

# SUPERINTENDENT'S BRIEF

Together, We are the Champions for Children in Poughkeepsie City School District

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## Alumni inspire Pioneers to achieve

Jiahni Higgs talked about the importance of managing priorities and time in college. It's a message that surely isn't new to most high school students. It was the messenger – a 2024 Poughkeepsie High School graduate who is nearing the end of their first year in college – that made an impact on 11th grade student Camiah McCallum.

A group of seven Poughkeepsie alums, Higgs included, returned to the school March 20 to speak with current students on what their college experience has been like. "They were close in age to us and more relatable," McCallum said. "They were down to Earth and I felt comfortable asking them questions."

Kelly Semexant, the district's college readiness and workforce education counselor, has organized the gathering of alumni and current students each of the last four years. While it normally takes the form of a panel discussion in an auditorium setting, construction forced a change in the format and location which, Semexant said, turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Each graduate was seated at a table in the cafeteria and groups of 10 students rotated through every 5-7 minutes for group discussions. "This allowed for more personal, honest conversations between students and alumni," Semexant said. "The response from everyone was overwhelmingly positive." Semexant, who organizes a myriad of college and career exposure events each year including college fairs, college representative visits, student campus visits and panel discussions, called it "truly one of the most meaningful events we've had this year."

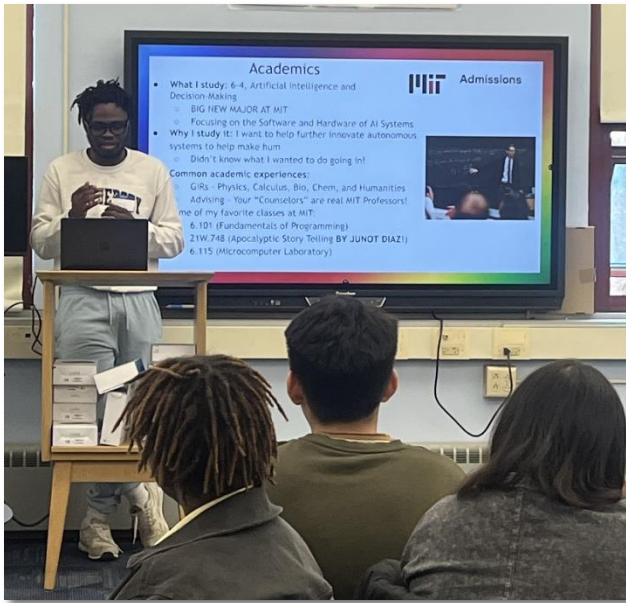
The list of participating alumni included Higgs (Class of 2024, now attending SUNY New Paltz and majoring in Organizational Communication), Jazylo Alexis-Taylor (2024, Pace University, Business Management), Aida Hernandez (2023, Dutchess Community College, Early Childhood Education), Marell Lewis (2024, SUNY Albany, Theater), Kayla Hawkins (2022, Vassar College, Africana Studies and Sociology), Amira Ibrahim (2022, Yale University, Political Science), and Saanie Moodie (2022, SUNY Albany, Psychology).

The alumni spoke with students about a wide range of topics, including adjusting to college schedules, managing roommates, navigating the college application process and the importance of scholarships. Several stressed to students that they should apply for every scholarship shared by the school, saying, "If Ms. Semexant sends it, apply! It's worth it."

After the panel, the alumni and invited district leaders engaged in discussion over lunch in which the graduates reflected on how their time at the high school helped shape their college journey. They also



**Students rotated to stations talking to different alumni in a new format for the annual event that led to more engaging discussions.**



**Elijah Johnson discussed his experience at MIT with students Wednesday.**

pointed out several meaningful changes they noticed since graduating, including the use of Yondr pouches, the updated cafeteria, and the increased number of dual-enrollment Dutchess Community College courses available to students. Many shared how proud they felt to see their school continuing to grow and evolve.

### Former valedictorian returns

On Wednesday another alum returned to the school, Class of 2022 Valedictorian Elijah Johnson, who now attends the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or MIT, majoring in Artificial Intelligence and Decision Making. Johnson met with a group of juniors enrolled in Precalculus and sophomores in Algebra 2; students who are ahead in math and science and are considering futures in STEM fields and/or who may be interested in the [QuestBridge National College Match scholarship](#) process. It was a unique and inspiring opportunity for them to connect directly with someone who once sat in their very seats.

Raised in a low-income household and having moved more than 10 times before enrolling at Poughkeepsie High School, Johnson shared his story of perseverance. He earned a full scholarship to MIT through QuestBridge, a national nonprofit organization that connects high-achieving, low-income students with full scholarships to the nation's top colleges and universities. Students were highly engaged throughout the session, asking thoughtful questions about Johnson's journey, the college application process, the QuestBridge experience, his coursework at MIT, and his time at Poughkeepsie.

At MIT, Johnson is focusing on hardware and software of AI systems, with a goal of helping to innovate autonomous technologies that serve society.

His message to the students was clear and powerful: "You are all brilliant and can do whatever you'd like. There are barriers, but you can overcome anything."

## Add your voice to survey on district effectiveness, concerns

Parents, students and staff are asked to participate in the upcoming 2024-2025 Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness, or DTSDE, survey, which will begin April 1.

This key New York State Education Department tool is specifically designed to support ongoing effectiveness in school districts. Each year, the Poughkeepsie City School District reaches out to parents, students and staff requesting input through the survey. The information gleaned is a critical tool designed to improve district operations and planning, as it assists the district in developing a deeper understanding of stakeholder concerns, challenges and areas of satisfaction.

Annually, results are posted of both districtwide and school-specific results. See [prior year survey results on this page](#), part of the Department of Data, Assessment and Accountability area of the district website.

Survey results are acted upon immediately by district administration. Our goal is to further increase and refine our support of student success through the feedback received.

Last year, parents and staff shared concerns regarding social emotional learning and parent and community engagement. Student responses revealed a strong sense of teacher appreciation and support on both the elementary and secondary levels. At the same time, students shared similar concerns regarding







systems and organization, social emotional learning, and parent and community engagement. This input cemented these as areas in need of immediate attention.

Development and planning initiated promptly upon receipt of results. For example:

- Additional support has been provided through annual and ongoing professional development that began in summer 2024, through the district administrative training retreats as well as school-based coaching through faculty meetings, early release days and Superintendent Conference days.
- Resource support and access have increased through tools supportive of social-emotional learning and engagement.
- Active development of parental engagement through district PTAs.
- A broad selection of enrichment opportunities designed to foster a stronger sense of belonging and a shared appreciation of our learning community.

For example, Friday Night Lights returns tonight, further extending engagement opportunities for our learning community. Simultaneously, the district has increased our targeted focus on cleanliness and the development of welcoming learning environments.

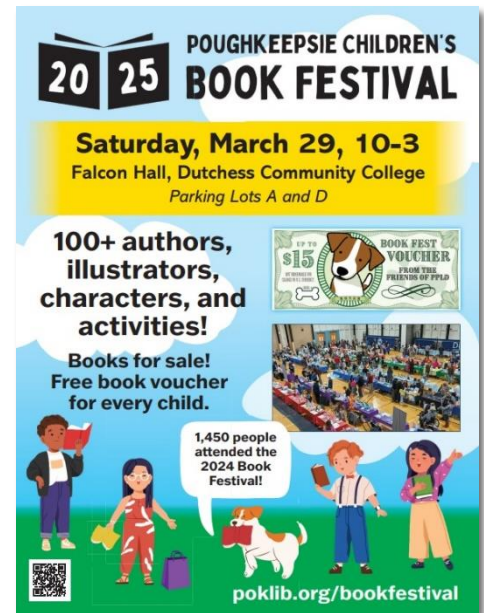
Your input matters. It is valued and acted upon as it will let us know what is working and what isn't. Make sure to participate in the upcoming Poughkeepsie School District DTSDE survey when the link arrives in your mailbox or through the district's posted link. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

## Children's Book Festival Saturday

The Poughkeepsie Public Library District's annual Children's Book Festival is this Saturday. It's an opportunity not only to encourage literacy and meet professionals in the field, but also to pose for photos with colorful characters and leave with a free book.

The festival is scheduled for 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Dutchess Community College's Falcon Hall. No registration is required for the free event. Upon entry, all attendees ages 17 and younger will receive a voucher for one free book costing \$15 or less for use at the event, courtesy of the Friends of the Poughkeepsie Public Library District. Books will, of course, be available for purchase, as well.

More than 110 authors and illustrators are scheduled to attend, including "Biscuit" illustrator Pat Schories, "Bad Kitty" creator Nick Bruel and young adult authors Laura Brown and Erica George. Several costumed characters will also be available for pictures and hands-on activities are planned. Visit [poklib.org/bookfestival](http://poklib.org/bookfestival) for more information.



## Other newsletters to keep you informed:

Poughkeepsie City School District publishes a variety of newsletters throughout the year. Here are the available newsletters: [Curriculum & Instruction Weekly](#), March 28, 2025; [Multilingual Learner](#), March 28, 2025; [College Readiness and Workforce Education](#), March 2025.

## Upcoming events

- **March 28:** [Friday Night Lights first session](#): 4 p.m., preceded by dinner offered at 3:30 p.m., at Poughkeepsie Middle School, 55 College Ave.
- **March 28:** [Building a Pathway to Homeownership](#) Junior Homebuying U first class: 5:30 p.m. at Poughkeepsie Middle School, 55 College Ave.
- **March 29:** [Elementary Reconfiguration Informational Session](#): 10-11:30 a.m. at Krieger Elementary School, 265 Hooker Ave.
- **April 2:** Professional Development Day (early release for all students)
- **April 2:** Board of Education Meeting: 6:30 p.m. at the Jane Bolin Administration Building, 18 S. Perry St.

**Together, We are Champions for Children in Poughkeepsie City School District**  
[www.poughkeepsieschools.org](http://www.poughkeepsieschools.org)