben Icenogle said that having the practice rooms gives all students new opportunities to experiment with music, even if they aren’t involved in the music program.

“A lot of people who use the practice rooms are not necessarily people in band or chorus, so it’s cool that it gives an opportunity for other people to come down here,” he said.

The rooms have also been beneficial for music classes, Icenogle said.

“It has been really useful for breaking up students into sectionals during chorus, and I know Mr. Wagg has used it in his general music class a good amount,” he said.

Rosen said that more spaces similar to the practice room will be beneficial for students.

“I think we need more places for students to practice music-related things,” he said.

Movie musical ‘Wicked’ highlights importance of acceptance

Displays vibrant, stunning visuals

By Sabine Cooper
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Jon M. Chu’s 2024 musical film “Wicked” takes viewers on an enchanting journey into the backstory of the witches of Oz, revealing the untold history of Elphaba and Glinda in a vibrant and entertaining film.

“Wicked” focuses on Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo), a misunderstood young woman with green skin and extraordinary powers, and her future best friend Glinda (Ariana Grande), an ambitious and slightly aloof witch.

Produced by Universal Pictures and based on the 2003 Broadway musical by Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman, “Wicked” serves as a prequel and reimagining of L. Frank

Baum’s 1900 novel, “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.”

The movie focuses solely on the first act. The second act, “Wicked: For Good,” will be released on Nov. 21, 2025.

The film delves into Elphaba’s early years, detailing her struggles with societal rejection and her quest to find her identity, which ultimately leads to her transformation into the infamous Wicked Witch of the West.

Alongside her, Glinda’s journey unfolds as she wrestles with the challenges of popularity and integrity.

Their unlikely friendship forms the emotional core of the story and highlights themes of acceptance, loyalty, and the complex line between good and evil.

Visually, “Wicked” dazzles with its vibrant settings and meticulous attention to detail. From the emerald-hued landscapes of

Oz to the sweeping grandeur of Shiz University, the film immerses viewers in the magical world.

The soundtrack, which features beloved songs like “Defying Gravity” and “Popular” is brought to life by powerful vocal performances by Erivo and Grande, who deliver a fresh yet faithful homage to the original musical.

While “Wicked” maintains its appeal to younger audiences through humor and fantastical elements, it also offers deeper messages about prejudice and individuality that resonate with older viewers. The film’s exploration of Elphaba’s social isolation and shattered dreams offers powerful commentary on moral complexity.

Though its pacing occasionally falters, particularly in the latter half with an overly extended sequence for “Defying Gravity,” “Wicked” remains a captivating and emotionally rich experience.

Fans of the original musical will appreciate the faithful adaptation, while newcomers will be swept away by the fantastical



WICKEDMOVIE.COM

“Wicked” tells the story of how Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo) becomes friends with the slightly aloof witch, Glinda (Ariana Grande).

storytelling. With its unforgettable characters, stunning visuals, and important themes, “Wicked” brings the magic of Oz to the big screen.

‘Alligator Bites Never Heal’ uses witty lyrics, infectious sound

Female rapper releases experimental, fast-paced project

By Alessia Omari
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

American rapper and singer Doechii explores an ambitious and old-school musical style in her debut album “Alligator Bites Never Heal.”

The album was released on August 30, 2024, about four years after the release of her EP “Oh the Places You’ll Go.”

Upon its release, the project received acclaim for its alternative sound and clever lyricism.

The album’s opening track,



LK95/WIKIPEDIA.COM

Female rapper and songwriter Doechii released her debut album “Alligator Bites Never Heal” on Aug. 30 after a four-year hiatus.

“STANKA POOH,” opens the project with a mellow yet unnerving synth. Doechii raps slowly about the frustrations of having risen to fame so quickly.

“BOILED PEANUTS,” the second track in the album, utilizes a more experimental style

of rapping reminiscent of artists such as Kendrick Lamar.

In “CATFISH,” a strong percussive instrumental helps to exemplify Doechii’s unconventional yet catchy flow.

In one of the standout tracks in the album, “DENIAL IS A RIV-

ER,” Doechii uses storytelling and witty lyrics to simulate a session between her and her therapist.

She discusses her personal turmoil with fame, rapping, “I’m making so much money I’m all over the net/ I’m movin’ so fast, no time to process / And, no, I’m not in a gang, but I’m always on set.”

Doechii’s ability to alternate between various flows and instrumentals shines through on the 11th track, “PROFIT.”

Despite being short, the track has an infectious upbeat sound, with a beat reminiscent of early 2010’s rap.

The fast-paced, clever flow of “NISSAN ALTIMA,” the 13th track, has made it one of the most popular songs on the album.

Doechii’s creative lyrics and quick rapping style help to give this track an invigorating yet light-hearted quality.

Despite the song’s short length, the chorus is a complete earworm that will be stuck in your head for months to come.

The 12th track of the album, “BOOM BAP,” is a bizarre yet meaningful. Doechii interrupts her nonsensical rapping to subtly give commentary on how little respect female

rappers are given within the rap industry.

“Alligator Bites Never Heal” by American rapper and singer Doechii is a versatile, yet fast-paced album that is a revolutionary project within the realm of modern female rap.

West Street Cafe boasts variety of flavorful food, drinks

By Gwendolyn Berger
INDEPENDENT EDITOR

Wedged on 1 West St. in the quaint Beverly Farms, West Street Cafe has wide array of delicious breakfast and lunch options.

The store itself is a bit cramped but charming.

The cafe has an array of drink and food options, suitable for various tastes and inclinations. In terms of drinks, West Street Cafe has coffee, espressos, and teas.

A guest can enjoy a wide selection of unique coffee flavors. Among them are three standouts: the Hazelnut Latte (\$3.95 - \$4.95), the Salted Caramel Latte (\$3.95 - \$4.95), and the Caramel Macchiato (\$4.25 - \$5.50).

The cafe offers traditional coffee options as well, such as the Dark House Coffee (\$2.25 - \$3.25), an Americano (\$3.50 - \$4.50), or the Latte (\$3.95 - \$4.95).

For tea, customers can savor a black, green, or flavored (\$2.25).

The menu names are quite unoriginal, and the dining space can be crowded, but the cafe redeems itself with its delectable dishes.

Due to the versatility of the menu, patrons can cater to their

sweet or savory tastes. There are 10 different types of omelets, including the Ham & Cheese (\$11.95), Western (\$12.95), and the Danvers (\$14.95).

If a consumer finds themselves hungry for a sweet breakfast, West Street Cafe is the place for them.

The cafe serves Buttermilk Pancakes (\$8.95 - \$9.95), Waffles (\$9.50), French Toast (\$11.50), and more. Other breakfast options include a selection of sandwiches (\$5.95 - \$10.95), wraps (\$9.95 - \$12.95), and variations of eggs Benedict (\$13.95 - \$14.95).

Lunch options follow a classic cafe theme with an emphasis on sandwiches and salads.



GWENDOLYN BERGER PHOTO

West Street Cafe in Beverly sells a large selection of lunch foods, which makes it an appealing choice for many different customers.

Lunch options follow a classic cafe theme with an emphasis on sandwiches and salads. A few standouts include the Bacon Chicken Avocado Sandwich (\$11.50), Tuna Salad (\$10.95), and

Steak Tip Salad (\$14.95). Although the space is quite compact, the cafe has a wide variety; the food is delicious and high-quality, and the staff is extremely pleasant.