



# Great things are happening at New Haven Public Schools

*Summer 2019*

**Please see articles below**

*We believe that all kids can learn, achieve, and rise to a bright future. Our purpose is to provide an outstanding education that extends beyond graduation and prepares our students to be the next generation of leaders, innovators and problem-solvers.*

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# Birks Aims High For Second Year

by CHRISTOPHER PEAK | Aug 27, 2019 3:07 pm

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CHRISTOPHER PEAK PHOTO: Birks at kick-off: Welcome to a new school year!

Rallying her team two days before a new school year starts, Superintendent Carol Birks vowed Tuesday to have all 3rd-graders reading proficiently, all 10th-graders on track to graduate, and every other student meeting their growth targets.

The superintendent's plan to get there: develop a plan by the end of the school year, specifically a strategic plan that's "bold" and "comprehensive."

Birks presented that plan to plan at Convocation 2019, the kick-off to her second school year as superintendent, held on Tuesday morning at Hillhouse High School's Floyd Little Athletic Center.

"New Haven is the #1 school district in the state!" Birks said, asking for applause.

"We have to sound like this. We've got the press here; we've got it streaming on Vimeo and Facebook," she said, asking the crowd to cheer even louder. "New Haven is the best school district in the state!"

"Now we sound like we believe that."

## An Upbeat Launch



Attendees stand up and cheer at Tuesday's convocation.

### **Nijija-Ife Waters: Thank you for coming back.**

Compared to [last year's event](#), this year's school-opening convocation was pared back. Teachers complained last year that they'd lost too much prep time, which they needed to arrange classrooms and meet colleagues. So Tuesday they stayed in their schools and watched the convocation on a live video feed.

But the speeches were just as upbeat, repeatedly echoing the district's overarching philosophy — “Kids First!” — to put politics aside and let teachers do their jobs.

Over the course of two hours, an array of speakers including Mayor Toni Harp, Board of Education President Darnell Goldson, and City-Wide Parent Team President Nijija-Ife Waters pumped up school staff about the year ahead.

### **Justin Threet and his teacher Rose Murphy, at center.**

“This year, some of our students will read their first words. Some will fall in love with a book for the first time. Some will play their first notes on an instrument they'll pursue for the rest of their lives. Some will be another year closer to becoming fully bilingual,” said Rose Murphy, the district's Teacher of the Year, who leads English classes at Hill Regional Career High School.

“Some will experience the joy of playing on a team, of bringing home an ‘A,’ of pushing themselves to understand something new.”

### **Harriett Alfred and Danielle Storey riff on Barbara Streisand.**

In between, High School in the Community’s band played a jazz rendition of Will Smith’s “Wild Wild West.” A family of five siblings sang the spiritual “Ride the Chariot” a cappella. A Cooperative Arts & Humanities student, Bradyn Pettway, shimmied and leaped across the floor to an instrumental version of “Stand By Me.” And two music teachers, Danielle Storey and Harriett Alfred, sang the “Funny Girl” show tune “People” with the lyrics rewritten for teachers. Justin Threet, a senior at Career, read a poem asking his teachers to “be fair” and his fellow students to “step it up.”

### **Mayor Toni Harp and Superintendent Birks, on stage.**

When it came her time to speak, Birks celebrated the successes over the last school year. She said the schools are lowering their [chronic absenteeism rates](#) while [raising Smarter Balanced test scores](#) and [graduation rates](#).

She said that the district has expanded opportunities through academies for literacy, numeracy and social-emotional learning; an English Learner Fellows program for teachers pursuing a certification; and a lunch series for clerical staff in Central Office.

She said the district is also piloting [a play-based curriculum for the early grades](#) that experts say is more developmentally appropriate and network improvement communities for principals that can help schools learn from each other.

### **District officials clap along with the music.**

What’s up next? Birks led a call and response with the audience with the answers projected on a screen.

“One?”

“New Haven!”

“One goal?”

“Student achievement!”

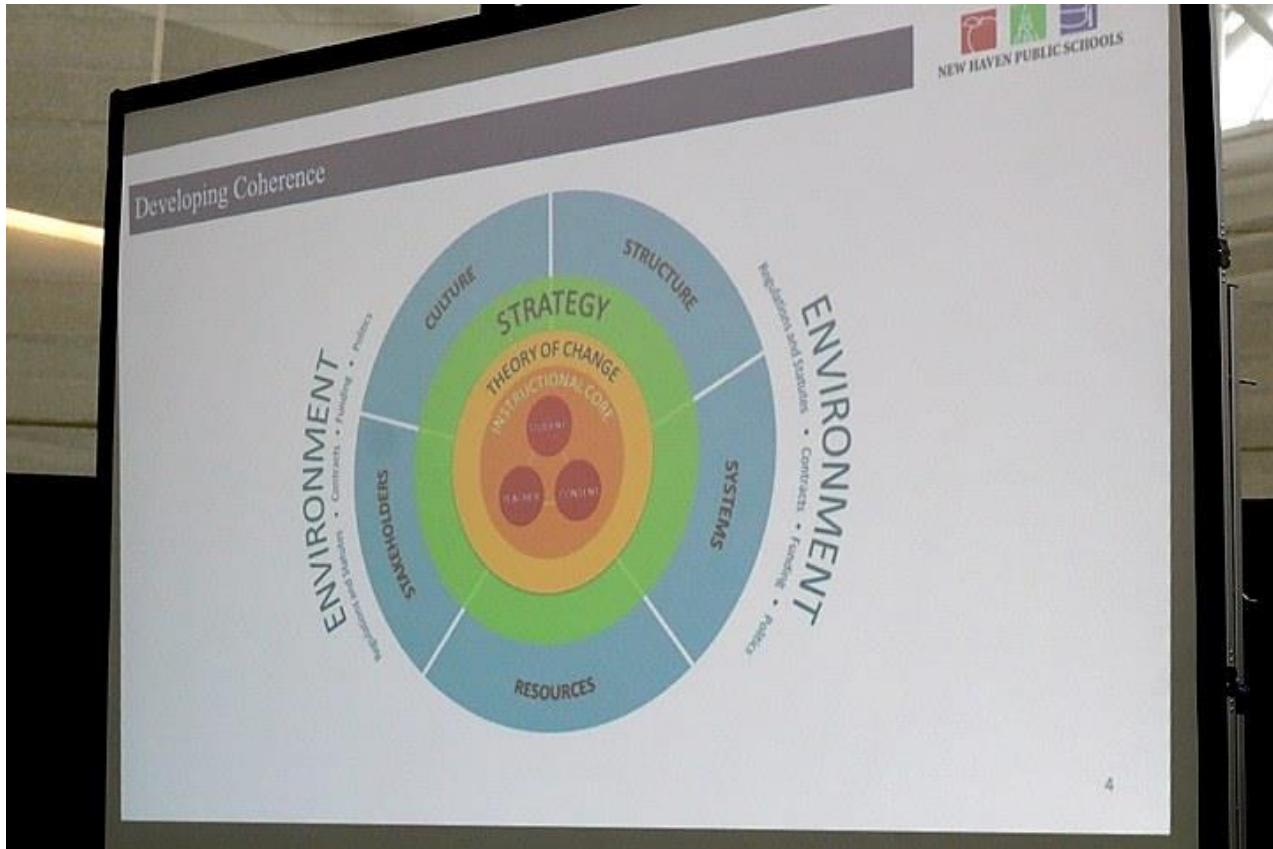
“The bottom line is student achievement,” Birks echoed. “Our children are looking to us to be role models, to be examples, to do what’s best for them, to be on our best behavior, to stand up and be counted, to be accountable, to ensure that they are successful. They only get one shot at this, and they are looking to us.”

She said she wants to see every students meet all [their growth targets](#) in math and reading, boost their attendance and make it to graduation.

That means, in elementary school, students should be developing social-emotional skills; in middle school, they should be working toward an individualized success plan and receiving

wraparound services; and in high school, they should be exploring multiple pathways to prepare for life after graduation, whether training for a job or taking college courses.

## “Developing Coherence”



New Haven’s goal is to protect the “instructional core.”

To get there, she said the district needs to do more planning.

Birks put up a multi-colored chart to explain the district’s goals for “developing coherence.”

At the center, she said, is the “instructional core,” which is surrounded by a “theory of change,” a middle layer of “strategy” and an outer layer of “culture,” “structure,” “systems,” “resources,” and “stakeholders,” all being pressed in by the “environment.”

She went on to say the district needs to improve its strategy for “continuous improvement” by improving at analyzing data, teaching critical thinking, and implementing a rigorous and culturally relevant curriculum based on an audit whose results are still being finalized.

And: The district needs to revisit its continuous improvement plan and continue strategic planning that will align the budget to clear accountability measures; figure out how to assess math and reading skills and share the results with families; and develop a “multi-year plan” that will individualize learning for gifted and high-needs students and introduce more digital platforms for a “21st-century classroom.”

Finally, Birks said, the district needs to revisit New Haven's [portfolio model](#), the controversial strategy that's based on the management style of treating schools like a diversified portfolio of stocks, doubling down on those making gains and replacing those showing losses.

"As a district, we say we're a portfolio district. We've adopted a few elements. But as a team, we're going to co-construct and co-create what that really means through our strategic planning process," she said. "We can't want people to have autonomy when it's convenient. If we're going to say 'autonomy,' we need to define it. If we want to hold principals and teachers and everyone accountable, we have to define what they're accountable for and what is what we call 'loose' and 'tight.'"

Birks ended by passing out postcards of lighthouses to every employee in the room, as a sign that they are beacons to their students.

"I want to thank you for your leadership, your drive, your passion and your love that you show our students every single day," she said.

# New Haven Schools Take New Teachers For A Walk, To Neighborhoods

By Brian Zahn

Updated 2:16 pm EDT, Monday, August 26, 2019



Photo: Brian Zahn / Hearst Connecticut Media

IMAGE 1 OF 4

Lee Cruz points out a boarded up bodega where two passengers died in a crash three days prior across from Christopher Columbus Family Academy during a tour for new teachers on Aug. 26, 2019.

NEW HAVEN — School officials took first-year teachers for a tour Monday, but it went much further than any single building.

Instead, the tour was a way to give teachers a greater sense of the communities they serve.

District officials added four walking tours for new teachers as part of the orientation they undergo as they begin working for the school district.

“This year, the Youth, Family and Community Engagement Department decided to include a tour to take teachers into the neighborhoods where they’ll be working,” said Coordinator of Parent Engagement Daniel Diaz.

Diaz said teachers were split into four groups Monday, based on the schools where they will be working, to tour Fair Haven, Brookside in West Rock, the Hill and Dixwell/Newhallville.

Lee Cruz, a longtime advocate for encouraging more foot traffic in Fair Haven, led about 40 new district employees for one mile — from Fair Haven Middle School to Christopher Columbus Family Academy to John S. Martinez School — where a school bus would wait, ready to take them back to their orientation.

Before the tour, Cruz gave a brief summary of the migration patterns in Fair Haven over the last century, which he said he’s learned from engaging neighbors more than from any book. Today, Fair Haven is mostly Puerto Rican, Mexican and Ecuadorian, although Italians, Germans and Poles played a large role in shaping the area’s culture since the 1920s, he said. In the homes roughly bordering his own, he said, there are at least five languages represented and even more nationalities.

On the tour, Cruz pointed out some resources teachers could use with students, such as the local branch of the New Haven Free Public Library next to Fair Haven Middle School. He also offered some lightly sardonic commentary: because of the importance to the community of the CTown Supermarket on the corner of Grand Avenue and Ferry Street, he said, the intersection has become a favorite among politicians.

“I love this opportunity to be in the community and see it for ourselves,” said Jessica Jones, a substitute teacher for Roberto Clemente Elementary School, who asked Cruz questions about the history of the area as they walked.

Heriberto Cordero, principal of Fair Haven Middle School, said the tour is a “neat opportunity” to see outside of the school buildings where teachers work. Cordero, who addressed the Fair Haven tour group from inside his school’s historic, restored auditorium, said the lovely buildings can be a safe space for students, but don’t always reflect their home lives.

“It’s nice to get out there and get a feel for the community,” he said.

As the group stopped on street corners, life in Fair Haven played out around them; mothers pushed carts holding personal items with their children on tricycles and joggers zipped in between new teachers.

brian.zahn@hearstmediact.com

# How One School's Kids Tackled Math

by CHRISTOPHER PEAK | Aug 26, 2019 4:15 pm

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CHRISTOPHER PEAK PHOTO

**Strong School's third-graders line up for a math bee, as teacher John Fortier queues up times tables.**

As she rode the morning bus, Melany Abigail Catota Lopez, a third-grader at Strong School, pulled a stack of pink notecards with multiplication tables out of a plastic baggie. Her teacher had helped her cut them out. She asked a friend to help her go over them.

"But you know them," the friend told her.

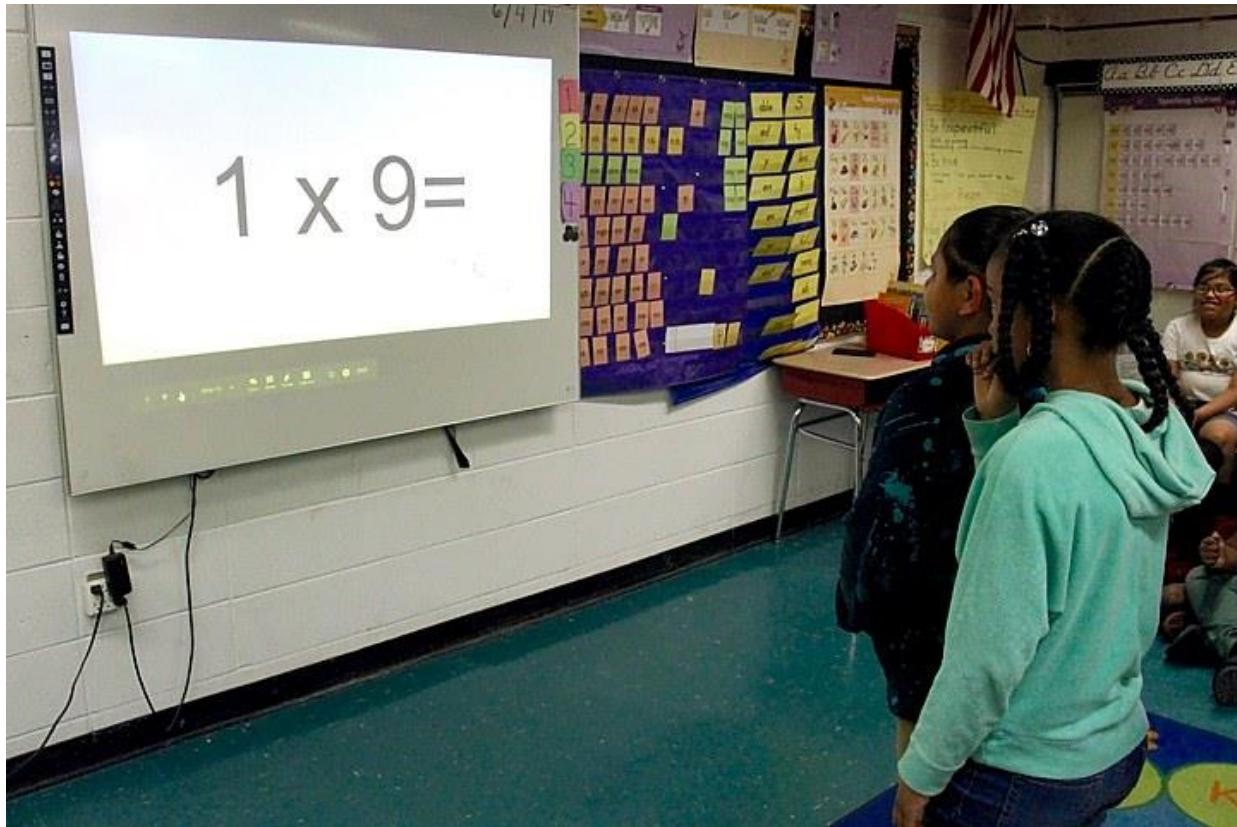
"I know," Catota said. "I just want to practice them in case."

Hours later, that cramming came in handy as Catota competed in a "math bee" at Strong 21st Century Communications Magnet School — the school's riff on a spelling bee that encourages students to go over primary math skills.

The extra hours of study helped Catota take home the competition's top prize of a "Pop To Win!" board game, a study-hall version of "Trouble." And that helped Strong at the end of the

academic year earn state recognition as a “School of Distinction,” an honor given to only 160 schools in Connecticut, for its rapid growth in math scores among high-needs students.

As students prepare to return to school Thursday for the start of another academic year, Strong’s success shows how one school has responded to New Haven’s biggest instructional challenge: how to teach kids math.



Quick: Five seconds to answer.

Over the past two years, Strong has focused on what experts call “math facts.”

Just as in language arts, where readers are eventually supposed to recognize about 200 common words on sight without having to sound them out, students are expected to also be able to do basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division problems almost automatically.

To help reinforce those fundamentals, Strong School has been running “math bees” throughout the year. Along with a new teaching method, added after-school tutoring and a slew of other programs, those drills have helped the school nearly double its math proficiency rates in one year, even if three-quarters still aren’t where the state wants them to be.

But more importantly, regardless of what they know at the beginning of the year, the average student at Strong is completing 76.6 percent of their growth targets, a metric that shows whether they’re on track to reach grade level within five years, even if they’re way behind when they start.

The rate among high-needs students — who are living in poverty, growing up with disabilities, or learning English for the first time — is even higher.

At 77.7 percent of growth targets met, the average Strong student with high needs far exceeds even the state average of 55.4 percent of growth targets met. It's an especially impressive feat at a school where nearly every student is overcoming challenges: 71 percent of the students are living near the poverty line, 39 percent of the students are learning English and 12 percent of the students have special-education plans.

"The NHPS Math Department is immensely proud of the students and faculty at Strong," said Kenneth Matthews, the department's supervisor. "They exemplify the Math Department's mission of lifelong learning and access to higher education and careers in STEM."

**Finalists, including Melany Catota at left, face-off.**

On a recent afternoon after coming back from lunch, a group of about 20 students from Strong's fourth-grade class lined up to compete in the year's final math bee. A teacher sat at the desk, ready to click through a slideshow of multiplication equations.

They'd each have five seconds to answer correctly before being eliminated.

12 x 8? A student blanked, unable to think of the answer before the clock ran out. 8 x 4? 24, a student incorrectly said, just off with the answer to 8 x 3. 11 x 7? 77, a student blurted out, making five syllables sound like two.

Like him, most of the students knew the answers off the top of their head right away. After the first round, just a handful of students had been disqualified.

For the second round, they'd have to answer even faster, within just three seconds.

12 x 11? Ouch, that was a toughie. 4 x 9? "I don't know know that one," a boy said. 10 x 6? Now, that was a gimme.

The remaining students who got their answers right — some with buzzer-beaters, just before the clock ran out — raced to the back of the line, not wanting to risk even a second of being caught off guard. By the end, almost half the group had sat down.

For the final round, about 10 students who couldn't be stumped — many of them participants in Strong's after-school tutoring sessions — went head-to-head, competing in pairs to see who could answer quicker.

They were so fast that, to win, the students had to say their answers almost as soon as the numbers flashed on the whiteboard.

The finals came down to Melany Catota and Saviour Moccormack. 12 x 8? Catota yelled out first. 96! The class burst into applause.

"You guys have got those facts down so well, we couldn't even get you out," Principal Susan DeNicola told the class. "We're ready for division."

## **Math Bee winners Melany Catota and Saviour Moccormack.**

Holding her certificate and her prize afterwards, Catota said that she had started “sweating,” by the time she’d made it to the finals. “I was worried that maybe they would have done it,” she said. “But then when it was  $12 \times 8$ , I just turned around and said the answer quick.”

“Looking at where we were, which was low, we knew that we needed to make some changes,” DeNicola said. “We kind of revamped everything, because what we were doing wasn’t working.”

Catota said that she knew the answers would be helpful to her later on. Especially if she wanted to be a teacher, she added, though she was thinking about being an actress. She said her mom, who’d helped her practice the twelves while they were driving around, had been “impressed.”

Could she do thirteens? “On paper,” she said. “Sometimes in the mind too. Like right now,  $20 \times 3$  is 60.”

Moccormack said she liked being challenged in her math classes. Right now, she said she was learning how to do three-digit multiplications.

“If you don’t know it, you can concentrate on how to do it,” she said. After solving it, “I feel excited. It’s like I already knew it.”

## **Fourth-grade teacher Kellie Mullally teaches students the difference between perimeter and area.**

The “math bees” are just one part of a bigger overhaul of Strong School’s math instruction. Even without having a math coach on staff, the principal and the magnet resource coordinator worked with teachers to come up with fixes.

They doubled down on the “workshop” model, where students spend the bulk of class working in small groups on a series of increasingly difficult equations, Mathews said. That method has shown success in other schools, like Quinnipiac Real World Math STEM School, where last year’s fifth-graders showed more growth in their math scores than any other group of kids in the entire state.

They divvied classes up by ability, allowing some groups to get ahead while others worked on fundamentals. Unlike “tracking,” which permanently keeps students apart based on initial scores, those arrangements are flexible. They change throughout the year based on classwork and assessments. Catota, for instance, had recently moved up into a more advanced group.

They added an after-school tutoring session through Title I funds, where two math teachers stayed late after school for four months. Rather than just baby-sitting students while they do homework, they challenge them with advanced problems for two hours.

They added a math night for parents, where nearly 70 parents showed up to learn how they could help their kids study.

And they also drilled down into their math facts, reviewing the fundamentals with elementary-school students to make sure they weren’t stumped by easy calculations, through computer games, everyday classes and regular competitions.

“It’s the basics,” said Julie Demsky, the school’s math coach. “Especially with the Smarter Balanced Assessment” — the state’s year-end test — “when you’re getting into those harder word problems, if you don’t know addition or subtraction facts, that’s going to slow you down.”

Demsky added, though, that they weren’t trying to teach to the test. She said the math facts gave students the self-assurance they needed to feel like they can tackle tougher equations.

“When they have that strong basis, you can move onto that more complex, four-step math problems,” she said. “They’re more confident in tackling something like that, and just having that helps them to push through.”



Fourth-grade students compare answers during a math workshop.

At Strong, teachers wanted to make that process fun, so they introduced the math bees. Charles Warner, Jr., a math teacher, said he modeled the idea off of competitions that he did as a student at Worthington Hooker School years ago.

“Math is cumulative, so if you have a gap somewhere, you really are stuck until you address it,” he said. “The little part we can do in elementary school is give them that solid beginning so that they can take off, build and make their way to calculus or trigonometry so much.”

Principal DeNicola said that her school had come so far because she gave teachers “more autonomy.” When she received the math scores two years ago, she said she’d been “devastated” and “defeated,” because she felt like her staff had already been trying so hard.

DeNicola called her staff together for an emotional meeting. She said she told them, “We know we have to follow the mandates of the district. However, what can we do to change things?”

“I really felt like I needed to put it back in their hands. Not like, ‘It’s you’re problem, figure it out,’ but more like, ‘Alright, we’re going to brainstorm together as a group. We need to decide what are we going to do,’” she said. “That made a world of difference, letting them know we support you. Because you know the kids better than us. We can dictate, but you guys are the ones that can really make the difference.”



Strong School's current location on Orchard Street.

DeNicola said the work teachers put in has changed Strong School’s reputation. It went from the overflow kindergarten, where parents with unregistered five-year-olds lined up every August to claim a late spot, into a school that was being held up by the state for its progress.

That transformation will be completed when the school moves to a new building on Southern Connecticut State University’s campus in January and is renamed the Barack H. Obama University Magnet School.

“We’re going to have waitlists,” DeNicola predicted. “I’m extremely proud of where we’ve come.”

## Wilbur Cross High School



This summer, Wilbur Cross student activists from our Cross In Action club participated in the CT Students for a Dream/Citywide Youth Coalition "Freedom Summer". On August 17 they moderated a forum for New Haven mayoral candidates that was held at the United Church on the Green. They posed tough and thoughtful questions, and were excellent hosts.

Photo #1 Cross In Action students before the event began. From left to right, Nicole Hernandez, Juan Stevens ('19 graduate), Angeli Arevalo, Aldo Cortes, and Dajia Carr.

Photos #2 and #3 Aldo and Nicole explain the rules of the forum.

Photo #4 Candidates responding to students' questions, from left to right: Justin Elicker, Seth Poole, Urn Pendragon, and Wendy Lecker. Toni Harp did not attend.

Photo #5 all the Freedom Summer participants introduced themselves.

\*\*\*there were about 6 other young people from other NH high schools too, but I don't know their names or schools. Sorry!

## Kindergarten Canvass 2019









## Superintendent's Summer Reading Challenge

