

# The Tower

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Princeton High School  
151 Moore Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

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## PHS searches for a new superintendent

Avantika Palayekar, Aritra Ray, and Meiya Xiong, STAFF WRITERS

Following the resignation of Carol Kelley on October 30 of last year, the Board of Education began the process of finding a new, permanent superintendent for Princeton Public Schools. With interim superintendent Dr. Kathie Foster's contract set to expire on July 1, 2025, the Board aims to make a decision before then.

To facilitate the search process, the district hired School Leadership LLC, a search consultant firm based in New York. As lead consultants on the search, Dr. Marty Brooks and Rina Beder are responsible for advertising the job posting and recruiting candidates who fit the profile and specifications sought by the district. These candidates would then be reviewed and interviewed by all ten members of the new Board formed after the election on November 5 for a final decision.

Before recruiting potential candidates and during the information gathering stage of the search process, Brooks and Beder sought input from Princeton community members regarding the ideal qualities of a new superintendent. From September 30 to October 10, they conducted a total of 18 in-person sessions, including one with PHS students, and six virtual forums with groups like the Princeton Parents for Black Children and the Parents Special Ed Union Leadership, and a

group of three district unions representing faculty and staff. The consultants also made use of an online survey in which 500 community members responded.

"We were really impressed with the openness and honesty of everybody that [we] met with. There's a deep commitment to the district's schools, and that came through loud and clear," said Brooks.

Through the forums, they saw recurring patterns in the needs of the community.

Brooks and Beder then compiled these needs and feedback for the new superintendent into six key specifications. The qualifications, as per the School Leadership LLC's Specification Development Report, were categorized as follows: an experienced teacher with a strong commitment to the needs of students, a compassionate promoter of Princeton Public Schools' mission, a collaborator who creates strong relationships with the community, an effective communicator who readily shares and exchanges ideas, a skilled financial manager who can maximize the board's resources, and a visionary who plans to lead the community to a higher level of excellence.

These qualities were assembled into a draft of the profile for the job sent to the Board of Education and approved on October 16. The 2024 Princeton Public Schools Superintendent job description reflected the community's input, and the LLC started recruiting on October 17.



PPS Board of Education president Dafna Kendal (second from right) heads a special meeting with superintendent search committee chair Betsy Baglio (right), Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources Angela Siso Stentz (left), and Superintendent Kathie Foster (second from left) on October 16.

In particular, the last specification in the board's final job profile describing a "leader who is excited about becoming a member of the Princeton community" was designed to promote greater stability, given the high turnover the district has seen recently in superintendent and principal positions.

"There has been a lot of change, so we're looking for somebody who is committed not only to staying for some period of time but also embedding him or herself in the community — somebody who really loves the place, wants to sink his or her roots there, and wants to commit ... for the work that needs to be done as well," said Brooks.

The Board will conduct a rolling search, so as the LLC pre-interviews candidates, it

will continually send specific individuals who meet the superintendent profile to the Board to interview for the position. Ideally, the Board hopes to have a candidate by early 2025 since Foster's contract requires PPS to give her a 90 day notice that a new superintendent will fill her position.

"[Dr. Foster's contract requirements] would take [the Board] back to March [to find a superintendent]. And in [NJ], we have an additional step: the executive county superintendent has to approve a superintendent's contract. So the ideal timing [to hire someone] would be that the board announces in January or February or even early March that there is a successful candidate," said Betsy Baglio, vice president of the Board of Education and

chair of the superintendent search committee.

However, the Board cannot announce a successful candidate until after the school board election on November 5, so actual voting on a superintendent cannot happen until 2025. Despite these challenges, the July 1 deadline will not deter the Board from selecting the best possible candidate for Princeton Public Schools.

"We are going to make sure that whoever we choose meets the criteria we're looking for. So if we don't have someone by July 1, as we get closer to that date, we'll have contingencies in place. There has to be a superintendent on July 1 ... but if not, there will be someone in that role," said Dafna Kendal, president of the Board of the Education.

## Assembly format changes spark spirited student response



PHS's MSAN and PULSE clubs perform at last year's Black History Month assembly.

Claire Tang, NEWS & FEATURES  
CO-EDITOR

Harry Dweck and Reed Sacks,  
STAFF WRITERS

In past years, both the Black History Month and Hispanic Heritage Month assemblies followed a special bell schedule: on a given day, one club would give two distinct 75 minute performances separated by an approximately 30 minute break in between.

This year, PHS Principal Cecilia Birge proposes to have the celebrations occur during homeroom in a shorter, hybrid format, during Tiger Time, or after school like the annual Asian Fest. These modifications were requested by many teachers, as student performers were missing a significant amount of class times for rehearsals and an additional two-thirds of school-time instruction on the assembly day; Birge cited loss of instructional time as the main justification for the change.

"We want our students to thrive culturally. We also want

them to learn academically. When a student is celebrating their heritage on the stage while carrying 60 absences in a class, then we're not doing our job right," said Birge.

Birge proposed these changes before the summer, reaching out to the advisors of Hispanic Heritage Month, Latinos Unidos, and Black Students Union to receive their input on the proposed shifts in assembly structure.

"The [advisors] expressed that they understand where we're [coming] from," said Birge.

However, many students are displeased with the modifications, including Osbaldo Morales '25, a student leader of Latinos Unidos. The changes mean that only half of PHS will see the assembly in person (the other half on Zoom), which Morales feels would diminish the impact of the assembly in highlighting the culture of underrepresented students.

"With this going on, I just feel not heard," said Morales. "[PHS] is a predominantly white school.

[The assembly is] a way to show that [we Latinos] are here. There's a lot of us, right, that are in this school, and [people] don't know that we're here."

Lena Hamilton '25, the president of Pride, Unity, Leadership, Sisterhood, and Esteem club (PULSE) is also protesting the change. The club, which aims to "promote a safe space for women of color to excel in our community," had previously been a leader in the Black History Month Assembly. Hamilton fears that, if the assembly is moved after school, fewer people would attend, resulting in less chance to foster understanding between different groups within the PHS community.

"Assemblies like these foster communication and open dialogue across students who wouldn't normally talk to each other," said Hamilton. "Last year, after the assembly, I had a lot of people coming up to me who I didn't even know, going, 'Wow, that assembly was so good!'"

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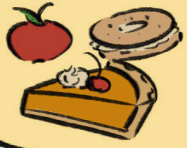
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## PHS behind the scenes workers



Claire Tang, NEWS & FEATURES CO-EDITOR  
Mattias Blix, Daniel Gu, and Fangwu Yu,  
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

### Bill Urias

Every day, students who enter PHS through the Tower entrance are greeted by Bill Urias and asked for their IDs. However, this quick interaction does not reveal much about his interesting life before PHS or his adventurous hobbies outside of his work.

After finishing high school in South Jersey, Urias joined the military for four years before going to college. He attended both Rutgers University and The College of New Jersey, where he studied accounting. He then traveled to California in hopes of pursuing a master's degree in business.

While in California, Urias instead worked for a private company where he cut trees due to his passion for adventure and nature. However, after eight years of living in California, his wife's parents fell ill and the couple decided to move back to New Jersey.

Although Urias formerly studied accounting, he decided to become a foreman for the Township of Princeton.

"I had a crew of 45 men and women, and every morning we would make the assignments on what we were going to do. We had crews that took care of the trees, took care of the signs around the town, maintained the parks, [and] cut the grass," said Urias.

Not long after retiring from his position as a foreman, Urias was recruited to become a part-time security guard and building monitor at PHS. He has been working at PHS for the past five years. His job includes checking student IDs when they enter the building, pointing visitors in the right direction, and filling in for other missing staff.

His passion for the outdoors not only influenced his career choices but also how he spends his time outside of work. One of his favorite pastimes is riding motorcycles.

"I have three motorcycles. We do tours [and] take people up to Lake George and Lake Placid. I don't bring [the motorcycles] to work," said Urias.



photo: Emily Kim

### Tracy Hart

Keeping students fed is an integral yet complex process at PHS. As one of several cafeteria workers who make sure this process runs successfully, Tracy Hart ensures that all students are well-fed and ready to learn.

Growing up in Hopewell, Hart has been working with Pomptonian Food Service, PHS's new food service provider, for three years. She has worked all over New Jersey in multiple school districts with Pomptonian, but started at PHS this July.

"I know that the community is interested in farm-to-tray and locally sourced things like that. My father's also a farmer in the Hopewell area. I was really excited when we [started at PHS] because I can incorporate a lot of things that are locally grown that I'm familiar with from this area into the menu," said Hart.

Prior to Pomptonian, Hart worked for several other food service providers, but she enjoys working with Pomptonian as the company focuses on delivering services exclusively in schools, whether K-12 or community colleges.

"I went to Rutgers, and I have a degree in nutritional science, and I was hired by Sodexo, a food service company, right from class. I was with them for 20 years. I also did country clubs involved in food service, and started as Grimace at McDonald's and got involved in food service, then I went to Strayer [University] for my Master's [in] Business Administration," said Hart.

Outside of work, Hart enjoys taking her four kids tent camping, going to Hershey Park, and tending to her backyard chicken. She is also helping her father as he opens a brewery in Pennington.



photo courtesy: Pomptonian Food Service

### Nick Cream

Armed with a ten-year tenure as a police officer, Nick Cream now uses the security skills he gained in his role as PPS's attendance officer and PHS's security officer. With this year marking his 34th in the district, some of Cream's responsibilities include maintaining building security, monitoring the cafeteria during lunch, breaking up physical confrontations between students, conducting wellness checks for chronically absent students, and conducting residency checks.

"If [PPS] suspects that somebody may be living outside of Princeton, but attending the schools illegally, I investigate those maps," said Cream. "And if a kid's missing a lot of school, sometimes ... I'll make a home visit."

Cream's interest in pursuing a career relating to public security stretches back to college. After he graduated from Lawrence High School in Lawrence Township, Cream studied criminal justice at The College of New Jersey. Following his college graduation, he trained to

become a police officer and ultimately joined the Trenton Police Department.

"I left the police force after I had a couple back surgeries. I've been with this school ever since," said Cream.

Cream's role in the district started as a part-time job as an attendance officer conducting occasional residency checks. As the demand for security in schools increased, Cream's position evolved into the full-time job he currently holds, where he serves as a security officer for PHS on top of his attendance officer duties.

"I'm fortunate that the students are great here, which makes my job a lot easier," said Cream.

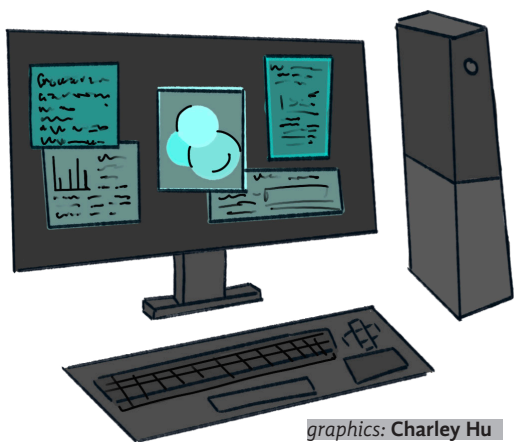
Outside of keeping PHS's security in shape, Cream likes bike riding and exercising. As big fans of the shore, Cream and his wife also enjoy visiting their beach house in Brigantine. Cream enjoys visiting his grandchildren in Florida and Pennsylvania as well.



photo: Matias da Costa

## Testing infrastructure update

Angela Chen and Daniel da Costa,  
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS



graphics: Charley Hu

While Princeton High School sophomores and juniors took the PSAT this month, they had a significantly better testing experience compared to last year. As an investment to improve the school's testing infrastructure, PHS

replaced over 350 access points and added an additional 50 access points in new locations. However, improvements to internet networks expanded beyond both PHS and testing-related infrastructure. The improvements were a district-wide endeavor, with the PPS technology team upgrading both wireless and physical infrastructure in all schools. The team replaced all access points and old cabling, bringing them to the newest standard.

"We replaced everything to be WiFi six ready, just [the] latest, greatest technology ... It's for our general network for the entire district, which, again, will help testing," said Danny Turner, district engineer.

Not only did the upgrade resolve short-term issues with testing, it was also an investment towards the district future. As technology use becomes increasingly prevalent within the district, networks need to be upgraded to support students that are constantly on their school devices.

"Now we have the newest standard for cabling. The old cabling was 20 years old. The new cabling is what's being installed nowadays for everything. So even in X number of years that we do go to change this again, we won't need to change all that cabling," said Todd MacDonald, PPS's chief technology officer.

The changes were prompted by issues during testing last year, where several students were unable to test in certain classrooms and others experienced frequent crashes of the testing infrastructure. Though the technology office acknowledged most problems were not on the school's end, the improvements will ensure confidence in the network and in determining the source of any issue.

"The issue, from what I've heard, was actually more on the testing company's end than our end," said MacDonald. "We're confident that ... there'll be no issues in our network for this year."

Overall, this investment positively impacted the students' testing experience as students were able to focus on the actual test rather than ways to resolve the frequent technical issues. Improvements aim to guarantee a positive test experience for now while also ensuring long-term readiness for the future.

"I think part of it is trying to meet the needs that we have now, but also trying to make sure we have this in place that's going to be able to support future needs as well. And this investment from the referendum is going to give us many years of network that we can handle the growth now," said MacDonald.

# Changes to PHS assembly times spark controversy

Continued from Page One

Birge stated that, despite positive reactions from students and community members, cultural assemblies have not addressed fundamental issues or created long term change.

“To me, the message is that the students are feeling good about the celebration only ... but then in other aspects students are not feeling included, and we must address that ... one day of celebration [is] not addressing the issue in a fundamental manner,” said Birge.

Moreover, additional cultural clubs have requested their own celebrations, including the Muslim Student Union and several South Asian culture clubs. In Birge’s view, maintaining past years’ special assembly schedules while also creating space for new assembly requests can make it difficult for teachers to fully cover the curriculum.

“[PHS’s schedule has] extremely limited time [and a] very rigid school structure by default at the state level. [We have to consider] the availability of [the] PAC as well as the amount of time required to put up a really fabulous show like that,” said Birge. “We want to keep that highlight for our students. We want them to walk away at graduation [and] say, ‘I did



photo: Matias da Costa

(Clockwise from bottom) Simone Henriques ’28, Amber Schutz ’26, Gabriela Maldonado ’26, Emanuella Dweck ’27, Leany Gonzalez ’27, Nomsa Nganang ’27, Janae Brown ’26, Crystal Thompson ’27, Madison Hamlin ’27, Ariana Jones ’25, Arianna Malave ’26, Jane Sajan ’25, Lena Hamilton ’25, Emily Garcia ’26, Valeria Trujillo ’26, Reyna Garcia ’28, Alyssa Moreno ’26, Evelyn Barillas ’26, Joselyn Winslow ’26, Sephora Romain ’26, Andrea Gregorio ’26, and Lauren Estime ’26 hold a PHS PULSE club meeting to discuss a new assembly format.

something,’ but we can still do that in 60 minutes.”

In order to reach a solution, Birge has asked student leaders to send a proposal for an assembly that would address some of the administration’s concerns.

Hamilton is currently drafting the Black History Month assembly proposal along with other leaders to address the administration’s concerns.

“We’re making a proposal to send to Mrs. Birge on how we would do [the assembly] and make sure it’s as educational as possible,” said Hamilton. “I’m very hopeful that we’ll have a clear

solution to this before February, so that we can have our assembly, because I think a lot of people recognize how important these assemblies are in promoting diversity and inclusion within our school.”

PHS Social Worker for Wellness and PULSE advisor Bethany Siddiqui is confident that this year assembly leaders can address some of the administration’s concerns about students skipping the assemblies as a means to cut school.

“Mrs. Birge was not pleased with some of the attendance issues related to the assembly,

which I think can be resolved this year in a similar format as we’ve done with the club fair, and now even our evacuation drills,” said Siddiqui. “We can utilize the scanning system to scan in students to verify their attendance.”

Siddiqui believes that with these issues resolved, Birge will approve an in-person Black History Month assembly.

“I think that Ms. Birge was really receptive to the students advocating to have an assembly. I think she wants to see the students step up in an organized way to let her know what [they]

want to do, what the mission is, what the layout and the format and all that kind of stuff is going to be, which is totally understandable,” said Siddiqui.

Will Ponder ’25, leader of the Multicultural Student Achievement Network (MSAN), is similarly confident that the Black History Month can work in a shorter time frame, and said that the administration has been receptive to possible changes.

“I think a compromise can occur. Since there is a Tiger Time every week on Thursday, it is definitely an option to incorporate some sort of a cultural assembly within one of those days during this year,” said Ponder.

Siddiqui also emphasized how impressed she is with the student leaders who have worked to reach a compromise with the administration, while at the same time not refraining from their ultimate goal.

“I’m just really proud of the students that are voicing their opinions about something,” said Siddiqui. “It can be really scary to have a meeting with your principal or to challenge authority in any type of way, but I think that the student leaders of MSAN, PULSE and Latinos Unidos have been really professional, and I’m just really proud of them.”

## PHS hosts a Seeds of Peace assembly

Alexander Gu and Benjamin Li, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

On October 21, the international organization Seeds of Peace held an online assembly at PHS between 9:40 a.m. and 10:40 a.m. during a 60-minute homeroom day. The organization aims to cultivate leaders who work together across diverse backgrounds to create more equitable and inclusive societies. Across the world, the team works with students worldwide and engages in various dialogues designed to shift attitudes and perceptions, promote understanding, and build respect and empathy.

During their presentation at PHS, two speakers were featured: Ittay Flescher, from Israel, and Suma Qawasmi, from Palestine, who each shared their personal experiences living in the Middle East amidst the ongoing conflict. The event aimed to provide students with a better ability to enjoy meaningful dialogue with others on controversial topics.

“[We are here] to show you that, [even though] Suma and I don’t agree on a lot of things, we’re still friends, we work together, and we bring children, who are living this war and are talking to each other and trying to work out how to share Jerusalem in peace,” said Flescher.

During the meeting, Flescher and Qawasmi shared tools students can use to help them navigate through challenging conversations. In addition, they also gave insights into a few activities they do with the students at their camp and the importance of having these dialogues.

“The message is we, who are living in this conflict — and we have all the reasons in the world to not want to meet with each other — can maybe serve as role models to you [so that] you can also find ways to listen and have difficult conversations,” said Flescher. “It’s not talking for the sake of talking, it’s talking for the sake of building peace. And building peace means creating a circumstance where everyone has freedom, justice, and equality.”

In May, Princeton University became a focal point for student activism like other colleges nationwide. During the student-led “Gaza Solidarity Encampment” protest on Canon Green, which lasted for three weeks, students

led sit-ins, rallies, and speeches, demanding the university divest from organizations associated with Israeli military efforts. Some students from PHS left their classes to participate in the university protests.

After the protests, Principal Cecilia Birge met with the PHS Jewish Students Club and the PHS Muslim Student Union, both of which shared a desire to communicate to understand each other’s perspectives and seek respect and understanding. Following her meetings with the clubs, Birge also organized a dialogue between some Muslim and Jewish teachers at PHS to better understand their viewpoints and how they handle and address differences in their community.

“[They] have been my intellectual and cultural support system as I navigated the complexities surrounding the encampment at Princeton University. I spent countless

hours with them — listening to their stories, engaging in meaningful discussions, exploring different perspectives, and even challenging my own assumptions,” said Birge.

One of Birge’s major realizations was that a singular approach that intends to create an inclusive environment for everyone doesn’t always work.

“Both communities contain diverse viewpoints, which are often overlooked when issues are framed in oversimplified narratives of right versus wrong or good versus bad. These conversations highlighted the need to embrace nuance and complexity when addressing sensitive topics. What stood out most was the shared desire across both communities for peace, mutual respect, and dignity for all.”

With these findings, over the summer, Birge, Superintendent Kathie Foster, and Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Kimberly Tew, met with other organizations, including

Seeds of Peace, that prioritize peacebuilding. Birge discovered that the teams’ mission was similar to the school district’s goals for education, subsequently organizing an assembly for students and a panel meeting with teachers.

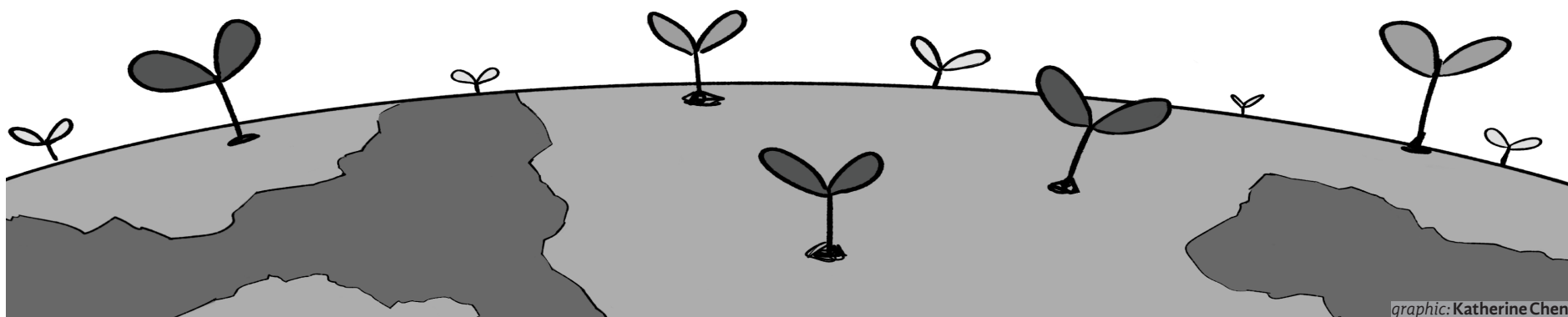
“We found their approach and philosophy are aligned with our district’s mission to ‘prepare all of our students to lead lives of joy and purpose as knowledgeable, creative and compassionate citizens of a global society,’ and that ‘our schools are places of care where every child is known, every culture valued, and where kindness and courage are modeled,” said Birge.

In his activism, Flescher puts emphasis on the importance of caring about the current conflict and engaging in productive dialogue. Through Seeds of Peace, Flescher and his team aim to demonstrate to children that dialogue can foster peace, and that trust and friendships with different people can enable significant positive change.

“What we have been trying to do is to say that the ... present reality, which is horrifying, doesn’t need to be a blueprint for our future,” said Flescher. “We have the power to create a different future, and that starts with seeing the humanity in every person, especially those who differ from us.”



# Seeds of Peace



graphic: Katherine Chen

### TOWER MULTIMEDIA



Long-form interviews with teachers and students. “Papercast” renditions of Tower articles. Audio journalism. Documentaries. And so much more.



PAPERCASTS  
The Tower. Out Loud.



TOWER SHORTS  
Multimedia... bite sized!



PHS TALKS  
Long-form interviews

# OPINIONS

## You should still read books

Sarah Chen, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

A recent article in *The Atlantic*, titled “The Elite College Students Who Can’t Read Books,” caused quite a stir online. The article puts a spotlight on college professors’ surprising realization that many college freshmen struggle with reading multiple books per semester. Being able to read so much used to be standard, but because of a lack of preparation by middle and high schools, many college freshmen struggle to read whole books, being more used to excerpts or chapters.

It seems that smartphones are to blame. “Reading books, even for pleasure, can’t compete with TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube,” said Rose Horowitz, the article’s author.

She also pointed to test-oriented education steering instruction away from reading whole books, instead assigning students to read excerpts and individual chapters. Indeed, look no further than the format of the new digital SAT: in the Reading and Writing sections, the “archaic” poems have completely disappeared, and the infamous 100-line reading passages have shrunk to single paragraphs.

These diagnoses seem reasonable but are incomplete. Smartphones aren’t the first challenge books have faced. According to *Britannica*, the popularity of radio broadcasting in the 1920s already spelled trouble for reading. *The Atlantic* reported that by the 1960s, Americans were spending on average four to five hours a day watching TV and reading time had dwindled down to just 15 to 30 minutes a day. In the battle for our leisure time, books have sadly already lost a long time ago to other easier-to-consume media formats.

Even when students do sit down and read, classical literature is increasingly crowded out by a sea of choices in YA fiction. Thanks to the phenomenal commercial successes of “Harry Potter” that made J.K. Rowling the highest paid author to date and Suzanne Collins’ “The Hunger Games” series that garnered \$3.3 billion worldwide through movie adaptations, authors and publishing houses have flocked to the YA category, hoping to replicate these

earlier triumphs. In the 1990s, only about 400 to 500 YA book titles were published each year. That number soared to 1,400 to 1,500 only two decades later. Don’t get me wrong — some YA novels are quite fun to read. It’s definitely better to read them than to not read at all. The problem is that the reading levels of many popular YA novels are simply too elementary to prepare students for post-secondary education and beyond. The top ten most popular YA books on Goodreads sport an average Lexile measure, a scientific indicator of text difficulty, of just 775. That’s the equivalent of a fourth-grade reading level.

While the sales of YA books have plateaued in recent years, graphic novels and comic books saw a 62 percent jump in sales in 2021. Publishing industry insiders argue that the manga versions of classics like “Pride and Prejudice” and “Macbeth” make these works more accessible. While that may be true, graphic novels provide immediate representations of characters, settings, and emotions, removing the element of imagination and the critical skill of interpreting the author’s words that are an integral part of the reading experience. Even worse, graphic novel adaptations often end up serving as substitutes rather than springboards to the original texts.

This includes our school too — according to PHS librarian Jen Bigioni, between the 10,121 titles borrowed across physical and digital sources, most were in the fantasy Young Adult (YA) and manga genres.

Just because students are short on time and commercial interest is reducing reading to the most basic level, it is still worth it for us to fight this uphill battle for reading whole, sophisticated books.

I don’t object to reading excerpts and chapters. But just like how food samples in grocery stores can never

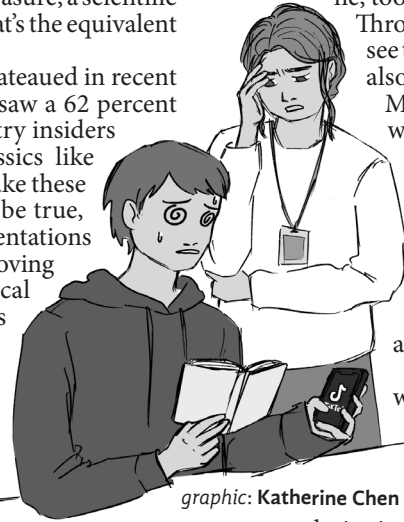
replace regular meals, reading whole books is a completely different experience to only sampling chapters. Reading whole books offers the thrill of the twists and turns of the plots, the satisfaction of the grand finale, and most importantly, the understanding of the complexity of the human experience. If you only read the courtroom chapter of “To Kill A Mockingbird,” you would mistake Atticus Finch as an anti-racist advocate and miss the nuance that he, too, possesses the racial biases of his time.

Through reading whole books, we learn to see the world not just in black and white, but also the infinite shades of gray in between.

Moreover, reading books cover to cover will be a great way to acquire new knowledge after we complete our formal education. One of our school district’s goals is to instill passion and curiosity in students to become life-long learners. Without the skill and stamina to complete whole books, learning comes to an end when there are no more tests administered to us.

Adding on to all of this, education was once affordable only to the rich and powerful; reading books was an upper-class activity for much of human history. However, in the 1400s, the invention of the Gutenberg printing

press revolutionized the dissemination of information and increased access to knowledge. It was the spread of books like John Locke’s “Two Treatises of Government” and Jean Jacques Rousseau’s “Social Contract” that ushered in the Enlightenment Age and built the philosophical foundation of modern democratic societies. Throughout history, the widespread access to books has driven human progress, but if we let reading once again become a luxury of a few, it will be a major step back in human progress.



graphic: Katherine Chen

## To make clubbing more enjoyable

Chloe Zhao, OPINIONS CO-EDITOR  
Iniya Karimanal, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The PHS Club Fair in late September was quite a spectacle, with a bustling, friendly atmosphere and impressive turnout. Students moved from stand to stand, eagerly typing their email into sign-up sheets and taking a piece or two of candy on their way out, building a mounting stash of treats. One of the most exciting aspects of the high school experience is the opportunity to join clubs — and not just for the snacks. PHS has a robust club culture, boasting over 140 registered clubs. The vast array of organizations — from Debate Club to the Spork to Chess Club — ensures that each student can find a space and community that aligns with their unique passions. For the most part, students at PHS enjoy the process; clubs offer a tangible space for students to bond over shared interests and form lasting friendships throughout their four years.

However, not all clubs are created equal. The most beneficial clubs for students are those that hold regular, organized meetings, have active participation, and clear goals. Such clubs can allow students to gain valuable skills, experience, and confidence. But the tale of clubs that meet once or twice before disappearing into inactivity is all too familiar. PHS is plentiful in clubs that lack steadfast leadership to look up to, making it difficult for students to create a lasting impact. Thus, the benefits of joining a club are limited to reliable clubs that meet recurrently, and PHS’s club system is not ensuring this as such.

The current club system is surprisingly rudimentary considering the large sum of student organizations we have. For a student looking to start a club, the process looks like this: leaders submit a club application with the endorsement of an advisor, and if the proposal is accepted, the responsibility is left completely up to students to promote their club, attract students, design club plans, retain members, and meet consistently.

The unfortunate truth is that many clubs are not formed

out of true passion or genuine interest — as a result, rather than engaging with the established clubs, students start near-duplicate clubs that end up serving little purpose other than fodder in their college applications. Worse, nearly all proposed clubs pass the application process seamlessly, including clubs that are simply performative.

The low bar set to create a club at PHS ultimately causes deteriorating quality. Most clubs fall short of providing the experience they promise to deliver to prospective members at the club fair. Many underclassmen complain about unproductive club meetings, where members do little more than eat their lunch and talk to friends. This may seem harmless on the surface, but the existence of organizations managed halfheartedly distorts the purpose of our club culture as a whole.

As the existence of these dispassionate clubs become normalized, students lose trust in PHS clubs overall, even the truly productive ones led by passionate students. At best, attendance dwindles over time as people become reluctant to waste their valuable free time; at worst, students will emulate this behavior in their own organizations, and this complacent phenomenon will become commonplace.

Some sort of check-in system needs to be in place to stop this from occurring. First, a reform to the application process itself is necessary. Clubs that are possible duplicates should face much higher scrutiny before receiving approval, and be extremely apparent in their distinctions. A more detailed description of activities and curricula should be provided by club leaders, rather than a vague mission statement. Advisors should ensure that the club is being actively managed to keep students accountable.

Numerous aspects of the club system make it difficult for clubs to remain reliable for both members and leaders. Most well-established, reliable clubs have recurring meeting rooms that are claimed — but only unofficially.



graphic: Chen Jiang

It is a cumbersome task for new club leaders to find available rooms and times to occupy, making meetings hard to organize. Rooms may be locked, occupied, under maintenance, or denied usage by a teacher, and there would be no efficient way to tell ahead of time. Lacking a reliable meeting location makes it challenging to plan productive events; members may be deterred from the complication or miss meetings out of confusion, lowering attendance and creating new obstacles to productivity. To make matters worse, keeping track of the clubs you’ve signed up for is a pain. Getting on a club’s email list after the club fair is often near impossible if you don’t already have friends connected to them, making it even harder to find out which room meetings are.

Of course, it could be argued that these issues can all be more or less rectified with increased efforts of club leaders. Leaders could facilitate seamless communication with their members, have their contact information constantly be available to interested students, and sort out logistical obstacles on their own. After all, by taking on the role of a club leader, a student is encouraged to devote themselves to the community they manage. Unfortunately, the idea that students are wholly responsible for maintaining a club simply is unrealistic; at the end of the day, we are all busy high school students trying to get by. Between the overwhelming load of assessments and projects, essays and presentations, it is inevitable that mishaps and miscommunications will occur.

There is a straightforward solution to these rampant problems — establishing a club room log available to all students. Faculty would first indicate which rooms are available at what times, and then club leaders can fill in which slots they would like to occupy in advance. This not only makes room claims a much more standardized process, but also addresses accessibility problems. Students will finally have a log they can refer to if they would like to join a club after the club fair, or simply to check when their club is meeting in case communication was missed.

As we head into the 2024–2025 school year with a record-breaking number of new clubs, it is important to think about a set of checks and balances to hold students accountable. A more consolidated, organized, club system would support PHS’s ambitious students and preserve the passion and community that clubs promise us.



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# PHS's clubs need funding

Elif Cam and Kylie Sek, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

We live in a world driven by money, and like many things, school clubs need money to be able to function. So, where do we get this money? Other than small fundraising activities on school grounds, the obvious answer is from the deep pockets of parents. However, this comes with some questions that need to be addressed. Is having families cover the costs of club activities sustainable? Is it enough? And most importantly, is it fair?

Right now, the financial burden of club activities falls mostly on members and their families, and depending on the club, these costs can be staggering. For example, Charlotte Valvanis '26, a PHS Model United Nations officer, explained that tournament costs can range from around \$200–\$500 per student. Although these costs might not be a concern for some families, the same cannot be said for all. PHS's student body is made up of people of diverse financial backgrounds, and we should provide equal opportunities to all students, or else we risk



graphic: Madison Charles

these club activities only being accessible to those who are more privileged.

Having only a few clubs receive a stipend from the school brings up the issue of fairness. How should we decide who will get the funds? How much will they receive? Where is this money coming from? The district needs to set aside a budget dedicated to club activities. Once there is a budget, club leaders can submit grant applications to be reviewed by a committee team consisting of administrators and students. In the beginning of the school year, clubs that need funding can explain the total amount they will need and what they will need it for in a detailed application. Considering that our funds will be limited, the job of the committee will be to decide what percent of a club's request to actually grant.

In addition to funding club costs, part of this budget can be set aside to provide financial aid. Right now, clubs lack a reliable system to support

students who need financial assistance. Dean of Students Diana Lygas revealed that financial aid generally is funded by other members of the club who pay increased fees.

Another important factor to consider, however, is where this money will come from. It is the school district's responsibility to facilitate education, and club activities contribute to the academic excellence and reputation of our district. Just as how the district has budgets for other parts of our school system like facility maintenance and staff salaries, they can set aside a budget for student club activities too. Another way to finance this budget pool would be to engage alumni donors. Some high schools create a strong alumni network to help support student activities. PHS has prominent alumni in a variety of fields, and their contributions could go towards financing this budget to support clubs.

Of course, the proposal outlined here is just one possible way of addressing the club funding issue. Like for any other problem, the first step to finding a solution is acknowledging that there is a problem to be solved: that school clubs are negatively affected by a lack of funding.

“We should provide equal opportunities to all students.”

# Going beyond our lackluster educational standards

Benjamin Li and Fangwu Yu, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

“Hard times create strong men, strong men create good times, good times create weak men, and weak men create hard times,” wrote the postapocalyptic author G. Michael Hopf. Currently, our country's education system is in the “good times” phase in many ways.

However, after the recent relatively calm decades and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many students today face various academic challenges, one of the most significant being social media's increased influence and usage, which has led to a decline in focus and engagement in learning. If we want to avoid creating “hard times,” PHS needs to go beyond our educational standards and learn from other countries to improve the present state of our education culture.

What is the current education culture like in the United States? When compared to educational systems overseas, the U.S. school system is falling behind in multiple different aspects. Taking a look at the latest Programme for International Student Assessment, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress exams held in the years 2018–2021, the United States regularly doesn't even land in the top ten. This is despite being a global superpower and an extremely well-developed first-world country.

When zooming in on the Princeton area, the case is no different. According to the official website of the state of New Jersey, for the 2022–2023 NJSLA and DLM, 71.4 percent

and 61.0 percent of students in the PPS District met or exceeded expectations in the English Language Arts section and Mathematics section, respectively. This doesn't look good in comparison to other districts, like the Summit Public School District, which had 81.0 percent and 69.9 percent of students meeting or exceeding expectations for the same test. In New Jersey, PMS and PHS don't even come close to being on top. So what could PPS do better?

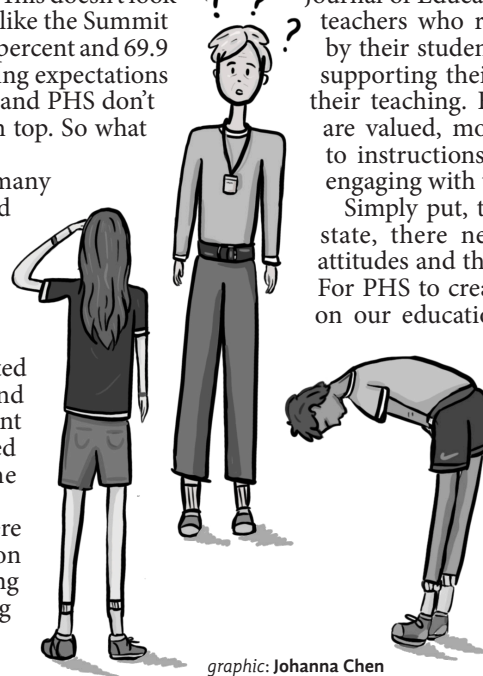
“There needs to be a change in students' attitudes and the environment in which they learn.”

To improve, there are many ways our school could take inspiration from international educational standards and culture, specifically when it comes to respect for teachers. In China, a 2018 study conducted by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research found that 81 percent of teachers felt that they were respected by their students, compared to the international average of 36 percent.

This is not at all the case at PHS, where it is becoming increasingly common to see students being distracted during classes — not participating, talking during lessons, or ignoring classroom rules. For teachers, these distractions are

more than just frustrating, but also make them feel insulted and undervalued. In a study published in 2018 by the Journal of Educational Psychology, it was found that teachers who reported that they felt disrespected by their students were less likely to be engaged in supporting their students and have enthusiasm in their teaching. For more teachers to feel like they are valued, more students need to start listening to instructions, being curious about lessons, and engaging with their classes.

Simply put, to improve our current educational state, there needs to be a change in students' attitudes and the environment in which they learn. For PHS to create future leaders, we have to focus on our education — students need to put in the effort and show that they care about school. Being engaged in learning and academics helps us build lifelong skills and become more knowledgeable citizens in the future. It's time for PHS to step away from our current education culture and follow the lead of other countries when it comes to learning, like by increasing academic rigor, showing respect to teachers, and showing a genuine interest in learning.



graphic: Johanna Chen

## PHS SPEAKS OUT

### WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE MOMENT FROM THE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES?

Aarna Dharmavarapu, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



“WHEN FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP STATED THAT PEOPLE IN SPRINGFIELD, OHIO EAT CATS AND DOGS.”

- ALEXANDER GU '28



“I JUST THOUGHT IT WAS KIND OF FUNNY SEEING TRUMP'S UNBLENDED FOUNDATION AND KIND OF HOW HE WAS WEARING THE WRONG SHADE MATCH, AND IT WAS VERY OBVIOUS SEEING LIVE ON TV THAT FOUNDATION [MATCH].”

- VIOLA QUE '27



“I LIKED KAMALA WHEN SHE WAS SORT OF TAUNTING TRUMP ... I FOUND THAT FUNNY. I LIKED RIGHT BEFORE THE CATS AND DOGS [SEGMENT] WHEN SHE WAS KIND OF TALKING ABOUT HOW PEOPLE LEAVE [TRUMP'S] RALLIES.”

- LILY LUDMER '26



“I FEEL LIKE [DEBATES ARE] USED FOR ENTERTAINMENT VALUE WHEN REALLY THEY SHOULD BE USED FOR THE ACTUAL POLICIES OF THE CANDIDATES ... I DON'T THINK THAT WE SHOULD BE TREATING DEBATES LIKE ENTERTAINMENT.”

- BHAVYA YADDANAPUDI '25



## Lowering the school board voting age

Editorial

In a significant move toward empowering youth, a proposal to lower the voting age for school board elections to 16 has gained attention, supported by Governor Phil Murphy and advocacy group Vote16USA. If passed, this would be the first statewide law of its kind, with individual cities such as Newark already embracing this idea. This law can instill the habit of voting at an early age — an integral skill in the democratic process — for a generation that needs it now more than ever.

The United States already struggles with voting participation. Only around two-thirds of the voting-eligible population turned out for the 2020 presidential election, and it was still the highest participation rate in over a century. However, when we compare these figures to those of other countries, the United States falls behind most developed nations, ranking a disappointing 31 out of 49 countries globally. Introducing younger voters into voting early could be a pivotal step to improving our democracy.

Concerns about younger voters being swayed by fleeting emotions or specific candidates are understandable.

However, the potential increase in the voting population is not as alarming as it may seem. 15,859 votes were cast in the last school board election as per the Daily Princetonian, and if only students from public high schools were allowed to vote (as those in private high schools have no relevant interest), they would represent less than five percent of the vote (assuming approximately all 800 eligible PHS students voted).

“The United States already struggles with voting participation.”

Recent tumultuous years at PHS caused by decisions of the Board of Education — such as the termination of Principal Chmiel, mask mandates, and scheduling changes — would surely engage students in the political process. The approval of this change can lead to improved voting habits as students mature, encouraging them to consider issues that directly impact their education while fostering a sense of responsibility and connection to their communities.

By lowering the voting age for school board elections, we can ensure that the voices of young people are heard and valued in decisions that shape their education, opening the doors to a more engaged electorate.

## In defense of student-run nonprofits

Harry Dweck, STAFF WRITER

At PHS, there are dozens of student-run nonprofits: StemRoots, PHS Building Bridges, Music Mentoring, PHS Novae, the Aligned Minds Foundation, etc. This list represents just a fraction of the nonprofits I saw from scanning my Outlook inbox over the past 24 hours.

However, these organizations must unfortunately contend with endless criticism from their skeptical peers, nonprofit professionals, and dozens of online articles. One article by The Harvard Crimson bears a title with a simple instruction for students: “Stop Making Your Own Nonprofit.”

The article, like many other critiques of student-run nonprofits, argues that instead of starting their own nonprofits, students should instead join existing charitable organizations. It's indeed feasible that in the short term, building on existing structures might produce greater net benefits — for example, by avoiding the logistical costs that come with running new charitable organizations. However, importantly, these critiques ignore the powerful long term impact that student-run nonprofits have in shaping a charitable community.

PHS students know from first hand experience that when students begin to create nonprofit organizations,

one of their primary motivations is undoubtedly college admissions or other personal benefits — such as earning business experience or demonstrating leadership.

However, despite sometimes selfish beginnings, through their journey in founding and running a nonprofit, students eventually gain immense knowledge about the issue they seek to address often far more than if they were to volunteer for an existing organization. By navigating the complexities of fundraising and rallying, students also learn about how a nonprofit is structured, and (hopefully) how to create change.



photo: Katherine Chen  
Zihan Yu '26, Rex Zhang '26, and Andi Wang '25 help PMS student Melody Tang '29 with her homework as part of the community service program Building Bridges.

PHS students to support cancer patients, is able to engage around 25 people in their weekly meetings.

It would of course be ridiculous to argue that the nonprofits run by high school students are what will save humanity. But in the long term, the charitable culture that they develop might. That's why it's important to engage young people in philanthropy now, so that a

# The Tower

Princeton High School  
151 Moore Street, Princeton, New Jersey

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**Mission Statement**

The Tower serves as a medium of information for the community through reporting and/or analyzing the inner workings of Princeton High School, the school district, and cultural and athletic events that affect the student body; providing a source of general news for parents, teachers, and peers; voicing various opinions from an informed group of writers; and maintaining quality in accurate content and appealing aesthetics, as well as upholding professionalism and journalistic integrity.

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**Editorial Board**

The Editorial Board of the Tower consists of a select group of 14 Tower 2024 staff members. The views of board members are accurately reflected in the editorial, which is co-written each month by the Board with primary authorship changing monthly.

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**Letter and Submission Policy**

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The newspaper accepts advice from the administration and the advisors in regard to the newspaper's content; however, the final decision to print the content lies with the Editor-in-Chief. The Tower's articles do not necessarily represent the views of the administration, faculty, or staff.

habit of doing good can be cultivated and extended into adulthood. In 20 years, a current PHS student may have left behind their high school nonprofit, but the effort they made to submerge themselves in philanthropy will undoubtedly stay with them for a long time.

Moreover, if critics continue to discourage high school students from starting their own nonprofits, they might not only reduce, but eradicate this culture of charity completely. Given students' self-motivated ambition, it's unlikely that in the face of continued opposition students will simply settle on joining existing organizations. Instead, they will transition to starting other, much more self-serving, business oriented organizations to gain the experience they need. As opposed to organizations that, say, provide music tutoring to underprivileged youth, organizations that simply charge for music lessons will spring up.

Rather than writing off student nonprofits as trivial, we should help to support them, and the students that run them, in any way we can. By simply providing positive encouragement to the founders, or mentoring them, or even helping them reach their mission, we will create a positive culture that encourages charity and long term change.

# CHEERS

Stuff  
we like

Stuff  
we don't

# JEERS

BAKLAVA

THICK OF IT by KSI

HALLOWEEN

Thanking BEYONCE

NO SCHOOL NOVEMBER

Journaling OUTDOORS

The NOBODY WANTS THIS show

College application DEADLINES

Studying for the SAT

APUSH HOMEWORK

THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STATE OF THE WORLD

# NO TRICKS, JUST TREATS

VANGUARD PRESENTS

# CANDY

## Halloween: a haunted history

Aarna Dharmavarapu, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The roots of this tradition can be traced back to the early ninth century in the Celtic lands of the United Kingdom, when Christian churches started celebrating what they called “All Souls Day” on November 2. On this day, impoverished families visited wealthier households, asking for small pastries known as soul cakes in exchange for the promise of praying for the wealthy family’s deceased relatives. This practice was then passed down to their children, who went door-to-door asking for either food, money, or ale.

This custom then expanded to Scotland and Ireland, where children dressed up and participated in “guising,” in which they performed short songs and dances (tricks) in front of houses in exchange for treats, which came in the form of fruit, nuts, or coins.

When the tradition made its way into the United States, it quickly gained widespread popularity. Starting in the 1930s, children walking door-to-door were given homemade cookies, cakes, and fruit. By the 1950s, large candy manufacturers began to promote their products during this season, and as trick-or-treating became more popular, many households switched to handing out candy, as it was far more affordable and convenient. However, some households still chose to provide handmade goods until the 1970s, when candy became the only acceptable treat to hand out to all the children.

Throughout the decades, the most popular candies greatly varied. From the 1930s to the 1950s, some of the most common favorites included Hershey’s chocolate and candy corn. From the 1960s to the early 2000s, treats like Tootsie Pops and Laffy Taffys began to dominate the candy industry. Nowadays, we often find a balance between candy and chocolate. Regardless of the type of candy, trick-or-treating has remained a popular activity. From chocolate bars to sugary treats, the excitement of dressing up and going from door to door has kept this tradition alive.

The excitement for Halloween can especially be seen throughout the Princeton community. In addition to the ghosts and goblins trick-or-treating throughout the streets, Princeton University’s campus is enlivened by displays of the classic black and orange color scheme of Halloween. Costume parades across the town allow families to show off their vibrant costumes. At PHS, creative costume challenges invite students to participate in the festivities with a bit of friendly competition.

Beyond local events, many students also choose to experience the thrill of roller coasters and haunted houses during Fright Fest, the annual Halloween event hosted by Six Flags. During the daytime, East Windor’s Field of Terror invites visitors to wander through their corn mazes and pumpkin patches. As night falls, zombies and clowns hide in shadows during their haunted hay rides.

If satisfying your sweet tooth is not enough of a delight on Halloween, maybe a BOO! will electrify your night!

Graphics  
By

Emily  
Kim

# Sweet selections: Maruichi edition

Maxime DeVico and Anna Petrova, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

While you search for the best place to buy candy this month, it might be worth your time to take a detour from the usual supermarket chains. We visited Maruichi, a Japanese grocery store on Nassau Street, and perused the shelves to sample some sweets. Four caught our eyes: Kasugai peach gummies, Peko strawberry chocolate, milk-flavored Meiji Chelsea, and Hello Kitty matcha marshmallows. We evaluated them for flavor and texture.

**1. The least Halloween friendly: milk-flavored Meiji Chelsea**  
This candy fell flat — the milk flavor was strong and unpalatable, tasting faintly spoiled. Unlike most candies, its taste doesn't go away quickly. Its unpleasantness stays in your mouth even after the candy is gone.

**2. Almost there: Kasugai peach gummies**  
Like the milk-flavored Meiji Chelsea, this gummy's flavor was strong and impossible to miss, but unlike the Meiji Chelsea, the taste was sweet, natural, and pleasant. Its downsides were that the gelatin was sticky and its texture felt chewy, landing it at number three.

**3. Would buy again: Hello Kitty matcha marshmallows**  
The marshmallows were extremely soft, easy to chew, and not exceedingly sweet. Although the flavors of the two components seemed to clash, the matcha jelly inside wasn't overpowering. If a kid found this on a porch on Halloween, a smile is sure to dawn on their face.

**4. New favorite Halloween treat: Peko strawberry chocolate**  
The most visually appealing of the candies, these pink and brown chocolates are stamped with Sanrio (a Japanese entertainment company that manufactures kawaii stationery and accessories) characters. As for taste, the chocolate was perfectly sweetened and stayed milky throughout. The strawberry taste wasn't artificial, and paired well with the milk chocolate, replicating the taste of chocolate-covered strawberries. This chocolate exceeded all expectations, landing it first.



photos: Syra Bhatt

# Candy crossword challenge

Jaisel Iyer, Leo Luo, and Fangwu Yu, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

**Across**

- Use of corn syrup in candy prevents \_\_\_\_
- Holiday when you give out candy
- Largest brand under [10]
- The \_\_\_\_ of candy is determined during the process of [4]
- Bean used to make chocolate
- To let something fall, or type of hard candy
- Country that is the top import market for chocolate
- Company that dominates the gum industry
- A mineral that doubles as a piece of candy

**Down**

- Breath \_\_\_\_
- The most popular sweetener used in gum
- Most popular halloween candy in New Jersey
- Most popular non-[12] based confectionery
- Salt water \_\_\_\_
- Confectionery and Pennsylvania-based amusement park
- Type of chocolate that is bitter



graphics: Emily Kim

## Pumpkin Spice Fudge

Marina Yazbek Dias Peres, ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT CO-EDITOR  
Vanessa He, CONTRUBUTING WRITER

One of the simplest sweet treats you can make at home is chocolate fudge. Not only is it easy to make, it is also easy to personalize. During autumn, eating pumpkin flavored foods are a must — including this delicious pumpkin spice fudge!

Cooking time: 2 minutes  
Cooling time: 3 hours maximum

- Ingredients:**
- 2 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips
  - 14 oz sweetened condensed milk
  - 1 tsp vanilla extract
  - 2 tbsp pumpkin puree
  - 1 tsp pumpkin pie spice



photo: Vanessa He

- Instructions:**
- Line a square pan with parchment paper so that it covers the sides of the pan.
  - Combine the semi-sweet chocolate chips and condensed milk in a large bowl. Microwave the bowl for one minute, take it out, and mix thoroughly. Microwave it again in 30 second increments, mixing in-between, until no chunks are present.
  - Add the vanilla extract, pumpkin puree, and pumpkin pie spice into the bowl.
  - Mix everything quickly and immediately pour mixture into the pan, spreading evenly.
  - Refrigerate the pan for two to three hours until the fudge is firm.
  - After taking it out of the refrigerator, immediately cut the fudge into squares. Enjoy the fudge right out of the fridge for a firmer texture or at room temperature for a softer texture!



## Chocolate Honeycomb

Seven years ago, my parents started raising bees in our backyard, and every year that goes by, we find ourselves with a surplus of honey. This recipe is my solution to use up some of that honey creatively. This dark chocolate honeycomb bark combines the smooth texture and bitter flavor of chocolate, with a sweet and crunchy yet chewy caramel that is bound to please all tastes.

Cooking time: 20–25 minutes  
Cooling time: 3 hours minimum

- Ingredients:**
- 1 cup (215g) sugar
  - 3 tbsp (70g) honey
  - A pinch of salt
  - ¼ cup water
  - 2 tsp baking soda
  - 250g dark baking chocolate

### Pro Tip!

Make sure to store the bark in an airtight container so that the humidity won't soften the caramel.



photo: Marina Yazbek Dias Peres

### Instructions:

- In a medium-sized saucepan, combine the sugar, honey, salt, and half of the water. Make sure the sides of the saucepan aren't sugary; if they are, brush some of the remaining water on the sides.
- Heat the sugar and honey mixture on medium heat until it reaches 300 degrees Fahrenheit, or until the sugar mixture is boiling and has turned an amber color. Do not stir the mixture as it heats. While waiting, line the baking tray with parchment paper.
- Once the sugar mixture has reached the right point, whisk in the baking soda. The mixture should be fluffy and a pale orange color. Use a spatula to transfer the sugar fluff onto the baking tray. Once cooled, remove the block of honeycomb from the pan and set aside (keep it stuck to the parchment paper). Place another sheet of parchment paper in the same baking tray.
- While the honeycomb is cooling, start tempering the chocolate. Fill a saucepan with a bit of water and place a heatsafe bowl on top so it covers the mouth of the saucepan. The water should not touch the bottom of the bowl.
- Place half of the chocolate in the bowl and heat the water on medium heat. Keep stirring until the chocolate melts. Once the chocolate is melted, remove the bowl from the saucepan and dry the bottom. Keep the honeycomb away from water to avoid it becoming soft.
- Finely chop the rest of the chocolate into tiny grain-like pieces. With a spatula, mix the chopped chocolate into the melted chocolate until fully combined. While mixing, test the temperature of the chocolate by dabbing some above your upper lip. If the chocolate feels cool, it is properly tempered.
- Spread the chocolate evenly onto the parchment paper in the baking tray. Then remove the parchment paper that is on the honeycomb, and place the honeycomb onto the chocolate, lightly pressing it down. Let the chocolate harden at room temperature.
- After fully cooled, you can break the bark into as many pieces as you'd like. Enjoy!





# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## The Numina Gallery exhibition showcases Hispanic traditions

Chloe Lam, STAFF WRITER  
Yunsheng Xu and Maiya Qiu,  
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

The PHS Numina Gallery celebrated Hispanic Heritage Month between October 9 and 17 with an exhibition that showcased a diverse display of Hispanic cultures. The exhibition featured many artifacts from different Spanish-speaking regions, including Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

Hispanic Heritage Month is a national celebration observed from September 15 to October 15 to celebrate the diverse contributions of Hispanic-American citizens to the United States.

"[The Numina Gallery exhibit] provides a vital platform for Latino students to express their voices and pride in their culture," said Martha Hayden, a Spanish teacher at PHS.

In addition to displaying student's culture, the event also brings together people from across the community.

"[In the other months] we usually do art showcases ... this exhibition, [however], is a more [broad] and cultural exhibition, which makes it special because we are not showcasing specific artworks of art students ... [instead] we are bringing in projects and cultures from Spanish students and from different clubs," said Cindy Zhou '25, co-president of the Numina Gallery.

The centerpiece of the exhibition, the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) ofrenda, displayed traditional offerings given during a reunion with the dead, such as candles, flowers, and photos of deceased loved ones. The exhibition also presented poems related to immigration, traditional clothing from several regions, and güiro frog instruments.



The Spanish exhibition displays salsa dancing skirts and student-made posters about Spanish traditions.



(From left to right) : Lily Berkley '26, Alisa Tsai '26, and Zack Ware-Huff '26 look at the front of the exhibition.

Camila Del Castillo, a Spanish teacher at PHS and the main organizer of the Numina exhibit, was pleased to see the reactions of parents and students on the opening night of the exhibition.

"The Hispanic kids that came and saw things from their country loved it. They saw the altar or the Día de los Muertos ofrenda, and they connected with things they have learned," said Del Castillo. "People visiting and being happy to be there [is] when I feel the proudest."

The preparation process lasted two weeks and involved the collaboration of many different people, including students, teachers, and even supervisors.

Spanish teachers and students did most of the work, while Numina Gallery members mostly assisted in putting up pieces, podiums, and lighting.

"The Spanish classes would come and help, and during our free time we would listen to their ideas and help incorporate our knowledge about the gallery to help with the setup," said Zhou.

The Latinos Unidos club was a significant part of the exhibition, sharing Hispanic traditions through music and visuals. Brian Donis '25, the club's vice president, helped plan and set up the event, along with other students.

"The students helped us carry out the projects and events, but all in all, there is no difference from being a student leader and being a student in the club [because] we all came together as one community," said Donis.

Students and teachers each had different roles in the preparations for the exhibit. The Spanish teachers, created themes such as geographical and cultural regions for each of their respective classes to focus on. The students then researched these regions and designed posters to display on the walls of the gallery.

While preparing the exhibition, students and teachers faced many challenges, such as planning and coordination.

"Finding the time is the most challenging. It's hard because you're still teaching, [and the Numina exhibit] is not your only job," said Del Castillo. "Kids are in school, so I can't pull them out of class to [help], and after school everybody has things to do."

The preparation process is different every year, as although the Hispanic Heritage exhibition is designed to display Hispanic culture, its theme changes from year to year.

Last year's focus was more on celebrations, while this year the exhibition focused on spotlighting specific people and countries. However, while the focus of the exhibition changes annually, the goal remains the same: to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month and showcase the diverse cultures spread across Latin America.

"We even [had] the Chinese teacher bringing in her kids and the Italian teacher bringing her kids and making comparisons between things that we have, like the fans and different artifacts," said Del Castillo. "We compare, but to highlight our similarities."



Fans embellished with floral art and two figurines playing instruments display aspects of Cuban music.

## Sebastian Bongiovi '25 passionately pursues a musical life

Suroor Menai, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Sebastian Bongiovi '25 has always been surrounded by music. He fell in love with the trumpet in second grade, and grew up with several accomplished musicians in his family, including his father, Joseph Bongiovi, who is the longstanding band director at PHS, and his mother, who is a vocalist. His passion for music and its presence in his family's story has played an outsized role in Bongiovi's life, such as his decision to follow in the footsteps of his father and sister to apply to the Berklee College of Music where he hopes to study composition. Now a senior at PHS and about to embark on his next musical adventure, Sebastian plays trumpet for the highly selective Studio Band, sings for PHS Choir, and is a vocalist in the a cappella group Around 8. He acts in numerous school plays and composes music for video games and web series. Most recently, he composed a song called "Be Sorry" for Studio Band's Abbey Road Studios album "Run It Twice."

### What made you choose the trumpet?

That's actually a funny story. In second grade, I had to choose an instrument, and I had my heart set on trombone, but I was a really tiny kid, and my dad was aware of that, so he told me to take trumpet and change from there, and I just never [ended up changing] to trombone.

### When did you start acting and what do you love most about it?

The first time I started legitimately acting was in fifth grade. The thing I love most about it is being able to portray different personalities that I wouldn't really act like in real life. Unlike other aspects of art that I do, I don't really take it as seriously, which is better for me, because it makes it more lighthearted and fun.

### How does acting, singing, and playing an instrument all connect for you artistically?

I feel much more attuned to playing than anything else, but I need to give credit where credit is due. Singing is like the bridge between acting and playing for me. It's the only medium where you use both.



Sebastian Bongiovi '25 practices a chord progression on the piano in one of the band practice rooms.

### Can you talk about the experience of recording at Abbey Road Studios and what that meant to you?

It was absolutely ludicrous in the moment, and it still is now. The overall experience was extremely validating. Being able to play in that room was a very grueling process, like when you're physically there and you're working, it's a lot more stressful than you realize. We had to record ten hours straight for three days. Specifically recording my song, in the heat of the moment it was absolutely insane, especially with Randy Brecker, who was the guest artist we had there. He is someone whose music I've been listening to for a very long time, so having an artist who is a part of your daily life being in front of you and then also playing your music that you wrote and asking you questions about your song was baffling a bit. It was an amazing experience.

### What is your process when composing music?

For me, usually what happens is I'll be messing around with the piano, and I'll come up with a random chord progression, and it'll be a lot of me experimenting. Going into my room, being like, "Okay, let's make something out of this," and spending however many hours just fiddling.

### Are you planning on pursuing a career in music, and if you are, what type?

Definitely. My goal is to apply to three to four different schools for some form of either composition or a contemporary writing and production major, the latter of which is offered at Berklee College of Music, which is my top college of choice and the only college I've applied early admission to.

### What advice would you give to new musicians or artists?

Give yourself time. More often than not, I'll be working on a song and I get stuck and have no idea where to go, so I just go to bed, and then I wake up the next morning and I have an idea. Being able to give yourself space and time is invaluable to creating music.

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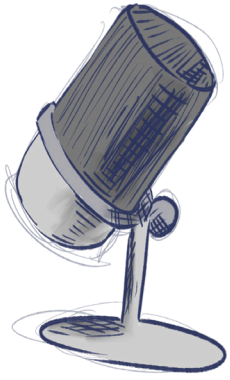
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# Plug in: a beginner's guide to podcasts

Tessa Silver, OPINIONS CO-EDITOR  
Joy Chen, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



For someone who is just getting into them, there are so many podcasts in the world that it can be incredibly overwhelming. After all, with so many options, how do you know which podcasts are high quality and line up with your interests? If you are a new podcast listener, here is our guide to navigating the podcast world, including how to pick accurate and reliable sources.


As we're in the middle of election season, podcasts are a great way to have information presented to you in an understandable and condensed way. However, it's hard to know where to find unbiased information about the election, a topic that's incredibly polarizing. One place to start is seeing if a news site you trust also creates podcasts. Many newspapers and channels, like The New York Times, CNN, and The Washington Post produce audio content in addition to written articles. Alternatively, if you find a news podcast, but are unsure about its reliability, searching up the person or group that creates it online is a good way to see how they're likely to approach the subject. Finding the podcast's bias rating from listeners is also an effective way to determine its reliability.

Once you've found a reliable source, there is a diverse range of podcasts to explore. From investigative journalism to historical comedy, here are our top picks of reputable podcasts to check out from each genre.




graphics: Charley Hu

### True Crime Podcasts




Another classic genre of podcasts is true crime, which is a favorite among teenagers for its thrilling and suspenseful content. With over 300 episodes, "Rotten Mango" is one of the best-known true crime podcasts, diving into two different cases every week. Through detailed and illustrative language, podcast host Stephanie Soo structures her episodes like a movie, which helps listeners empathize with the victims and also learn more about cultural nuances across the world. For example, in Episode 261, which covered the Sewol Ferry Tragedy in South Korea, Soo explained the deeply ingrained respect for authority and Han grieving culture in South Korea, immersing listeners into the victim's experiences. Soo does not simply recount the tragedies, but spreads awareness on important issues in today's society.

### Political Podcasts




One informative political podcast we recommend is "Left, Right & Center," which is a discussion of recent political news with guest speakers from the three main political perspectives: conservative, moderate, and liberal. Additionally, "On the Ballot" is a facts-based, nonpartisan podcast that helps listeners learn about politics, provides facts, and allows its audience to establish their own opinion.

### Educational Podcasts



Of course, we can't forget about educational and news podcasts. This genre branches into a variety of different types, from purely informative to investigative or storytelling. Among the informative podcasts, you can learn history lessons on "You're Dead to Me," and random fun facts on "Stuff You Should Know." If you're looking for a podcast that combines both storytelling and investigations, "This American Life," is a thought-provoking choice. Ira Glass, the host, centers each of the podcast's 800 episodes around a spontaneous theme. Split into different "acts," the episodes explore each theme through true stories, interviews, and investigations. Recorded since 1995, Glass talks to different people each week: Palestinian exchange students, strangers visiting the Iowa State Fair, or two girls who were switched at birth. You never know who or what to expect.

### Comedy Podcasts



For those looking for a witty and lighthearted listen, comedy podcasts offer the perfect way to cheer you up. One of our favorites is "Mike Birbiglia's Working It Out." In this podcast, Birbiglia, a renowned comedian and storyteller, interviews fellow comedians and creatives, giving listeners a behind the scenes look into creative life and the entertainment industry. Each episode is filled with humorous and heartfelt reflections and contains insightful conversations with featured guests.

# Student Takes: What is your favorite Halloween costume?

Asma Frough, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



"I think the best Halloween costume is a fairy princess because it is fun, cute, and sparkly."  
- Ivy Cordle '27



"My favorite Halloween costume that I ever was, was probably Scooby-Doo."  
- Owen Barry '25



"My favorite Halloween costume is a turtle because my friend introduced it to me and I think they are cute."  
- Yedda Wang '26



"My favorite Halloween costume is Darth Vader because I used to watch [Star Wars] while growing up."  
- Siddharth Chellapan '28

graphics: Charley Hu and Katherine Chen  
photos: Asma Frough

## Taste of autumn: warm recipes for chilly days

### Pumpkin pancakes with cinnamon butter

Maeve Walsh, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It's Sunday morning, and I'm watching the fall classic "Gilmore Girls" with a warm coffee in hand. What's missing? A plate of Luke Danes' pumpkin pancakes with cinnamon butter, of course! These fluffy pancakes, inspired by Luke's, are perfectly spiced and topped with homemade cinnamon butter. After trying this recipe, I felt like I was a part of one of my favorite autumnal TV shows.

#### Ingredients:

##### PANCAKE BATTER

2 cups flour  
 ¼ cup brown sugar  
 1 tsp baking powder  
 1 tsp pumpkin pie spice  
 Pinch of salt  
 1 ½ cups milk  
 1 tsp white vinegar  
 1 cup pumpkin puree  
 ¼ cup salted butter (melted)  
 2 eggs  
 1 tsp vanilla extract

##### CINNAMON BUTTER

½ cup salted butter (room temperature)  
 2 tbsp brown sugar  
 2 tbsp maple syrup  
 1 tsp cinnamon

Recipe adapted from: "The Palatable Life"

Total time: 32 minutes

Prep time: 12 minutes

Cook time: 20 minutes



photo: Maeve Walsh

graphics: Charley Hu

#### Instructions:

1. In a large bowl, add the milk and vinegar, and stir to combine. Allow the mixture to sit for five minutes, then add the pumpkin puree, butter, eggs, and vanilla extract. Whisk until combined and smooth.
2. In a separate large bowl, add the flour, brown sugar, baking powder, pumpkin pie spice, and salt. Stir until well combined.
3. Add the dry ingredients to the large bowl of wet ingredients. Use a rubber spatula to carefully combine until there are no large chunks of dry ingredients. Be sure not to overmix!
4. Add cooking spray to a pan over medium heat. Add ¼ cup of batter to the pan and cook for two to three minutes before flipping the pancake. Cook for another two to three minutes on the other side. Repeat with all the remaining batter.
5. To make the cinnamon butter, add the butter to a medium bowl and mix with a hand mixer until fluffy (about three minutes).
6. Mix in the cinnamon, brown sugar, and maple syrup until combined.
7. Add a scoop of butter on top of the pancakes along with whatever toppings you like. Enjoy!

### Snickerdoodle apple pie cookies

Aarna Dharmavarpur, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

I've always loved autumn. Seeing all the vibrant fall colors engulf every tree, ordering countless pumpkin spice drinks, spending time with loved ones, cooking all sorts of comfort food — who can say no to that? Amidst the chaos of school, I've found comfort in baking for my close friends and family. While perfecting my baking rotation for this season, I came across my current favorite fall recipe — caramel apple snickerdoodles! The sugary cookie base with notes of cinnamon and nutmeg, combined with the sweetness of the caramelized apple sauce, creates a delicious burst of flavors that will leave you coming back for more. Whether you're sharing with friends and family, or keeping these all for yourself, be prepared to enter a world of comfort.

Recipe adapted from: @brooklynburlew on TikTok

Total time: 45 minutes

Prep time: 30 minutes

Cook time: 15 minutes

#### Ingredients:

##### SNICKERDOODLE COOKIES

2 cups salted butter (softened)  
 3 cups granulated sugar  
 4 eggs  
 4 tsp vanilla extract  
 4 ½ cups all-purpose flour  
 4 tsp cream of tartar  
 2 tsp baking soda  
 8 tbsp granulated sugar for coating  
 2 tsp cinnamon

##### APPLE PIE FILLING

4 honeycrisp apples, thinly sliced  
 ⅔ cup granulated sugar  
 3 tbsp brown sugar  
 3 tbsp cornstarch  
 2 tsp ground cinnamon  
 ½ tsp ground nutmeg  
 ½ tsp ground cloves  
 ½ tsp salt  
 2 ½ cups water

##### TOPPINGS (optional)

Caramel sauce  
 3 tbsp powdered sugar  
 2 tsp of milk



photos: Aarna Dharmavarpur

#### Instructions:

##### SNICKERDOODLE COOKIE

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit.
2. In a large mixing bowl, mix together the softened butter and sugar, until it reaches a light and fluffy consistency.
3. Add the eggs and vanilla into the bowl, mixing until fully combined.
4. Add the flour in five parts, slowly folding it into the dough.
5. Add in the cream of tartar and baking soda, and mix until fully incorporated into the dough. (Note: the dough is supposed to be slightly sticky.)
6. In a separate bowl, mix cinnamon and sugar together.
7. Using a cookie scoop, make balls of dough and roll them in the cinnamon sugar mixture made in the previous step, until each dough ball is fully coated.
8. Place the dough balls at least three inches apart from each other on a baking sheet.

##### APPLE FILLING

1. Place a medium saucepan on a stove over medium-high heat.
2. Add in the granulated sugar, brown sugar, cornstarch, ground cinnamon, ground nutmeg, ground cloves, salt, and water.
3. Stir gently until the mixture simmers.
4. Add in the apples, and turn the heat down to medium-low heat.
5. Stir in the apples until they turn a golden color

##### BAKING COOKIES AND FILLING

1. Bake the cookies for eight minutes at first, and carefully remove them from the oven. (Note: they're supposed to be slightly undercooked at this point.)
2. Using a spoon, gently press down the center of the cookie to form a slight indent on the surface of the cookies.
3. Place the apple pie filling into the indents of each cookie.
4. Put the cookies back into the oven for two to three minutes.
5. To make the icing, add some powdered sugar into a small bowl, and slowly add in milk and whisk until a creamy consistency is achieved.
6. Take the cookies out, drizzle some icing and caramel on top. Enjoy!

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# Screen or scream: two Halloween movies, reviewed

## "Corpse Bride"

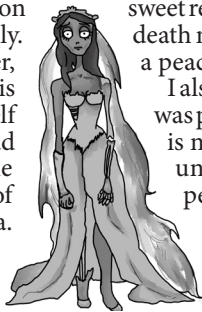
Gabby Kaputa, STAFF WRITER

"Corpse Bride," directed by Tim Burton, draws viewers into a haunting world where love reaches beyond the grave. On the day before his wedding, Victor, who is betrothed to Victoria, runs away into a dark forest to practice his vows. While practicing, he places his ring on the root of a tree, only for it to be revealed as the skeleton hand of a dead woman named Emily. By placing the ring on Emily's finger, Victor is officially married to this "corpse bride," and finds himself taken away to the land of the dead as her husband. From there, he works to escape back to the land of the living to reunite with Victoria.

While the stop-motion animation and Burton's gothic style give the film a spooky look, I would not really consider it as an ideal Halloween movie; at first it seems like a classic horror movie with villainous characters and jumpscare, but it ends up being very sweet and meaningful, pivoting away from the usual outcome of most horror

tropes. The land of the dead is not dark and cruel, and the land of the living is not lively and enjoyable; rather, the stereotypes of both have been switched. The dead are not cruel and quiet, but the living are instead. When the living and the dead meet, it is not seen as a terrifying interaction, but a sweet reunion. This refreshing take portrays death not as something to be feared, but as a peaceful transition.

I also loved the way the expected villain was portrayed. While at first the audience is meant to see the villain as cruel and unfair, throughout the movie this perspective shifts; the character turns out to be incredibly sympathetic, especially at the end when they realize they are putting someone else through the same hardships they once faced. While the movie doesn't follow the trajectory of a classic Halloween jumpscare film, it ultimately delivers an unexpectedly engaging storyline and provides depth to its characters alongside its gothic charm.



## "Nightmare on Elm Street"

Layla Saint-Pierre, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

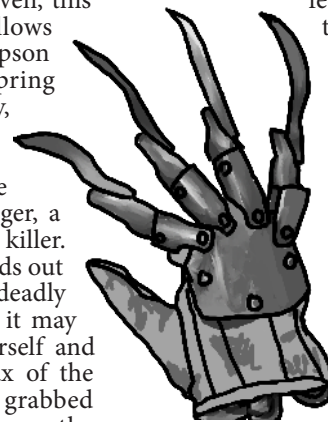
If you're looking for a Halloween fright, nothing beats "A Nightmare on Elm Street." With spooky season just around the corner, we all need some chilling movies to get us into the Halloween spirit.

Directed by Wes Craven, this 1980s slasher film follows teenager Nancy Thompson and her friends in Spring County, Ohio. One day, the lives of these teens are forever changed when they become targets of Freddy Krueger, a burn victim and serial killer. Though Nancy soon finds out the reason for Freddy's deadly hauntings, she realizes it may be too late to save herself and her friends. The climax of the movie was tense and grabbed my full attention because the main character was in a suspenseful situation, leaving the watcher on the edge of their seat.

At the beginning, I thought this was another cheesy horror movie; however, the notion of a friend group that sticks together until the end really enhanced the pain and fear that I felt for the characters, making me feel as though I had experienced that nightmare alongside them.

"A Nightmare on Elm Street" is one of those classic movies that will for sure stay popular for years to come. Although some jumpscare were pretty predictable, it added a certain charm to the feel of the movie, and hearing the iconic song, "One, Two, Freddy's Coming For You" felt very nostalgic as well.

Instead of wasting time searching for the cinematographically "perfect" Halloween movie, this classic film makes for a great combination of nostalgia and thrill.



graphics: Charlie Gregson

# The rising popularity of digital art

Jane Hu, STAFF WRITER  
Dhruv Khanna and Joy Chen,  
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Art is a reflection of the times, constantly evolving alongside modern technology. Today, we find ourselves in the middle of yet another major transformation with the rise of digital art, which uses technology to give artists more tools and opportunities to take their artwork to the next level.

Over the past few decades, the popularity of digital art has skyrocketed due to the advancement of technology and the increasing popularity of social media. This growth has allowed artists including cherise.art and haranikala to promote digital art by creating posts on apps like TikTok and Instagram. Furthermore, digital art has become a popular medium for artists thanks to its portability. Unlike traditional art, such as painting, which requires numerous supplies, including paint, paint

brushes, a water cup, and a pencil, digital art only uses two instruments: a device and a stylus. Digital art softwares also offer customizable settings that allow users to easily adjust their brush size, brush type, opacity, and canvas size with just the tap of a button.

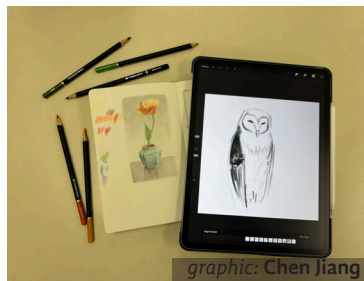
While digital art is gradually changing the creative world with its flexibility, traditional art remains a vital pillar to the foundations of art. Traditional art forms, such as sculpture, print-making, and painting embody techniques and a historical significance that will last

throughout human history. Art movements such as the Renaissance, Impressionism, and Cubism are all tied to centuries of culture and societal reform. Traditional artworks from different artistic movements remain a way for people to admire, study, and understand the past.

Digital art and traditional art, just like how one might compare handwritten letters to emails, are two unique ways to express oneself — neither can replace the other. Both may communicate the same message, but the experience and creation

processes for each are vastly different. While traditional art may hold the weight of art history and craftsmanship, digital art has opened artistic creation to new realms once thought unimaginable. The efficiency and mobility of digital art is often disregarded with a lack of time, effort, and heart. But in reality, digital art is just a different form of creative expression.

Art is never a competition between different styles and media. Every new art form draws inspiration from previous styles, such as how digital brushstrokes are made to mimic traditional paint brushes, and how the emphasis in contrast and shadow in digital photography art is a model of traditional still lives. Despite the rapid growth of new art styles and movements, art cannot be replaced, only transformed.



graphic: Chen Jiang

# PHS Orchestra and PHS UNICEF co-host a benefit concert

Aleena Zhang and Rebecca Zhang,  
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

On October 17, the Princeton High School Orchestra (PHSO) collaborated with the PHS UNICEF community service club, as well as Princeton Middle School, to host a benefit concert promoting the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that UNICEF has set to achieve by 2030.

This event occurs every other year; this year's edition specifically placed emphasis on presenting the 17 goals. These goals include ending poverty, improving global education, achieving gender equality, and making clean energy affordable. PHS UNICEF leaders and officers discussed these goals while the orchestra played



Orchestra director Robert Loughran conducts all orchestra members.

music in-between presentations.

"[We combined] artistry with mission ... [to support children] artistically from where we are in Princeton," said PHSO conductor and UNICEF club advisor Robert Loughran.

While in previous years the concert featured PHSO alumni, this year, only current orchestra members participated. Loughran described this experience, noting that the soloists were all student performers.

"We have a really talented piano section in the orchestra ... [that performed] solo repertoire that [coincided] with what [was] presented on stage by the officers," said Loughran.

During the concert, all members of the PHS orchestra program — as well as some Princeton Middle School orchestra members — had the opportunity to perform.

As the event was open to the community at a low cost of attendance, it reached a wide range of community members.

Moreover, the performers had the opportunity to expand their musical talents while simultaneously learning more about global issues. PHSO violinist Elif Cam '26 describes her connection to

these goals as a musician after studying UNICEF's mission.

"I personally donate to UNICEF, and I have researched the Sustainable Development Goals a lot, so for me, it [was] truly really special to have a concert in honor of [this cause]," said Cam.

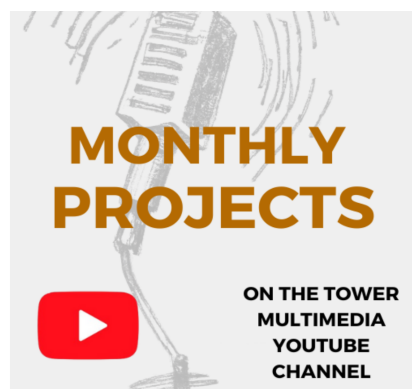
PHS UNICEF leader Ava Tabcart '25 shared her hopes to inspire other high school students.

"Community service shouldn't be thought of as a graduation requirement ... it's really something that [we hope students will] embrace and try to make the most of," said Tabcart.



photos: Katherine Chen

The Sustainable Development Goals are presented on a projector screen above the orchestra.



## TOWER MULTIMEDIA

HOW HAVE WE ADAPTED TO THE NEW SCHEDULE?

With thoughts and reactions from PHS students and teachers



# SPORTS

## Investigating the link between music and exercise

Asya Morozov and Katie Qin, SPORTS CO-EDITORS



photo: Katie Qin

Debdeep Sen '26 listens to music while lifting

According to multiple studies compiled into "The Influence of Music Preference on Exercise Responses and Performance: A Review," published in 2021 by Christopher Ballmann, who has a Ph.D. in exercise physiology, music has been proven to benefit athletes

during endurance, sprint, and resistance-based activities. Music distracts the athlete, making them have a distorted perception of their level of fatigue and even motivating them to enjoy the exercise more, ultimately improving the quality of the workout. But is music always helpful during workouts? How do people react to it on a case-by-case basis?

At PHS, many students participate in athletic activities, from school sports to personal exercise. PHS track athlete Bhavya Yaddanapudi '25 often does cardio and lifting, and testifies to the effectiveness of music during her workouts.

"I listen to music because it distracts me from the pain of working out, and it boosts my mood," said Yaddanapudi. "If you're not listening to anything, you really focus on how you feel while working out and what muscles are being activated."

Research conducted by Matthew S. Biagini of California State University suggests that increased activity in the brain while listening to music is associated with better performance while exercising. On top of that, a 2022 study led by Chenyang Li of Liaoning Normal University's Physical Education Institute shows that syncing movements with songs may save energy and even make them more efficient. Yaddanapudi notes that listening to slow-tempo songs seems to have a negative effect on her workouts, making exercise feel even more tiring for her.

"In the weight room, sometimes, there's slower songs or ballads, and those are somewhat miserable to work out to," said Yaddanapudi.

According to Healthline, instrumental music is particularly good for studying, as it offers a minimally-distracting background sound. For working out, though, instrumentals can be too faded to provide the ideal balance of focus and distraction. Debdeep Sen '26 recalls

his experience of listening to slow instrumental music while working out.

"I tried listening to lofi, and it did not work out. It made me more tired," said Sen.

These differences in perceived exhaustion may arise from personal preferences in music, but also from the effect music has on mood. Psychology Today proposes that music can validate emotions someone is feeling and also inspire new ones. Music's ability to change a person's mood can be beneficial during workouts, allowing people to harness more energy and inspire themselves to work harder, but it can also disrupt someone's rhythm. Sen admits having experienced a similar disruption in his workout pace.

"I listened to metal sometimes ... it made me angry, which was distracting from the workout, but it didn't make me work harder," said Sen.

When listening to the right music, though, an athlete can truly surpass their limits. Sen sees a change in how his body reacts when working out while playing music.

"After a set, I'll feel even more tired than if I didn't listen to music," said Sen.

According to the National Center for Health Research, music has the ability to set the tempo of a workout session. Faster-paced songs can set a strong rhythm, especially when doing repetitive exercises. When an athlete is able to access this focus, they are able to surpass themselves, working harder than they would normally and building muscle effectively.

Whether it's to maximize gains or enjoy exercise more, music has a potent effect on a person's experience while training. Music's effect on workouts depends on its tempo, the mood it inspires, and an athlete's personal preference. Ultimately, the right playlist can make or break a workout.

“When listening to the right music ... an athlete can surpass their limits.”

## Dylan Unkert '28: pursuing perfection in professional pickleball

Asya Morozov and Dester Selby-Salazar, SPORTS CO-EDITORS  
Marco Gonzalez and Nia Zagar, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS



Dylan Unkert '28 hits a return strike, launching the pickleball across the court.

As a professional pickleball player sponsored by Selkirk Pickleball, the leading pickleball gear company, Dylan Unkert '28 stands out from the crowd of talented PHS athletes. He has played pickleball recreationally for around six years, but has started competing this past year. He currently plays in individual, team, and mixed events in tournaments across the nation, although he mainly competes in doubles. In the past year of play, he won medals at almost every tournament he participated in, including a division in the U.S. Open, and hopes to continue his winning streak at nationals.

**How did you first get into playing pickleball? Why did you choose this sport?**

[My grandma and I] went down to Florida one year for Christmas and I was really hesitant to play because I didn't really know anybody. She thought [pickleball] was a good, inclusive sport that all ages can play, so she brought us down and I just fell in love with it. Before, I would only play once a year but then I found more courts [nearby] and we were able to play once a week. Now I've been playing almost every day.

**How was your transition as a player from middle school to high school?**

I play on a team outside of school. It can be hard managing school and [playing] because the practices are four to five hours each day, on top of competing ... I definitely think that the jump from middle school to high school has been more challenging.

**What makes playing doubles special for you? How do you build the necessary chemistry with your teammates?**

I've been playing with some of my partners for a year. Just knowing each other and not having to communicate because I know [they will] be there ... I think that really helps. I think even if you're playing two people that are better than you, it's your chemistry that really sets you apart from the others. It's really [about] how well you can communicate [and] how well you can work together and uplift each other.

**What misconceptions about pickleball do you frequently encounter?**

That pickleball is an old people's sport. If you play at a lower level, you're obviously not moving as much. At the pro level, especially singles, there's studies that show that [pickleball is] harder on your body than tennis because there's more of a jolting movement than just side to side ... you need to have hand-eye coordination and a [solid] mentality.

**What are the biggest challenges you have faced as a pickleball player, and how have you overcome them?**

At least in competitions, I have been one of the youngest people — everyone else is in their twenties, thirties, even fifties. I just try to maintain knowing that I'm a kid, not getting too crazy on the court because [my opponents] are a lot older than me. Being so young ... it can give you opportunities, but other times it can be a hindrance.

**What was your most memorable moment during a match?**

I was playing singles in the pit and during my final match on game point, I ended up getting hurt — I pulled my hamstring. Not knowing that I pulled my hamstring, I kept on going and I won [the match] with one leg only.

**Can you describe your trip to the U.S. Open?**

It was overwhelming at first because there were so many people, especially good people. It was a national qualifier tournament — if I won it, I would be able to go to Arizona and compete in nationals. I went undefeated [while injured], so I'm going to nationals in a few weeks!

**What do you think your next steps are for pickleball in the coming years?**

So the APP (Association of Pickleball Players), which is one of pickleball's main foundations, is starting a boarding school for the best junior pickleball players. Thankfully, I was invited to be there. Now I just have to decide if I want to move to Florida or not!



photos: Charley Hu

Dylan Unkert '28 gets ready to return a serve on the pickleball court.

## Which song are you listening to on repeat while working out?

Katie Qin, SPORTS CO-EDITOR



photo: Katie Qin

"I like 'What's Up, Danger' from Spiderman: Into the Spider-Verse."  
- Bhavya Yaddanapudi '25



photo courtesy: Debdeep Sen

"I listen to 'Party in the USA' and 'California Gurls' on repeat."  
- Debdeep Sen '26



photo courtesy: Aditi Rapaka

"I will often play 'Non-Stop' from the musical 'Hamilton.'"  
- Aditi Rapaka '27

graphics: Emily Kim

## A Homecoming retrospective

Asya Morozov, SPORTS CO-EDITOR

To most, Homecoming is a sports game with the bonus of a dance. To me, Homecoming was a dance with the bonus of a sports game. I'd never seen a football game before. All I knew was that PHS was unusually terrible at it (based on past years' statistics) and that the announcer was so loud I could hear him speaking from my backyard.

But this year, I wanted to go and have that typical American high school experience. I had accidentally bought two tickets to the game, so I dragged my mom along with me. When we arrived at the field fifteen minutes late, everything was already in chaos: the cheerleaders were shaking their pom-poms, spectators were sitting everywhere they possibly could, and someone scored a touchdown?

I think that first touchdown made it quite clear to me how little I knew about football. In fact, about two hours of my viewing were spent just trying to figure out what I was watching.

When I finally understood, it was hard not to get sucked into the game. With every touchdown, the audience stomped; I stomped too. With every musical interlude, my heart beat a little faster. The constant stopping and starting barely even bothered me anymore.

At halftime, when the players left the field, I started to see things clearly again. How did I get so caught up in the game? How did years of disinterest vanish so quickly?

A little thought and I realized: it was all a show. The music, the roars, the crowd, the cheerleaders, the blinding lights. The commentators, the subtle digs at the other team, the row of substitute players that blocked our vision. It was like sitting in a theater box, watching something beautiful but mostly unreal. The atmosphere was what made the game; the game could not possibly stand alone.

And then I had some questions. Why football? Where is this excitement for other school sports? Why isn't there a Homecoming for any girls' team? Why is girls' role during the biggest game of the school year to be cheerleaders wearing players' names? Is this tradition worth it?

Then the lights turned back on, the music started to play, and those thoughts were pounded out of my head as if by a hammer. The fanfare was a cover, a distraction. It was hard to think but easy to cheer.

That isn't to say that I didn't have fun. I'm glad PHS won, and I now have a genuine interest in football. I had a great night at Homecoming. But how much of it was the game, and how much was the crazy show of it all?



Elisio Moncada '25 gets in position for the next play.



photos courtesy: Rohan Viswanathan

Wyatt Arshan '25 rushes towards the endzone.

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# Athletes of the Month

## Mia Ramirez '25: field hockey

Dester Selby-Salazar, SPORTS CO-EDITOR  
Kaelan Patel, STAFF WRITER



photos: Jasur Agzamov

Ramirez set a goal to make varsity as a freshman, which she accomplished.

Running up the field with the ball, Mia Ramirez '25 sees a defender coming her way. Rather than taking them on, she finds her teammate with a perfect pass, leading to a goal. Seeing how her style of play has led others to success is one of her favorite joys of playing the sport.

Ramirez discovered her passion for field hockey when she was in middle school. With three siblings who played different sports, she was always encouraged to find a sport that she liked.

"I wanted to play a sport for middle school, so I kept trying sports until I found one that stuck," said Ramirez. "I signed up for field hockey in the fall of middle school, and I really loved it."

While some things were different to her, like playing on turf instead of playing on grass, her desire to improve always remained. This sense of responsibility immediately made an impression with their coach, Heather Serverson.

"When she came in as a freshmen, I knew she was going to be captain, because she's always listening," said Serverson. "She was always getting other people [on track] when they got distracted at practice, she would always be giving older players tips when they needed help, so she wasn't afraid to step up and lead, even as a young player."

As a captain, Ramirez wants to return the same positive energy she received as a freshman. To bring unity to the squad, Ramirez regularly organizes team dinners, group studies, and movie nights.

"The thing about PHS field hockey is that we're always super close," said Ramirez. "I remember freshman year, everyone was super welcoming to me, and that's just kind of the culture that we have, where the older players and younger players just naturally mesh together."

Sophie Gono '25 has been right beside Ramirez for most of their time on the team, and has seen how Ramirez has grown as a player. As the team's other co-captain, she feels that Ramirez has the qualities needed in a leader.

"We have a similar working style, so we're always there to support each other, playing or not playing field hockey," said Gono. "She's always willing to listen and help, and when I want to get extra touches in the off season, she's always open to going to a field to go and practice."

The desire to improve has had great results; Ramirez currently leads the girls field hockey team with an astounding 21 goals, and will be looking to add to that tally in the coming weeks. For her, there's no need for extra motivation.

"I'm naturally competitive and self-motivated," said Ramirez. "I think that no matter what my day was like, or what warm up felt like when I got onto the field, I naturally turn into my competitive nature. That's always really helpful, because there's nothing I really have to do to tune into that."

When it comes to motivating and helping other teammates out on the pitch, Ramirez can do that as well. Serverson recalls a game against Lawrence High School in the Mercer County Tournament where, although they eventually lost the game, Ramirez's captain qualities really stood out.

"In the MCT game, the younger players were very, very nervous. I had some freshmen starting, and these were freshmen who weren't used to the crowd and the lights, which can be a lot for a young player," said Serverson.

"They were getting frustrated in the moment because they weren't performing at the level that a senior would be expected to perform at. Ramirez was on the field, telling them to hang on and that they were doing well."



Ramirez continues to set an example for the younger players.

Looking towards the future, Ramirez is demonstrating that, like most things she has done so far in her athletic career, she wants to make sure that the final decision is right for her.

"I was going through the recruiting process for a while, but ultimately didn't find a school that was the right fit, so I decided to not commit anywhere," said Ramirez. "If I go somewhere that has a team, that's definitely something I would like to think about pursuing, either at the club level or at the varsity level in the future."

For new players considering trying out for the PHS field hockey team, Ramirez has some words of encouragement.

"You shouldn't be afraid to make mistakes, and you should always be open to trying things," said Ramirez. "Field hockey is a game where there is always something more that you can learn."

## Emilio Gonzalez '25: track and field

Gabriel Andrade and Claire Yang, STAFF WRITERS



photos: Charley Hu

Gonzalez has worked hard this year to be the best athlete he can be.

Silence fills the air as the runners take their position at the starting line. Emilio Gonzalez '25 steps forward, eyes fixed ahead, mentally mapping the grueling course. As the race begins, the first mile proves to be tougher than expected, but Gonzalez digs deep, finding his stride and rallying to score a point for his team — a powerful display of resilience and unshakeable grit.

Gonzalez began running cross country competitively at the start of middle school, and ever since, he's continued to pursue the sport.

"I got inspired because the sport just seemed interesting to me," said Gonzalez. "I've always liked running, but I didn't know how I could find a team or place where I could just practice those skills."



Training six days a week, Gonzalez is constantly seeking improvement.

Upon joining the team his freshmen year, Gonzalez wasn't as proficient a runner as he is now. It was through countless hours of dedication and perseverance that Gonzalez managed to become one of the best runners on the team.

"I usually train six days a week," said Gonzalez. "Saturdays tend to be our invitational races so our training lines up for that. In the beginning of the year sometimes we have other meets, maybe two meets in a week, but during the most important part of the season it's just on Saturday and the rest is all practice."

But during the offseason, Gonzalez takes his work to the next level. Every summer, he goes to Colombia, and takes the high altitude as a challenge to overcome and grow.

"I'll do a lot less volume even though I'm supposed to stay to a stricter training plan," said Gonzalez. "It just gets hard with everything that comes up, but I'm still training every day, getting my miles in and just making out of that altitude training."

Gonzalez's long-time friend, Jeremy Wachtel '25, has seen all of the hard work that Gonzalez has put in over the years.

"From the time that we were middle school to now, I've seen so much improvement in both his times and his ability to lead a team," said Wachtel. "Between sophomore and junior year, he really, really put in a lot of work, and just went from being an average runner to being just amazing."

Jennifer Smolyn, one of the head coaches of the cross country team, has watched over Gonzalez's growth since his freshman year.

"He has come so far from when he started running in the beginning. Like many newer runners, they don't know how to navigate cross country, especially because all the courses are different," said Smolyn.

As co-captain of the cross-country team, Gonzalez has become a role model and leader that everyone on the team looks up to. When the team falls on tough moments, they can always count on his upbeat personality.

"I hope that everybody on the team knows that I'm somebody that they can come to if they need advice or support," said Gonzalez.

Gonzalez led the team to a fourth place finish out of 30 teams at the Shore Coach Invitational at Holmdel Park — a course known for its especially tough terrain.

"We're really pleased with how they performed. He was definitely in the mix in that race," said Smolyn. "He got a slightly slower start, but in the first mile, he started putting the pieces together. In the second and third mile, he had really figured things out."

As someone who is always looking for opportunities to improve, Gonzalez always reflects after every race with his team. Having been part of the team that won the county championships two years ago, Gonzalez has high hopes.

"It'd be really good to see us make it to groups this year and place very well in that race. On a more individual side, I'm hoping to keep lowering [my personal record] time," said Gonzalez.

Gonzalez recorded his first sub-18-minute 5K this year at the first meet, and also helped PHS's cross country team place first at the XC Fall Classic meet at Thompson Park.

Even though Gonzalez doesn't plan to run for a college team, participating in cross country has been about more than just the competition: it has allowed him to build strong connections with teammates and coaches while forming lasting bonds which will last much longer than the sport itself.

"The thing about this sport is that it's as much [as a] team sport as it's individual," said Gonzalez. "You build these really strong connections, and, for me, the support that comes from coaches and everyone on the team is what keeps you going."



Gonzalez broke his personal best time in the 5k this year — a testament to all the hard work he's put in.