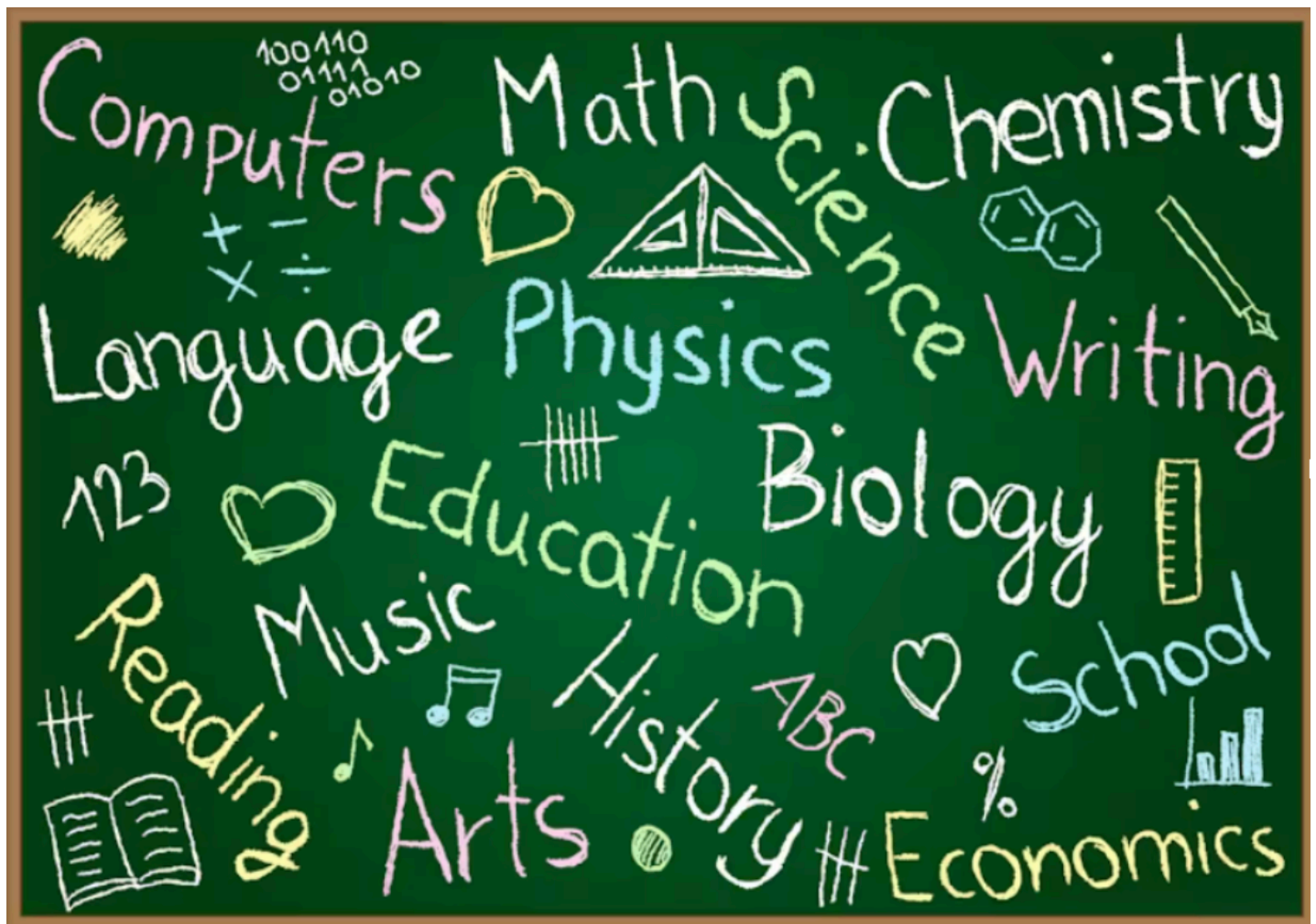


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NEWS

Independent Studies at Dalton

MARCH 18, 2025 BY MIKA HIGGINS-WOO

One of the most special opportunities Dalton students have is the privilege to participate in an independent study. An independent study is an extra class Dalton students can add to their schedule in which they meet one-on-one (or in small groups) with a member of Dalton's faculty to investigate a topic of their choosing. Many students construct independent studies at Dalton to delve into a topic not covered by the standard Dalton education, to learn from an expert, or to deepen their understanding of a niche and specific subject. Independent studies are open to students in their sophomore, junior, and senior years. As Assistant Head of School and Interim High School Director, Shira Kohn explains, "an independent study is a fantastic way [for a student] to follow [their] curiosity while also developing a stronger working relationship with a faculty member who can discuss the topic with them and learn more alongside the student through what is ideally some shared or overlapping interest."

Independent studies are also deeply intertwined with the Dalton Plan. Kohn points out that these studies parallel the Dalton Plan in their message: "students should be following up on their intellectual interests in creative ways and using their self-advocacy to find an adult to work with while taking on the responsibility for determining the arc of study and potential source material on their own." In essence, independent studies at Dalton are the ultimate manifestation of the Dalton Plan in action.

The extent to which Dalton students have agency to chart the direction of their own education through independent studies is truly unique to Dalton. *The Daltonian* reached out to students at several other private schools in New York City and found that Dalton's independent study program has a distinctive structure not found in other schools. Hazel Hoffman, a sophomore at the Horace Mann School, explains that her school has a similar program with a slightly different structure. At Horace Mann, independent studies are advised by a librarian who checks in once a week on students independently conducting asynchronous work. This process differs from Dalton's as it does not hinge upon the student-teacher relationship vital to Dalton's model. Catarina Nolli, a junior at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, reports that while her school does offer independent studies, they are quite different from Dalton's and more restrictive. At Fieldston, independent studies are limited to students in their senior year and can only revolve around a topic similar to one already taught in the general Fieldston curriculum. The biggest difference between the Fieldston and Dalton models is Dalton's prioritization of student creativity; at Dalton, students are encouraged to choose out-of-the-

box, niche topics that meet their own particular interests rather than topics adjacent to those already taught in the curriculum. Independent studies at Dalton can be about anything from Diasporic Jewish Foodways in NYC to Tituba and Gender in the Salem Witch Trials (two independent studies Kohn has personally overseen).

Many Dalton students participate in independent studies. According to High School Assistant Director for Operations Charlie Forster Stewert, in the 2023-2024 academic year, 48 students participated in independent studies, around one in every nine students. Many different departments welcome independent studies. In the last four years, independent studies initiated by students span across 12 different disciplines, from “Health and Wellness” to “Interdisciplinary” (across multiple departments) to the standard five core departments: English, History, Math, Science, and World and Classical Languages. This diversity in subject matter allows students to truly find what they are passionate about and pursue it through this program.

The Daltonian reached out to a handful of Dalton students who have taken independent studies to get a sense of the diversity and creativity of these courses. Oliver Katz ('26) did a semester studying the linguistics of Latin with Dalton Latin teacher Cortney Norris. He explains: “Ms. Norris and I would meet once a week to discuss a new passage of Latin which we had individually translated over the course of the previous few days. Each week, we would select a text from a different time period and would analyze the changes we saw in style, grammar, and syntax.”

Katz talks about how he truly had fun with his study with Norris. It wasn't a burden or just another class for him; instead, it was something that he truly wanted to learn more about. To him, it “not only was truly interesting and fed my curiosity, but was also just, at its core, fun – something I looked forward to even though it occasionally meant giving up my only free period of the day.” This is truly what is at the core of the independent study program at Dalton; the students who participate in it are doing so out of genuine passion and curiosity.

Another Dalton student who participated in an independent study is Isabella Fogelman ('27), who focused on neuroscience and neurodevelopment with Science teacher Benedetta Sampoli. Fogelman is currently interning at a neuroscience lab outside of school and has found her study with Sampoli to be an incredibly rewarding way to enrich her knowledge

before she applies it in real work at her internship. Fogelman and Sampoli used an online textbook as well as research articles to supplement their learning. Fogelman enjoyed getting to learn from someone so experienced in the field: "My favorite thing about the independent study was getting to learn with an experienced scientist who could answer my many questions about neuroscience, especially about topics I had heard of in the lab but was too nervous to ask the principal investigator about. It was definitely a lot better than trying to read the textbook on my own!"

Olivia Cooney ('27), participating in an independent study about the geometry of art with Math teacher Ezra Nelson, is yet another example of an extremely creative—as well as interdisciplinary—project. In her independent study, Cooney is working together with Mr. Nelson to understand the intersection of geometry and art. Cooney describes the specifics about what she has been studying: "So far, [she and Mr. Nelson] have made geometry constructions, discussed multiple point perspectives, and learned about how the golden ratio has influenced Renaissance art, nature, and art today."

A final example of a Dalton student using the independent study model to engage with something targeted and specific is Ava Van Dusen ('26), who completed a study with English teacher Michael Forbes about "Nancy Drew through the decades." In her study, she investigated the evolution of this iconic character in tandem with the ever-changing culture of feminism. To gather more information about her study, she read academic articles and conducted interviews with peers and teachers regarding her study topic. Reflecting on the process, Ava remarks, "I really enjoyed getting to explore the different facets of a character that I really loved, and I think I learned about myself in the process...My own escapades taught me that independent studies can be interdisciplinary, and in my opinion, they should be. You can learn so much more and cover so much more ground in really niche areas you'd never expect."

A final unique aspect of the independent study model at Dalton is an optional culminating project. As the model is flexible and up to the student, different studies can end in many ways. For example, Fogelman worked with Sampoli to create a presentation about neuroscience that she will be presenting at the end of DSRP (Dalton Science Research Program) this year. Cooney is combining both her interests in creating a final piece that includes both a written

and an artistic presentation, truly embracing what it means to have an interdisciplinary study. Van Dusen created a podcast with Dr. Forbes and released it privately on SoundCloud.

Katz, however, did not have a final project, which he remarked felt liberating. One of the perks of independent studies at Dalton is that they are all required to be Pass/Fail. Because of this, there is no need to carry stress about a final grade or project, which can often be freeing. Katz absolutely felt this freedom; he explained that the lack of a final grade or project “allowed [him] to get the most of each individual text we read. This wasn’t a class that was building towards a grade or something more important than what we were doing every week—the greatest thing [he] could get from this was the conversation [he] had about a text with Ms. Norris and the occasional friend dropping in.”

Whether you’re interested in math or painting—or both!—the opportunities Dalton provides to pursue that interest through the independent study program are limitless. Not only is it truly a demonstration of the Dalton Plan in action, but independent studies are also an amazing privilege to delve into interdisciplinary topics not covered by the Dalton curriculum, and certainly something for every high schooler to consider adding to their course schedule.

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