



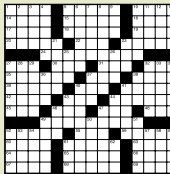
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Bartram Trail AFJROTC unit FL-20061 cadet, Ava Blanton, graduates Flight Academy.

Cadets earn distinguished status

By C/Lt Col Sophia Wagnon

Beginning in July 2024, a group of cadets from Bartram Trail’s AFJROTC unit returned home from Flight Academy, a program designed to help students reach their goals of pursuing careers in aviation. This is a very rigorous program of which many cadets apply, and only a slim amount actually end up receiving the opportunity. One of which was FL-20061’s very own cadet, Ava Blanton.

Shortly after, an event titled “Bootcamp” took place. This happens in late July every year, as a way to welcome the new cadets who are joining the program for that specific school year. Within this three-day occasion, the cadets start by learning important

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New superintendent, new school year

Dr. Brennan Asplen brings decades of experience to his new role, emphasizing collaboration and innovation

Tracy McCormick-Dishman
editor@floridanewslines.com

Dr. Brennan Asplen settles into his new role as St. Johns County Schools superintendent with the confidence of someone who has walked these halls before. After a distinguished 37-year career in education that has taken him from math teacher to district leadership across multiple counties, Asplen is back where he once served as principal of Bartram Trail High School.

“I’m very blessed to be the superintendent here in St. Johns,” Asplen said during a recent interview in his district office. “We have such wonderful people who work here. They do a great job and they serve our students and families very well.”

Asplen’s journey to the superintendent’s chair reads like a roadmap through Florida education. After graduating from the University of Central Florida, he spent 18 years in Seminole County as a math teacher, dean, assistant principal and principal. In 2006, he moved to St. Johns County to lead Bartram Trail High School for five years before transitioning to district-level positions, including associate superintendent for human resources and deputy superintendent for academics

and student services.

A four-year stint as superintendent in Sarasota County broadened his perspective before he returned to St. Johns in 2023 as deputy superintendent for operations. Now, he’s ready to tackle the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Embracing Technology and Communication

One of the most significant changes students and parents will notice this school year is the rollout of new technology tools designed to improve communication and streamline daily operations.

“Parent Square,” a two-way communication platform, will replace the district’s current one-way messaging system. Director of Communications Christine Upchurch, who joined the interview, emphasized the transformative potential of this new tool.



Photo courtesy St. Johns County School District
Dr. Brennan Asplen

“It’s going to open up communication like we’ve never experienced before in the district,” Upchurch said. “Rather than just being able to push things out one way, this is engaging our community and our parents.”

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District squares communication gap

ParentSquare to replace one-way messaging system with two-way engagement tools

Tracy McCormick-Dishman
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St. Johns County Schools is rolling out a new communication platform that promises to transform how the district connects with families, moving beyond simple announcements to interactive engagement.

“ParentSquare,” a web-based and app-compatible system, will replace the district’s current School Messenger platform, which Director of Communications Christine Upchurch describes as limited to “push things out one way.”

“It’s going to open up communication like we’ve never experienced before in the district,” Upchurch said during a recent interview. “This is engaging our community and our parents, and all kinds of different tools are built into it.”

The new platform represents a significant technological leap



for the 53,000-student district. Unlike the current system that simply sends messages to parents, ParentSquare allows for true two-way communication between schools and families.

Strategic implementation timeline

The district is taking a measured approach to the rollout. Principals received training on the new system this week, with teachers scheduled to be trained next. Parents will gain access to the platform just before the school year begins, ensuring educators are comfortable with the system before families start using it.

Superintendent Dr. Brennan Asplen sees the communication upgrade as part of a broader strategy to meet modern parent expectations in an increasingly competitive educational landscape.



Christina Upchurch

“We compete more than ever with charter schools and private schools and school choice,” Asplen said. “School

ParentSquare cont. on pg. 2

Dr. Brennan cont. from pg. 1

The web-based and app-compatible platform will allow for interactive communication between schools and families, marking a significant upgrade from the previous system.

Transportation is also getting a technological makeover. The new “Bus Planner” system allows parents to easily check routes and bus numbers by entering their address, while the “Chipmunk” app provides real-time bus tracking.

“Parents will know when the bus is gonna arrive,” Asplen explained. “So when you’re at the bus stop and something happens, you can see the bus is 15 minutes out because there was a traffic accident. Parents are gonna love that.”

Maintaining Excellence While Addressing Challenges

While embracing innovation, Asplen recognizes the importance of preserving what makes St. Johns County Schools successful. The district serves approximately 53,000 students from kindergarten through 12th grade and continues to grow.

Three new K-8 schools are in various stages of development. Hallis Cove K-8 in the Rivertown area opens this August, starting with grades K-7 and adding eighth grade next year. Two additional K-8 schools in Silverleaf and the Nocatee/Seabrook area are scheduled to open next August.

Academically, Asplen has identified key focus areas: ensuring all students read

by second or third grade, accelerating students who need advanced challenges and guaranteeing every senior graduates with a documented plan for their future.

“We want to be sure that our seniors have a plan, a documented plan, when they leave us,” he said. The district will utilize “Zellow,” a state-supported platform that allows students to build portfolios of their interests and goals starting in middle school.

Collaborative Leadership for Changing Times

Perhaps most telling about Asplen’s leadership philosophy is his emphasis on collaboration. In an educational landscape increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, school choice and evolving parent expectations, he believes teamwork is essential.

“One of my main priorities as a leader is to make sure that we have a great culture and climate of collaboration,” Asplen said. “That’s where we solve all of our challenges and our issues.”

He views AI not as a threat but as a tool that must be properly understood and utilized. “When they leave us now in this environment, they are going to need to understand AI completely to get a job when they get through college or even if they don’t go to college.”

The district is providing professional development to help educators integrate



AI appropriately while maintaining academic integrity.

As Asplen begins this new chapter in his career, his message to the community is one of continuity and progress. The foundation of excellence remains strong, but the tools and methods continue to evolve.

“There’s always something to work on,” he said. “Even though we are highly ranked in the state, there’s always things that we can work on. And we find those little gaps and we work on those and help those students.”

With decades of experience and a deep understanding of the St. Johns County community, Dr. Asplen appears ready to guide the district through whatever challenges and opportunities lie ahead.



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ParentSquare cont. on pg. 2

choice is a great thing, but you need to be able to compete in that arena. And part of that is communication.”

Meeting parents where they are

The push for better communication technology stems from a recognition that parent expectations have evolved. Asplen, who has a 32-year-old daughter and 30-year-old son, acknowledges the generational communication gap.

“I don’t even know what they’re doing on their phone and on their apps,” he said. “But that’s how they communicate, and so we need to understand how to get the info out.”

The new platform addresses this challenge by offering both web-based access for those who prefer computers and a mobile app for parents who primarily use smartphones. District officials chose ParentSquare specifically because both interfaces offer excellent user experiences.

Beyond basic messaging

While Upchurch says she’s “still

learning” all of ParentSquare’s capabilities, the platform promises features far beyond simple text alerts. The interactive nature of the system should allow for surveys, event RSVPs, volunteer coordination and other engagement tools that weren’t possible with the previous one-way system.

The communication upgrade comes as the district implements several other technology initiatives, including new transportation tracking systems and continues expanding its use of artificial intelligence in educational settings.

For parents accustomed to the limited communication options of School Messenger, ParentSquare represents a significant step forward in school-home collaboration. As Upchurch noted, the district has never experienced this level of interactive communication capability.

The platform will be fully operational when students return to school this August, marking a new chapter in how St. Johns County Schools connects with its community.

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BFF

Best Furry Friend of the month

Breed:

American short hair

Favorite Activity:

Watching animals from the window

Favorite Food:

Shredded chicken

Favorite Friends:

Her mom, but she loves everyone

How did your BFF get their name:

Her dad



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Back to School
Tech Guide
in this issue!

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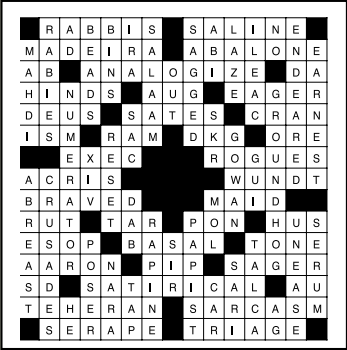
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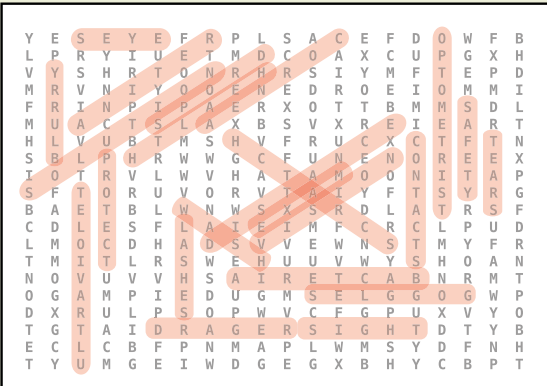
Last month's Mystery Photo was The Rick House at Broudy's liquor store.



Answers
to our
Puzzles
PG 9



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August

Community Calendar

What's Happening in St. Johns

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

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 Mandarin Road Campus in the Woody Room at 11844 Mandarin Road. It's the guild's birthday party! Come and enjoy the fun and games. New members are always welcome and wearing masks is optional. Visit honeybeequilters.org for more information.

Aug. 9
Bartram Trail Genealogy Club
The Bartram Trail Genealogy Club meets the second Saturday of each month from 2 - 4 p.m. at the Bartram Trail Branch Library. The August topic is analyzing DNA results with some club members' actual data to identify relatives and to establish evidence to confirm or deny their existing research. Open to the public of all levels of genealogical experience. Email ginglish@comcast.net for more information. Visit www.facebook.com/groups/BTGenClubGroup to send a request to join the club.

Aug. 11
United for Progress meeting
The Northwest St Johns County United for Progress club will welcome Lisa Chismark from Epic-Cure Inc. who will speak on "Food Insecurity in St Johns County." Social 6:30 p.m., meeting 7 p.m. Please contact nwsjcp@gmail.com for meeting details.

Aug. 14
ACT and SAT Prep Classes Registration Begins
ACT and SAT Prep Classes offered by Friends of the Bartram Trail Public Library at Bartram Trail Public Library. Students may register for either or both test prep series. Classes run Wednesdays (Aug. 14, 21, Sept. 4, 11, 18): SAT 5 p.m. - 6:15 p.m., ACT 6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. Fifty dollars per series or \$100 for both. Bring calculators and purchase required prep book. Limited to 25 students per series. Registration closes Aug. 10, 2025. Contact the library reference desk or email macyp17@yahoo.com for information.

Aug. 14
Republican Women meeting
St Johns Federated Republican Women will meet Thursday, Aug. 14, 2025, at 6:30 p.m. social, 7 p.m. meeting, at Loopers Lounge at the Caddy Shack restaurant, 455 S Legacy Trail, St. Augustine. The speaker this month is Congressman John Rutherford. All are welcome. Visit the Facebook page at St. Johns Federated Republican Women.

Aug. 15
Adult Craft: Cool Crafts for Hot Days
Adult Craft: Cool Crafts for Hot Days on Friday, Aug. 15 from 10 a.m.-noon at BT Branch Bartram Room. Celebrate National Watermelon Day this month with a double dose of fruity fun. Craft your own watermelon-inspired hand fan to stay cool, then make matching watermelon drink umbrellas to sip in style. All supplies are provided by the

Bartram Trail Friends of the Library. Space is limited. Registration is required for this event and will open on Aug. 1, 2025 at 8 a.m. This event is for registrants age 18 and above. Register online at sjcpls.org.

Aug. 18
All Star Quilters Guild meeting
All Star Quilters Guild meets on the third Monday of each month at First Christian Church, 11924 San Jose Blvd, Jacksonville. Check-in and social time at 9:30 a.m., meeting at 10 a.m. Visit www.allstarquilters.org for more information.

Aug. 19
Happy Hookers crochet group
Happy Hookers crochet group will meet at the Bartram Trail Branch Library on Aug. 19 from 5:30-6:45 p.m. The group crochets or knits blankets for cancer patients at area hospitals. All skill levels are welcome. Visit www.sjcpls.org or call 904-827-6960.

Aug. 19
Volunteer Blast-Off
RSVP of St. Johns County and the St. Johns County School District will be hosting a volunteer orientation Tuesday, Aug. 19 for individuals interested in learning more about tutoring and mentoring students in our county. The session will share strategies with individuals interested in volunteering and assist with volunteer placement for the new school year. The Blast Off will take place 9 - 10:30 a.m. at The Fullerwood Center, 10 Hildreth Drive, St.

Augustine, Florida. For more information and to register, contact Cheryl Freeman at cheryl.freeman@stjohns.k12.fl.us or 904-547-3952.

Aug. 20
Free Tech Help with David
Free Tech Help with David will be held on Tuesday, Aug. 20 from 10:30 a.m.-noon at the Bartram Trail Branch Library. Drop in for tech assistance with Android, Apple, and reader devices; no RSVPs required. Bring your device fully charged and know your passwords. Visit sjcpls.org/branches/bartram-trail-branch/ for more information.

Aug. 20
Coin Collecting for Kids
Join Tony, a member of the Florida United Numismatists for Coin Collecting for Kids on Wednesday, Aug. 20 from 4-5 p.m. There's a story behind every coin. In this program, participants will learn a little history, geography, math, science, vocabulary and much more. All supplies provided. Designed for ages 8-16. Visit sjcpls.org for more information.

Aug. 23
Dress a Girl Around The World
Join the women of Dress a Girl to learn to make dresses and now shorts on Saturday, Aug. 23 from 10 a.m.-1 p.m. You can pick up a kit to create at home or turn in dresses you created to the Bartram Trail Branch. The group also accepts fabric and notion donations. All friends, old and new, are welcome. Visit sjcpls.org for more information.

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Q&A with St. Johns County School Board Member, Beverly Slough, District 1

Q. How did St. Johns County Schools perform on the state school grades this year?

A. We have received school grades and all the backup data that accompanies them. We are tied for first place in the state with Nassau County, based on percentage of achievement points we earned. However, they earned eight more points than we did, so they can actually claim first place.

Q. How did Nassau County earn those extra points?

A. What is interesting is how they earned the extra points – by encouraging their students to take higher level courses. One of the twelve elements of the school or district grade is the number of acceleration points earned. These points are earned when students take and pass high school courses while in middle school (algebra 1, geometry, biology), by taking advanced placement, IB, AICE, or dual enrollment courses, or by earning industry certification.

Q. What is St. Johns County doing to improve in this area?

A. Our district has analyzed the data to understand how we can do better in this area. We found that 400 middle school students who scored at the highest levels on state testing were not going on to take advanced math courses that earned the points. We are going to focus on these students, challenging them to reach higher since they have demonstrated that they are prepared to do so. We are also going to require that all our high school students take at least one course in their 9-12 years that will earn an acceleration point. This will yield dividends both for the student, who will be better prepared for college and career, and for the district grade.

Q. What is the current budget situation for the district?

A. It is budget time across our state. Budget hearings will be held in Aug. and September and the final budget will be adopted in September. When we compare the dollars we receive with the dollars that we have to spend, we find ourselves with a slight negative balance. We are very grateful to you, the voter, for approving the millage referendum.

Q. How are the millage referendum funds being used?

A. Eighty-five percent of these dollars are going directly into compensation increases for our employees. The remaining fifteen percent is allowing us to make up enough of our budget deficit to protect our schools. These will not be staff or programming reductions, thanks to those extra dollars. Superintendent Asplen plans to make cuts at the district office level to cover the remainder of the shortfall.

Q. What is the status of the new Hallpwes Cove Academy?

A. Our beautiful new K-8 school, Hallpwes Cove Academy, is ready to receive students on Aug. 11. We are excited that construction is on time and very pleased with the new school. Parents and students have been receiving information from Principal Hathaway about everything they need to know for a smooth first day. We are excited to welcome the Hurricanes to St. Johns County Schools.

Q. What should parents do if they haven't enrolled their student yet?

A. If you have not enrolled your student yet, please do so right away. Numbers of students drive numbers of teachers, and we want to be prepared on Aug. 11.



Q&A with St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller Brandon J. Patty

Q. Your office is launching Teen Court in August. What is the purpose of Teen Court?

A. St. Johns County Teen Court is a diversionary program designed to provide a second chance for first-time juvenile offenders while educating student volunteers about the legal system. It's a powerful example of restorative justice, where teens help hold their peers accountable while gaining hands-on courtroom experience.

Q. How does the program work?

A. Students between ages 10-17 serve as attorneys, jurors, clerks, and bailiffs in real criminal cases involving their peers. The program only accepts cases where the youth offender has admitted guilt and voluntarily agrees to participate. Successful completion of Teen Court allows these individuals to avoid a permanent criminal record.

Q. What kind of training do student participants receive?

A. Prior to participating, all students attend interactive training sessions. These cover courtroom procedures,

legal principles, and trial preparation. Through the Teen Court experience, they gain public speaking skills, legal knowledge, and a unique understanding of the justice system. Plus, they earn community service hours for their involvement.

Q. Who oversees the Teen Court proceedings?

A. Our Office's Community Outreach Coordinator organizes and supports each session. A local attorney serves as the judge, while teens handle all other courtroom roles. Adult involvement is minimal, giving teens the lead while still maintaining structure and guidance.

Q. What is the best way for people to contact your office with questions?

A. Parents can contact our Customer Care Call Center Monday-Friday, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., at 904-819-3600, or email at teencourt@stjohnsclerk.com. I can also be reached directly on my cell at 904-599-8688 or by email at bpatty@stjohnsclerk.com.

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By St. Johns County Property Appraiser Eddie Creamer

The TRIM notice is the most important tax document a property owner will receive each year. Property owners should carefully review this document to be sure they agree with their property values and that they are receiving all eligible exemptions.

The TRIM notice shows the property's market value, assessed value and taxable value. The market value is the property's probable sale price in a competitive, open market as of Jan. 1 of this year. The assessed value is the market value limited by the statutory caps, which is up to 3% for homesteaded properties and 10% for non-homesteaded properties. The taxable value is the assessed value minus exemptions. The taxable value is used to calculate property taxes.

If our office is unable to make the requested change in value, then a petition can be filed with the Value Adjustment Board (VAB) for a third-party review. Property owners have 25 days from the TRIM notice mailing date to request a review by our office and to file a petition with the VAB. The 25-day deadline is Sept. 9.

I'm available to answer questions or provide additional information at eddie@sjcpa.gov or 904-827-5500.

Cadets cont. from pg. 1

facts about the program, as well as obtaining their uniforms and advice on how to do well in the years to come. On the final day, they go to Camp Blanding, a Joint Training Center located in Starke, Florida, to implement the new skills they've learned.

A few months later, a mass inspection took place. The unit was named a distinguished unit with merit, the highest level an AFJROTC unit can be awarded. As a way to praise themselves for all the things accomplished from July-November, the cadets take an overnight trip to Camp Blanding. All cadets are welcome, but the decision as to whether or not to attend is fully up to each individual. This trip is

meant to be nothing but fun, with a militaristic view behind each aspect.


Once March hits, it's time for a change of command. The cadets attend a Military Ball held in Jacksonville specifically for them, in order to accomplish this task. At the beginning, the cadets and parents enjoy their dinner, and then an awards ceremony is hosted. During this, all awards earned throughout the year are received and then the official change of command takes place. Following all of that, the remainder of the evening is filled with fun and happiness, as the cadets are given time to socialize with each other, as a way to wrap up the school year, and start working towards the next.



Cadets from Bartram Trail's AFJROTC unit return home from Flight Academy.



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Reverend Yvonne McAndrew

ST. JOHNS Business Monthly

Business Briefs

New leadership takes helm at Newcomers of North St. Johns

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

Newcomers of North St. Johns installed its Executive Board of Directors for 2025-26 at its May luncheon held at Club Continental in Orange Park.

Serving for the coming year are co-presidents Michele Oliver, a Fruit Cove Forest resident, and Charlene Lim, a resident of The Colony at Greenbrier. Other board members include co-vice presidents Suzy Catania of South Hampton and Dawn Coston of Cimarrone, co-secretaries Gayle Richard of Isles of the World and Judy Belluso of Cimarrone, and co-treasurers Kathy Boyd of Del Webb Ponte Vedra and Mary Ellen Fleming of Heritage Landing.

“Our club motto is ‘Friendship is a Gift to Be Shared With Others’ and we strive to be a very friendly, welcoming group that offers many opportunities to enjoy social activities and help form life-long friendships,” said co-president Michele Oliver.

The organization, established in April 2004, offers newcomers opportunities to become acquainted with others while finding their place in the community. Activities include monthly luncheon meetings, bunco, weekly golf, walking groups, card games and monthly book discussions.

Recent additions include special social trips to Fernandina Beach and Cumberland Island ferry tours.

For membership information, visit newcomersofnorthstjohns.org.



Newcomers of North St. Johns board members, from left, Dawn Coston, Suzy Catania, Kathy Boyd, Charlene Lim, Gayle Richard and Michele Oliver pose after their installation at Club Continental in Orange Park. Not pictured are Mary Ellen Fleming and Judy Belluso.



Members of the Bartram Trail Rotary Club gathered in July to celebrate the new Rotary year, with 2024-25 Club President Molly Paxton, center, and 2025-26 Club President Mitch Ross to her right.

Bartram Trail Rotary serves locally, globally

By Al Kalter

The Rotary Club of Bartram Trail–Julington Creek is just over 20 years old, but in those two decades, local Rotarians have truly made a difference both locally and globally. We are proud to be part of Rotary International, which is the oldest and most international service organization in the world, founded in 1905, with over 35,000 clubs and 1.4 million members in almost 200 countries around the globe. Our club is involved in service projects both locally and internationally, ranging from donations to local charities and community groups to sharing in projects that provide fresh water in poor communities in Central America and elsewhere. Our volunteer efforts and monetary donations have benefitted local charities like the Betty Griffin Center, the St. Johns Homeless Coalition, Habitat for Humanity, and more.

The club also brought to this area the Rotary Youth Exchange program, which allows high school students to spend a year in another country, attending

school, living with host families, and learning a new language and culture. Since 2003, Bartram Trail Rotary has sent out and welcomed in dozens of these exchange students for a life-changing experience, for both the students and those that host them.

Service is the focus of all Rotary Clubs, as demonstrated by the organization’s motto, “Service Above Self.” But our club also has a lot of fun, and members often become close friends. Social activities and local excursions are always on the club’s calendar, and we happily offer our hand of friendship to new and prospective members. If you are looking for a way to give back to the community while meeting new friends, we encourage you to visit us at one of our weekly meetings, or contact us through our website, www.bartramtrailrotary.org.

The Rotary Club of Bartram Trail–Julington Creek meets every Thursday morning, from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m., at Westminster Woods on Julington Creek. Guests and prospective members are always welcome.

Nease High School earns national football recognition

Local news sources report that Nease High School has earned prestigious national recognition ahead of the 2025 football season, securing the 158th spot in the High School Football America Preseason Top 300. The ranking places the Panthers among the top two percent of the nation’s more than 14,000 high school football teams.

The Panthers made an impressive statement under head coach Collin Drafts, completing a perfect 9-0 undefeated season in 2024. The remarkable performance highlights the

program’s growing strength in the Ponte Vedra area.

St. Augustine High School also earned national recognition, ranking 147th in the same poll. St. Augustine head coach Brian Braddock, who has led the program since 2016, guided the Yellow Jackets to a 9-1 record last season while continuing the program’s two-decade tradition of deep playoff runs and district championships.

Both programs have become pipelines for college talent, regularly sending

players to premier university programs nationwide.

Florida led all states with 53 teams

making the national Top 300 list, demonstrating the competitive nature of high school football throughout the state.

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AI in the classroom: What parents need to know

Tracy McCormick-Dishman
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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 across the country.

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 striking, research shows that 89% of students admit to using AI tools like ChatGPT for homework, according to Packback research.

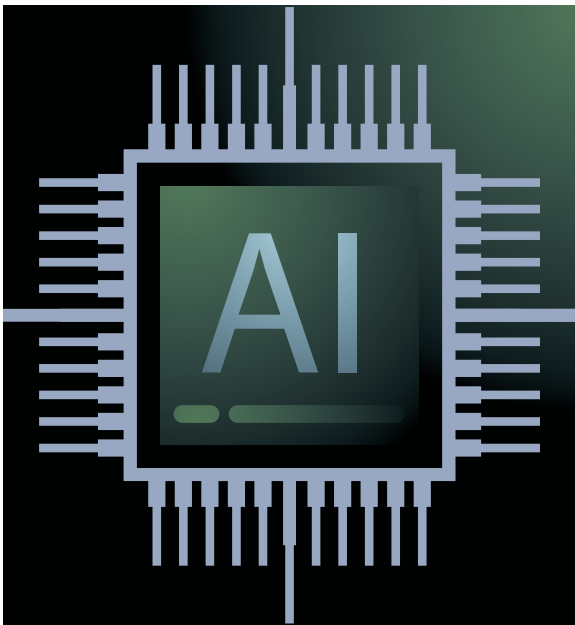
Rather than fighting this trend, many school districts are embracing it thoughtfully. Forward-thinking educators are recognizing that artificial intelligence literacy will be essential for students entering today’s workforce, whether they pursue

college or enter careers directly after graduation.

Districts nationwide are providing professional development to help educators integrate artificial intelligence appropriately while maintaining academic integrity. This approach acknowledges that students must be prepared for a workforce where AI skills are increasingly valuable.

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.

School districts are developing

guidelines that include data security, privacy controls, user restrictions, and age-appropriate content standards to ensure ethical AI tool usage. These frameworks help teachers understand how to incorporate AI tools effectively while maintaining educational integrity.

Some schools are even offering specialized courses in artificial intelligence, preparing students to earn industry certifications that will serve them in technology-focused careers.

For parents, the key seems to be staying informed and engaged. As AI tools become more prevalent in classrooms, families can better support their children by understanding both the opportunities and the boundaries these technologies present.

New school year, new screen time challenges for parents

Tracy McCormick-Dishman
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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 evolved beyond simply limiting screen exposure. When tablets and computers become required tools for homework, traditional screen time rules become nearly impossible to enforce.

St. Johns County Schools recognizes the balance families must strike as technology becomes increasingly integrated into education. Superintendent Dr. Brennan Asplen acknowledges that students must understand technology completely to

New school cont. on pg. 10



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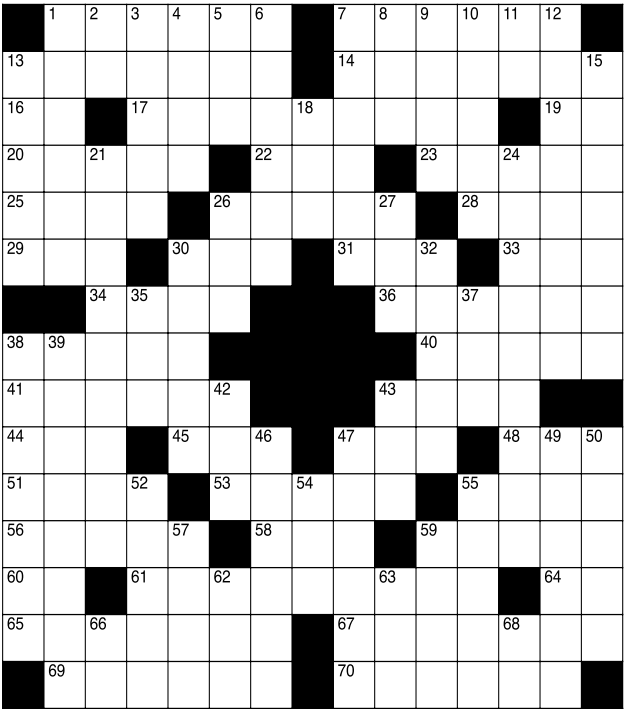
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A photograph of a man and a woman in formal ballroom attire. The man is in a black suit, and the woman is in a black dress. They are in a dance pose.

Puzzles

Answers on page 3
Provided by MetroCreative



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 Mol
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

EYE HEALTH WORD SEARCH

Y	E	S	E	Y	E	F	R	P	L	S	A	C	E	F	D	O	W	F	B
L	P	R	Y	I	U	E	T	M	D	C	O	A	X	C	U	P	G	X	H
V	Y	S	H	R	T	O	N	R	H	R	S	I	Y	M	F	T	E	P	D
M	R	V	N	I	Y	O	O	E	N	E	D	R	O	E	I	O	M	M	I
F	R	I	N	P	I	P	A	E	R	X	O	T	T	B	M	M	S	D	L
M	U	A	C	T	S	L	A	X	B	S	V	X	R	E	I	E	A	R	T
H	L	V	U	B	T	M	S	H	V	F	R	U	C	X	C	T	F	T	N
S	B	L	P	H	R	W	W	G	C	F	U	N	E	N	O	R	E	E	X
I	O	T	R	V	L	W	V	H	A	T	A	M	O	O	N	I	T	A	P
S	F	T	O	R	U	V	O	R	V	T	A	I	Y	F	T	S	Y	R	G
B	A	E	T	B	L	W	N	W	S	X	S	R	D	L	A	T	R	S	F
C	D	L	E	S	F	L	A	I	E	I	M	F	C	R	C	L	P	U	D
L	M	O	C	D	H	A	D	S	V	V	E	W	N	S	T	M	Y	F	R
T	M	I	T	L	R	S	W	E	H	U	U	V	W	Y	S	H	O	A	N
N	O	V	U	V	V	H	S	A	I	R	E	T	C	A	B	N	R	M	T
O	G	A	M	P	I	E	D	U	G	M	S	E	L	G	G	O	G	W	P
D	X	R	U	L	P	S	O	P	W	V	C	F	G	P	U	X	V	Y	O
T	G	T	A	I	D	R	A	G	E	R	S	I	G	H	T	D	T	Y	B
E	C	L	C	B	F	P	N	M	A	P	L	W	M	S	Y	D	F	N	H
T	Y	U	M	G	E	I	W	D	G	E	G	X	B	H	Y	C	B	P	T

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

WORDS

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

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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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Fishing

Jimmy's Fishing Report: Shrimp season heats up

By Jimmy Tomazinis
mail@floridanewslines.com

Wow, what a summer it has been and we are only in August. The shrimp run started with a bang and remains strong from the Buckman to the Shands. I've had reports of 100-150 shrimp per throw. Limits in under an hour. If those numbers hold through this month while they continue to grow, we are in for something special this fall. Let's all cross our fingers to make that happen.

The water is very warm, but the rains help mitigate it some since we do not get much relief from cooler ocean water this far upriver. Hot water can cause fish to be less active and even stop feeding. Because of this, finding areas that are slightly colder will help you find fish that are more likely to bite.

Redfish have been everywhere from bridges, docks, and drop offs. Most of them have been slot sized but a few have been caught close to 40 inches. Finger mullet, shrimp, and crab would be that natural baits of choice. Lots of different artificials will work as long as they resemble a small baitfish or shrimp.

Drum and sheepshead are around docks and bridges. They are very

keyed in on shrimp right now, but they will still take clams if you would rather use them. Look for drum in the deeper areas around the structures. Sheepshead will be there too but they are much easier to catch in shallower water, especially when baits are on the bottom.

Tarpon remain a possibility if you enjoy chasing them this time of year. Bridges are one of the most consistent places to find them. They also can be extremely mobile following bait schools up and down the river. They are most active at night, but you might be able to find them by looking for rolling fish early and late in the day. Try larger live baits like mullet and croakers where you see them rolling and you might just get a bite.

Another fun thing to do would be to catch some shrimp and take them up some of our creeks in the area to target bass. Bass absolutely love our river shrimp and will put on quite a spectacle trying to catch one on the surface. Rig the shrimp free-lined or under a float and see what you think about it. Drink plenty of water and stay safe out there.

Tight lines.

New school cont. from pg. 8

succeed in today's world.

"When they leave us now in this environment, they are going to need to understand AI completely to get a job when they get through college or even if they don't go to college," Asplen said.

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.

St. Johns County Schools is also addressing communication challenges in the digital age with

new technology tools. The district is rolling out "ParentSquare," a two-way communication platform that will replace the current one-way messaging system.

"It's going to open up communication like we've never experienced before in the district," said Christine Upchurch, director of communications. "Rather than just being able to push things out one way, this is engaging our community and our parents."

Asplen recognizes that parent expectations have evolved with technology. "I don't even know what they're doing on their phone and on their apps," he said. "But that's how they communicate, and so we need to understand how to get the info out."

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 technology into curricula, families are finding new strategies for managing the intersection of required educational screen time and healthy digital boundaries.

The path forward requires finding balance between embracing necessary educational technology while maintaining limits that support children's overall development and well-being. For many families, it's becoming less about the amount of screen time and more about the quality and purpose of that time.

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Gardening

Resilience in extreme conditions

By Master Gardener Volunteer Lesley Arrandale
mail@floridanewslines.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. Wow. Some of our wild areas are naturally resilient to these conditions, having been evolving over thousands of years, but not so our yards and gardens.

My yard is an average size lot, dating from the 1940s and '50s. In common with neighborhoods of similar age, over the past 20 to 30 years, water and laurel oaks have succumbed to old age. Storms have damaged some mature hickories and live oaks and even caused them to be taken down. Consequently many yards in the once shady street are now more exposed. There are more lawns and less shrubbery, like the old-fashioned azaleas that were traditionally planted around those large trees and as foundation plants.

We can take steps to achieve a resilient landscape, but what would be a reasonable starting point? I would say: choosing plants according to the mantra "Right plant, right place," which will ensure that the light, soil, and drainage for your chosen plants would be near ideal. It is notable that native plants historically found in our area are good bets. For my sandy well-draining situation, that means if I decided to grow any moisture-loving perennials I would group them in a limited planting area and be prepared to water them when droughts hit. I would probably set up a soaker hose to attach to a garden hose, which is the least wasteful - expensive! - way to use precious potable water.

When choosing plants, I look for pollinator friendly plants. Yes - pollinators; those varied insects that play a vital role in pollinating more than 30-40% of our foods. This chart lists some good native pollinator plants for Florida: <https://xerces.org/publications/plant-lists/native-plants-for-pollinators-and-beneficial-insects-florida>. Taking it one step further, refer to the Florida Native Plant Society to see if a plant is native to Duval County. For example, tropical sage is a readily available, pollinator friendly plant. A search for 'tropical sage fnps' will lead here: <https://www.fnps.org/plant/salvia-coccinea>, and there the distribution map shows it occurs here naturally. At this point,

one can determine the plant's needs.

Another good resource, <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/EP605>, contains a table that lists pollinator plants, their planting zones and their requirements.

What can you expect when you garden with pollinators in mind? What insects might you be welcoming into your yard? The Florida Wildflower Foundation can help: <https://www.flawildflowers.org/category/pollinator-profile/>. Although there's no guarantee which of those beauties will show up in your yard, I'm sure you'll agree that most of them would be well worth seeing.

When buying pollinator friendly plants for your landscape, please bear in mind that not all nurseries sell suitable plants, even if the labels say they will attract bees or butterflies. I recently bought a beautiful yellow, fragrant, easy-to-care-for rose. I asked the sales associate if the grower had used pesticides but they didn't know. I tracked down the grower and learned that the rose may have been raised using a neonicotinoid systemic pesticide, though they were in the process of eliminating those treatments. I appreciated their honesty and regretfully returned the plant. It was lovely, but I wasn't going to take the chance of spreading a deadly pesticide into a hive, or a native bee's nest, if the pollen and nectar they collected was tainted.

And there we have the dilemma; how to choose pollinator plants that would be safe for visiting insects. Ultimately, independent nurseries will probably be the best sources. The staff are more likely to have information about how their plants are grown, whether they grow them themselves or buy them from wholesale growers.

I was heartened to read this blog: <https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/news/2025/06/17/uf-ifas-research-protects-pollinators-from-harmful-pesticide-exposures/>, although my hope for certified pesticide free plants is a way off yet. In the meantime, I will grow some of my plants from untreated seed 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.



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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 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. 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



Photos courtesy Debi Lander

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

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.



The Alhambra includes a complex of buildings and gardens.



The Generalife gardens at the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, once served as a summer retreat for Nasrid rulers.

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