

## Model Train Project Builds Community

By Areeta Faiz || STAFF WRITER

Tiny trains chug along past 3D-printed buildings, felt hillsides, vintage bridges, and miniature barns. Steam and diesel engines roll over sensors that power glowing windows and waving figurines as a lively chorus hums a century-old railroad song. The trains rumble through tracks that weave their way through an imagined Andover landscape, and there's this antique, glowing magic in your heart you can't quite pinpoint.

On December 10, a 7-by-18-foot world came to life in the Andover High School library. For nearly the past year, AHS had come together to craft an appealing, functional, and immersive world for model trains to live in.

All Aboard Andover! was a school-wide collaboration that merged science, technology, engineering, the arts, and



STAFF PHOTO / Adeline Whitsett

mathematics into one ambitious STEAM installation. The brainchild of AHS librarian Mary Coombs, the exhibit was open during Computer Science Education Week from December 10-12 in the library.

"I thought it would be interesting to modernize these old-fashioned toys with the superpowers that students have now," Coombs said, with an inviting, rosy smile that complemented her pink wool sweater and determined expression.

Having been in the works since last spring, this project consisted of numerous moving parts to bring the exhibit to

life—as student engineers tinkered away at structures and circuits, coders developed its interactive features, and visual artists and musicians added their own creative flair.

In the library, David Strong, who teaches Pre-Calculus and Introduction to Mechanical Engineering, saw this as the perfect opportunity to integrate the arts and STEM community. "It's interdisciplinary with courses offered here, which I love," he said. "And from an engineering standpoint, [this was] actually very relevant for us."

According to Strong, the engineering process always starts with defining a problem or an opportunity: "We [knew] what work needed to be done, how long we had, and what our constraints were." His engineering students repaired components of the trains, learned about circuit diagnostics, and designed 3D-printed features, all while witnessing the engineering design process at play.

A short walk down the stairs by the art rooms, drawing and painting students led by art teacher Andrew Comeau and the National Art Honor Society (NAHS) had been working in tandem to design the visual setting for the trains.

"We...[aimed] to create not only the essential elements of a natural scene, but also to play with a wide range of mediums and techniques," said senior and NAHS co-president Zoe Roberts. Their goal was to craft a landscape that felt both imaginative and unique to Andover. Thanks to them, the exhibit boasted Model-Magic accessories and a deep green landscape.

Across the cafeteria towards the Collins Center, chorus teacher Dr. Lauren Peithmann and her students put together their very own contribution to the exhibit.

"Our chamber choir prepared a song called '900 Miles,' which we [performed] as part of the event," said Peithmann. The piece itself was particularly special to her, having been on her to-perform list for some time.

"It's a railroad song...preserved in the Smithsonian Folkways collection, which



STAFF PHOTO / Adeline Whitsett

A collection of some of the vintage trains on display in the library.

is a special record collection of songs that have been [dated] way back to the 1700s and 1800s," she said. The arrangement was performed by the AHS chamber choir along with a student-made presentation of the song's history.

Up by the computer science wing in room 354, members of Girls Who Code and the Computer Science Club helped develop the electronic components.

According to AHS Computer Science teacher Dr. Marianne Bezaire, students from these clubs used sensors and circuits that kept track of where the train was over time, building interactive storylines. A person waving, for example, or lights going off in a building—all of it helped add something dynamic and magical to the exhibit.

Clearly, Coombs is no stranger to this kind of community-wide endeavor, the last one being an AHS comic book fair that she organized two years ago. As a former digital learning teacher, she believes in the value of modeling collaboration. "I think it's important to invite students to cross curricular boundaries," she said, and did exactly that.

Roberts explained that All Aboard Andover! has been a great way for students to discover the bridge that exists between STEM and the arts. "Many

students aren't aware of how frequently these fields interact," said the NAHS co-president. "Contributing to this installation has shown students that they don't have to choose one passion over the other—they can pursue both."

Moreover, due to Peithmann's location in the building, it can be difficult to reach out across departments. "The Collins Center is kind of its own unique entity," she said. "But I have a real affinity for collaborative events like this, and I think Mrs. Coombs does such a great job."

Coombs also wished to give a new life to these treasured, sophisticated toys that nowadays go overlooked. Many students' parents and grandparents still own their trains. Since the spring, she'd been hard at work crowdsourcing toys and accessories from the Andover community.

"We've got a lot of interesting pieces, and they [needed] a little love," she said. That "love" was handled by the Yard Crew, a group of primarily junior volunteers who helped clean tracks, test engines, and plan the layout during their H-Blocks.

"I know several older gentlemen that still have trains from when they were little boys, so these were real keepsakes," said Coombs. Starry-eyed, she gestured towards a glass shelf of vintage acces-

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## APS defines student success through five-skill 'Vision of a Graduate'

By Isabella Yan & Tomas Kruecker-Green  
EXECUTIVE EDITORS

When the bus never showed up at Andover High School last month, the chamber choir students faced a problem. They were supposed to perform at a choral festival at Keene State University, and their ride had vanished. Stranded and waiting, the students did not panic; rather, they sang to pass the time, remained optimistic and flexible, and found a solution to get to their destination. To a casual observer, this was just a group of singing teenagers. But to AHS Assistant Principal Alicia Linsey, it was a

perfect real-world example of the "Vision of a Graduate" (VoG) in action.

This spirit—adaptability, creativity, and resilience—is the heartbeat of the Andover Public Schools (APS) initiative. Known as the Vision of a Graduate, the framework is a district-wide effort to define what success looks like for an Andover student. The framework consists of five key skills: critical thinking, communication, adaptability, collaboration, and self and other awareness. According to Linsey, these skills build the foundation for APS's primary objective to foster inclusivity and belonging within the district.

The VoG aims to inform the curriculum, allowing students to learn, build, and practice skills that can be applied in their future careers. "[The VoG is] about building transferable skills and dispositions into the curriculum that are necessary for success," said Linsey, who is also a member of the VoG Design Team.

According to Principal Jimmy D'Andrea, the district was encouraged to undertake the project by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the organization that accredits schools and works to im-

VISION OF GRADUATE / page 4

EDITORIAL

# AHS's New Displays are Leaving Us in the Dark

Shiny, new, flat-panel displays awaited us in every classroom when we returned to school in August. The decades-old projectors, stripped from the walls, were history. The new ones are modern, high-tech, and, unfortunately, unreliable. The displays saved the district \$106,000, a cost-effective alternative to upgrading to a modern projector system. But this discount came with a hidden fee. Teachers and students are paying the difference in a currency that is both valuable and nonrefundable: time.

Wasted time might be the biggest drawback of these screens as teachers navigate a litany of technical hurdles, from streaming videos lacking video, to a touch-screen with a life of its own, to the screen shutting down constantly and erratically. We have witnessed how the technology has understandably provoked frustration in teachers. Aside from lost learning time, one of the most glaring (literally) issues is visibility. The old projectors, despite the occasionally faulty technology, used the whiteboard space and created an image large enough for students in the back row to see. However, these new displays are not as large. For those seated near the back of the class or with poor eyesight, it can be difficult to read fine print displayed on the screen. The screen surface is also prone to glare. Unlike the matte projection on a whiteboard, the glass reflects fluorescent lights and windows. Depending on the time of day and where you are sitting, the screen might be partially washed out.

We realize the lengths the IT department went to in getting these units installed in every classroom (in the hottest weeks of summer, no less) and dealing with the technical issues that ensued soon after. Their hard work doesn't change the fact that the technology — whether that be the hardware or the software — is flawed.

There are plans to expand this technology to the middle schools next. As the subjects of this de facto pilot program, we urge the IT Department to pause. The school year is already four months old, yet the aforementioned problems persist. Let's fix the picture here before projecting it elsewhere.



ILLUSTRATION / Mason Lawrence

OPINION COLUMN

# Pledging to Liberties Lost

By Anya Gorovits || OPINIONS EDITOR

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

We've all had this one sentence memorized since the age of five. From the moment we enter kindergarten to our last day as seniors, we start our school days by standing with our hands on our hearts, swearing loyalty to our flag and nation.

Growing up in the Andover Public School system, I've always wondered why this short passage has been drilled into our minds on a daily basis.

Junior Ariana Teasdale, who stands for the Pledge but doesn't recite it, said, "It feels cult-like to pledge allegiance every morning."

As a country founded on democracy, freedom, and natural loyalty, why do we have this slightly dystopian tradition imposed upon the youngest Americans?

Upon examining the Pledge's content alone, it seems positive, asking America's children to promise to uphold values of "liberty and justice" and to honor their country. It's understandable for a nation to hope for such fidelity and to encourage such values among its citizens. However, our nation doesn't seem to be living up to its own principles.

"The Pledge is an ideal goal we haven't met," said AHS physical science teacher Ralph Bledsoe.

Yet in the context of current events, I struggle to see our Pledge as a goal that our government is focusing on. Our leaders should be role models for our children, exemplars of the "liberty and justice for all" we swear allegiance to each morning. Yet for many, it doesn't feel that way.

"There are just so many aspects of the Pledge of Allegiance around liberty that are being undermined right now," said Teasdale. The current Trump Administration has taken countless actions to limit the "liberty and justice" of its constituents rather than uphold it. Since taking office, the administration has deported thousands without due process, eliminated federal DEI programs, weakened civil rights and housing acts, minimized the Department of Education, terminated refugee programs, withheld university funding over First Amendment disputes, restricted abortion services, and threatened law firms taking on cases that conflict with federal actions. Most of these actions, opposed by millions as shown by protests and polls, aim directly at diminishing the freedoms and legal entitlements of chosen groups within America.

"The issue that remains at hand at the moment is that, currently, the administration does not seek to uphold the rights and liberties of ourselves, but in

actuality, they seek for us to uphold theirs," said junior Rohit Perugupalli.

As I approach adulthood, I find it difficult to make promises of "liberty and justice" to a country that I know cannot promise the same to myself or those around me. I recently attended a local convention in which I was surprised to see the attendees—all adults—stand and recite the Pledge without being legally obligated to do so. Following this recitation they spoke of how to maintain our country's true values, how to improve the lives of Americans, and how to protect our rights. This, to me, seems like the correct use of the Pledge of Allegiance. "Liberty and justice" are strong goals for the U.S., but the Pledge is a goal only if these morals are being worked towards.

As French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*, once said, "A goal without a plan is just a wish." Unfortunately, a wish will not achieve "liberty and justice" in the United States.

"The Pledge is trying to [foster] some national unity," said Bledsoe. "I think that it's worthwhile to at least try to have that aspiration still there." In the modern, extremely divided political climate, the tradition may feel like a last hope for patriotism. Bledsoe added that, without the pledge, there will be little left to keep the American people together. Yet I don't think the Pledge succeeds in instilling national unity. Because it has been ingrained in our minds since before we could read, the Pledge has become less of a thoughtful oath and more of an ordinary aspect of our morning routines: no different from brushing your teeth or walking to the bus stop. Most students choose whether or not to say it based on peer pressure and energy levels, not on national pride. "We recite it to the point where it is engraved within our skull, and yet we don't really know what its words mean," said AHS freshman Isaac Wilfond.

"I think we should teach these ideals," said AHS history teacher Kathryn Reusch. She added that, ideally, the Pledge should be taken out of school and replaced with thoughtful discussions. "If we were to do the Pledge at all in school, I would prefer it be done later in schooling, when [students] can make a more thoughtful choice about saying it," she said.

In regard to students who don't say the Pledge, Teasdale said, "If you are recognizing that our country has to fix [certain issues] before you can pledge yourself to it, then I think that's more of a pursuit of liberty and justice than potentially saying the pledge itself."

Though Massachusetts students are not obligated to say the pledge, the law does obligate that time is put aside for it every day.

Hearing these words each morning for 13 consec-

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Have an opinion you want to share? Email us at [andoverview@andoverma.us](mailto:andoverview@andoverma.us)!

# Liberty and Justice for Some

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE / from page 2

utive years feels like inculcation, whether we say the words out loud or not.

Additionally, a mandated Pledge blurs the lines between true patriotism and compelled loyalty. Patriotism should stem from true pride in a country's actions, not from an idealistic sentence. "Patriotism shouldn't come through like a forced sense of nationalism. It should come through a sense of

brotherhood, a sense of this is who we are," added Wilfond.

Written 133 years ago, perhaps the Pledge of Allegiance has become outdated. This tradition, so ingrained in our lives, would be difficult to abolish. Yet altering its content could make way for a more accurate representation of America, and what "We The People" want our country to strive for.

## OPINION COLUMN

### The Duality of a High School Senior

By Samin Faiz || STAFF WRITER

As midnight draws nearer, dozens of AHS seniors rush through their first round of college applications, wondering how this disaster came to be.

The sun set hours ago, yet the night seems to be getting darker and darker. Whether it be hurriedly scanning through important college information or conjuring up entire supplemental essays, the price of procrastinating turned out to be uglier than anyone could have ever imagined.

At last, the clock strikes midnight, and with that, a brief period of self-inflicted catastrophe comes to an end. Countless seniors across Andover breathe a sigh of relief—or do they?

"I am not content with myself at all," grieved Lasya Amere, a talented—but sometimes unproductive—senior at AHS. "I started writing my supplements a week before November 1, so I had 10 schools that I was going to apply to, but I had to move two of them to regular decision because I ran out of time."

For the majority of colleges that offer early applications, the deadline is November 1. Despite being aware of this deadline for nearly a year now, a startling number of seniors cut it extremely close regardless. For some—myself included—it was down to the last hour. However careless we may seem, it was even less for a reserved few.

"I submitted my last application at 11:59:54, so six seconds before midnight," admitted Amere, with a hint of amusement in her voice. Interestingly, her friends too were in a similar boat...a sinking one, might I add. "In my group chat with me and some of my friends, we were all stressing out about our apps," she recalled. "Someone even asked me to revise their college essay at 11:30."

But what if the power had gone out? What if her computer buffered? What if the universe spontaneously decided to hurl a curveball at her face? Or maybe...a rifle?

"The scholarship consideration for Georgia Tech was November 2nd, and I was invited to an all-day marching band competition that day," she began. "At my competition, I got hit in the face with my rifle, and there was blood everywhere—on my uniform, on the ground, everywhere. So after I got home, I obviously couldn't work on my supplements because I had to go to urgent care. I asked for an extension, and they were really nice about it and gave me one week." But Amere failed to learn her lesson the second time around and ended up racing the deadline yet again. "But I uhh—procrastinated on that," she added, "so my supplement was kind of really bad for Georgia Tech."

Thankfully, Amere is aware of her grave mistake—and the disheartening missed opportunities that came with it. "I feel really regretful because I know if I actually spent time, I would have had a much higher chance of getting in," she reasoned. "I think my stats are decent enough for the school, and I feel like at a certain point, it's your essay that differentiates you from the rest."

In hopes of redeeming herself, Amere is committed to turning things around for her second shot at college applications. This time, how-

ever, the finish line is light-years away: with the regular decision deadline on January 1, she has had two more months to put together applications she'll be proud of; this means that her time management will pave the path for the next four years of her life. With this in mind, Amere is set on implementing a new—and by far more sensible—plan for January.

"I'm going to actually start my supplements early," she asserted in early November. "I'm going to try to show my personality through my essays and make sure that they can actually tell me apart from other students... I've also made a schedule of what I want to get done every day."

As Amere worked feverishly into the night, another senior tugged their blanket closer to their chest, a wry smile on their face for cruising through one of the most chaotic nights of the year. You see, there exists another specimen at Andover High whose behavior is the polar opposite of Amere and her crew: meet Raahil Parikh, another one of the Class of 2026's brightest stars. Having completed his applications days in advance, Raahil was given the liberty to enjoy his Saturday night, stress-free.

"So, I kind of started my Common App in the middle of the summer," he said, coolly. "I'm generally not too big of a procrastinator and I don't like leaving things for the last minute, so I kind of just grinded out a lot of stuff in the first two weeks of school when everything was chill."

Parikh had a completely different mindset when it came to college applications: he felt that the relief of getting it over with early on was preferable to the short-lived satisfaction of procrastinating. On that note, he plans to take a similar approach with his regular decision schools, which is why he decided to plant his flag during the early weeks of November.

"I'm aiming to get all of them done before Thanksgiving so I don't have to think about college apps over break."

In the end, it was his grit and ability to control the irresistible urge to slack off that earned him the destination he had hoped for: a calm, manageable senior year fall. However, there was a hidden treasure for which he had not anticipated: a deep, rewarding warmth in his heart for being ahead of the game.

"I'm pretty satisfied with myself. I had things under control, so I haven't been stressing out these days."

At the end of the day—or night—both Amere and Parikh are special in their own, unique way. While Amere worked doggedly into the night, Parikh fought off distractions early on. Essentially, both seniors demonstrated their dedication, simply in different ways—it just shows how hard work doesn't come in a single shape or form. Although they seem to be worlds apart, their experiences encapsulate the fascinating nature of a high school senior. Believe it or not, this natural cycle seems to repeat itself every year.

"Of course, every year you get the early birds: the people that want to apply on the first day of school," said Mr. Hutchins, one of the school's guidance counselors. "We kind of have to tell them 'what you need to do right now is wait'... and then, as always, we have the kids that we're chasing down until the last minute."



## andover antics

### Senioritis Reaches Pandemic Levels

By Mo Gearin || STAFF WRITER

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has officially declared senioritis a national pandemic. Senioritis, now classified under Educational Fatigue Disease (EFD), is described by the CDC as "a virus from high school seniors that drains motivation and academic effort." The CDC has begun development on containment and prevention policies.

An infected senior at AHS, while choosing to stay anonymous, describes their symptoms: "I feel like a zombie...my wrist grows tired whenever I think about picking up a pencil." CDC epidemiologists warn that senioritis is dangerously contagious this season, and new strains have breached other classes. This is due to weather patterns and increased allergens promoting airborne transmission. Pathogens of EFD in the air can still be infectious for up to an hour. New anti-hallway-loitering policies are being pushed for by the CDC in order to keep EFD within the senior class.

The CDC has advised freshmen and sophomores to limit exposure to infected seniors and at-risk juniors, and avoid all contact with college-based conversations. The CDC has also developed the Goal-Setting Accountability Partners Programs (GSAPP) and is pushing for schools to implement GSAPP as soon as possible. "The Goal-Setting Accountability Partners will pair seniors with a peer or teacher mentor to set weekly goals and check-in," says Sandra Harwood, a medical researcher from the CDC Global Health Center. "This will hopefully lessen infectious symptoms and improve morale during these times."

More common symptoms include chronic procrastination, uncontrollable sighing, and a sudden or intense interest in napping. The pandemic status symptoms can mimic those of the common cold or a stomach bug. Reported cases at AHS range from mild, such as missing assignments and forgotten school supplies; to acute, which is possibly forgetting what class you're in and falling asleep during lectures; to AP effort failure, where the effort put in by AP students becomes redirected or fatigued by EFD. In some AP effort failure cases, students have begun journaling about the "futility of all human effort" in place of their assignments. The progression and diversity of the symptoms is one of the main reasons for the huge spread and lack of treatment.

"Honestly, I didn't think senioritis was real until it hit me like a snow-pow made of overdue assignments," said senior Claire Helle.

Others claim the pandemic has created unexpected side effects. "I tried to start my essay three times! My body physically rejected productivity," exclaimed junior John Woodring, who experienced overwhelming nausea.

"I used to color-code my planner," admitted Priya Shawn, a senior, "Now I use it as a coaster." Seniors across the board are expressing the severity of EFD in their daily lives.

"I used to chase extra credit," said Kyle Cabener, another senior, "Now I chase the feeling of finishing one task a week."

The pandemic status of senioritis has left it to mutate into new strains, the most prominent at AHS being the APocalypse Strain. This mutant strain overcomes the memory cells that foster improved immunity in AP students. Also detected at AHS is Early-Onset senioritis (EOS), sometimes detected in juniors, but mostly seen in sophomores. The CDC announces concern about "destabilization of the high school ecosystem" in regards to EOS, stating that "the normalcy that most students depend on to succeed could be greatly disrupted if EOS is left as it is."



You can read all of Violet's comics at [ultravioletcomics.com](http://ultravioletcomics.com)!

# AHS's New Framework for Success

VISION OF GRADUATE / from page 1

prove education across New England. NEASC has widely promoted the importance of having a VoG in all schools. AHS will undergo an accreditation visit later this academic year, during which NEASC will review the school's VoG implementation and offer recommendations for future development.

While the VoG is a district-wide initiative, much of its development has been localized to AHS. As outlined on the APS website, the three-year journey of creating VoG has taken five essential stages, the last of which is still in progress. The process began in May 2022 with the VoG Kickoff Retreat, when a group of Andover students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members gathered to learn about the concept and begin discussions.

The next phase involved receiving direct input from AHS faculty, students, and community members about the important skill set for students. Throughout the 2022-2023 school year, administrators organized meetings with AHS faculty and, in small working groups, received input on the skills they thought were central to student success. Based on this feedback, a "Top 5 Staff Skills" list was created, consisting of skills such as critical thinking, communication, adaptability/resilience/persistence, collaboration, and inclusivity/empathy.

In the third stage, during an advisory period in the spring of 2023, AHS students filled out a survey to indicate the skills they felt were necessary for their career of interest. Based on survey results, a "Top 5 Students Skills" list was established, which consisted of the skills communication, creativity, problem solving, collaboration,

and organization/time management.

The two lists were then synthesized to create the final five skills outlined in the VoG.

In the subsequent school year, a VoG Design Team was established, composed of leadership across the district and all APS schools, students, teachers, and community members. The team has since conducted extensive listening in the broader community, ensuring its views are represented in the development of VoG.

"It was really important that we had input from everyone in the schools and in the community," Linsey said.

Throughout the design process, focus groups with AHS students have offered feedback to inform the VoG and spark discussion about the application of the skills in school. Senior Kayleigh Kiberd-Rosi was one of seven students who participated in a workshop with the superintendent and assistant superintendent to discuss the VoG in October. She recalls being called down to Principal D'Andrea's office along with six other students—two from each grade—selected based on their involvement in the school community.

During the workshop, students discussed the five skills and how they are demonstrated at AHS. The conversation touched on challenges students face to apply certain skills, including the restriction of critical thinking through the practice of teaching to the test, and how students are hesitant to reach out for assistance from teachers.

This past year, a VoG Curriculum Council composed of AHS faculty has been working to identify specific sub-skills within each of the five main competencies, outlining

key benchmarks for fifth-, eighth-, and twelfth-graders.

Sean Walsh, APS Fine Arts Coordinator and member of the Curriculum Council, has been particularly involved in developing the subskills for Self and Other Awareness, which include metacognition, emotional intelligence, and solidarity.

In identifying these subskills, Walsh believes that the department has stated clearly "that the arts must be a place where we support growing a student's perception of their local and global communities, foster emotional intelligence, and support students as allies."

He added, "The core of this is asking young people to recognize the greater world, think deeply about themselves and their learning, and act as advocates for the marginalized, and be upstanders."

In the upcoming year, students at AHS will have the opportunity to learn more about VoG, and promotion efforts have directly involved AHS students. Meghan Michaud's Graphic Design class is in the process of creating a VoG logo, and Daniel Brennan's multimedia production class is developing a video to share with the larger community.

According to Linsey, the long-term vision is that all students will be able to display the VoG skills in a final project before graduation, whether through a portfolio, showcase, or collection of work. In the short term, many students can identify how they're showcasing these skills in their current work.

"My hope is that it will deepen the learning and it will be more transparent to students the skills and competencies they are learning," said Linsey.

## Invisible Hunger: How SNAP Cuts Reached AHS

By Kaveri Dole || SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER

In a town where brunch places are filled on weekends and parking lots gleam with SUVs, hunger seems like a distant problem, existing elsewhere. Yet as Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits were halted during the recent government shutdown, Andover families—some quietly, some urgently—found themselves facing a question few expected to ask: How will we eat this week?

The shutdown's sudden suspension of SNAP, the federal food assistance program, sent shockwaves through communities nationwide. Andover, often perceived as insulated by wealth, was no exception, with 8.92% of households falling below the poverty line according to data from USA's most recent census.

The federal guidelines for poverty, outlined by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), classify a 4-person household as having an income of \$32,150 or less. For many of these families, SNAP cuts weren't a distant policy debate; rather, they reshaped their daily lives overnight.

"They have to start making decisions," Mary Robb, a history teacher at Andover High School, said, referring to the families facing these changes. "Do I pay for my medication, or do I pay to put food on the table? Do I pay my rent? Do I pay my mortgage?" Robb explained how these daily calculations are forced on families when assistance from SNAP is no longer available. These are questions no one wants to need to ask, but ones many did and still do.

AHS Principal Jimmy D'Andrea described the school's focus on offering help discreetly to students from low-income families: "We work really hard to make sure that students have ways to reach out for assistance without feeling like anyone else is looking at them or drawing attention to them." This includes second lunches, private conversations with counselors, and regular updates directing families to community food resources.

During the holiday season, the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) collects gift

cards for families, and the school distributes food donated through drives. Last year, D'Andrea and staff even delivered meals directly to households. "It's a way to provide support without making students feel singled out in any way," he said.

Robb also connected the SNAP cuts to longstanding beliefs about poverty in the United States. "The stigma that's often attached to poverty by folks who aren't poor is still unfortunately very healthy," she said. She explained that people who haven't faced food insecurity sometimes cope with guilt by assuming those who struggle simply don't work hard enough. "Many of them are working very, very hard," she emphasized. "They're just at jobs that don't pay a livable wage."

Additionally, Robb spoke about her own experience growing up in Andover, where her family of eight lived on a single full-time income and one part-time job. "I looked like I fit in, though, because I was a white girl in this predominantly white school, so I was able to hide it," she said. The memories shape how she views Andover today: "We don't do a very good job of addressing poverty in Andover. I wish we did better."

According to the National Immigration Law Center, while many people are impacted by these issues, certain groups feel them disproportionately: low-income families, people with disabilities, and, most prominently, people of color and immigrants. These communities have fewer economic opportunities and greater vulnerability to policy changes.

The recent 43-day government shutdown from October 1 to November 12, 2025, set the record for the longest in the history of the United States, as said in the Peter G. Peterson Foundation. Although SNAP benefits resumed after the shutdown, millions of Americans are now facing a new crisis: a permanent loss of food assistance under the new tax and spending law recently passed by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA). The law puts into effect the largest cut to SNAP in the program's history.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Brooke Rollins

continued pushing states towards these new rules even during the shutdown. Now, states are enforcing stricter work requirements that start a three-month countdown. If recipients don't meet the updated rules within those three months, they lose benefits entirely.

The changes are specifically expected to push tens of thousands of legal immigrants off SNAP. Certain groups of these legal immigrants, including refugees and humanitarian visa holders, are being told they're no longer eligible, ef-

fective immediately.

adding more administrative barriers that could further reduce the number of people receiving SNAP benefits. These cuts are hitting at a moment when low-income families are already struggling with stagnant wages, while rent and living costs are all rising. Feeding America, a nonprofit addressing child hunger, reported a 325% increase of food they needed to purchase during the government shutdown, and noted that SNAP provides nine meals for every one meal provided by food banks. This means that



ILLUSTRATION / Mason Lawrence

food banks will not be able to offset the cuts.

According to the Boston Globe, communities are now preparing for an extended crisis, unsure how long they can continue to offer sufficient support as more and more families lose access to one of the country's most important anti-hunger programs. The SNAP cuts made something visible that often stays hidden. Behind Andover's reputation for being wealthy are real families navigating uncertainty and hard decisions. Yet the response inside the school, from counselors ready to listen and staff delivering food to doorsteps, shows how a community can step in when federal systems fall short.

The USDA has also said it may require current recipients to reapply for benefits,

# Cellphone Ban Bill Passes Massachusetts Senate

By Avery Slaughter || ONLINE EDITOR

It's 8:07 AM on a Monday morning, and lethargy makes your limbs weigh far more than they should. You pause your music as you move through the breakfast line. The cafeteria quietly buzzes with muted chatter, but most people seem to share your exhaustion.

After grabbing your food, you turn your AirPods back on. You could take them out, but it's easier to pick your bagel, sit down with your friends silently, and open TikTok. Having a conversation is daunting so early in the morning. Maybe your phone is impacting your relationships, but you're loath to be the only person socializing.

In recent years, the place of cellphones in schools has been an oft-discussed topic. According to a study in July from the Pew Research Center, 44 percent of Americans support banning devices in school. Several states across the country have passed legislation banning cellular devices from schools altogether, and Massachusetts could be next. On July 31, the Massachusetts Senate passed a bill that would prohibit the use of cellphones in schools entirely—or, as some call it, a “bell-to-bell” ban. Of the 40 senators, 38 voted in favor of the bill, including Second Essex's Barry Finegold. The bill has not yet reached the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

“Limiting cell phone use in schools has been shown to improve academic performance, strengthen social skills, support better mental health, and enhance school safety, with research demonstrating higher test scores, stronger peer relationships, and reduced mental health issues,” Finegold said.

Representative Tram Nguyen's office declined to comment on the topic over the phone.

According to a 2022 study from the academic journal *Innovative Higher Education*, it's difficult to overstate the positive effects of minimizing cellphone use in the classroom. Students who did not use devices during school hours reported higher levels of course comprehension

and mindfulness. They also experienced lower anxiety levels.

While it's nearly impossible to gauge the impacts of teacher-specific phone policies at AHS due to variation across the school, it's an unfortunate truth recognized by students and teachers alike that devices do serve as a distraction in the classroom.

“I use my phone probably every five minutes,” an anonymous student admitted. “I use it instead of talking to other people.”

Many AHS teachers have taken their own creative approaches to combat this issue, aiming to minimize the use of technology during class hours. According to the anonymous student, four of their seven teachers require phones to be locked in the “phone lockers.” Some teachers, including Robert Michaud in the Social Studies department, have seen improvements in focus and work ethic.

“The correlation between teen mental health problems and social media use is troubling to me,” Michaud said.

For Michaud, his in-classroom ban on cellphones stems from a well-founded place of concern. “Social media is more addictive to people than heroin. It disproportionately impacts girls,” Michaud shared, referencing a 2022 study by the *Acta Psychologica* academic journal. “We're all addicted...the only thing to do is take them away.”

Though academic performance and mental health are of utmost importance, there's another aspect to consider in regards to cellphones in schools. Gun violence in the United States has been on the rise in recent years, and it is a topic that remains on the forefront of many students' minds.

According to a report from CNN, gun violence in schools reached an all-time high in 2024. Despite the statistical improbability of firearm-related violence occurring on school grounds, many students are still wary, and some argue that the phone ban will make things worse. A student who wished to remain anonymous expressed discontent with the bill by suggesting that safety during school

shootings is a larger problem than classroom behavior.

Teachers are not exempt from this fear of shootings, either. According to a 2024 report from the Pew Research Center, “a majority of public K-12 teachers (59%) say they are at least somewhat worried about the possibility of a shooting ever happening at their school,” and another 18% are “very worried.”

Cellphones do have a place in AHS' current safety procedure, ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, and Evacuate). A stark example of this lies in Waltham Public Schools' ALICE training video, which AHS students watched earlier this year. Students are instructed to “inform” emergency services and peers during an emergency—this could include calling 911 with updates, messaging information to peers, or posting on social media. A blanket ban on phones could jeopardize the current meaning of the “I” in ALICE.

That being said, some argue that the use of cellular communication services during an emergency could ultimately do more harm than good. School Resource Officer Thomas Paolera expressed hope that there would be no need for the transmission of information through cellphones as updates would be broadcast over the loudspeakers.

“I can't say whether [phones] do more or less harm,” Paolera said. “Everything is situation specific...and in an ideal situation, a phone wouldn't be required to notify students.”

“Emergencies and school shootings are a serious concern for students, parents, and teachers alike,” Finegold said. “While cellphones are often seen as a safety tool, in reality, they can create more risks than benefits during a crisis. If students are distracted by scrambling for their phones, it not only makes it harder for teachers to secure their classrooms, but it can also overwhelm emergency services with excessive calls. By limiting phone use, teachers and first responders are better able to maintain order, communicate effectively, and ensure the safety of everyone involved.”

# All Aboard!

ALL ABOARD / from page 1

—sories—a miniature train conductor, a tunnel, a bridge, and various traffic signs. Most of these trains are products of the Lionel Toy Company, the oldest of which dates back to the 1930s.

In terms of funding, Coombs had written multiple grants to help buy the needed materials. She also partnered with several local institutions, such as the Cormier Youth Center, Andover Center for History and Culture, Andover Preservation Commission, and the Memorial Hall Library.

“It's a really great community outreach piece,” said Strong. “We work better when we collaborate with one another.”

According to Coombs, all communities involved were incredibly enthusiastic to take part in something beyond the scope of what they usually get to do. This project created the perfect opportunity for them to connect, collaborate, and showcase the unique strengths their respective disciplines bring to the table.

“[These communities] all have superpowers,” Coombs said. “They really do.”



STAFF PHOTO / Adeline Whitsett  
A depiction of the Beatles' Abbey Road album cover.

# Religious Holiday No-Test Policy Stirs Controversy

By Clara Strong || COPY EDITOR

It's the day before finals. Students around you desperately flip through notes and flashcards as your teacher answers your last-minute questions. But even though you try to concentrate, your mind is elsewhere. In order to be in school that last day and to get final instruction, you had to skip celebrating the Muslim holiday Eid with your family.

This was the situation faced by sophomore Syma Husain last year. Principal Jimmy D'Andrea has attempted to ease the burden of missing school for religious purposes by discouraging tests and major assignments on religious holidays. But is it working?

While this policy may seem intuitive to some students, teachers find it counterproductive. There are only so many days in school for students to learn, and postponing a test can throw off a teacher's plan. Also, if a student isn't missing a test, they're probably missing valuable class learning.

“Students miss school all the time for whatever reason,” said history teacher Fred Hopkins. “We're used to making up tests, and H-Block is perfect for that. It is much more difficult to reconstruct an entire lesson.”

Hopkins also questioned that anyone would ever come into school on a religious holiday just to take a test. “I can't imagine that happens very often,” he said.

However, D'Andrea said otherwise: “I have talked to students that have made the decision to say... I'm gonna come to school on this particular day, even though my family is observing this holiday, because I don't want to have to make up things.” For example, Husain had to skip a religious holiday to attend school.

The no-test policy encourages students' religious

and family practices, but does it actually help with schoolwork? Despite the good intentions behind it, many teachers believe D'Andrea's test policy is worse for student learning. Similar to Hopkins, history teacher Nicholas Rand said that while students feel it is more important to be present for tests, the actual in-person learning is more valuable and less replicable.

However, this sentiment is not as widely reflected in the student body. Husain said she appreciated D'Andrea's efforts as she disliked making up tests more than missed schoolwork. “You have to schedule time to retake [the test] and then you have to focus more on studying again... but then you also have to do your other work for other classes that you missed,” she added.

Some argue that not only is the policy worse for students, but teachers struggle with it as well. As Hopkins said, teachers only have so many school days to get through the curriculum, and even a day of missed instruction can throw off their plan for the year. Rand explained, “When the next thing [a teacher] need[s] to do for their curriculum is to give a quiz, when they have to pause that [for a religious holiday], it can really have a domino effect through the rest of their curriculum.”

So why do we have school on religious holidays, anyway?

According to Lauren Conoscenti, the School Committee Vice Chair, Andover Public Schools used to take Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Good Friday off from school. However, during the 2017-18 school year, a snowstorm causing ten snow days made it necessary to have school on Saturdays in order to meet the required time in school before summer. The School Committee subsequently changed the school schedule, omitting religious holidays to make the school year shorter.

However, in addition to concerns about the schedule, Conoscenti said the change was also made “in recognition of the growing diversity of religious and cultural holidays observed by Andover families.”

“The Committee at that time felt that acknowledging some religious holidays in the school calendar but not others was unfair and inequitable,” she continued. “After all, many people do not celebrate those specific holidays, and lots of people celebrate holidays that didn't give them a day off school.”

“That to me is totally in keeping with the history and the intents of this country,” said Hopkins, “because [the] government is not supposed to interfere with religion, but is also not supposed to promote a religion. So if you pick one holiday and give it off, and not another, then you seem to be promoting [that one].”

However, Husain proposed another idea to make it easier for kids observing religious holidays: “I feel like a half day on those days might be more effective, because then people can go and spend time with their families, but also not miss a ton of stuff.” Since half days count towards the number of required days in school, this would also address concerns about the length of the school calendar.

D'Andrea is introducing many other policies to recognize the diverse population of AHS. “It's not just about tests... You'll notice for major religious holidays, I'll usually ask students from a connected student organization... to make an announcement, just to educate other students,” he said. “For me, it's about how we educate all students here—and staff, for that matter—so we all understand what other members of our community are observing or celebrating.”



# ATHLETICS

## Mornings on Ice

### How Lizzy Doudkin balances two figure skating disciplines alongside school

By Ella Hu || SPORTS EDITOR

At 6 a.m., the rink is completely silent except for the scrapes of blades cutting into the ice. Under the fluorescent lights, sophomore Elizabeth “Lizzy” Doudkin has just started her morning figure skating practice, a routine she has committed to six mornings per week. Alone on the rink, with only her coach calling out instructions, she doesn’t have teammates cheering her on. Despite this, her practice is anything but solitary. Every practice is a reflection of years of competing in figure skating while balancing school work, overcoming injuries, and fulfilling expectations of both freestyle and synchronized skating.

People often think of figure skating as a winter-only sport and are reminded of its existence when public rinks open during the winter. However, for Doudkin, this reality is different. Doudkin, who has been skating since she was 4, practices and competes all year round, training over 20 hours every week.

According to Doudkin, “A lot of people think you’re just twirling on ice, but what a lot of people don’t see is [skaters] landing jumps. You’re smashing on the ice, on average falling 20 times per session.”

Originally, when Doudkin first started skating competitively, she only focused on freestyle skating. However, as she progressed, coaches suggested that synchronized skating would be a better fit for her in the future.

“Freestyle was not the best environment,” Doudkin said. “Because my dad is really tall, I was told that I was going to be too tall for freestyle, so they told me to try synchronized skating.”

This advice, however, did not discourage Doudkin from skating freestyle; ironically, her height has never been an issue for her. Since then, Doudkin has developed a dual focus in both freestyle and synchronized skating, where she appreciates being on a team, something she never had in freestyle skating, where she practiced independently and focused on skating solo.

The intensity Doudkin faced from her many vigorous figure skating practices has come with challenges. In the past year, Doudkin has suffered a stress fracture in her back from overtraining, which forced her to step off the ice for weeks.

“One bone went into the other bone and caused a small crack,” she explained. “The doctor didn’t see it because it was such a small thing, so I’d push myself harder. My whole back would go numb, and there would be sharp pains through my legs. It [would] take me two



COURTESY PHOTO / Lizzy Doudkin  
Lizzy Doudkin performs her routine on ice.

minutes to stand up from a fall. Then I realized it was something serious.”

Recovering from the stress fracture required Doudkin to completely stop training on ice for seven weeks, during which she had to forgo practicing her jumps on ice. After her recovery, Doudkin focused on regaining all of the jumps that she had once built through muscle memory while overcoming the mental barrier of trusting herself to jump again.

“When I got back on the ice, my jumps felt so different—I was like a wrestling star,” said Doudkin. “I was smashing on the ice, and it was really hard mentally to get back to a point where I was really doubting myself.”

While rebuilding the muscle memory lost was especially challenging for Doudkin, who, prior to her injury, was consistently landing double axels, she found that relanding a jump, or simply learning a jump, came down to mental skills, despite the physical skills required.

“It’s all trial and error. You have to basically throw yourself into the air and pray,” Doudkin said. “It can be really hard mentally because your brain thinks if you fall once, you don’t want to fall again. So you need to break that mental block and just go for it.”

This mental aspect in figure skating not only applies to Doudkin when she is landing her jumps, but also during competitions that she attends throughout the year. Usually, when this happens, Doudkin ensures her teachers are aware that she will be gone, so she is able to focus exclusively on her competition rather than academics in the days prior.

“I have to prepare myself mentally to compete, and nerves can affect a lot [of] skating,” Doudkin said. “I don’t think about anything until after the competition, and then after I just need to lock in with [my school] grades.”

Despite her injury, Doudkin still attended the National Qualifying Series (NQS) for figure skating this past summer. While she focuses mostly on freestyle during the summer, she has shifted her focus back to synchronized skating in the winter when the season officially begins.

According to Doudkin, because freestyle skating is an independent sport rather than a team sport, her parents and coaches have been her biggest supporters. She is glad that the transition to synchronized skating season will allow her to compete as part of a team.

“In synchro, you help each other. In freestyle, I get a lot more nervous before competitions because you’re alone in the locker room, tying your skates,” Doudkin said. “In synchronized skating, you’re with the team, you’re playing music, you’re having fun, and you enjoy it more.”

Although AHS doesn’t have a figure skating team, Doudkin expects that this could change as figure skating grows in popularity.

“I have friends in skating [who] go to schools that do have teams, and they go to competitions together although their team is not big,” she said.

Doudkin wishes she could experience the same sense of team closeness and spirit in figure skating through a sports team at AHS.

“I always look at the sports teams here,” she said. “They have all this spirit stuff and dress up some days. I wish figure skaters could also, because it looks like so much fun.”

As the season continues, Doudkin continues training to land her triple jumps while also helping her synchronized team reach the national stage. Between early practices and missed school days, every fall and injury brings Doudkin closer to the skater she is working to become, not defined by scores, but by the confidence and consistency she’s been skating towards since she first stepped on ice.

## Special Education Teacher Runs NYC Marathon

By Samantha Sun || COPY EDITOR

Louise Cummings, a special education teacher at Andover High School, ran her 7th New York City and 30th overall marathon on November 2.

Like every marathon, the NYC marathon was 26.2 miles long. However, what differentiates it is that it’s the largest marathon in the U.S., with around 60,000 participants running each year. Out of over 200,000 applicants, Cummings qualified to run the marathon this year.

To secure a spot, participants must either get admitted through a lottery, raise funds through the marathon’s official charity program, or run either a half-marathon or a full marathon recognized by the New York Road Runners (NYRR) with a certain time standard that differs by age group. Cummings did it in four hours and forty minutes, which is the qualifying time standard for her age group.

“It’s just the way [running] makes me feel...it’s both physical, mental, and emotional, like I always feel better after a run,”

she said, explaining what keeps her motivated to keep her time qualifications.

Cummings recounted the warm weather and her “It’s that New York energy” sweatshirt that made the marathon all the more enjoyable. She hopes to run the New York marathon every year through goal setting and training regularly.

Cummings is also the vice president of the Merrimack Valley Striders, a running club founded in the 1980s with the mission to encourage running for everyone. The Merrimack Valley Striders are known to host the Feaster Five, the biggest road race for running in Andover.

She first joined the club ten years ago. “I run a lot with my son, who has a disability, and I needed people who [were] faster than me to run with him, so that’s why I joined,” she explained.

She also mentioned the positive social impact it’s had on her. “A lot of people have been friends for 40 years... [the] people who founded the club are now in their mid-70s, and they’re still active and doing races,” Cummings said.

She has been running since high school. “I always liked sports, and lots of times [I] did running to get in shape for other sports,” said Cummings.

Her first marathon was the Boston Marathon. She didn’t join because of qualifications, but as a bandit runner. “I was working at the Harvard Business School, and while I was training, [I joined] a bunch of students who jumped in at the end; and just so we’re clear, back in the 80s, they encouraged it,” Cummings said with a laugh, reminiscing back on the memory.

Despite running being a longtime passion, she shared that it isn’t always easy to continue training. “Almost every day, I feel unmotivated, but I always know that I’m going to feel much better when I’m done,” she admitted. She added that her friends and family are all runners, too, and being able to share that with the people around her has heavily influenced her motivation to continue running every morning at 5 a.m.

Looking back, the marathon that

impacted her the most was one that she didn’t participate in, but one she volunteered at. At the 2018 Boston Marathon, it was pouring rain, 30 degrees, with a headwind the whole way. “I was at the finish line, and people were hypothermic,” she recalled. “It just showed me how vulnerable people are when they sign up for these things, and that we all have so much mental toughness.”

She realized that perseverance and overcoming the hurdles in life are akin to running. Cummings noted that even running can be dangerous and that watching people not give up even while suffering, has inspired her.

“I know how many people want to [run marathons], so it’s not lost on me how important just having the opportunity to do this is. I feel so blessed to have the health, physical ability, and the motivation [to run],” she concluded. “I’ll do it as long as I can until I can’t anymore.”

AND OVER ARTS

# Art Without Artists is Not Art

By Anushka Dole || ONLINE EDITOR

Since the beginning of the so-called “AI revolution,” AI-generated art has been marketed as a novelty. From generating selfies with your favorite celebrity to envisioning twists on the Mona Lisa to generating our favorite AI-slop-brainrot memes, most people regard AI art as a party trick—a five-minute gimmick to make something funny and forget about it later.

But ultimately, AI art undercuts the true purpose of making art, because it lacks what makes art made by humans so special to behold: time, emotion, and what can only be described as a human touch. AI-generated art is harming artists, distorting creative industries, and degrading our collective cultural standards for what truly constitutes “art.”

One of the most disturbing realities of AI art is how it is made: by scraping millions of online artworks without permission. Andover High School senior and visual artist Junyi Ye is passionate about the effects that AI art has had on the art community, which range from plagiarism and theft to the slow erosion of integrity from many artists’ work.

“Each brushstroke on each piece of AI art is taken from a human, man-made art. That’s how it...[copies] different styles...and different techniques,” she said. “It devalues art... you don’t get any effort or soul...it’s a disrespect to [artists].”

This clear violation of intellectual property has resulted in a mass exodus of artists from widely popular art platforms. On the platforms that Ye most often browsed, including Lofter, Twitter and Pixiv, she described artists deleting their posts or stating that they will be discontinuing their posts on the platform because of the fact

that the platforms have stated that they will use the art to train their AI models.

“There was a huge movement on [Lofter] where people would change their profile picture to an anti-AI symbol, an X through the word ‘AI,’” she said. The artists’ protest is a reminder that art being used to train AI, without the artists’ consent, is blatant theft of their work. Copyright exists for a reason; plagiarism in any academic or professional capacity is frowned upon, and the consequences once caught are often dire—so why don’t we hold AI to the same standards?

Moreover, much of AI-generated art may look polished, but it often carries a plastic quality. There’s just something missing. There are millions of tiny details that artists may incorporate into their work: a special watermark, an easter egg, a unique texture, or even a distinctive coloring pattern. When these works are fed into AI models, one can picture a giant machine grinding together each painstakingly created work into a heterogeneous pulp, to ultimately regurgitate a technically correct, but grossly mishmashed conglomerate of styles, devoid of the fragile spirit that brought that work to life.

For example, if an AI model such as DALL-E or MidJourney were to generate a human face, more than likely, a person viewing would mentally recognize that it was a human, but somehow the image would elicit an eerie, almost uncanny feeling in viewers. This effect has been described as the uncanny valley, and as AI art oversaturates social media, people are getting better at noticing this.

“Most AI art has a very specific art style...usually you can tell even by the way it’s drawn,” Ye said. “It’s usually a very specific way: [of a portrait] shoulders and bust up, doesn’t have a center point, or the background’s messy.”

This hollowness is gradually creeping into the performing arts as well; specifically, AI has made its foray into music. Anyone who spends at least an hour each day scrolling through social media of choice is aware of the flood of AI songs that have taken the place of human-made meme songs that used to dominate the culture. While AI meme songs may be funny at first, there’s nothing that exists once the novelty wears off.

Before, meme songs such as “Never Gonna Give You Up” and even the “Duck Song” worked as memes because they existed as songs in their own right: having structure and meaning beyond the joke. Now, tracks like “Didi Blud on a Calculator” and “We are Charlie Kirk” have been created expressly as memes designed to go viral, but they have no true meaning under the surface. Even meme-making is an art in its own way: it requires creativity and out-of-the-box thinking, taking some existing piece of media and extracting a different meaning or joke from it. But now, since all the meme songs are slowly being taken over by AI, meme culture is losing its heart. AI-produced brainrot has now become the de facto recommended content for many.

“It feels like it’s just pulling on small parts of different pop songs, and it doesn’t have meaning or intent. Then you also have songs like the ‘Tung Tung Sahur’ brainrot song, which are obviously satirical, and don’t hold meaning,” said senior Meredith Cummings, concertmaster of the AHS Orchestra.

At this point, AI music is simply not advanced enough to be a realistic alternative to human music, but the industry is already treating it as if it is. Recently, Xania Monet, an entirely AI-generated artist, charted on the Billboard and

signed a multimillion-dollar record deal. Cummings did not have a very high opinion of her music.

“It’s such a basic chord progression and there’s no nuance to it. The melody is so flat. Classical composers like Bach and like Mozart could do better even at nine years old,” Cummings said.

The quality of the music is definitely subpar, but even worse is the fact that Monet was signed. The record deal is an indication that companies are willing to invest in AI creators rather than spending time building a relationship and helping to hone the craft of a real musician.

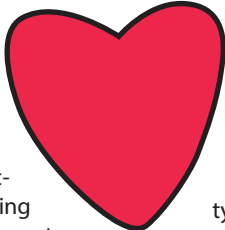
Moreover, if musicians begin to rely on AI-generated content, it can lead to the decline of composing and songwriting skills.

“If no one is generating their own [musical] ideas, they’re never going to learn the problem-solving skills that go behind it,” Cummings said.

What all this means for musicians going forward is unclear, but it’s hard to imagine a positive result; the rise of “AI musicians” just feels like another way for record companies to exploit musicians and a pathway for the erosion of the skills that define the art form.

While AI has not had the best influence thus far in art and music, there’s no question that it plays an integral role in the future of creative work. According to research from finance company Goldman Sachs, AI-generated art has the potential to automate many tasks that are carried out by professional designers. For example, AI art could be good practice material for beginning artists, providing good technical information on proportions and scale. But ultimately, the backbone of art is the human aspect of its creation.

“AI could be the building blocks, as in the hardware,” Ye said. “But the soul of the art has to be human.”



# 1776 Shows Glimpse Into Past, Reminds Us of Present

By Janaesa Macasaet || ARTS EDITOR

The curtain rises as a warm glow shines on the Second Continental Congress, crouched over on their desks, bickering over the Declaration of Independence—the document that kick-started our nation. With frustration in their eyes, the men, despite their white powdered wigs, thick British accents, and dangling epaulets, portray a political tension that feels all too familiar today.

we know them, were fraught with civil rights, women’s rights, and anti-war movements—a decade defined by protests and division.

“Watching a group of people who disagree on certain things and agree on other things, come to consensus, make compromises so that they can move forward...is a really valuable thing for us to see today,” Choquette said.

As John Adams, the protagonist (played in the AHS production by senior Jamie Finckler), attempts to convince

sound, the set design—take priority, an equal amount of reflection on the parallels between 1776 and today was made.

“Today, our two political parties are constantly bringing on conflict between each other and can never quite agree unanimously on most issues,” said sophomore and Tech Crew member Simone Sandler. “It makes me think about how history really does repeat itself at times, or that sometimes things never really do change.”

Echoing this idea, Joe Desmarais, playing the role of Benjamin Franklin, said, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Independence may have been the Founding Fathers’ greatest issue, but their intense arguments depict the same modern American political tension of today.

While 1776 grapples with themes of democracy and compromise, the musical also highlights who held power during the founding of the nation. There is little acknowledgement of the voices of ordinary people, but supporting roles offer subtle commentary on who exactly gets a say in government. Shapira believes that her role as McNair, a working-class man, adds this layer of depth to the musical.

“I feel like [McNair] represents the people,” Shapira said. “A lot of the conversations in this play are these very wealthy and high-status men talking about what the people want and...he is the people. It’s really interesting to portray that.”

Like many works of art, 1776 is not without controversy. The Founding Fathers cannot be fully represented in the play without the inclusion of the discussion of sensitive topics such as slavery—the main issue. To handle these complexities, each cast member and especially Choquette, devoted time to reading and researching real history.

Junior Nina Bond, who played Martha Jefferson, said that “knowing the backstories of your characters really helps to embody the role that you are playing.”

This commitment to research was shared across the cast. Sophomore Romy Obbard, who played Abigail Adams, said that she “took out three biographies from the library, one of which was a collection of letters exchanged between [Abigail Adams] and John [Adams], and [she] communicated with [her] middle school history teacher about Abigail’s views on slavery and race.”

While background reading and research were essential for context, Desmarais said, “The main understanding comes when we’re running the rehearsals and speaking as these characters and [having] these debates.”

History involves wrongdoings, but without this recognition, there is no way to avoid repeating them.

“At the heart of every part of the debate, every different issue that’s talked upon is an issue...[in] our country and parts of our institutions that are very much still around today,” said Desmarais. “And obviously slavery isn’t still around, but the concept of racial divisions still are.”

The questions raised in 1776 are more urgent to answer now in 2025 than ever. Who gets a voice? What can keep a country in order, and what holds it together? For Choquette, 1776 was the perfect way to spark these conversations.

“Humans have always used...live performances and storytelling to explore things that aren’t always easy to discuss or talk about,” said Choquette. “When we can do that and tell a story that fosters discussion and brings to light certain issues, I think that’s incredibly valuable.”



STAFF PHOTO / Tomas Kruecker-Green

Each year, Susan Choquette, the Director of Theatre Arts, chooses stories with relevance in mind. With America’s 250th anniversary coming next year, 1776 was a top choice for this year’s fall musical. Before the renowned Hamilton, there was 1776, its influential predecessor.

“[At] this moment in history right now, it seemed like a good topic to explore—the members of the Continental Congress...[struggling] with the idea of independence,” Choquette said. “They can’t agree, they have to compromise, and we see that...in Congress today.”

1776 first premiered on Broadway in 1969. Even then, audiences noted its political relevance. The 1960s, as

the other Continental Congress members to declare independence, the audience is met with conflict on every issue. Whether or not taxation was enough of a reason to separate themselves, if slavery should be omitted, and if it was even safe enough to declare independence were all raised questions.

The cast was not oblivious to the similar tensions found in 2025 and 1776. Cast as Andrew McNair, the congressional custodian, junior Gal Shapira said, “Even in the founding of the nation... people had very different opinions from each other, but they were able to...come together for a joint cause at the end.”

Even behind the curtains, where the technical aspects—the lighting, the

# BIOBUILDERS *BIO TREKS*

THE PEER REVIEWED HIGH SCHOOL SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY JOURNAL

## Trial, Error, Repeat

By Arshiaa Prem || STAFF WRITER

The sharp scent of chemicals mixed with the hum of focused chatter in the lab as students huddled around microscopes, their hands steady but eyes wide with anticipation. “Did it work?” one student asks, leaning over a beaker, her voice tinged with both excitement and uncertainty. In the BioBuilder lab, failure isn’t feared—it’s part of the process. BioBuilder doesn’t give students easy answers. It hands them a question, some tools, and a chance. A chance to design, build, test, fail, and try again. A chance to become scientists long before college. Here, students at the Andover High School chapter of BioBuilder are learning not just how to build with biology, but how to think like innovators, creating real-world biotechnologies that could one day change the way we live.

BioBuilder is an organization founded at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2011, and is a national nonprofit that combines life sciences and engineering education. Through hands-on laboratory experiences and design-based challenges, BioBuilder grants students access to the tools and mindset needed to “build with biology, and invent biotechnologies that can make the world better,” according to the official BioBuilder website.

The AHS chapter of the BioBuilder Club has operated since 2016. Groups of one to six students team up with a practicing bioengineer mentor, select a problem to tackle, and then design experiments using synthetic biology techniques, such as creating DNA molecules from scratch, editing genes, and much more. What really sets BioBuilder apart from other clubs is that the process is led by students themselves.

As co-leader, Senior Sanjith Kalpat explained, “BioBuilder Club, to someone who is interested, is a direct involvement in the field of synthetic biology.

It’s a really cool way to get hands-on experience in the scientific method by researching a topic you are interested in within the fields of medicine, environmental sustainability, agriculture, food, etc.”

Kalpat described what makes the club unique among student organizations: “I think BioBuilder is unique in the sense that the club is what you make of it. It’s super independent-focused and team-focused at the same time, and you are starting an idea from scratch. You have to build something yourself, of course; there is help readily available, but that level of direct involvement and self-motivation and ownership is something that made it totally different from any of the other clubs I have seen.”

One recent project—studying the effect of enzymes on plastic degradation (a continuation of prior work done by AHS alumni)—demonstrates just that. Some teams never go beyond brainstorming; Kalpat’s team, however, was committed to extra lab sessions and repeated revisions. Eventually, they collected meaningful data and refined their experimental methods.

If there’s one lesson BioBuilder seems to hammer home, it’s this: much of science is failure. For every breakthrough, there are hours of trial and error.

“Most of the process is failing, believe it or not,” Kalpat admitted. “Most of the project is just troubleshooting the tiny things that go wrong...I found this part to be very rewarding as part of the whole experience, although frustrating most of the time.”

Co-leader Siri Jayaprakash echoed this sentiment. “You have to build something yourself...you learn a lot of patience,” she said.

That persistence, both say, reshaped how they view science. What once felt abstract in biology class became real. It was something students

could mold with their own hands.

Kalpat reflected on his time at BioBuilder Club. “Before, I saw the topics I learned in my Biology classes as abstract and kind of intangible. But actually cultivating and developing a project made me realize the iterative process... This club pushed me to want to do more research in college.”

Some of Jayaprakash’s favorite memories are moments when the work felt real. Last year, one team visited a scanning-electron microscope at UMass Lowell that let them see their samples up close. Another highlight was attending the club’s Final Assembly in Cambridge, which was followed by a celebratory boba outing with the advisor of the club, Dr. Lindsey L’Ecuyer.

These experiences, combined with the technical work, reflect the broader mission of BioBuilder—to give students access to authentic lab work, mentorship, and a community of peers around the world.

BioBuilder’s impact stretches far beyond any single research project. According to their website, more than 87,000 students and teachers across 50 U.S. states and 80 countries have engaged with BioBuilder programs since 2011.

For students at AHS, BioBuilder offers a rare opportunity, which is to treat high school like a real lab—to question, to tinker, to fail, and to rebuild. That sort of education cultivates more than just scientific knowledge.

Kalpat’s hope for the club’s future captures this vision.

“I hope that BioBuilderClub can continue to live on as a successful group at the school, with many groups going above and beyond with their own projects,” emphasized Kapat. “I hope that this club continues to have lots of people participating from all grades so it can continue even further.”

## Advisor

By Kaveri Dole || SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR

Dr. Lindsey L’Ecuyer, a biology teacher and the faculty advisor for the BioBuilder club at Andover High School, brings a love for teaching as well as extensive experience.

L’Ecuyer’s achievements include holding a doctorate in education (Ed.D.) in STEM leadership, having written a two-hundred-plus-page dissertation, and winning awards like the 2021 Ron Mardigian Biotechnology Award and the National Association of Biology Teachers. This is awarded to teachers who incorporate creativity into the classroom.

Her Ed.D. focused on examining equity problems in schools, including topics such as whether student needs were being met in science classes and how to make improvements

Besides teaching, she previously considered getting a Ph.D in science and worked in an immunology lab at Massachusetts General Hospital studying the Ebola virus.

Guiding high school students with scientific research, she often refers to what she calls the ultimate science mindset: “To be successful in science, we have to be momentarily okay with not knowing where this is going,” she said, embracing failing forward.



STAFF PHOTO / Adeline Whitsett

## Student Researchers Explore Faster Depression Treatment through Neuroplasticity

By Kaveri Dole || SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR

Andover High School seniors Miley Arora and Serena Ma placed second in a national neuroscience competition, investigating whether boosting neuroplasticity could help patients with depression feel the effects of antidepressants faster.

Their project was published in the October 2025 issue of BioTReks, the high school synthetic biology scientific journal, where students in the BioBuilder club aspire for publication. They also submitted their project to the Young Investigators Research Competition, a neuroscience high school research competition, where they won second place in September 2025.

Their research focused on selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), which, according to the National Library of Medicine, are one of the most widely prescribed treatments for depression. They investigated why it takes so long—up to six weeks—before the effects of SSRIs are felt by patients with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD).

To achieve this, they looked into brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a gene associated with neural growth in the brain and synaptic remodeling (the process where connections between brain neurons change). They aimed to determine whether increasing BDNF production could help the brain adapt faster and shorten the delay in treatment response.

“We want to reduce the delay that’s so discouraging for people starting antidepressants,” Arora said. “If the neuroplasticity improves faster, treatment could become more reliable.” Neuroplasticity is the brain’s ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections in response to learning, experience, or injury.

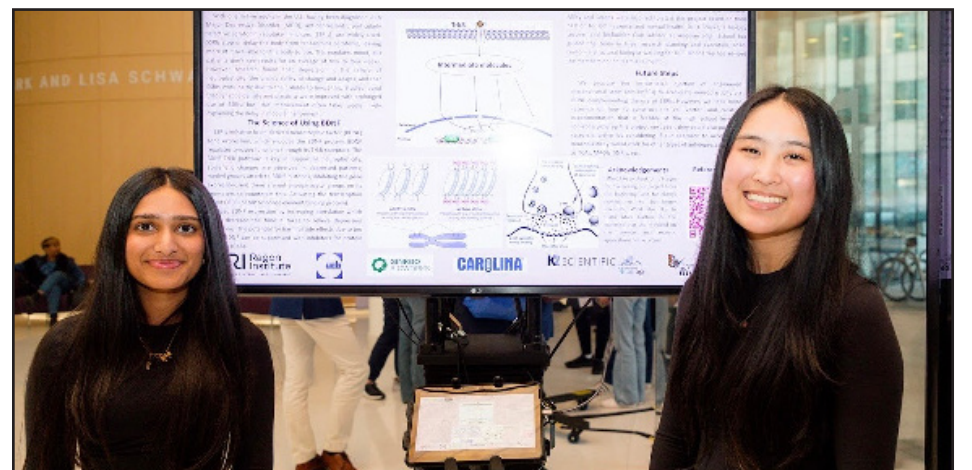
In their paper, they explained that SSRIs increase levels of serotonin—a neurotransmitter that acts as a hormone to carry signals between nerve cells in the brain and body—within days. This should theoretically help MDD patients, which is why the prescription is so popular.

To address this, the pair proposed enhancing BDNF expression using engi-

neered stem cells, which would contain the BDNF protein to be delivered to the brain through injection. They used stem cells because the BDNF itself cannot cross the blood-brain barrier, but stem cells can go into damaged tissue and release the BDNF directly where it is needed.

This solution would theoretically al-

low patients to experience the effects of SSRIs sooner by accelerating the neural changes that typically take weeks. “The reason why we want to improve neuroplasticity is not to just treat it and BDNF on its own, but actually to complement the SSRI antidepressants,” Ma said.



COURTESY PHOTO / Miley Arora

Seniors Miley Arora and Serena Ma posing with their poster at the BioBuilders General Assembly Conference in March 2025.