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Photo courtesy Duval County School Board
Melody Bolduc

Bolduc fights for fair school funding

Tracy McCormick-Dishman
editor@floridanewslines.com

As students prepare to return to school next month, Duval County School Board member Melody Bolduc is tackling two critical issues affecting Mandarin families: ensuring equitable funding for local schools and improving pedestrian safety around campuses.

Bolduc, who represents District 7, has been working to change how the district distributes federal Title I funds, arguing that Mandarin schools are being shortchanged despite having students who qualify for assistance.

Bolduc cont. on pg. 6

Team Duval celebrates historic A rating

Tracy McCormick-Dishman
editor@floridanewslines.com

Principal Sara Bravo has spent 26 years in Duval County Schools, and she's never been more proud of what the district has accomplished. For the first time in its history, Duval County has earned an A rating, and Mandarin High School played a significant role in that achievement.

"To get an A rating as a district, it's such pride because Duval County has so many wonderful things going on in every school," said Bravo, who is entering her 14th year as a principal and her third year leading Mandarin High. "Like every single corner of the district has amazing teachers and amazing programs and amazing communities."



Photo courtesy Mandarin High School
Sara Bravo

The achievement feels particularly meaningful to Bravo because of her diverse experience across the district. Before arriving at Mandarin, she served

as principal at Inglewood Middle School for five years, a Title I school with more than 500 ESOL students that earned a B rating for the first time in years.

"I was in those halls. I was part of that world. And I know how hard they work to get there," she said. "So it's exciting to see all of the work come to fruition around me."

But Bravo is quick to point out that this success didn't happen overnight. When she arrived at Mandarin three years ago, the school had a B rating, and she was tasked with getting it back to an A.

"It wasn't an immediate change a few

Team cont. on pg. 2

Building community at Mandarin High

By Batson-Cook Construction

When we first arrived at Mandarin High School in May 2024, we came with a clear mission: to renovate and expand a campus that had served its community for over three decades. What we didn't expect was how deeply we'd become part of that community ourselves.

Mandarin High, which opened in 1990, is the third-largest high school in Duval County, serving more than 2,300 students. As part of Duval County Public Schools' (DCPS) Bold Plan—funded by the half-penny sales tax approved by voters in 2020—the school was slated for a major transformation. The project was ambitious, and the timeline was tight.

The scope of work was extensive: A new 22,000 square foot expansion along with addressing deferred maintenance items spread throughout the campus. As part of the Deferred Maintenance initiative, we renovated restrooms to meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards, upgraded dressing rooms in

the auditorium, replaced aging heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems in classrooms, modernized electrical infrastructure, addressed drainage is-

sues at the softball field, and installed a new Bi-Directional Amplifier/radio signal system to bring the campus up to



Photos courtesy Batson-Cook Construction
Aerial photo of the new addition to Mandarin High School


Building cont. on pg. 6




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Team cont. from pg. 1

things, be strategic, do the chess game, play the math, and get the A," she explained. "It was more of a, what do we need to put in place for sustainable growth?"

That sustainable approach is paying dividends. Mandarin High is now the highest-performing total point school among all non-magnet high schools in the district, and the school boasts a 93% acceleration rate, meaning 93% of graduating seniors earn one or more college credits or industry certifications.

This year brings additional excitement with the opening of Mandarin's new wing, which houses the culinary and medical academies. The ribbon-cutting ceremony is scheduled for Aug. 28 at 11 a.m., with Superintendent Christopher Bernier attending.

"Being able to sort of open the doors with a new facility is really exciting," Bravo said, noting the relief of finally moving beyond portable classrooms to provide students with "beautiful, safe, comfortable spaces."

The new facilities support Bravo's vi-

sion for high school: giving students options to explore their interests and potential career paths. From medical academies to culinary programs, from dual enrollment classes to Advanced Placement courses, Mandarin offers pathways for every type of learner.

"For them to have options, for them to say, I could do a medical career. I could be interested in culinary. I could learn entrepreneurial business work," she said. "That's what high school is about. Giving them options."

Despite the success, Bravo refuses to become complacent. This year's theme is "In Pursuit of Progress," reflecting her belief that there's always room to grow.

"The worst mistake in my opinion that a leader can make is to become complacent and comfortable," she said. "There's always room to grow. There's always ways to reinvent and do new and exciting things."

As students return to campus, they'll find a principal who celebrates achievements while constantly pushing for more — a philosophy that helped earn Duval County its historic A rating and promises to keep Mandarin High moving forward.

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BFF

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Favorite Food:

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Favorite Friend:

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Tech Guide
in this issue!
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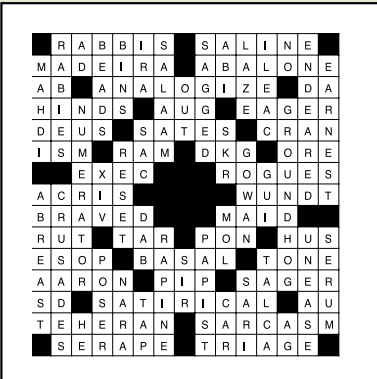
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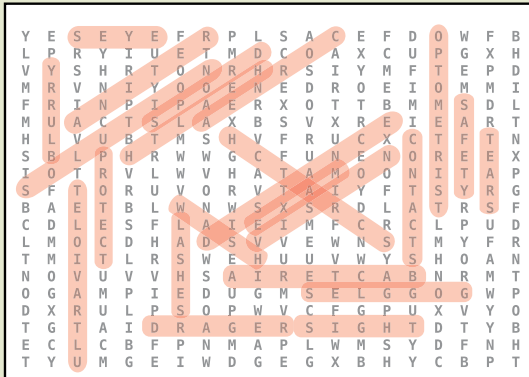
Last month's Mystery Photo was Greenland Pines Elementary School.



Answers
to our
Puzzles
PG 8



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August

Community Calendar

What's Happening in Mandarin

To submit items for the Community Calendar, email editor@floridanewsline.com.

Aug. 2
Walter Jones Historical Park buildings

Walter Jones Historical Park buildings, including the 1898 St. Joseph's Mission Schoolhouse for African American Children, the 1875 Webb Jones Farmhouse, the 1876 Barn, and the Losco Winery, are open the first Saturday of each month (this month, Aug. 2) from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. The Historic Mandarin Store & Post Office, located at 12471 Mandarin Road, will also be open. Museum volunteers will be inside each building for guided tours. Admission is free; Donations help support the museum's programming and operations. Visit www.mandarinmuseum.org or call (904) 268-0784 for more information.

Aug. 2
Meet the Maple Leaf Divers

Meet the Maple Leaf Divers at the Mandarin Museum, 11964 Mandarin Road, from 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. on the first Saturday of each month (this month, Aug. 2). This is an informal, conversational-style event; drop in anytime within the two hours to chat with Dr. Keith Holland and his team and view the museum's expanded Maple Leaf exhibit. Admission to Meet the Maple Leaf Divers and Mandarin Museum is free. Donations help support the museum's programming and operations. For more information, visit www.mandarinmuseum.org or call (904) 268-0784.

Aug. 5
Honeybee Quilters Guild meeting

Honeybee Quilters Guild will meet on Tuesday, Aug. 5 at 6:30 p.m. at Mandarin Presbyterian Church on the Loretto Road Campus in the Kids Space at 2501 Loretto Road. New members/guests

welcome. Visit honeybeequilters.org for more information.

Aug. 8
National Pickleball Day

Celebrate National Pickleball Day by playing America's fastest-growing sport at local courts in Mandarin. Free courts are available at Mandarin Park (14780 Mandarin Rd) with permanent nets, and LifePoint Christian Fellowship (14748 Mandarin Rd) offers two courts with non-permanent nets. Mandarin United Methodist Church (11270 San Jose Blvd) has two indoor courts available for a one-time fee, call (904) 268-5549. Pickleball combines elements of tennis, badminton and ping-pong for players of all ages and skill levels.

Today - Aug. 9
RadiFi Credit Union Back-to-School Supply Drive

RadiFi Credit Union is collecting school supplies for neighborhood schools during its Back-to-School Supply Drive. The community can donate supplies at any credit union branch through Aug. 9. The drive coincides with Florida's sales tax holiday in August. For more information or branch locations, contact RadiFi Credit Union.

Aug. 10
Mandarin Parkinson's Support Group meeting

Mandarin Parkinson's Support Group meets at Church of Eleven22, 4911 Losco Road, on the second Sunday of each month (this month, Aug. 10) from 2 p.m. – 4 p.m. Contact group leader Katheryn Donaldson at serving4_him@yahoo.com or (904) 710-1449 for more information.

Aug. 12
Acoustic Jam Session

Acoustic Jam Session (second Tuesday) is held at 7 p.m. in the Kids' Building of Trinity Mandarin, 2955 Orange Picker

Road. This jam is open to everyone and all levels of ability are welcome. Come to play with the group or just sit back and enjoy the music. For more information, contact Burt Coulliette at (904) 302-0423.

Aug. 14
Mandarin American Legion Post 372 meeting

Mandarin American Legion Post 372 general meeting will be held on Aug. 14 at 7 p.m. at Williams Family YMCA 10415 San Jose Blvd., on the second floor. Visit <https://alpost372fl.org/> for more information.

Aug. 18
All Star Quilters Guild meeting

The All Star Quilters Guild will meet at 9:30 a.m. for socializing prior to the 10 a.m. meeting on Monday, Aug. 18 at First Christian Church, 11924 San Jose Blvd. "Show and Tell" is always a feature. Guests are welcome. Visit www.allstarquilters.org for more information.

Aug. 28
Mandarin Republican Club meeting

Mandarin Republican Club will meet on Thursday, Aug. 28 at St. Mary's Seafood, 11290 Old St. Augustine Road. Social time begins at 6 p.m. and the meeting starts at 6:30 p.m. First time visitors are welcome.

Shuffleboard

Shuffleboard is played on Tuesdays at 10:30 a.m. at Tommy Hazouri Park (formerly Mandarin Park). The courts are at the park entrance next to the tennis courts. Try to get there a few minutes early for court assignments. Beginners are welcome. Just show up (a few minutes before playing time), unless it rains.

Parkinson's Exercise Group

Parkinson's Exercise Group meets every Thursday from 6 p.m. – 7 p.m.

at 4911 Losco Road. People of all ages and stages of Parkinson's as well as spouses and caregivers are welcome to attend these free classes. Contact group leader Katheryn Donaldson at serving4_him@yahoo.com or (904) 710-1449 for more information.

Toast of Jax Toastmasters

Toast of Jax Toastmasters meets every Saturday, except on holiday weekends, at 8:30 a.m. at Baha'i Community Center, 5034 Greenland Road. Guests are welcome. The meetings can also be attended online at <https://toastofjax.toastmastersclubs.org/>.

MPC MomCo

MPC MomCo meets every other Tuesday from 9:45 a.m. – 11:45 a.m. on the Mandarin Presbyterian Church campus. MPC MomCo is a vibrant fellowship of moms who support each other in motherhood and grow together in faith. Register at mandarinpres.com/momco; space is limited. Email momco@mandarinpres.com for more information.

Acoustic Jam Session

Acoustic Jam Session is held on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. in the Kids' Building of Trinity Mandarin, located at 2955 Orange Picker Road. This jam is open to everyone and all levels of ability are welcome. Come to play with the group or just sit back and enjoy the music. For more information, contact Burt Coulliette at (904) 302-0423.

Playing HOOKie

Playing HOOKie, a group for those who enjoy knitting, crocheting and loom-ing (with all items donated to charity) meets every Wednesday from 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. at Maple Street Biscuit Company, 1627 Race Track Road in St. Johns. Visit the group's Facebook page (Playing HOOKie) or email playinghookie2022@gmail.com for more information.

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Q&A with Jacksonville City Council Member Michael Boylan, District 6

Q. What major funding initiatives were approved at the recent city council meeting?

A. The council approved the appropriation of \$9.5 million for construction of a new fire station on Old St. Augustine Road. These are actually crossover funds from savings on some other construction projects. Response times in our area have not been to our liking, and the demand has compromised response times at the three existing stations serving District 6. While it will be a year or two before we see the completed station, this appropriation is the first step in improving emergency response times for the Mandarin area.

Q. What is the community engagement initiative you're working on?

A. I have \$150,000 appropriated for creating a Request for Proposals (RFP) to hire consultants who will help us establish what I would characterize as a community engagement group. I'm

looking to create a freestanding entity that helps Mandarin speak with one voice, similar to the Riverside-Avondale Preservation, Springfield Preservation and Restoration, or San Marco Preservation Society. By the time this edition of the Mandarin NewsLine publishes, the RFP should be available through the city's neighborhoods department, and over the next two months we'll be reviewing applications to determine how to move forward.

Q. What is your role on city council committees this year?

A. I will continue to serve on the Neighborhoods and Rules committees. The Neighborhoods Committee is particularly important because we are traditionally the first committee that addresses most major bills coming through council. A lot of the amendments, modifications, and substantive work on bills takes place in the Neighborhoods Committee rather than on the council

floor. While I'm not on the Finance Committee, I'll be paying particular attention during August when there are probably eight to 10 Finance Committee meetings reviewing the mayor's proposed budget.

Q. What is the status of the Mandarin sidewalk extension project?

A. We're continuing to work with the Jacksonville Transportation Authority (JTA) on the sidewalk extensions along Mandarin Road. We secured a federal grant a year and a half ago that brought \$3 million to extend sidewalks from Big

Cypress all the way up to Walter Jones Park — about two miles total. There's been both support and opposition to the project. Right now, JTA is doing due diligence, and I'm working with them to improve and update their website so people can track the progress. This is part of the Complete Streets Project that began in 2015 with recommendations to sidewalk the entire Mandarin Road peninsula.

Contact Council Member Boylan at MBoylan@coj.net or (904) 255-5206.




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Bolduc cont. from pg. 1

"The demographic in Florida, in Jacksonville, has shifted in a huge way where literally every single school in the city has a decent-size population of students who are low income and qualify for Title I funds," Bolduc said. "Our Mandarin schools are literally paying for the other schools in the district to operate, and yet we're not getting our fair share."

Currently, only two schools in the Mandarin area — Crown Point Elementary and Twin Lakes Elementary — receive Title I designation, which provides federal funding for schools with high percentages of low-income students. Bolduc wants the district to allow funding to "follow the student" rather than concentrate resources in

certain schools.

Under her proposal, schools like Mandarin Oaks Elementary, which has approximately 230 students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, would receive about \$230,000 annually — enough to fund two reading interventionists and a reading coach.

"Even though they're not low-income, they still need that support," Bolduc explained, noting that Mandarin Oaks serves students who speak 120 different languages. "Our slogan, our vision statement, is 'every child, every day,' and every child means every child."

The funding battle has personal stakes for Crown Point Elementary, which nearly achieved an A rating last year but lost the City Year program that

used AmeriCorps volunteers to provide literacy support. Bolduc is now working with local businesses to raise \$350,000 to bring the program back.

"If I could get 350 of what could be like 3,000 businesses in the Mandarin area to give me \$1,000, I can get that program," she said.

On the safety front, Bolduc has been pushing for pedestrian improvements after two local students were struck by vehicles in crosswalks between March and May. Working with City Councilman Michael Boylan and traffic engineering officials, she secured promises for safety upgrades.

Before school starts, Mandarin Middle School will receive an updated pedestrian crossing signal with an audible countdown timer. The current signal's flashing red hand confused students about when it was safe to cross.

"It looks like they have five seconds to cross the entire street," Bolduc said of the current system.

The city also promised to paint a crosswalk at Mandarin High School's main entrance, where students frequently cross Greenland Road to reach the school parking lot.

Bolduc's broader goal is establishing school zones and crossing guards at all middle and high schools countywide. Currently, traffic engineering officials told her that teenagers "don't listen

to anybody anyway," a statement she challenged based on her observations at school drop-off and pickup.

"What I'm seeing is a lot of adults breaking laws, and I've seen kids following rules," she said.

As families prepare for the new school year, Bolduc reminds parents that the district has ended universal free lunch at most schools, returning to income-based eligibility. However, all students will receive free lunch for the first 30 days while families complete applications.

"Whether you think you would qualify or not, I'm encouraging everyone to fill it out," she said, noting that the process is confidential and students simply scan their ID cards.

Bolduc encourages community members to support her efforts by attending school board meetings or emailing Superintendent Christopher Bernier about funding concerns.

"It's time for us to fight for our kids and for what we need here in Mandarin," she said. "We want our schools to be fully funded. We want our schools to have the resources."

For parents looking to help, Florida's tax-free shopping period runs throughout August for school supplies, and applications for free and reduced lunch are available online through the district website.



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Building cont. from pg. 1

code. And we did it all while the school remained fully operational.

High schools, we quickly learned, never sleep. From early morning classes to late-night games and performances, Mandarin was always alive with activity. Every task we undertook required careful coordination to avoid disrupting the rhythm of school life. It was a balancing act—one that demanded flexibility, patience, and constant communication.

At the heart of the project was the new classroom addition. Designed to house the school's Medical Academy and Culinary Arts programs, this space is more than just a building—it's a launchpad for students pursuing careers in health-care and the culinary arts. With simulation labs, collaborative learning areas, and industry-grade equipment, these classrooms are built to inspire.

Still, what stands out most from our 14 months on campus isn't the construction, it's the people.

Principal Bravo and Assistant Principal Durkin were incredibly supportive and patient. They worked with us through every schedule shift and unexpected hiccup, always with the goal of minimizing disruption for students and staff. We were invited to school events, celebrated at milestone ceremonies, and made to feel like part of the Mustang family.

As we complete the final phase—removing 19 portable classrooms that had stood for over 20 years and preparing athletic practice field in its place—we are proud of what we've built. But more than that, we are grateful for the relationships we've formed.

We want to thank the Facilities, Engineering, Design and Construction team at DCPS for trusting Batson-Cook with this project, and the Office of Economic Opportunity for introducing us to new small/minority and women business contractors. We're also grateful to our design team, trade partners, and vendors for their dedication and craftsmanship. Most of all, we'd like to thank Mims Construction—our partner on this project—for their collaboration and commitment.

As our General Superintendent Jeremiah Perkins often says in project meetings, "Every day in construction is a challenge where you get to solve problems and keep moving forward." At Mandarin High, we did just that—and in the process, we built something far more lasting: we built relationships.

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Get to Know ...

By Tracy McCormick-Dishman
editor@floridanewslines.com

Debbie Holmes brings hope to human trafficking survivors

After decades in corporate America, Debbie Holmes knew her retirement would be different. The former CSX employee felt called to do "God's work," as she puts it, and found her mission through an unexpected connection at Orange Theory Fitness in Mandarin.

It was there she met Donna Fenchel, founder of Orange Theory's Jacksonville locations, who shared her passion for helping women escape human trafficking. That meeting led Holmes to Villages of Hope, a nonprofit organization that's about to open 13 small homes on Jacksonville's west side to house survivors of human trafficking.

"When I retired, I had to do something that was about giving back and helping others," Holmes said. "Donna's passion was behind it 100%, and I told her when I retire, I would love to get involved."

The statistics Holmes shares are sobering. Jacksonville ranks third in Florida and 48th nationally for human trafficking cases. Florida ranks third in the nation, with more than 10,000 cases reported nationwide in 2020. Most disturbing, the average age of trafficking victims is between 12 and 14.

"The traffickers actually prey on



Photos courtesy Debbie Holmes
Debbie Holmes

vulnerable people, friending them online and building an emotional bond which turns into emotional abuse," Holmes explained. "They may use drugs and alcohol to increase the dependency."

What makes Villages of Hope unique is its comprehensive approach. The organization offers a two-year program that begins with rest, allowing women to recover from trauma while connecting them with resources to overcome substance abuse. The second phase, called "restore," includes individual and group counseling, equine therapy, medical and dental care, and life skills classes.

"We're teaching basic stuff that most of us know how to do — how to

cook, how to clean, personal hygiene, how to balance a checkbook, how to write a resume," Holmes said.

The program partners with Re-threaded, a local organization that employs trafficking survivors, giving women work experience in a supportive environment before transitioning to jobs elsewhere.

Villages of Hope was patterned after Thistle Farms in Nashville, Tennessee, which has successfully operated a similar model. The Jacksonville village includes 13 homes of nearly 900 square feet each, with two bedrooms per home. One house will be for a live-in manager, two will serve as emergency housing, and the rest will house women who seek out the program.

Construction is nearly complete, thanks to partnerships with the Keeling Group, Northeast Florida Builders Association, and a matching grant from the Delores Barr Weaver Foundation. The foundation provided \$500,000 after Villages of Hope raised \$600,000.

"The houses are only a couple of weeks out from being completed," Holmes said. "They're beautiful. They look fabulous."

Now serving as secretary, volunteer coordinator, and newsletter helper, Holmes is preparing for the village to welcome its first residents in late September or early October.

The organization needs donations for furniture, appliances, and apartment-size washers and dryers.

Villages of Hope also conducts "tea parties" at churches and community organizations to raise awareness and recurring donors. The presentation uses mismatched teacups and teapots to symbolize how tea has historically been linked to slavery and exploitation.

Through their "Tea for Two" program, a monthly donation of \$28 covers one night of care for one woman, while \$56 covers care for two women.

Since starting in 2019, Villages of Hope has helped three women complete the full program, with two more graduating in November. All are working and rebuilding their lives.

"It's in our backyard," Holmes said. "If you want to help these women, here's how you can help them."

To learn more about Villages of Hope or to volunteer, visit VillagesOfHope.org, call (904) 253-3123, or contact Debbie Holmes about furnishing the new homes.



Villages of Hope founders Carla Sweeney, left, and Donna Fenchel, right.



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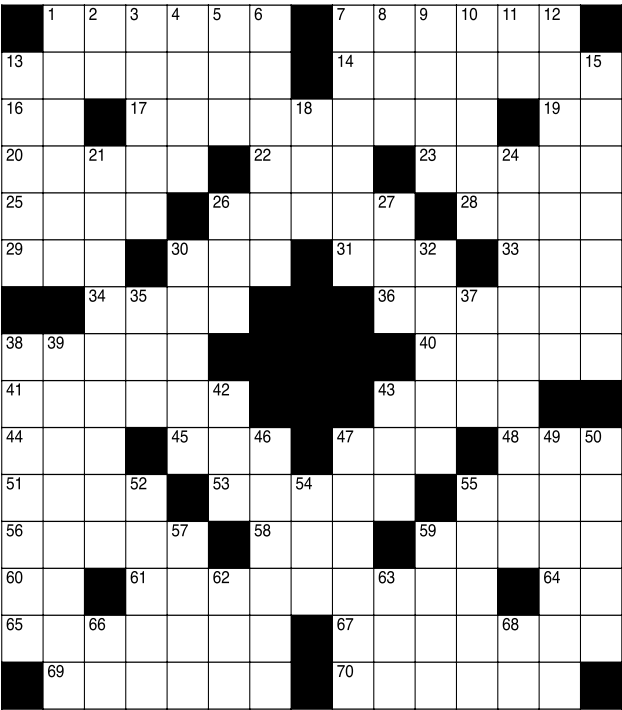
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Puzzles

Answers on page 3
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CLUES ACROSS

1. Spiritual leaders
7. Salt
13. Fortified wine
14. Edible mollusk
16. They precede C
17. A way to compare
19. State lawyer
20. “Game of Thrones” actor Ciaran
22. Eighth month (abbr.)
23. Very willing
25. __ ex machina
26. Satisfies
28. Mountain in New Zealand
29. A doctrine
30. Popular Dodge truck model
31. Dekagram
33. Naturally occurring solid
34. Company officer
36. Villains
38. Cricket frogs
40. One of the founders of modern psychology
41. Endured
43. A female domestic
44. You can get stuck in one
45. Partner to feather
47. Passive optical network
48. French ballet dynasty
51. Employee stock ownership plan
53. Bottom layer
55. Sound
56. Yankee great Judge
58. Dickens character
59. Late beloved TNT sportscaster
60. South Dakota
61. Exposing human vice or folly to ridicule
64. Gold
65. Longtime Braves hurler Julio
67. Humor
69. Shawl
70. Hospital unit

CLUES DOWN

1. Animal disease
2. Commercial
3. Necklace materials
4. Containers
5. Investment account
6. Colorado Heisman Trophy winner
7. Dipped down
8. Head injury category (abbr.)
9. Lay about
10. Intestinal
11. Not yes
12. Caused to be loved
13. Muslim spiritual leader
15. Showing sincere conviction
18. Not in
21. Number above the line in a fraction
24. Lawn pest
26. Pouch
27. Ancient language in India (abbr.)
30. Start over
32. Wild white flower
35. Fourteen
37. Visual way to interact with computer (abbr.)
38. Side by side and facing the same way
39. Religious conflicts
42. Touch lightly
43. “Boardwalk Empire” actress Gretchen
46. Violent seizure of property
47. One who supports the pope
49. Malaise
50. Body fluid
52. Inauthentic person
54. Title of respect
55. Chilean city
57. Japanese city
59. Silk garment
62. Draw from
63. Automobile
66. The man
68. Top government lawyer

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Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

WORDS

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CONTACTS
CORNEA
DISTANCE
DROPS
EXAM
EYES
GOGGLES
HEALTH
LASHES
OPTOMETRIST
PROTECT
REGARD
RETINA
SAFETY
SCRATCH
SIGHT
SOLUTION
TEARS
ULTRAVIOLET
VISION
WASH

CRYPTO FUN

Solve the code to discover words related to eye health.
Each number corresponds to a letter.
(Hint: 1 = S)

A.

14 17 1 17 10 13

Clue: Sight

B.

1 18 13 25 3 5 1 1 8 1

Clue: Tinted lenses

C.

8 6 5 11

Clue: Test

D.

21 4 10 22 8 15 22

Clue: Care for

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Mandarin Library launches new book club, continues year-round programs

The Jacksonville Public Library continues offering programs year-round at its Mandarin locations, including a new adult book club.

Ravenous Readers, a new book club for adult readers, meets at 6:30 p.m. every third Tuesday at Mandarin Library. The group explores new genres, reads classics and discusses genre fiction. On Aug. 19, members will discuss "Ender's Game" by Orson Scott Card.

The library's established "As the Page Turns" Book Club continues meeting at 1 p.m. on the second Thursday of each month at Mandarin Library. On Aug. 14, the group will discuss "The Midnight Library" by Matt Haig. Pre-registration is recommended as space is limited.

Children's programs continue

Little Readers Storytime features stories, music and movement for infants and toddlers from birth to age 5. Sessions run 2-2:30 p.m. Mondays and 10:15-10:45 a.m. Thursdays at South Mandarin Library, and 10:15 a.m. or 11 a.m. Fridays at Mandarin Library.

Sensory Friendly Storytime offers stories, music and movement for ages 2 to 5 in a small, welcoming environment for children with sensory sensitivities.

Sessions are held Wednesdays at 11 a.m. at Mandarin Library. Registration is required and attendance is limited.

Junior Artists and Junior Scientists programs alternate weekly for ages 5 to 8. Children create art or explore science, technology, engineering and math concepts through hands-on activities. Programs start at 3:30 p.m. Wednesdays at Mandarin Library and 4 p.m. Tuesdays at South Mandarin Library.

Teen programming

Teen Advisory Board meets at 4:45 p.m. every other Friday in the Teen Room at South Mandarin Library. On Aug. 8, teens will learn chess basics. On Aug. 22, participants can join an air hockey tournament and discuss "Check, Please!" by Ngozi Ukazu.

Game Day drop-in sessions are held at 5 p.m. Tuesdays at South Mandarin Library, featuring board games and card games for ages 12 to 17.

Some youth programs will take a break or end in August, with new programs planned for September and October. Check the schedule at jaxlibrary.org/events.

Submitted by Jeremy Yates, Jacksonville Public Library

Expert discusses 16th-century discovery

An archaeologist will discuss his search for remains of a large wooden cross erected by Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto during a lecture at the University of North Florida.

The Archaeological Institute of America—Jacksonville Society will meet at 12 p.m. on Sep. 20, 2025, in Building 51 at UNF. Jeffrey M. Mitchem, a board member of the Archaeological Conservancy, will present "Searching for the Remains of Hernando de Soto's Cross at Parkin, Ark."

Parkin is a 17-acre Mississippian village site in northeast Arkansas that the state purchased and converted into a state park. Mitchem served as station archaeologist there in 1990.

His research concluded that Parkin is the town of Casqui mentioned in all



Photo courtesy AIA - JAX Society Jeffrey M. Mitchem

four historical accounts of the de Soto expedition. These accounts describe the raising of a large wooden cross on a platform mound at the site.

During excavations, Mitchem consulted with the Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma, who may be descendants of the original

Parkin residents.

The free lecture is open to the public. Refreshments will be served afterward in the Anthropology Lab. Saturday parking is free, with faculty, staff and vendor spaces available to everyone.

For more information, contact Melva Price at (904) 241-9411 or aiajaxsoc@gmail.com.

Submitted by Mike Napper, AIA - JAX Society



Photo courtesy Mandarin Library

What would you like to read in Mandarin NewsLine? Send your ideas to editor@floridanewsline.com

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AI in the classroom: What parents need to know

Tracy McCormick-Dishman
editor@floridanewslines.com

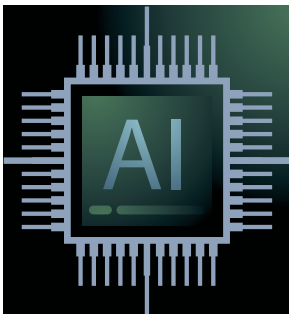
If you've heard your teenager mention ChatGPT in passing, you're not alone. Artificial intelligence tools are rapidly transforming how students approach homework and assignments, creating new questions for families in Duval County and beyond.

The numbers tell a compelling story. One in four 13- to 17-year-olds now use ChatGPT for schoolwork, according to recent Pew research cited by Axios. That figure has doubled since 2023. Even more interesting, research shows that 89% of students admit to using AI tools like ChatGPT for homework, according to Packback research.

Instead of fighting this trend, Duval County Public Schools has decided to embrace it thoughtfully and strategically. In March 2025, district officials

announced that "Team Duval Teachers looking to save time generating test questions and passages for students have found support through software powered by AI." The district plans to launch its own "AI Institute," designed to help teachers grow their understanding through hands-on experience.

Holly Lanham, DCPS Director of Technology Innovation, told a local news station in March 2025 that the district sees opportunity rather than threat. "I do believe that this is something our district is going to lean into instead of trying to push away from," Lanham said. "Why not help (our teachers) learn ways to use it ethically and safely?"



The district's approach appears to be working. Over 45,000 items have been generated by their AI program PowerBuddy, which saves time and offers customization such as language and reading level options. "It just makes teachers' lives easier," said

Katy Stouffer, DCPS Director of Data and Assessment, in a March 2025 interview with the district's news service.

Yet the challenge extends beyond the classroom. Nationally, over one in four teachers have caught students cheating by using ChatGPT, according to National Education Association data. In the 2023-24 school year, 63% of teachers reported students for using AI on schoolwork.

Education leaders express broader concerns, too. According to Axios, 66% of education leaders think generative AI will cut into students' attention spans, raising questions about long-term learning impacts.

Still, perspectives on AI in education aren't uniformly negative. "Far from being just a dream machine for cheaters, many teachers now believe, ChatGPT could actually help make education better," according to MIT Technology Review analysis.

Duval County is taking this balanced approach to heart. According to March 2025 reports, Sandalwood High School Web Design Instructor Brannon Lutz is teaching an artificial intelligence foundation course called "AI in the World" where students can earn an Information Technology Specialist (ITS) in Artificial Intelligence certification.

New school year, new screen time challenges for parents

Tracy McCormick-Dishman
editor@floridanewslines.com

As parents finish back-to-school shopping and check tablets and laptops off

their supply lists, many are discovering that traditional screen time rules don't work when devices become essential homework tools. If you've ever found



yourself trying to determine whether your child is doing homework or watching videos on that required school tablet, you're facing one of today's most

common parenting dilemmas.

The numbers paint a clear picture of how significant this issue has become. During July 2021 through December 2023, 50.4% of teenagers ages 12-17 had four hours or more of daily screen time, according to the CDC National Health Interview Survey. Research shows that children aged eight to 18 now spend an average of 7.5 hours per day in front of screens, according to Kids Mental Health.

The challenge for parents has changed. It's no longer just about limiting screen time. When tablets and computers become required tools for homework, traditional screen time rules become nearly impossible to enforce.

Duval County Public Schools recognizes the balance families must strike. The district's Technology Services department states its mission is "to improve



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New school cont. on pg. 11



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Gardening

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By Master Gardener Volunteer Lesley Arrandale
mail@floridanewsline.com

By Master Gardener Volunteer Lesley Arrandale
mail@floridanewsline.com

Living in the South, we're subject to extreme heat, periods of drought, and torrential rains, as well as the potential for devastating storms. Our wild areas are naturally resilient to these conditions, having evolved over thousands of years, but not so our yards and gardens.

My yard is an average-size lot dating from the 1940s and '50s. Like neighborhoods of similar age, over the past 20 to 30 years, water and laurel oaks have succumbed to old age. Storms have damaged mature hickories and live oaks, causing them to be taken down. Consequently, many yards on the once-shady street are now more exposed, with more lawns and less shrubbery.

We can take steps to achieve a resilient landscape. A reasonable starting point is choosing plants according to the mantra "Right plant, right place," ensuring that light, soil, and drainage are near ideal for your chosen plants. Native plants historically found in our area are good bets. For my sandy, well-draining situation, if I grow moisture-loving perennials, I group them in a limited area and use a soaker hose during droughts—the least wasteful way to use precious potable water.

When choosing plants, I look for pollinator-friendly options. Pollinators—those varied insects that play a vital role in pollinating 30-40% of our foods—are essential. This chart lists good native pollinator plants for Florida: <https://xerces.org/publications/plant-lists/native-plants-for-pollinators-and-beneficial-insects-florida>. The Florida Native Plant Society website shows if a plant is native to Duval County.

When buying pollinator-friendly plants, not all nurseries sell suitable plants, even if labels claim they attract bees or butterflies. I recently returned a beautiful rose after learning it may have been treated with neonicotinoid systemic pesticides—deadly to pollinators if pollen and nectar are tainted.

This creates a dilemma: how to choose pollinator plants safe for visiting insects. Independent nurseries are likely the best sources, as staff are more likely to know how plants are grown.

While research continues on certified pesticide-free plants, I'll grow plants from untreated seeds and take cuttings from others. If I have enough, I'll share and hope to get some in return. Although we can't all grow enough plants to fill a yard, every little helps.



Submitted photo
This showy southern native is characterized by the loose, widely spaced nature of the flowering spike. It is found in the hot sands of the South.

New school cont. from pg. 10

student success, eliminate achievement gaps, and produce technically competent graduates able to compete in a global workforce" while "providing teachers and students access to the digital tools they need for instruction."

Fortunately, research suggests not all screen time carries equal impact. Educational screen time provides the most benefit, showing positive effects on children's persistence and educational outcomes while having no significant impact on health, according to EdTech Magazine research.

The key lies in helping families distinguish between productive educational screen time and passive entertainment. Experts recommend creating designated

"digital homework zones" separate from "digital free zones" within homes, allowing families to maintain structure while accommodating necessary technology use.

What's particularly interesting is that children themselves recognize potential problems with excessive screen exposure. According to Internet Matters research, nearly 30% of children spend three to four hours on devices every day, and children cited "spending too much time online" as the issue they experienced most.

Every family's situation is different. The Pew Research Center found that nearly one-in-five parents of a child younger than 12 say their child has their own smartphone. The research also revealed disparities in device access: parents

with a high school education or less are twice as likely as parents who are college graduates to say their child has their own smartphone (21% vs. 11%).

Rather than fighting technology altogether, educational experts suggest the solution involves teaching digital literacy skills and helping children develop healthy relationships with their devices. As schools continue integrating technol-

ogy into curricula, families are figuring out how to balance required school screen time with healthy limits at home.

The key is finding balance between the technology kids need for school and the limits that keep them healthy. Many families are realizing it's less about how much screen time and more about what kind of screen time their kids are getting.

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Travel

A rainy day in Granada: Power and poetry at the Alhambra

By Debi Lander
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On a recent trip to Spain, I reserved one day to explore Granada, a city steeped in history and home to one of Spain’s most treasured landmarks: the Alhambra. From Seville, I boarded a group tour bus before dawn for the three-hour ride, groggy but excited.

Our first stop was the Albaicín, Granada’s oldest neighborhood—a former Moorish quarter of whitewashed houses, flower-filled balconies and steep cobblestone alleys. Unfortunately, it was pouring rain, but we still wandered through the labyrinthine streets. From a hilltop overlook, I gazed across the city and saw it at last: the Alhambra, sprawled across the ridge and silhouetted by the misty Sierra Nevada mountains. Even through the rain, the sight was stunning.

After lunch, we entered the Alhambra complex. My designated guide chose to



The Alhambra includes a complex of buildings and gardens.

begin in the Generalife, the vast gardens once used by Nasrid rulers as a summer retreat. The weather made it challenging: I found myself wiping my camera lens, dodging umbrellas, and trying to keep up with the fast-moving group. But despite the damp and distraction, the gardens worked their charm. Trimmed hedges, blooming flowers, and glimmering water channels created a peaceful oasis—even in the rain. The sound of running water, a hallmark of Islamic Garden design, added to the sense of tranquility.

Next, we entered the Nasrid Palaces, the architectural heart of the Alhambra. At the entrance, we were required to show our passports—a reminder of the site’s strict preservation. Here, our guide began unfolding the Alhambra’s remarkable story.

What began as a small fortress in the ninth century rose to greatness in the 13th and 14th centuries under the Nasrid dynasty, the last Muslim rulers of Spain. The complex became a self-contained royal city: palaces, mosques, military quarters, and gardens spread across the hilltop.

The Nasrid Palaces, built in the 1300s, are masterpieces of Islamic architecture—expressions of paradise on Earth.



Photos courtesy Debi Lander

Fountain of Lions are 12 carved figures supporting a marble basin that once symbolized the cosmos.

Inside, intricate stucco designs ripple like lace across the walls, archways frame the changing light, and water flows in sinuous patterns.

In 1492, the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, completed the Reconquista by capturing Granada. The Alhambra became their royal court—most famously the site where Christopher Columbus received approval for his voyage to the New World.

Centuries of change followed. Emperor Charles V demolished part of the Nasrid complex to build his Renaissance-style palace in the 1500s—a bold but jarring contrast to the Moorish delicacy. By the 18th century, the site had fallen into disrepair and was even used as military barracks. But in the 1830s, Romantic artists and writers, including Washington Irving, revived interest in the Alhambra, sparking preservation efforts that continue to this day.

In the Palace of the Lions, I paused to admire the famed Fountain of the Lions — 12 carved figures supporting a marble basin that once symbolized the cosmos. Light filtered through filigreed archways, casting patterns that danced across the floor. The Alhambra’s magic lies not in gold or grandeur, but in light, geometry and water, a quiet kind of majesty.

We ended at the Alcazaba, the fortress section of the complex. Though we didn’t have time to climb the tower, the view from the ramparts was enough. Below, Granada unfurled — a sea of terracotta rooftops, the golden dome of the cathedral, and the winding lanes of the Albaicín I’d walked that morning.

Gazing down, I was struck by a realization: the Alhambra is more than a historical site. It’s a living conversation between architecture and landscape, power and poetry, past and present.

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