


Falls Church  
Annual

WINTER  
2026



SCHOOL  
& CAMP GUIDE

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# Westminster School Breaks Ground on State-of-the-Art Field and Playground

The Annandale community is seeing a dream come to fruition as top-rated Westminster School adds a state-of-the-art turf field and playground complex to its Gallows Road campus, with planned completion in early February 2026.

Westminster School, an independent, private preschool through 8th grade educational fixture since 1962, is raising its profile and that of the Falls Church-Annandale neighborhood by investing in modern outdoor facilities. The project includes a regulation-sized middle school field with a digital scoreboard, which can accommodate soccer, softball, and lacrosse. Fans can observe and cheer from a new raised terrace that overlooks the field.

The expansion also contains two new playgrounds. One is a space for preschool and kindergarteners, featuring equipment suited to exploration and imaginative play, while the other is suited to older elementary school students, providing structures that offer more challenging physical activities, such as a flexible climbing wall. Children will also enjoy the new full basketball court with one adjustable basket and one fixed. These play spaces are surrounded with welcoming stone walkways, a fountain and sculptures, and a picnic area.

These stunning, modern facilities not only benefit the school, but augment Fairfax County as well. They offer new opportunities for Westminster's award-winning camps program, which serves students throughout Fairfax County. Westminster's Camp Griffin will now offer an extensive selection of athletic camps, as well as new outdoor play spaces that will brighten its already vibrant program.

The project has sparked excitement in the Annandale neighborhood, with Mason-District Supervisor Andres Jimenez attending Westminster's June 2025 groundbreaking ceremony where he delivered remarks on the school's impressive program in academics, arts, and athletics, beautifully maintained facilities, and student body diversity. Westminster School is a vital member of the surrounding community, evidenced by its membership in local chambers of commerce and sponsorship of the Taste of Annandale. The school also provides community service through an active K-Kids Club and Builders Club, which each support various charitable organizations such as Northern VA Family Services, Martha's Table, Adopt-a-Highway and others. Westminster looks forward to continuing to amplify awareness of the school and the neighborhood of which it is a part.

This campus development is more than a decade in the making. First, a visionary plan of Westminster's last head of school, Ellis Glover, the current construction was the result of his groundwork in purchasing the land adjacent to the school's campus and overseeing the project's planning phases. This combined with the recent efforts of current head of school Nancy Schuler, who led a dedicated team to obtain county licensing, consult with the school's neighbors, and secure financing for the project through John Marshall Bank. Westminster School is carrying out an ongoing capital campaign to fund the construction and successfully reached the one-million-dollar mark at the close of 2025.

Westminster's investment in its campus is an investment in the Falls Church-Annandale community, and the school's growth reflects the expansion and modernization of the area at large. If you would like to know more about the project or tour Westminster's campus, please visit the school's website at [www.westminsterschool.com](http://www.westminsterschool.com).



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# Schools and Camps Offer Families Many Paths to Learning

BY NICK GATZ  
FALLS CHURCH NEWS-PRESS

Families across Northern Virginia are increasingly looking for options that combine education with enrichment—programs that support academic growth while also building confidence, creativity, and practical skills. A range of local institutions, from early-childhood schools to performing-arts organizations and athletic training centers, are meeting that demand through school-year programming and seasonal camps.

At the early-learning level, programs such as Grasshopper Green School and Westminster School represent a continued emphasis on developmentally focused education, particularly in the preschool and elementary years. These schools generally center learning around social-emotional development, early literacy and numeracy, and structured play—areas many educators consider essential for long-term success. In addition to classroom instruction, early-childhood programs often appeal to families seeking consistent routines, close teacher-student re-

lationships, and learning environments designed around the needs of younger children.

For families who prefer a faith-based structure, St. Anthony of Padua School offers an academic program shaped by Catholic education, typically blending core subjects with values-based learning and community service. Schools in this tradition often emphasize character formation alongside classroom achievement, aiming to provide a structured setting where students are encouraged to develop responsibility, leadership, and a sense of service.

Beyond traditional academics, performing-arts organizations are continuing to play a larger role in youth education—particularly through camps and conservatory-style training. Creative Cauldron has built a reputation in the region for youth theater programming that introduces students to acting, singing, and ensemble work. These programs often function as both arts instruction and confidence-building experiences, pushing students to practice public speaking, collaboration, and creative risk-taking.

Signature Theatre, known for its professional productions, also offers training opportunities that give students exposure to high-level instruction in musical theater and performance. Programs tied to major theater institutions tend to attract students who want more focused training, whether they are trying theater for the first time or considering it more seriously. For many families, arts camps fill a gap during the summer months while also providing a structured, skills-based environment.

Athletic and movement-based programs remain another major part of the local camp landscape. Kips Family Gym offers youth-focused fitness and movement instruction, often geared toward building strength, coordination, and healthy habits. Gym-based camps typically appeal to families looking for high-energy environments that keep children active while teaching age-appropriate physical skills. In recent years, demand has grown for camps that balance fun with measurable skill development, especially for younger kids who benefit from structured physical play.

Specialty sports programs add

another layer of options. NoVa Fencing & Archery provides instruction in two disciplines that emphasize focus, technique, and self-control as much as physical ability. Fencing and archery programs often draw students interested in individual sports, where progress is tied closely to repetition, precision, and goal-setting. These camps can also serve as an entry point into competitive training, though many participants attend simply to try something new in a supportive environment.

Meanwhile, educational programming for older students and adults continues to expand through institutions such as the University of Virginia – NoVa Center, which serves as a regional resource for continuing education, professional development, and community learning. While not a youth camp in the traditional sense, the center reflects a broader trend: education as a continuum, with pathways for skill-building and advancement at every stage of life. For families, the presence of a major university’s regional hub reinforces the idea that learning opportunities do not end with graduation—and that local ac-

cess to higher education resources can shape long-term goals.

Taken together, these programs illustrate how “school” and “camp” have become broader categories than they once were. Families are no longer choosing only between academics and recreation; increasingly, they are selecting from a mix of academic schools, arts instruction, fitness training, and specialized skill programs that reflect children’s individual interests. In many cases, camps serve as testing grounds—places where students discover new strengths that can later develop into hobbies, long-term pursuits, or even career ambitions.

As the region continues to grow, the common thread among these institutions is a focus on building capable young people through structured experiences—whether that structure comes from a classroom, a stage, a gym floor, or a training strip. For families planning the school year or mapping out summer schedules, the local landscape offers one clear message: learning happens in many forms, and there are more ways than ever for students to find the right fit.



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# AI Is Reshaping Classrooms Faster Than We're Willing to Admit

BY NICK GATZ  
FALLS CHURCH NEWS-PRESS

Artificial intelligence did not enter America's classrooms with a permission slip. It slid in through homework tabs open at midnight, group chats trading "better prompts," and students discovering that a machine can produce something that looks like thinking. The speed of this shift is not normal, and the scale is hard for the public to grasp.

Consider one widely repeated but still mind-bending marker. A UBS analysis, reported by Reuters, estimated ChatGPT reached 100 million monthly active users in about two months after launch. That is not a slow adoption curve that schools can "pilot." That is a flood.

Now layer that flood onto student behavior. The College Board, drawing on surveys conducted June 2024 through June 2025, reported the share of high school students who say they use generative AI for schoolwork rose from 79% to 84% between January and May 2025.

Pew Research Center, looking specifically at U.S. teens ages 13 to 17, found 26% have used ChatGPT for schoolwork, double the share

from 2023. The numbers do not perfectly match because they measure different things, but together they tell the same story. AI is not occasional anymore. It is part of the academic ecosystem.

Most people still frame this as a cheating problem. It is that, but it is also a deeper power problem.

The part most people miss: AI is a plausibility engine!

ChatGPT does not "know" in the way a teacher knows. It generates language by predicting what comes next based on patterns in data. That means it can sound authoritative while being wrong, and sometimes the wrongness is subtle enough to pass unnoticed.

Stanford researchers reported something that should make every educator uneasy. In experiments, people could distinguish between human and AI text with about 50% to 52% accuracy, basically coin-flip performance. In practice, that means a polished AI-written paragraph can sail through, especially when the assignment rewards smoothness, structure, and confidence.

And it is not just writing style. A peer-reviewed 2025 study in JMIR Mental Health tested GPT-4o's abil-

ity to generate literature reviews with citations and found nearly two-thirds of citations were fabricated or inaccurate. Let that sink in. A system can produce academic-looking references that feel real and are not. Students and even adults can mistake bibliography formatting for truth.

AI can help a struggling student get unstuck. It can re-explain a concept five different ways without embarrassment. It can support English learners, generate practice questions, or help a student with ADHD break an assignment into steps. For teachers drowning in workload, it can draft rubrics, create differentiated materials, and generate feedback templates quickly.

Those are meaningful advantages. But the very usefulness of AI is what makes it dangerous as a default.

The hidden cost: outsourcing the hard part of learning.

Education is not the production of answers. It is the development of mental muscles: argument, synthesis, judgment. AI is strongest at producing the appearance of those outcomes. So the risk is not only that students turn in machine-written work. The risk is that they stop practicing the cognitive steps that make

them capable adults.

If a student uses AI to brainstorm, outline, draft, revise, and polish, what is left for the student to do besides hit submit. The classroom can end up measuring compliance and formatting rather than thinking.

This is the new arms race. Students learn how to prompt. Teachers learn how to redesign. Administrators try to write rules that cannot keep up with the technology.

Educators are shifting fast and what many teachers report is a move away from naive bans toward smarter friction.

Process-based grading, with more emphasis on outlines, drafts, revision notes, and in-class checkpoints.

Oral defense, where students explain their reasoning aloud and short-cutting is harder to hide.

Local, lived assignments tied to classroom discussion, local data, interviews, or personal reflection, things AI can imitate but not truly originate.

AI literacy, teaching students what AI is good at, what it is bad at, and how to verify outputs.

This is not about punishing students. It is about preserving the purpose of school: building independent

judgment.

Why I am wary: power concentrates quietly

The public tends to treat AI as a neutral tool, like spellcheck. But AI is not passive. It shapes language, and language shapes thinking. When a generation gets used to receiving fluent answers instantly, patience for ambiguity and slow reasoning can erode. That has consequences far beyond GPA.

UNESCO has warned that generative AI in education needs immediate safeguards, including human-centered policy, transparency, and protections around privacy and equity. The biggest danger is not the obvious cheating case. It is the subtle cultural shift. We start accepting fluency as intelligence. We start trusting confident-sounding output. We start letting systems that can fabricate at scale seep into the habits of young minds.

A "crazy" predictions that no longer sounds like science fiction

Prediction: Every student gets a near-constant AI tutor, approved or not.

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# Raising Builders, Not Just Screen Users, in Northern Virginia

BY NICK GATZ  
FALLS CHURCH NEWS-PRESS

Kids have always been the ones to come up with the new stuff first. The shortcuts. The hacks. The next language. The next way of making something cool out of nothing.

What's different now is not the imagination. It's the equipment.

In Northern Virginia, the kid with a half-charged phone and a half-formed idea is standing on a launchpad. Nearly all teens, 95%, have access to a smartphone now. Pew also found that almost half of teens say they're online "almost constantly." That is not a side note. That is the environment.

When I was growing up, dial-up was a door you had to knock on and wait for. Today, it's a door that's already open. The world is not just available, it's rushing at them. Some estimates put global data creation at roughly 402 million terabytes per day, about 0.4 zettabytes daily.

So here's the parenting question in NOVA in 2026. Not "How do we keep them off screens?" That's a losing argument and honestly it's the wrong argument.

The right question is: What do we

surround them with so the screens turn into tools instead of traps?

I've got a 13-year-old daughter, and she is the reason I believe the answer is a three-part blend: sports, hands-on art, and apps. Not three separate lanes. One braid.

Because I've watched what happens when all three are present in a kid's week, not as a perfect schedule, but as a real life rhythm.

Sports is the anchor.

A practice, a game, a team, a coach, a clock. That stuff still matters. It matters even more now because sports is one of the last places where you cannot edit your way out of reality. You cannot filter conditioning. You cannot swipe away a loss. You learn, fast, that the work shows up in your lungs and in the scoreboard. You learn how to sit next to a teammate after they mess up and keep them in it. You learn how to be accountable without making it about you.

And in Northern Virginia, we see it every weekend like a rolling parade. Minivans at sunrise. Mud on cleats. Gym floors that smell like popcorn and effort. This region is loaded with opportunity, but it's also loaded with pressure, and sports

teaches kids to handle pressure with their feet on the ground.

The hard part is that youth sports is also getting expensive, and families feel it. A Harris Poll survey commissioned by Good Sports found that three out of four parents have considered pulling their kids out of sports because of rising costs, and it reported average annual spending of \$883 per child. That matters in NOVA because costs stack up fast, and when kids lose access, they lose a community.

That is why the second strand matters just as much.

Hands-on art is the counterweight.

Not "arts" as in a fancy framed thing that hangs on the wall. I'm talking tactile, messy, real-world making. Drawing. Building. Sewing. Painting. Wood. Clay. A cheap tool kit. A pile of cardboard. The kinds of projects where your hands learn patience and your brain learns that mistakes are not failure, they are information.

This is the part that has surprised me most as a parent. My daughter is good on apps, sure. But I'm equally amazed by what she can do with her hands. She likes sports, and she likes making. That combination creates

confidence you can see in how she walks into a room. It's not performative. It's earned.

There's research behind that too. The National Endowment for the Arts has highlighted findings that, among high schoolers, arts participation is positively correlated with social-emotional attributes, and arts course completion is linked with greater academic achievement, graduation, and post-graduation outcomes.

That's the stuff everyone says they want for kids: resilience, confidence, motivation, follow-through. Art is not a side quest. It's training.

Apps are the amplifier.

This is where adults either panic or tune out. But I'm watching a generation that can storyboard an idea, build it, test it, publish it, and get feedback before we have finished debating whether their "screen time" is too high.

The key is whether the phone is used for consumption or production.

In NOVA, we have a quiet advantage that we should talk about more. Schools and community spaces are leaning into hands-on tech in ways that fit this blend. Fairfax County Public Schools talks about middle

school Technology and Engineering Education as "active learning" where students explore engineering and related careers. FCPS CTE materials also point to scale: over 160 courses offered at middle and high school levels, plus thousands of work-based learning experiences and industry credentials earned.

Falls Church has been doing it too, just without the big-county megaphone. Meridian High's robotics program is the kind of real, sustained maker culture that doesn't happen by accident. Their FIRST Robotics team, Vae Victis (Team 1418), has been around since 2004 and has made multiple trips to the FIRST World Championships. That's students building, coding, troubleshooting, and learning leadership under real deadlines.

At the middle school level, Falls Church has put tangible tools in kids' hands. The Falls Church Education Foundation has funded makerspace and STEAM equipment at Mary Ellen Henderson, including items like Arduinos, Ozobots, Bloxels, KEVA planks, and even a Glowforge laser cutter. That's not "screen time." That's making, prototyping, and learning how ideas become objects.



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