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Titan Herald
TACONIC HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
www.taconichills.k12.ny.us NOVEMBER 2026

Growing, Evolving, and Looking Ahead

Dear Taconic Hills Families, Students, and Community Members:

As I begin my fourth year as Superintendent at the Taconic Hills CSD, I continue to value the opportunity to connect with our students, staff, families, and community. One of the most important parts of my role is listening, learning, and sharing the meaningful work taking place throughout our schools.

Communities change, and so do schools. While we value our history and traditions, we also recognize the importance of looking ahead. Taconic Hills is an evolving district, and I believe it is important that our community has an opportunity to see who we are today, what we are working toward, and the opportunities we are creating for our students.

We continue to strengthen teaching and learning through the thoughtful review and selection of mathematics and literacy curricula for grades K–8. Our educators are working collaboratively to create consistent, connected learning experiences that build students' knowledge and skills. At the same time, we recognize that education extends beyond the classroom. Through athletics, the arts, field trips, the Shakespeare Festival, and grant-funded experiences, we are expanding opportunities for students to explore interests, discover talents, and experience new things.

We are also developing work-based learning opportunities that connect students with local businesses, organizations, and agencies. These partnerships help students explore careers and see the connections between their education and future possibilities. Just as importantly, we want student voice to help shape their experiences and the future of our schools.

Our schools are an important part of this community, and their success is something we all share. Whether you have children or grandchildren attending Taconic Hills, graduated from our schools years ago, recently moved to the area, or consider this community your second home, you are part of the Taconic Hills story.

I encourage everyone to take a fresh look at the district. Attend a Board of Education meeting, join one of my virtual Coffee and Conversation sessions, watch a Board meeting livestream, volunteer, or share your expertise and connections with our students. There are many ways to become involved, and we welcome your questions, ideas, and perspectives.

We are proud of our history, energized by the opportunities ahead, and committed to continuous improvement. We want our community to see Taconic Hills for who we are today, not simply who we have been, and be part of the future we are building together.

With gratitude,
Lynnette Brunger
Superintendent of Schools

Senior Selected for NYSSMA All-State Mixed Chorus

We are proud to celebrate Senior Calee Nowak, who has been selected to perform in the New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA) All-State Mixed Chorus!

Selection for an All-State Ensemble is a highly competitive honor, with a limited number of spots available. Student musicians must prepare a solo at NYSSMA's highest level of difficulty and complete rigorous sight-reading evaluations as part of the audition process. Calee earned her selection with a perfect score of 100 during her audition last April.

Calee will travel to Rochester December 3–6, where she will rehearse with other exceptional student musicians from across the state before performing at the renowned Eastman Theatre on December 6 for the NYSSMA Winter Conference.

"We are very proud of Calee and her accomplishments," said Rebecca Miller, Calee's Vocal Educator. "The hard work and dedication demanded by her craft are evident. Calee will be an excellent representative of our music department."

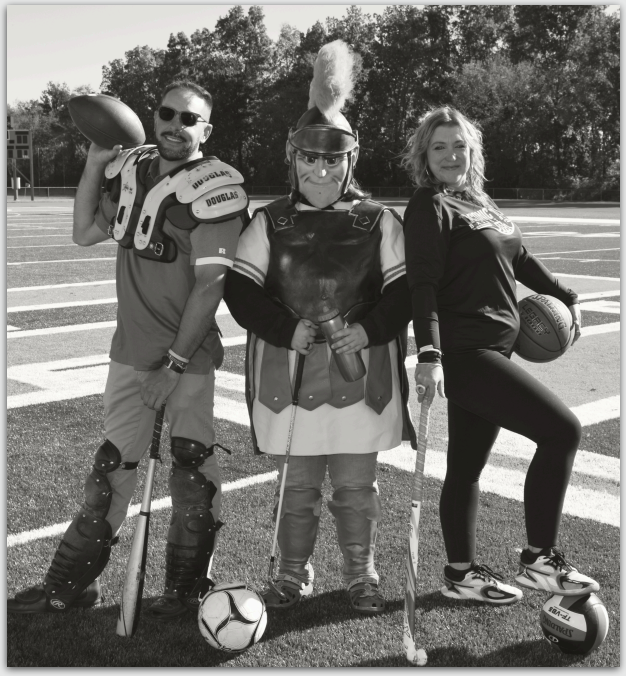


Calee's passion for the performing arts extends beyond All-State. She is a member of Select Choir and has taken on significant roles in Taconic Hills Drama Club productions. She also participates in Varsity athletics and is a consistent High Honor Roll student, sharing her talents on the stage, on the field, and in the classroom. In addition, Calee participated in a prestigious program at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania this past summer.

We are so proud to have Calee represent Taconic Hills and look forward to cheering her on as she takes the All-State stage!

A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE OF TITAN ATHLETICS

We are proud to welcome two familiar faces into leadership roles within our athletics program. Effective July 1, 2026, Joshua Piper began serving as Athletic Director, with Ericka Shook joining him as Assistant Athletic Director. Both Mr. Piper and Ms. Shook bring decades of experience, a deep understanding of our school community, and, most importantly, a genuine commitment to the success and well-being of our students.



For Mr. Piper, becoming Athletic Director is a homecoming in more ways than one. A Taconic Hills alumnus, Josh has been a part of the Titan community for many years as both an employee and coach. He has coached a variety of athletic teams throughout his time at Taconic Hills, and has built strong relationships with students and families along the way. In addition to his coaching experience, he has served the District as a Teaching Assistant for more than a decade. His experience as a former student, coach, and staff member gives him a unique perspective on what it means to be a Titan.

Joining Mr. Piper is Ericka Shook, who brings an incredible wealth of experience and an enthusiasm for students that is truly unmatched. Ericka has been part of our team for more than two decades, serving as classroom support across nearly every grade level throughout her career. Her years working directly with students have given her an invaluable understanding of their needs, interests, personalities, and potential. Anyone who knows “Shooky” knows the energy and dedication she brings to everything she does. Her passion for our students and her commitment to supporting them make her a natural fit for this new role.

We congratulate Josh and Ericka on their new roles and are excited to see all that they will bring to Titan Athletics. Their experience, relationships, and deep connection to the Taconic Hills community will be tremendous assets as we continue to support and celebrate our student-athletes.

REAL CONVERSATIONS, REAL CHOICES.

A Substance Free Future.

On Tuesday, October 20, Taconic Hills Juniors and Seniors had the opportunity to hear an inspiring and important message from Stephen Hill, founder of Speak Sobriety, who visited the District to speak with students about the importance of leading a healthy, substance-free life and mindfully building a life worth defending.

Through sharing his personal life journey, Mr. Hill encouraged students to think critically about the choices they make, the influence of peer pressure, and the impact those decisions can have on their health, well-being, and future. One of his key messages was simple but powerful: “You cannot become addicted to something you never try.” He challenged students to recognize the pressures they may face, feel confident in saying no to substances, and understand that they have the power to make decisions that protect their futures.

Following the assembly, students participated in smaller breakout sessions throughout the day. These sessions provided an opportunity for more personal conversations, allowing students to ask questions, share thoughts, and connect with Mr. Hill in a smaller setting.

Speak Sobriety works with schools and communities to provide education and support focused on substance use prevention and recovery. Experiences like this reinforce Taconic Hills' commitment to providing students with the knowledge, resources, and support they need to make healthy decisions as they prepare for life beyond high school.

A special thank you to the Columbia County District Attorney's Office and the Columbia County Sheriff's Office for sponsoring this valuable learning opportunity and making it possible for our students to participate at no cost to the District. We are also grateful to Stephen Hill for sharing his personal story, connecting with our students, and reminding them of the importance of making thoughtful choices that support a healthy and positive future.



Speak Sobriety



Fresh Faces: Get to Know our New Leaders



MARCIE HEYWOOD



MELISSA PICARIELLO



LYNDSEY FINK



AUSTIN ELLSWORTH

Please welcome **Marcie Heywood** to the position of Assistant Superintendent. After a 24-year career in education in the Newburgh Enlarged City School District, Ms. Heywood joined Taconic Hills in March 2026. Her service in public education includes being a Classroom Teacher, Assistant Principal, Interim Principal and Director of Elementary Education. She holds degrees in General Education, Special Education, Psychology and Educational Leadership, and is currently pursuing her doctorate at Fordham University. Her philosophy reflects a deep commitment to ensuring every student receives the support they need to succeed. Beyond her profession, she considers her greatest role to be that of mom to her son and especially enjoys cheering him on at his football and lacrosse games.

Melissa Picariello joins the Taconic Hills team serving as our Supervisor of Special Education. She served the Middletown City School district for 18 years as a Special Education Teacher serving students with diverse learning and behavioral needs. Mrs. Picariello holds a Bachelors of Science in Behavioral Sciences, Master of Science Dual Certification in Elementary and Special Education and her Master of Science in Educational Leadership. Her philosophy of education is that inclusive learning environments promote students' engagement and progress, academically and socially. We welcome her expertise and experience as they are assets to our district. When she is not on campus she enjoys spending time with her husband, son and daughter, and other close family members.

Elementary Assistant Principal **Lyndsey Fink** began her 18th year in education at Taconic Hills. She holds degrees in School Leadership, Science of Reading, Special Education, and Childhood Education, along with certifications in School Building Leadership, Literacy, Students with Disabilities, and Childhood Education. Mrs. Fink brings extensive experience in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and curriculum development. Having previously served as a teacher, summer school principal, and literacy/instructional supervisor, she believes in empowering educators through strong relationships, collaboration, and shared responsibility. In her free time, she enjoys making memories with her husband, son, and pets, as well as cheering on her favorite sports teams.

Following the retirement of John Dodds III, **Austin Ellsworth** has stepped into the role of Coordinator of Computer Technology. Mr. Ellsworth brings six years of experience from Questar III BOCES and Hudson City School District, where he held various roles, including Computer Services Specialist, District Data Coordinator, and Registrar. He holds an associate degree in Computer Science, along with multiple technology certifications. In an ever-changing field, he believes it is important to meet adults and students where they are with their technology skills and build upon that foundation for success and confidence. Outside of work, Mr. Ellsworth enjoys being a handyman, tinkering with everything from cars and vintage technology to DIY home renovations and upgrades.

Strengthening Our Systems; Better Serving our Children

To begin the 2026–2027 school year, we made several adjustments to our administrative team as part of our ongoing goal of strengthening systems, improving collaboration, and making the best use of existing resources.

These changes were not about adding positions, but rather realigning responsibilities to better support students, staff, and families.

The Director of Pupil Personnel Services position was realigned to Supervisor of Special Education, allowing for more focused oversight of special education programs, services, and student needs.

Additionally, responsibilities for curriculum, instruction, and student support services were brought together under the Assistant Superintendent to create stronger connections between classroom learning, professional development, and the services students receive.

We remain committed to building on our District's strengths while identifying opportunities to improve. By strengthening the systems that connect our work, we can better support our staff and provide every student with an engaging, supportive, and successful educational experience.

Thank you for your continued partnership and support of Taconic Hills Central School District.



Coffee Talk: Chat with our Superintendent - From Home!

Last year's Coffee Talks gave families and community members an opportunity to connect with Superintendent Lynnette Brunger. This year, we're taking the conversation virtual to make it easier for everyone to participate!

Grab your coffee, get comfortable, and join Superintendent Brunger from home for quarterly conversations about topics impacting our students, families, and community.

All sessions begin at 5:30 p.m. on the following dates:

- Thursday, December 10: Portrait of a Titan & NYS Regents Requirement Updates
- Monday, February 8: Student wellbeing - How do we support our Titans?
- Monday, April 12: All About the School Budget

Meeting links and additional information will be shared on our website and social media as each date approaches.

Want a personal invitation? Contact Alexsis Ellsworth, District Clerk, to have an invitation sent to your email.



A TASTE OF HONDURAS: Young Student's Meal Request Comes to Life



Last school year, third-grade student Eduardo approached Food Service Director Kyle Mattler with a special request: to create a meal inspired by his family's home country of Honduras so he could share a piece of his culture with his fellow students.

After careful planning and sourcing ingredients, we were excited to bring Eduardo's vision to life this September! While school meal regulations mean we couldn't prepare a fully authentic version, we created our own school-friendly take on Pollo Con Tajadas, served with cilantro-lime brown rice, seasoned black beans, cabbage and carrot slaw with a lime vinaigrette, and baked green plantains.

This special meal was about more than trying new foods. It was an opportunity for Eduardo to share something meaningful with his classmates and for our students to experience a taste of another culture through school lunch. Food has a special way of bringing people together, celebrating our differences, and reminding us of what we share. At Taconic Hills, we're proud to create opportunities for students to share their traditions and stories while building a stronger school community. That's what being Titan Strong is all about!

We always welcome student requests, ideas, and suggestions for future meals. You never know when one idea might bring an entire school community together!

More Than Just a School District

Taconic Hills Central School District spans 208 square miles and helps to bring our close-knit, caring community together. Whether or not you have children in our schools, you are a valued member of the Titan Community.

Our district serves a purpose far beyond the school day. Our facilities include a six-lane indoor swimming pool, a well-equipped fitness center, a large performing arts center, and a track and field complex that highlights our rural setting, where neighbors can come together for athletic events, concerts, performances, community events, and so much more. Soon, our district will serve the youngest members of our community through the opening of an in-house daycare. Made possible by our residents and community support, these facilities and opportunities belong to us all.

One of the most meaningful ways residents can participate is by taking an interest in the decisions that shape our schools. We have more than 9,000 registered voters in our district, yet we average only about 5% participation, roughly 500 residents, in our annual budget vote and school board member election. Your voice matters, and your vote helps shape the future of our district. Mark your calendar now: Tuesday, May 18, 2027 from noon to 9PM is our next annual vote. Come out, take part in your school district, and make your voice heard.

But don't wait until May to get involved. Follow what is happening in our schools by attending a Board of Education meeting, cheering on our Titans at an athletic event, coming to a concert or community event, volunteer in our classrooms, or participate in a board committee. Whatever your interest, find a way to connect that is meaningful to you. The strength of a school district isn't just measured by its enrollment numbers or student achievement. It is also measured by the people who stand behind our students, support our schools, and care about the future of our community.

If you're interested in ways you can get involved in the Taconic Hills community, please reach out to Alexsis Ellsworth, District Clerk, at DistrictClerk@taconichills.k12.ny.us.

Taconic Hills is not just a school district. We are a community, and there is a special place for you here.



Class of 2027 Senior Sunrise

Progress Across Campus: Capital Improvement Updates

There has been a lot of progress across the Taconic Hills campus as work continues on our Capital Improvement Projects. Several major projects are now complete, while others are in their final stages. Here is a closer look at what's been happening:

Athletic Complex
One of the most visible improvements has been the transformation of our old athletic complex into a modern facility for our students and community. Installation of the synthetic turf field and all-weather track is complete, along with new athletic equipment and supporting infrastructure. These upgrades will benefit our athletic programs and physical education classes for years to come. The athletic complex is now open for public use when school is not in session, adding another great recreational space to our campus alongside our tennis, basketball, and pickleball courts.

Daycare Area
Renovations to the District's daycare space are substantially complete, with just a few finishing touches remaining. The project transformed the former Board of Education room, Business Office, and Superintendent's Office into a spacious daycare facility designed to serve infant and toddler children. Updates include renovated interior spaces, restrooms, exits, a fenced-in outdoor recreation area, and improvements to existing building systems to accommodate the new program. We look forward to welcoming our youngest learners to this space within the next year and, hopefully, providing a natural transition into our Universal Prekindergarten Program.

Interior Flooring
New tile flooring has been installed in the auditorium area and Elementary School atrium, replacing the previously failing terrazzo flooring. The tile gives these spaces a fresh look while maintaining the familiar appearance of the original terrazzo, including a custom TH incorporated into the entry of each building. Beyond the updated appearance, this was an important safety improvement. Special care was taken during preparation and installation to ensure proper moisture barriers and other necessary precautions were in place. Work in the High School atrium is scheduled to take place on weekends and school breaks to avoid interrupting instruction, and is anticipated to be completed before spring.

Roofing
Roof replacement work is now mostly complete, with only minor flashing and gutter work remaining. The previous roof served the district for nearly 27 years. While a new roof may not be the most noticeable improvement from the ground, it's certainly one of the most important. This work addressed leaks and will help protect our building, extend the life of our facilities, and reduce future maintenance needs.

Bus Garage
Several important upgrades are taking place at the Bus Garage. New energy-efficient exterior lighting has been installed to improve visibility and safety, heating system repairs are nearing completion, and fire alarm upgrades are underway. The project also includes a new water heater system with updated piping. The previous setup did not have the capacity for the number of occupants served and was nearing the end of its useful life.

As the remaining work wraps up, we're making every effort to schedule construction on school breaks, weekends, and other times when students and staff are not in the building. Our goal is to keep projects moving forward while minimizing disruptions to instruction and the daily school routine.

We're excited to see these improvements come together and appreciate the continued patience and cooperation of our students, staff, families, and community throughout the process. These projects represent a significant investment in Taconic Hills, and we look forward to enjoying the benefits for many years to come. We will continue to share updates as major milestones are reached and the remaining work is completed.









Taconic Hills
CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
73 Route 11A
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SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS
Lynnette Brunger

The Taconic Hills Board of Education meets regularly on the third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. Meetings are open for the public to attend and are also streamed on YouTube.

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www.taconichills.k12.ny.us

Welcome New Staff

Leah Brody, Kindergarten Educator
Erica Cotter, Special Education Educator
Salinda Deery, Elementary Art Educator
Stefanie Driscoll, Math Educator
Christina Dwarka, Teacher Aide
Austin Ellsworth, Coordinator of Computer Technology
Lyndsey Fink, Elementary Assistant Principal
Kayla Friscia, Elementary Educator
Nicholas Funk, Elementary Educator
Erica Hufnagel, Food Service Worker
Joan Karron, Elementary Educator
Nicole Kernan, Elementary Educator
Emily Kirch, English Educator
Ryan Oakley, Jr/Sr High Clerk Typist
Kaya Osterhoudt, Special Education Educator
Melissa Picariello, Supervisor of Special Education
Dell Potts, Math Educator
Jessica Roberts, Teacher Aide
Jessica Serna, Agriculture Educator
Aja Sisco, Speech Language Pathologist
Lindsay Smith, Teaching Assistant
Isabella Torre, Jr./Sr. High Counselor
Rebecca Ward, Pre-Kindergarten Educator
Alexandra Whitbeck, Registered Nurse
Sarai Zele, Teacher Aide

UPCOMING EVENTS

Nov 23..... Parent-Teacher Conferences 5:30PM - 7:30PM
Nov 24..... Half Day Dismissal for All Grades 11:15AM
Nov 24..... Parent-Teacher Conferences 12:00PM - 2:50PM
Nov 25 - 27..... Thanksgiving Recess, District Closed
Dec 5..... Class of 2027 Craft Fair 10:00AM - 3:00PM
Dec 8..... Grades 9-12 Winter Concert & Art Show 6:30PM
Dec 15..... Grades 7-8 Winter Concert & Art Show 6:30PM
Dec 16..... Board of Education Meeting 6:00PM
Dec 24 - Jan 1... Winter Recess, District Closed



2026 Homecoming Court
pictured left to right: Calee Nowak, Mathias Bradley, Jesus Mercado, Spencer Harrington, Jennyfer Martinez, Emery Slater III, Emma Stickles, Tristan Super, Ava Hodges, Carly Busch