

The Leaning of TOWER Pisa



PHS OLYMPICS

Kylie Sek/Goat-ylie and Claireeeee

This year's annual PHS Olympics will take place between December 27 and January 3. Administration has decided to end winter break early so that the games don't take up school days. Over a quarter of the student population and various alumni have signed up to compete in the games. Popular events include tardy excuse freestyle, wifi signal gymnastics, fruity scent, NYT games dash, and signature forgery.

Daniel Guo '25 is most pumped for the Fruity Scent event. Held in the boys' bathroom near the main intersection, the Fruity Scent event attracts dozens of edgy sophomores and certain seniors, eager to create the most breathtaking scent.

"Piña Colada is my favorite scent combo. All you need to do is blow some pineapple, then some coconut, maybe some cherry," said Daniel Guo '25, coughing. Guo had been prepping for the event all year, hiding in the largest stall with his scents while barking "who the hell just came in here!" every time the bathroom door opens.

"He's my least favorite person here. He thinks he's so edgy," said Tamar Assayag '25. A seasoned champion at the parent-and-teacher signature forgery competition, Assayag's forgery skills have gotten her permission to several school events, including the Homecoming Dance and the annual Spring Dance. "I've dreamed of attending HOCO and stuff like that ever since I was a little girl," said Assayag, looking up from signing a field trip form. "But my mom would never let me go. But I'm slick," she said, smirking.

Also skilled with words, Tessa Silver '26 is especially excited for the NYT games dash, in which contestants attempt to complete all NYT games without getting caught by PHS English teacher Douglas Levandowski.

"I'm so pumped for the NYT games dash; I've been preparing for this my whole life. Ever since I was a baby, my mother has told me that I was destined to be the NYT games champion," exclaimed Silver, whose eyes were sparkling with delight while being interviewed. "My fastest Mini completion is three seconds, so I know I can finish all the games without Dr. Lev catching me."

Tardy excuse freestyle, a newly added event inspired by Parisian breakdancing, has even attracted former PHS students. "Yo, yo yo, it's not what it looks like," said Peter Eaton '24. "I know I've been skipping class, that makes me kind of ass, I'm not tryna give you sass, but the traffic was so trash. It's all good though." "I hear you, Peter," the judge, Lauren King, said in response. "He's always been good with words." She added.

For the more flexible student, get-the-wifi-signal gymnastics is popular. In this event, participants attempt to complete a floor routine while getting as many signal bars as possible. Points are also awarded for creativity and aesthetics.

"I've tried every position and routine possible, but I still end up only getting one bar of signal," said Matt Chen '25.

Matias da Costa '25, the 2023 gold medalist of the get-a-wifi-signal gymnastics offers advice to future competitors. "To win, you gotta know your body well," said Costa, touching his quads. "You need to know its limits, how it bends, how it curves."



OUR LORD AND SAVIOR DONALD J. TRUMP APPOINTS DOUG LEVANDOWSKI TO LEAD THE CIA

Matthew from the Coast and Chloreka like Eureka

On December 20, president-elect Donald J. Trump announced sweeping reforms to the Central Intelligence Agency by nominating Princeton High School English teacher Dr. Doug Levandowski to lead the department. Posting on X, the convicted felon cited Levandowski's game design skills and experience in the classroom as the main reasons for his appointment.

"I MET DOUG THE DAWG WHEN HE STAYED AT MY HOTEL IN NEW YORK LAST THURSDAY," wrote Trump on X. "HE SAID HE LOVED MY HAIR AND WANTED TO KNOW WHERE I GOT MY BEAUTIFUL TAN."

Trump states that after meeting Levandowski, he invited him to go to McDonalds for lunch about which Levandowski was allegedly very enthusiastic. According to the newly-elected president, he enjoyed his lunch with Levandowski so much that he divorced his third wife, Melania Trump.

"Melania ... so boring. Most boring woman ever ... from the standpoint of women. Doug the Dawg made me realize what true happiness feels like," said Trump on his victory tour as he ordered a taco from a Mexican restaurant in Wyoming.

Levandowski said that Trump began calling him daily after their first lunch together, as well as sending him several classified documents postmarked with greasy orange fingerprints. He notes that the felon became very touchy at their second lunch at Burger King on Saturday and asked him multiple times to come to his golf course so that they could stargaze together.

"I'm still trying to clean the grease off my hands," said Levandowski.

According to the English teacher, at the end of their second lunch, Trump became very upset upon hearing that Levandowski was married.

"I HATE STRAIGHT PEOPLE. WHY DO THEY EXIST. I COMMAND THE SENATE TO BAN STRAIGHT MARRIAGE!!!" posted Trump at 2:00 a.m. yesterday on X.

Although the president had apparently made several angry phone calls and sent paragraph-long texts to Levandowski yesterday evening, he decided to nominate the English teacher to lead the CIA this morning.

"My doorbell suddenly started randomly ringing at 4 am this morning," said Levandowski. "When I opened the door, I saw President Trump, Elon Musk, and Hulk Hogan holding my passport and social security card. They said that if I didn't accept the invitation I'd be deported to Florida."

Levandowski explained that he'd rather lead the CIA than live in Florida and so was forced to accept Trump's offer.

"I LOVE TRUMP. LET'S GET THESE CANADIANS OUT OF HERE AND MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!" said Levandowski on TruthSocial minutes after downloading the app.

Levandowski is said to have resigned from Princeton High School at 6:00 a.m. but was seen in the school parking lot this morning revving his new Ford F-350 with 23 American flags fixed on the back.

Former colleague and fellow English teacher Lauren King says Levandowski is unrecognizable.

"He barged into school playing horrible Thanksgiving music as we English teachers were having a meeting about his resignation. I saw he had an orange tan and was wearing a suit so tight you could almost see his tiny muscles. He then began screaming that turtles were coming for our jobs and that we should all join him in ruling our flat earth under a new empire," recounted King. "His IQ has definitely regressed."

Several Republican senators expressed concerns over Levandowski's appointment but President Trump is said to have reassured them.

"THE DAWG HAS ALWAYS, ALWAYS BEEN LOYAL TO ME," gushed the president-elect at a press conference this morning. "HE NOT ONLY DONATED FIVE BILLION DOLLARS TO MY CAMPAIGN, BUT ALSO SHOWED UP TO MY HOUSE WITH A BOUQUET OF FLOWERS TODAY FOR LUNCH."

The Biden administration did not respond for comment but published a press release soon after the announcement.

"Good luck folks," read the statement.



graphics: Katherine Chen

CAFETERIA WORKERS REVEALED TO BE CONTROLLED BY RATS

Goatlie & Tessa Don Remy

This fall, returning PHS students were shocked by the taste of the cafeteria and Tiger Café food.

"It tasted ... good?" Aritra Ray '27 remarked. "Usually the food I buy is like pig slop, but this had a surprising amount of texture and flavor."

These school-wide concerns led Charley Hu '26, confident in her investigatory skills fresh off binge-playing detective video games, to launch an inquiry into what could be behind the mystery food taste. Hu, with reluctant sidekicks Emily Kim '27 and Katherine Chen '27, hatched her plan after hearing one of the lunch ladies refer to "Operation Ratatouille" in a conversation with another cafeteria worker on December 19 during break.

"We snuck into school around 5:00 a.m. and set up a trapeze on the cafeteria ceiling," said Kim. "Then we waited ... and waited ... I can't believe we missed class for this!"

Students waiting to buy lunch were astounded when Hu suddenly swung down from the ceiling, knocking off the hats of several cafeteria workers. What was under the hats? Rats.

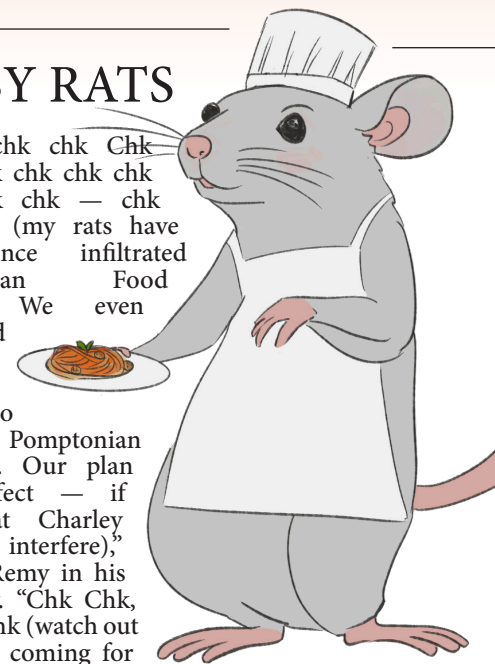
The culprits identified themselves as the "Ratches," a branch of the Sicilian Mafia composed of PHS's sewer rats. Hu's investigation revealed that the cafeteria workers were actually life-like robots that could be controlled by the rats hiding under their hats.

"Chk chk chk chk chk. Chk chk ... chk chk chk chk (I was appalled after I ate the cafeteria food. It tasted even worse ... than the meals our children make)," chirped the Ratches' don Remy. "Chk chk chk chk (we are determined to ensure these kids eat real food)."

Don Remy and his henchmen were swiftly carried to the police station kicking and squeaking. They have been sentenced to jail for one year, with an additional year of community service to be completed by assisting with food prep at PHS.

"What they did was wrong, but, I mean the food is just too good," said Ray, with a look of yearning on his face.

"Chk chk chk Chk Chk. Chk chk chk chk Chk. Chk chk — chk Chk chk (my rats have long since infiltrated Pomptonian Food Service. We even managed to get PPS to switch to using Pomptonian this year. Our plan was perfect — if only that Charley didn't interfere)," sneered Remy in his testimony. "Chk Chk, chk chk chk (watch out Hu, we're coming for you)."



graphics: Charley Hu

PPS BOE ANNOUNCES DAY-LONG BLOCK PERIODS

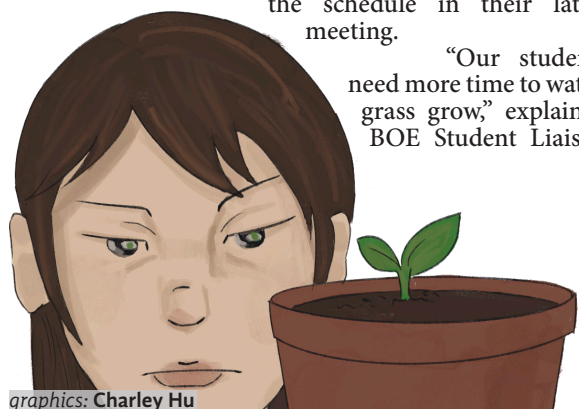
Clairly Tangly, Chloreka like Eureka, and Harrold Duck

This past month, the Princeton Public Schools Board of Education tested their new plans for Princeton High School's bell schedule, which is set to include a rotating schedule of day-long block periods. The plan is expected to be implemented in the 2025–2026 school year, and was inspired by the success of the newly implemented 90-minute block periods for the 2024–2025 school year.

"A lot of thought and consideration was put into this decision," said PHS Principal Cecilia Birge. "A lot of thought..."

The Board of Education overwhelmingly approved the schedule in their latest meeting.

"Our students need more time to watch grass grow," explained BOE Student Liaison



graphics: Charley Hu

Nikolai Margulis '25. "It is crucial for the further development of our STEM program."

PPS's administration is confident that teachers and students will be able to adjust to the new schedule, pointing to the success of the trial period. A few students, eager to secure their college recommendation letters, have enthusiastically praised the changes.

"I'm so grateful to have the opportunity to spend more time with Dr. Lev!" said PHS student Matias da Costa. "He has become a sort of father figure to me..." Costa continued, a bit more wistfully.

After collecting himself, Costa asked the Tower to note how enthusiastic his facial expressions were, including the dab he performed at the end of his statement.

However, Levandowski grimaced when questioned on Costa's sentiments. "I am uncomfortable with ... certain students ... for trying to spend so much time with me. Especially one of them," said Levandowski.

Students in French teacher Madame Janelle Wilkinson's class were particularly distraught, and are currently planning to go on strike.

"We just can't take it anymore," a representative for Wilkinson's class said through tears. "Oui ou non? For eight hours straight!"

In general, it appears that students (aside from Matias da Costa) are opposed to the change, while teachers (aside from Dr. Lev, who teaches Matias da Costa) support the new schedule.

"My Biology I Accelerated students have been able to test the sucrose concentrations of 30 different fruits and vegetables!" said science teacher Jennifer Smolyn,

grinning while dicing sweet potatoes for her next lab and dinner. "The new schedule has been very helpful in our lab procedures. The data has never ever been more accurate!"

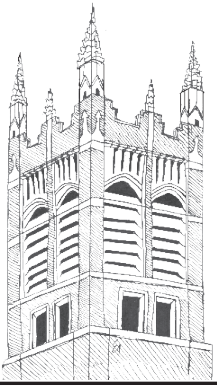
PHS gym teachers also expressed love for the new schedule. While cheat days are spent in a day-long study hall in the cafeteria, Lenny Goduto's gym classes spend most of their days hiking the various scenic trails of Princeton.

"We've covered, like, most of the hills around here," said Goduto, waving his hand towards the horizon. "And when I play aggressive gym phonk, it really gets the students going: they've broken all of their PRs. Also, I feel like they're all better, happier people now, ever since we've been hiking at Mountain Lakes."

Goduto appeared not to notice that several of his students had passed out after his exercises.

"Mr. Goduto is making my knees weak," said one student, leaning on a wall after reps of Bulgarian squats. "My knee surgery is tomorrow."

Other teachers have tried to be more sensitive to student difficulties, with mixed success. AP Environmental Science teachers have decided to break up the long period by allowing students to look at plants from different angles. APES students have counted that there are 8,898,298 blades of grass, 1,233,562 clovers, and 2,034 unremoved dandelion roots on PHS's front lawn. They also concluded that the rat colony inside of PHS's walls holds a population of 46. The nest of roaches tallied to 807, not including the 32,034 unhatched eggs, which were collected for future use.



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PPS sues social media giants

photo: Charley Hu

Angela Chen, Avantika Palayekar, and Reed Sacks, STAFF WRITERS

At the November 19 board meeting, Princeton Public Schools (PPS) passed a resolution to join around 200 other districts nationwide in suing several of the largest social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, Snapchat, and YouTube. The lawsuit cites the growth of social media use as a cause for increasing costs related to “staff time, disciplinary proceedings, emotional and social counseling, medical services, and other costs.”

Although it started with only the Seattle public school district, the lawsuit eventually spread nationwide. It comes as a class action lawsuit: when a group of people or organizations with a similar claim sue a defendant (in this case social media companies) together, represented by only a few individuals.

“I hope that [we can] make some positive effects on society,” said PHS Principal Cecilia Birge. “That’s really the reason I think we should join, not particularly ... for dollars with class action lawsuits [because] law firms keep usually about a third of the proceeds ... but if we did get dollars, we could use them to help.”

According to a 2019 study cited by the lawsuit, social media is strongly linked to

self-image issues. This comes particularly with the exposure of teenage students to unrealistic or ideal body presentations, fostering adverse comparisons.

“This study also showed that ‘adolescents who engage in high levels of social media use may experience poorer quality sleep’ and that increased social media use could be associated with an increased risk of cyberbullying, which has a strong association with depressive symptoms. Further, the study noted ‘negative body image’ ... as connected to social media use,” the lawsuit reads, quoting the study.

According to the psychiatric non-profit Compass Health Center, U.S. teens spent an average of 7 hours 22 minutes on a screen per day in 2024, representing an increase of nearly two hours since 2015. Moreover, one in five teenagers report depression, and nearly 32 percent are estimated to have an anxiety disorder.

“Younger generations [are] switching from websites to social media, and you see the impact on their mental

health crisis and significant uptick of ... suicidal thoughts, or negative feelings or low [self] esteem ... all of these things that are critical in us being healthy,” said Birge.

PHS administration has taken measures to tackle rising disciplinary and mental health issues in students. Assistant principals and counselors are meeting more frequently with students to check in with them emotionally, and PHS has established a new tier of counseling to address students’ mental health.

“Each student has a Tier 1 [counselor] — they deal with schedules. Say you have a bad day, you need somebody to help you process things; they’re there,” said Birge. “Then Tier 2 is for when you start to have chronic absences or feel blue for a significant period of time. We have three Tier 2 counselors who manage those kinds of things.”

In addition, administrators have recognized the role that social media plays in facilitating incidents of harassment, intimidation, or bullying.

In response, administrators emphasize promoting an inclusive school culture through counselors, assistant principals, and staff being more accessible to students.

“[Countering] the negative impact that social media brings ... needs lots of education, lots of communication. It needs students to build self-regulation and resilience. It needs parents’ involvement, and it definitely needs school intervention,” said Birge. “So, I think, regardless of the outcome of the lawsuit, it’s pretty evident that cell phones [and] social media ... [will] bring a much bigger negative impact in all of our lives.”

By participating in the lawsuit, the Princeton district hopes to seek justice and reparations from these companies without resorting to impractical or overly restrictive measures like banning social media. This new approach focuses on accountability rather than elimination, creating a healthier digital environment without disrupting students’ access to technology.

“With all these new technologies ... there are many companies that just want to monetize and create dollars from it, and don’t think about some of the harmful side effects,” said Bouldin. “I’m hopeful that something like this [lawsuit] can help lead to better use of the technology.”



photo: Charley Hu

PPS officials push 2025 referendum approval

Aritra Ray, MULTIMEDIA EDITOR
Harry Dweck, STAFF WRITER

In an effort to ensure the passage of the largest referendum Princeton Public Schools has proposed in over two decades, PPS officials have begun several initiatives to share information with voters and address any resulting concerns. These include virtual forums, a website devoted to the referendum, and in-person tours of issues with school facilities.

The referendum is divided into three parts called “questions.” The first part, with an estimated cost of \$37.9 million, would fund improvements to the PHS HVAC system and an expansion of Community Park Elementary school. The second part, with an estimated cost of \$38.3 million, which can only be approved if the first part is passed, would cover expansions to PHS and Princeton Middle School. The final part, contingent on the passage of the first two parts, would fund expansions to Littlebrook Elementary School.

In total, the referendum — if passed — would have an annual tax burden of \$532 on the average Princeton home assessed at \$850,000. Thus, PPS officials have been keen to explain the critical importance of the referendum and consequences the district would face if the referendum were to fail. Business administrator Matthew Bouldin highlighted the importance of the referendum’s first section.

“If [question] one doesn’t pass, it’s definitely going to be an issue. We’re going to have to really look at our programs and possibly have to do redistricting more often,” said Bouldin. “If it’s overcrowded at one [elementary] school, we would have

to make shifts, and it’s really disruptive and difficult to do that.”

Kathie Foster, PPS’s Interim Superintendent, elaborated on the consequences PPS would face if the overall referendum were to fail, including larger class sizes, overcrowded schools, and reduced programming.

“We would need to repurpose existing spaces for regular classrooms, making it harder to provide all the programming we believe is important in key areas, such as art and science. [Further], modular classrooms, or trailers, may be needed, straining the operating budget,” Foster wrote in an email to The Tower.

PPS teacher and union leader Renee Szporn noted that in some instances, the challenges Foster warns of are already being faced by teachers.

“In our seventh and eighth period class, we have 24 to 25 students and we can’t fit those kids in that room. It is tight, and it impacts teaching,” said Szporn. “It’s very difficult to do cooperative teaching.”

However, Szporn believes that the frequent use of referendums is not the best way to solve long term district issues. Last year, the Princeton community passed a \$13 million bond referendum for security and major maintenance upgrades. Moreover, a referendum in December 2018 helped fund security vestibules at the middle and elementary schools, as well as HVAC upgrades.

“I think you always have to plan for growth ... you just can’t keep asking the taxpayers to keep paying for things,” said Szporn. “I think taxpayers are tired. And I think to keep asking and drawing from the same well is a little tough.”



photo: Emily Kim

Principal Cecilia Birge welcomes parents to the first building tour on December 8.

To address community concerns and highlight necessary improvements to the district buildings, elementary, middle, and high school tours will be offered through December and January. In a December 8 tour to community members, PHS Principal Cecilia Birge emphasized the importance of updating the school’s HVAC, which is the oldest in the district. Birge also cited the school’s increasing population as a reason to support the referendum, which at around 1500 students sits well above the 1200 she believes the school can perfectly accommodate. PPS officials have also sought to inform community members about the importance of the referendum through more accessible methods.

“We have written letters to the editor of all local publications explaining the facilities referendum questions and offering opportunities to learn more about our plans,” said Foster. “Members of the public who attend events at the schools, such as the fall plays and concerts

at [PHS] and [PMS], will hear brief announcements about the ... referendum and how to learn more.”

Beyond advertising the referendum, PPS officials are also arguing that even Princeton voters without children in the district, who, as taxpayers, should also vote in the district referendum.

“The property values of homes are definitely related to the quality of the schools. In that sense, somewhat directly, people that own properties in Princeton benefit from the improvement of schools overall,” said Bouldin.

Foster believes that given the many efforts of the PPS administration in promoting the referendum, Princeton voters will vote to approve it.

“We feel confident that if we effectively make the case for the referendum, community members will see that they are sensible, cost-effective investments in sustaining the quality of the education we provide and the experience our students enjoy,” said Foster.

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... bathrooms

Emil Kapur, STAFF WRITER
Joy Chen and Aarna Dharmavarapu,
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS



Scott Goldsmith performs a routine check-up on the boys' bathroom.

At PHS, bathrooms have slowly become the center of disruptive student activity during instructional periods. While these issues have been present in past years, their increasing frequency has raised concerns about student behavior and the learning environment. In response, administrators have introduced more rigid disciplinary and preventative measures to reduce inappropriate behavior.

As of now, vaping is one of the main issues identified in bathrooms, with

administrators focused on addressing the health concerns associated with vaping.

"We don't know who manufactures those things. We don't know what's put in them [or] if the new things have been out there long enough for the harmful effects on our bodies to be fully analyzed and researched," said PHS Principal Cecilia Birge. "[Vapes] can also have marijuana [and] THC products in [them], and that clearly is connected to depression, ADHD, and other kinds of health impacts."

Beyond vaping, large social gatherings have become a growing issue. The main concern is that socializing in the bathrooms creates overcrowding, making the space uncomfortable for students who are trying to use the bathroom.

"Whether you're a freshman or you're in your senior year, [if] you go to the bathroom and you see 10 to 15 people or less standing around, it's a little awkward and unfortunate. So what we're trying to do is to clear out the bathrooms just for bathroom usage, and not as a [place for] socializing," said Scott Goldsmith, one of PHS's building monitors.

To solve this issue, PHS staff have increased the number of bathroom sweeps, in which building monitors and administrators routinely inspect the bathrooms to check for inappropriate behavior.

"Personally, I usually do it every period. If not every other period, every day. With some of the other guys, they do it every other period or whenever they get a chance. Same thing with administration, whenever they get a chance, they pop their head in," said Goldsmith.

When students are caught vaping or inappropriately socializing in the bathrooms, they are required to meet with their Assistant Principal and can face a variety of disciplinary actions, ranging from detention to suspension.

"If students are using or are in possession of substances at school, [then according to] our handbook, it's an automatic suspension. Then, [it] depends on the number of infractions," said Birge. "[It's] three to five days out of school suspension [for the] first offense. A second is five to 10 days. And the third is another five to 10 days. When students are suspended more than 10 days during any school year, it raises the question [of] whether this building is the best fit for the student."

But while routine sweeps are performed to minimize such disciplinary issues, emphasizing education ensures students understand its risks and make informed decisions.

"Our goal is to help students rather than penalize students," said Birge. "Don't promote the so-called 'coolness.' Recognize the harm that it does to your body and your mind."

Though the work of the PHS administration has made progress in minimizing these activities, student reports are very useful for the main office and can help minimize the occurrence of vaping and other bathroom activities.

"Report it. You don't have to report it right away," said Goldsmith. "But whether it's adults, students, staff, visitors, bathrooms are meant to be used as bathrooms."

... academic integrity

Daniel da Costa, Tyler Fiorentino, and Aryan Singla,
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Across PHS, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT to assist students with school assignments has become an increasing trend, raising concerns about the future of academic integrity at PHS.

While some argue these tools are simply new forms of study aids, others are raising concerns regarding AI being used as a gateway to academic dishonesty. The rise of AI has made cheating easier than ever in a modernizing digital environment, where a few keystrokes can generate essays, solve math problems, and even mimic human thought. At PHS, AI chatbots have sparked concerns among teachers, administrators, and student leaders, who are actively collaborating to discover new methods and policy changes to uphold academic integrity in an increasingly tech-savvy world.

"[AI is] a fast developing technology; our policy, our adaptation to it, how we manage our student expectations, [and] how we teach in [the] AI era, needs to continue to be evaluated and monitored ... perhaps regulated as well," said PHS Principal Cecilia Birge.

There is a significant concern that violations of the AI policy may become progressively challenging for teachers to regulate as technology continues to advance and become more accessible. The challenge lies more in addressing how these tools impact student engagement and education rather than simply identifying AI-generated content. As a result, many teachers have developed various techniques to tackle this growing issue, such as the usage of AI checker softwares or monitoring the editing history to prevent students from entirely relying on AI to complete their assignments.

"We have students submit assignments to Turnitin.com, but I also check," said AP Language and Composition and English II teacher John Bathke. "[Students] give me editing permission on Google Docs and a lot of [assignments] are written in class."

But teachers aren't the only ones

concerned about AI—student leadership representatives have also voiced their worries about its misuse. In November, Board of Education Student Liaisons Nikolai Margulis '25 and Maya Hagt '25 addressed the Board of Education, highlighting instances of students violating the district's AI policy. Since then, the administration has been actively discussing ways to strengthen policies, ensuring that PHS not only keeps up with rapidly evolving technology but also upholds its commitment to fostering safe and effective AI usage that enhances individual learning.

"We can't completely keep kids from cheating," said Margulis. "Teachers can make rules for cheating ... [but] it's hard to enforce those rules unless the student body is committed to it and believes it from an ideological standpoint. I think that's really important [to] ingrain it in our school culture not to cheat."

With AI usage often overlapping with academic dishonesty, educators believe an overreliance on AI tools can stifle critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as students may feel empowered to skip the deeper analytical thinking in favor of the quick, easily presented AI responses. This not only impacts their ability to absorb

"AI is like a compass — it can point you in the direction, but [real learning happens] when you put in the work yourself."

and apply knowledge but also creates gaps in skills that are crucial for success in both future academic and professional settings.

"Using [AI] to complete entire assignments [will] hurt you in the long run. If I plagiarize all my stuff, then I'm not actually doing the learning that is required for me to actually [understand] the information, which ultimately [will hurt me] when I get to the real world and [have] a job, since I haven't learned that skill," said Bathke.

The environment students are in is believed to also play a large role in shaping how students use these tools. If classrooms foster collaboration, curiosity, and accountability, students may feel more encouraged to engage with the learning process authentically.



Student Board Liaisons Maya Hagt '25 (middle) and Nikolai Margulis '25 (right) speak about school culture at PHS at the November 19 Board of Education meeting.

However, in more cutthroat, competitive environments, students may see it necessary to unethically use AI tools as a means to gain an edge, prioritizing outcome over learning.

"We live in a very competitive learning environment, society as well. An unhealthy part of our building culture is this toxic competitiveness of grades. So there's that simple-minded focus on grades that makes some of our students make bad choices," said Birge. "But when your grades are not truly reflective of your mastery, eventually it will catch up with you. It happens all the time in life."

However, many teachers do not view the existence of AI tools as the issue, but rather how they are used. When used thoughtfully, AI has the potential to support learning by offering explanations, generating ideas, and providing assistance that encourages deeper understanding.

"There [are] significant benefits that AI brings, especially when it comes to equity issues. If I speak English as a second

language learner, I can say something in [English in] an okay manner, but if I ask AI to help me with certain content and language and grammar, that's learning. That's a positive thing," said Birge.

Many educators believe that the key is balancing the positives and negatives of AI, which involves teaching students to use these tools responsibly, as an additional source of learning rather than a replacement for completing their own work.

"AI is like a compass — it can point you in the right direction, but [real learning happens] when you put in the work yourself and make the most of the tools around you to learn," said computer science teacher Edward Yin. "AI can be integrated into education when used thoughtfully and responsibly ... but it's up to students to use it as a learning tool, not for shortcuts. As [educators], we must [create environments] where students don't feel like cheating, but rather [learning]."

PHS fencing coach Sam Blanchard dies at 56



photo courtesy: Cathleen Sheehan

Claire Tang, NEWS & FEATURES CO-EDITOR
Harry Dweck, STAFF WRITER

Aaron Sam Blanchard, known as Coach Blanchard to the PHS fencing team, died at age 56 on December 2, 2024 at the RWJ University Hospital. He was surrounded by his wife and three daughters, one of whom is a PHS graduate. Blanchard was born in Salem, Oregon and grew up in the nearby town of Independence. While studying at the University of Oregon in 1987, Blanchard discovered his passion for fencing. In 1995, Blanchard began fencing foil competitively, eventually achieving A rank, the highest rating possible. Blanchard relocated to Princeton with his wife in 2000. He soon joined Princeton YMCA's fencing program to coach multiple classes. When the YMCA shut down the program in 2023 after the pandemic, Blanchard continued to teach his students at his own club, Princeton Interscholastic Fencing. In addition to teaching year-long fencing courses at all levels, Blanchard also started fencing programs at local elementary and middle schools, including Princeton Charter School. From 2018, Blanchard was also a coach at the Bucks County Academy of Fencing. Blanchard joined the PHS community in 2012, when he was hired as the assistant coach for the fencing team. In his time at PHS, he led the team to success at the state level, bringing home individual and team awards. Many remember Blanchard as a highly passionate and creative coach, devising his own system of warmups with unique

names. Rebecca Zhang '26, the captain of the girls foil squad, expressed gratitude for Blanchard's contributions to the Princeton fencing community. "I've trained with Coach Blanchard ever since sixth grade. He was a great role model ... he never once complained about my mistakes or my irresponsibilities, but instead he took his time to teach me what it meant to be a mentally stronger, a more responsible fencer and a better person," said Zhang. In addition to fencing, Blanchard had a passion for drawing cartoons and comics. He enjoyed comics since childhood, and worked as a comic artist under the pseudonym of "Shlepzig," amassing many fans and becoming a regular at several comic cons. Blanchard's family said that at the time of his passing, Blanchard still had much he planned and hoped to experience. "There was so much Sam had hoped to still do in life — he planned myriad comics, many more fencing classes, after school fencing clubs, adventures in grandparenthood, and countless future endeavors," his family wrote. Anita Ndubisi '26, echoing Zhang's sentiments, reflected on the entire team's gratitude for the contributions Blanchard made to the team in his 11 years as a coach. "Coach Blanchard was more than just a coach to us — he was a true mentor and friend. He gave so much, including providing us with fencing equipment, all because he wanted us to enjoy the sport," said Ndubisi. "Every member of our team would agree that Coach Blanchard was a great coach, and we are all thankful for everything he did for us."

PHS Profile: Shwu-Fen Lin

Daniel Gu and Rohan Srivastava,
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

As a published author and the creator of the Mandarin curriculum at PHS, Shwu-Fen Lin has taught Mandarin for over 50 years. Growing up in Taiwan, Lin dreamed of becoming a Mandarin teacher ever since she was a young girl.

"I think [being] a teacher is a powerful job. You can teach somebody something new," said Lin. "I think [it is important that] you teach a student [so that] they can see, they can read, they can speak, they can talk."

Lin's journey as an educator began in Taiwan, where she taught high school Mandarin for 30 years before moving to the United States. She initially taught elementary and middle schoolers in the Highland Park School District. She ultimately found herself drawn to PHS because of the students and the quality of the district.

"I'm here because Princeton High School [is in] a very good school district ... they have very nice students ... I love to teach here," said Lin.

Lin employs a number of teaching methods that involve simulating real-world situations to help students become more confident with their Mandarin.

"We can 'shop' in the classroom. So some students become the vendor, some students become the buyer ... [this is] very practical, how to shop in the real world," said Lin. "[I also use the] bicycle-chain [method] every day. So all the students [stand] ... in the center of the classroom [and talk about] different topics every day [with a] friend [until] they rotate like a bicycle chain."

Another particularly unique method she uses is called "ban zhang," which means class captain. Being ban zhang allows students to model the lesson for the day, setting an example for their peers.

"All the students can become a ban zhang for one week ... to help ... the student's self-confidence," said Lin.

Outside the classroom, Lin has also co-authored books on Mandarin, from basic levels all the way to AP. Her effective teaching style has led her to give talks at multiple large teacher conferences.

"The past 19 years ... I [gave] a lot of good [speeches] in very huge teacher [conferences], like [the] National Chinese Language Conference, and ACTFL, a very big World Language teacher conference," said Lin.

Thomas Basso '27, who has been taking Mandarin for three and a half years, appreciates Lin's energetic teaching style and the enthusiasm she brings to class.

"She ... tries her very best to get everyone to participate and will often cold-call on people who she thinks aren't participating enough, which in a way forces everyone to pay attention and stay engaged ... I've been learning Spanish since kindergarten, and I still feel like I know more Mandarin than Spanish," said Basso. "Mrs. Lin sometimes makes jokes in class to make us laugh and is happy to answer any questions that we have."

Lin believes that the end goal of learning Mandarin is to connect with Chinese culture. To help spread and showcase Asian culture throughout the Princeton community, Lin established the annual Asian Festival at PHS in 2005, an event featuring performances and booths from several Asian culture clubs.

"Every year, we have around 500 people that come together to celebrate [and] learn Asian culture. This is very important [as] people need to talk to people, [because] if I understand your culture, I will respect your culture," said Lin. "So I say language is communication, the tool, but most important that you use this tool in real life, and be able to use language not only as regular conversation, but also as a skill to develop."



photo: Katherine Chen

Lin shows her Mandarin class traditional Chinese New Year decorations.

Lin believes that learning a new language is not something that can happen in a classroom alone, but requires skillful practice throughout one's life.

"I like to help my [students] become life [learners], not only in my classroom ... so they can continue to learn, even in society," said Lin. "When you graduate, you will continue to learn your whole life. I think that's very important."

January 2025: Save the dates

Claire Tang, NEWS & FEATURES CO-EDITOR
Harry Dweck, STAFF WRITER
Stephanie Liao, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



StuCocoa day
January 9, 2025 at Tiger Time

A long day at school can wear down even the toughest of students. On January 9 at Tiger Time, you can stop by at the main intersection for a sweet pick-me-up! At Student Council's annual StuCocoa fundraiser for PHS's spring events, you can buy a delicious cup of hot chocolate for only \$1 each! You can also add marshmallows and whipped cream to level up the perfect, limited-edition after-school comfort drink.

A Cappella Night
January 10, 2025

Like singing, harmonies, and catchy tunes? Attend A Cappella Night hosted by the Princeton Student Board on January 10 in the Princeton Public Library! Featuring a handful of PHS a cappella groups including Around 8, Cat's Meow, and Cloud Nine, the musical event will leave you saying "encore!"



PHS building tours
January 15 6:15 p.m., January 24 5:30 p.m., January 26 10:00 a.m.

In one month, Princeton voters will vote on a \$90 million referendum that would support renovations at PHS. These tours might be your last chance to get a sneak-peek at all PHS's quirks, including a 20 year old HVAC system! You will also have the chance to ask Ms. Birge any of your burning questions on our heating, air conditioning, and modular classrooms.

Planetary alignment
January 18, 2025

Join the six planets in a once-in-100-year event that will dazzle both the eye and the night sky! On January 18, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune will look as if they're gathered in a small area, appearing like a bright cluster across the night sky. Visible anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere, this celestial gathering is not something Princeton residents would want to miss.

Big Band Dance
January 31, 2025 at 7 p.m.–10 p.m.

Do you feel like dancing when you hear jazz? Unleash your funk at the Big Band Dance in the PHS Cafeteria on January 31. Under bright disco lights, Studio Band and Jazz Ensemble will play popular jazz tunes that will get your feet moving. Bring a friend, your favorite dancing shoes, and be ready for a night of nonstop, swinging fun!

graphics: Charley Hu and Emily Kim

OPINIONS

Self-regulating social media usage

Stephanie Liao, STAFF WRITER
Sarah Chen, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Picture this: it's 4:00 p.m., and you've just gotten home from school with a mountain load of assignments on your to-do list. You make yourself a snack, plug in your phone, immediately open Instagram or TikTok, and start scrolling. 30 minutes later, you tell yourself, "Just five more minutes." When you check the time again, it's already 5:00 p.m. The stress of the never-ending pile of work sets in, and you scramble to make up for lost time.

This scenario isn't unusual — it's a daily reality for many teenagers. Popular social media platforms like Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram are designed to grab and hold your attention, using algorithms that prioritize engaging and personalized content. While these platforms offer endless opportunities for connection, entertainment, and self-expression, their pervasive and addictive nature can be detrimental to teens. The impact of a social media addiction goes far beyond wasted time. According to research by the Surgeon General of the United States, Vivek Murthy, excessive social media use can disrupt sleep patterns, increase stress levels, and contribute to

feelings of anxiety and depression. While it's easy to blame the platforms, the real problem lies in the ability to take control through self-regulation. Developing a conscious digital routine is crucial for teens to be able to protect their mental health, boost their productivity, and build long-lasting healthy habits.

One reason why self-regulation of social media use isn't prevalent among teens is forced parental regulation via daily screen time limits. Although it effectively reduces the reported amount of time spent on their phones, many students feel frustrated when it restricts communication with friends and see it as an indication of

overall lack of trust from their parents. Choosing to take regulation of screen time into your own hands, rather than relying on rules imposed by others, fosters responsibility, self-discipline, and independence — skills that are necessary for a successful life down the road. As teenagers grow older and move beyond their parents' jurisdiction, the habits they develop now will shape their future. Later on, unhealthy screen

use as a teen can snowball into challenges with time management, focus, and well-being. Learning to self-regulate early on equips teens with the ability to make intentional, healthy choices and build habits that align with their goals. And even better, successfully managing screen time independently brings that satisfying sense of accomplishment and control, far more rewarding than simply following rules set by someone else. It's an empowering step toward becoming an independent, responsible adult.

Of course, getting in the habit of self-regulating screen time is much easier said than done. Setting app limits with the built-in screen time might work for the first few weeks, but motivation gradually wanes, making it far too easy for teenagers to simply tap "Ignore Limit For Today" and fall right back into their old routine. In order to combat these common relapses, students should consider downloading stricter screen time apps that make it much harder to turn off an app's limit for the day. In the time it takes to maneuver through the settings, teenagers can weigh whether or not five more minutes of Instagram reels is actually worth it. Additionally, some apps feature a reward system that can help motivate students to stay on track with their screen time goals.

With the endless amounts of entertainment available at our fingertips and our generation's cultural emphasis on online connectivity, it's not an easy task to resist the temptation to spend hours glued to our phones. There is no silver bullet that will destroy our addiction to social media — rather, we need to develop a healthy relationship with our devices that starts by taking personal ownership of our screen usage. Only by assuming the responsibilities that come with the privilege of using social media can we truly gain the freedom and independence we all value.



Jessica Chen '26 and Angelica Hu '27 scroll on their phones during break.

photo: Emily Kim

Democracy is dead: the modern resurgence of fascism

Alexi Meyers, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

More people voted in 2024 than ever before in human history. Approximately two billion people globally were eligible to vote, and vote they did. However, around the world, the trend of democratic backsliding continued, with many liberal incumbent candidates losing votes. As a society, we are regressing, and we can never improve our situation unless we take on progressive policy.

This growing trend is fundamentally related to fascism, but the two are still distinct issues. To paraphrase Robert Paxton's thesis in his book "The Anatomy of Fascism," fascism is the politics of emotion, making it fundamentally different from other ideologies such as liberalism or conservatism, which are based on logical principles and ideals. Fascism makes reasonable people unreasonable, logical people illogical, and tolerant people hateful. Fascism arises during times of political instability and historically has been pushed forward by conservative elites in an attempt to save themselves. There is an inherent othering of minorities under fascism, which is not unique to fascism but certainly an important part of all authoritarian regimes.

But although fascism excludes some groups of people, it also puts others in the limelight. "You matter," fascism says. "You are important, and you must be a patriotic part of our perfect community. But some people want to take our beautiful community away from us." Now, the final blow: "All of these people hate your way of

life and want to destroy it. Therefore, we must destroy them first." People want to feel like they matter. People want to be a part of the group, a part of the righteous force fighting against evil. Fascism promises that, and more.

There are many characteristics of fascism in President-elect Donald Trump's campaign. Trump is a conservative elite, and his campaign is supported by many others who share the same background.

The mainstream Republican party has become a cult of personality centered around Trump; to them, what he says is law. Criticism is forbidden, and only the most fanatic advocates will be supported. How did this happen? Trump is supported by like-minded upper-class conservatives who wish to protect their place in the world. And he certainly helped the upper class in return — through tax cuts, pardons, rolling back environmental and worker protections — all letting them increase their bottom line by that much more.

The groups targeted by Trump are too many to name, but for an extremely pertinent example, just look to his rhetoric on immigration, and his classification of a specific group of people as an "other," then pushing policies for their deportation and detention. Somehow even more blatantly than this, one can simply look at his treatment of women. Rape, sexual assault, and prostitution charges follow him, and recordings of his lascivious and

obscene tendencies abound. Given all of this, we then have to ask why we allowed this to happen. How could we, as the people who should hold freedom and equality above all else, who live in a nation founded on those ideals to escape the rule of a tyrannical king, elect a candidate who doesn't even pretend to follow our ideals?

To understand this phenomenon, we must examine why someone would support policies which hurt them, candidates who hate them, and parties which oppress them.

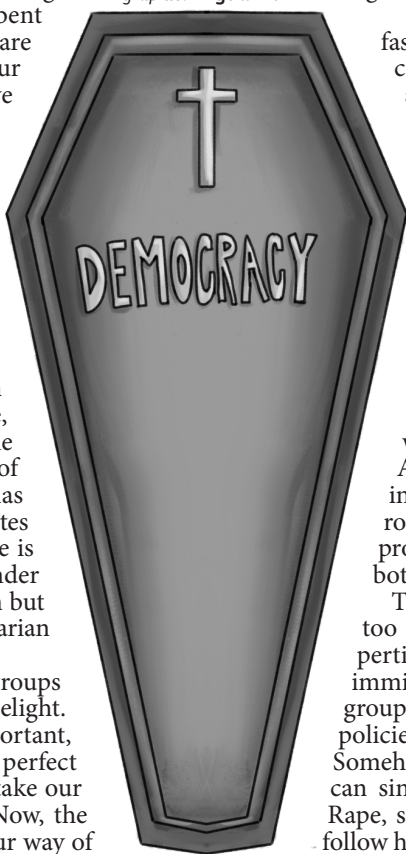
"Fascism makes reasonable people unreasonable, logical people illogical, and tolerant people hateful."

The answer? When they think that the policies will actually support them, that the candidates care for them, and that the party loves them. Through the narrative of othering, conspiracy theorists claim that immigrants are taking your jobs, that Jews control the weather with space lasers, or that deep-state elites are eating babies. It is easier for most people to believe the right when it gives people the supposed cause of their problems, before telling them that only they can fix them. But the supposed

causes are never the real causes, and the right doesn't try to fix the problems anyways.

So where does this leave us? What can we do to fight the rising tide of injustice? We, as students, cannot do all that much. However, this doesn't mean that we cannot do anything. We can be informed: know what is happening in the world and know what policies actually mean and what their effects will be. The second thing that we can do is call out injustice, to notice the hatred and bigotry in the world and speak out against it. It is not enough to simply be against fascism. Many people were against the Nazi party in Germany, yet it still came to power. We, as the next generation, must take it upon ourselves to preserve the mantle of democracy and equality and must endeavor to push those ideals forward. If we simply stand by and do nothing in the face of tyrants, we are surely lost.

graphic: Angela Wu



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You have a right to remain anonymous

Harry Dweck, STAFF WRITER

In April 1988, Margaret McIntyre, a citizen of Westerville, Ohio, was handed a \$100 fine for distributing a leaflet that opposed a local school tax. The small fine, equivalent to around \$250 today, was appealed, unappealed, and nearly seven years later made it all the way up to the Supreme Court. The reason for the controversy wasn't the amount of the fine, or what the leaflet said. It was simply that the opinion expressed on the leaflet distributed by McIntyre was anonymous. In a 7-2 decision, the Supreme Court struck down the fine, and in its ruling decreed that "anonymity ... exemplifies the purpose behind the First Amendment in particular: to protect unpopular individuals from retaliation ... at the hand of an intolerant society."

The decision was written in 1995, well before the rise of social media. In the 25 years that have elapsed since, there have been many attempts to ban our right to anonymity — especially online. In 2021, a proposal seeking to require IDs on social media platforms received nearly 700,000 signatures in the UK, making it the fourth largest petition in the past five years to be debated in the United Kingdom Parliament. In the Republican primary last year, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley referred to anonymous accounts on social media as "a national security threat."

The petition, a response to anonymous accounts involved in cyberbullying, expresses a common belief: that banning anonymity on social media, for example by requiring

people to verify themselves with an ID, would lead to a more civil, less misinformed internet. And in theory, it makes sense — according to Pew Research, almost 60 percent of teens have experienced abuse online, often at the hands of a user with a mysterious pseudonym.

But while it's possible that the amount of cyberbullying from anonymous accounts would be slightly reduced if anonymity were banned, cyberbullying as a whole would remain. In 2015, a research study published by Dr. Emily Nagel and Dr. Jonathan Frith showed that many accounts that spread misinformation and cyberbullying are not anonymous. This is why BBC journalist Hussein Kesvani noted that even on sites like Parler, where users have to prove their identity with documentation, there are high levels of abuse.

And every act of cyberbullying that does still occur would be much more dangerous. Anyone with internet access, armed with just the knowledge of a person's real name, can determine that person's address, place of work, and other personal details.

Furthermore, out of fear of stalking and more intense cyberbullying, the posting of controversial beliefs or ideas would be virtually impossible without the right to anonymity. Thus a ban on online anonymity would spell the end to a free internet that, while flawed, continues to provide invaluable benefits to society. Every year, anonymous internet forums allow millions of people to seek medical

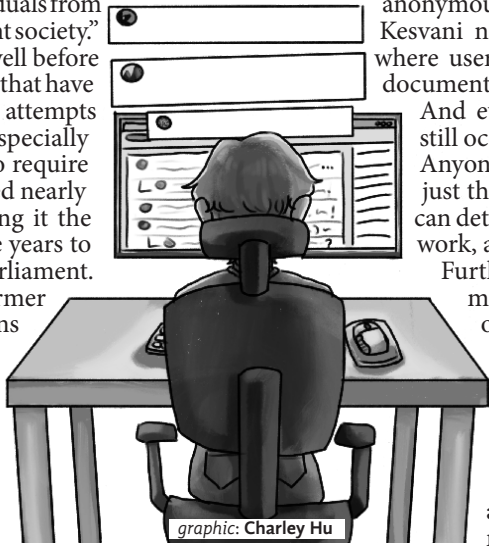
advice, answer sensitive questions, and have important conversations. To minorities and other at-risk groups, online support can mean the difference between life and death. After *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in 2022 and abortion became banned for women in 13 states, many anonymous Reddit and Facebook accounts provided transportation and housing resources for women seeking to have an abortion.

Internet anonymity, through ensuring free speech, has also given regular people the confidence and ability to join movements such as #MeToo, which exposed cases of sexual harassment among high profile celebrities. Forcing users to disclose their identity would silence calls for justice, as victims would fear for their job security, social reputation, or safety.

In authoritarian regimes, the risks of a global platform like Twitter or Instagram cracking down on the use of pseudonyms or other tactics that create anonymity would be even more severe. While whistleblowers and dissidents in democracies like the United States have avenues of expression aside from social media, in many autocracies, anonymous posts on social media are a powerful form of protest and dissent.

Finally, in less extreme daily situations, internet anonymity is also important in allowing people to express their true selves. A study published in the *Journal of Social Issues* showed that when shielded by anonymity, people are more honest and thus "more likely to form close relationships with people they met on the Internet."

Online anonymity is central to so many of the rights we should all be able to enjoy — freedom of speech, freedom of the press, privacy, and self expression. It's time that tech companies, governments, and angry internet users should start to treat it that way.



graphic: Charley Hu

In defense of school assemblies

Angela Chen, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Since the moment we first stepped into our elementary school auditoriums, school assemblies have defined our educational experience. Whether it's the lessons of an anti-bullying assembly, the passion of a motivational speaker, or the thrill of an interactive game show, these events leave lasting impressions and play a crucial role in shaping the character of our school community. Yet this year, this vital tradition has waned at PHS.

At PHS, traditional school-wide in-person assemblies have become a thing of the past. Events like the Hispanic Heritage Month and Black History Month assemblies, which were once fully in person, are now being shifted to a hybrid format. This new approach limits the assembly to a single period, with half of the student body viewing in-person, while the other half watches on Zoom. Additionally, the administration has scaled back on other annual assemblies, opting in favor of separate Zoom sessions with students only interacting in their homerooms.

This change undermines the very essence of school assemblies: bringing unity and fostering a stronger school community. Students are no longer in the same space together, sharing collective experiences, and learning with each other. Furthermore, these fragmented, virtual environments are much less engaging. During these virtual assemblies I've noticed a recurring pattern: my classmates gradually grow more disengaged and divert their attention to their phones as the assembly progresses — this was a less common sight at in-person assemblies.

In events such as the Hispanic Heritage and Black History Month celebrations, school assemblies usually feature different student groups showcasing the many traditions of their culture. With PHS and Princeton having a predominantly white population, it is crucial that we make space for celebrations of diversity and minority groups. In 2022, the American Psychological Association found that an inclusive classroom where students learn about diversity is proven to have many benefits, such as "improved critical thinking," and higher achievement "for both majority and minority group members." Though there are some classes at PHS that teach these concepts, in-person assemblies provide an opportunity for such lessons to be widely accessible, engaging, and impactful for the whole student body.

The lack of in-person assemblies this year can be largely attributed to concerns over students' class attendance. While preserving instructional time is important, these assemblies are another way to gain a nuanced understanding of the group being highlighted — far surpassing the depth covered by the PHS curriculum. Many students at PHS do not take Spanish as a world language, and therefore don't have the opportunity to learn about Latin American history. For these students, the Hispanic Heritage Month Assembly is one of the only opportunities to gain a thorough understanding of Latin American history and culture.

By sidelining the assemblies in favor of a stricter focus on class time and schedules, PHS is removing vital opportunities

to expand and enrich students' learning. Underrepresented narratives are at greater risk of not being told, and students are robbed of an opportunity for a deeper and more inclusive understanding of the world. The PHS administration needs to reinstate these events and make sure they are a main focus of that day, and not a mere afterthought. Assemblies are much more than routine school events — they are unique experiences that inspire learning in ways that a traditional classroom cannot.



photo: Emily Kim

PHS students showcase West African dance in a school-wide assembly for Black History Month in 2023.

PHS SPEAKS OUT

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE HOLIDAY TRADITION?

Tessa Silver and Chloe Zhao, OPINIONS CO-EDITORS
Franciszka Czerniak, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



"TWO DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS, [MY FAMILY AND I] ALL GO ICE SKATING IN NEW YORK ... IT'S REALLY FUN, I'M GOOD AT IT ... MY MOM AND MY DAD ARE VERY BAD AT IT, BUT WE KEEP GOING AND THEY GET BETTER."
- LUWAM TSEGWAY '27



"MY FAVORITE HOLIDAY TRADITION IS PROBABLY LIGHTING UP MY TREE FOR THE FIRST TIME WITH MY FAMILY."
- ANDREY SARKISOV '28



"MY FAVORITE HOLIDAY TRADITION IS MAKING DUMPLINGS WITH MY FAMILY FOR CHINESE NEW YEAR."
- JESSICA ZHANG '26



"MY FAVORITE HOLIDAY [TRADITIONS ARE] PROBABLY FUN GIFT-GIVING TRADITIONS LIKE SECRET SANTA OR WHITE ELEPHANT."
- JULIA WANG '25

photos: Franciszka Czerniak, Tessa Silver, and Chloe Zhao



The Tower

Princeton High School

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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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A fatal shot to our democracy

Editorial

On the morning of December 4, Brian Thompson, the CEO of health insurance giant UnitedHealthcare (UHC), was fatally shot on the sidewalk next to midtown Manhattan's Hilton Hotel. Thompson led one of America's most reviled insurance companies.

Since becoming CEO in 2021, he has presided over 140,000 employees and fostered record yearly profits. Critics have purported, however, that these profits came at the expense of insureds in need. In his tenure, UHC denied almost 20 percent of claims filed while charging deductibles that many find unaffordable. In the wake of his murder, social media sites were inundated with people voicing displeasure with the late CEO by telling their stories of high prices, outrageous denied claims, and quips such as "the claim for my condolences has been denied."

After a six day manhunt, the alleged murderer was identified at a McDonald's in Altoona, Pennsylvania. An outpouring of public support ensued for Luigi Mangione, the prime suspect, including calls for an acquittal. Mangione was even more deified after his motives became clear; his manifesto villainized Thompson as a "parasite" who, along with others in his corporate class, deserved a comeuppance because he's "simply gotten too powerful," and "[continues] to abuse [the people of the United States] for immense profit."

Praises for Mangione, however, are only a part of "vigilante justice" movements in the past year. In February, New York-based vigilante group the Guardian Angels boasted to have "taken down one of those migrant guys" following an altercation. In July, Thomas Matthew Crooks came inches from assassinating Donald Trump in Butler, Pennsylvania.

This politically motivated violence is ultimately an outlet for a surge in ire toward a government perceived as serving corporations rather than the people it represents. A rising number view the U.S. legislature as in the pocket of corporate lobbyists, including health insurance companies like UHC.

However, by using violence to foster political change, we risk undermining the democratic principles that allow us to have a representative voice in the first place. Violent means circumvent our fundamental rights to advocate change through the polls. Moreover, bypassing advocacy by traditional democratic means risks creating a spiral of violence, with instability and autocracy as the bottom. We, as young people, must engage with our political system in productive means, like peaceful advocacy, protest, and voting. In this way, we can make meaningful progress toward reforming a deeply-flawed governmental institution so it is truly for the people.

"We, as young people, must engage with our political system in productive means."

The importance of positivity

Ben Li and Alexander Gu, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Pollution, climate change, and overpopulation are just a few of the major global issues that are yet to be solved. Posts about these issues are omnipresent on social media, along with comments sections full of people exclaiming that humanity is doomed. This nihilistic content is extremely harmful, particularly for teenagers, as they spend significant time on social media. Moreover, while it is true that these major global issues have yet to be solved, adopting a mindset that states these problems are insurmountable achieves nothing. The constant stream of pessimism can make people feel hopeless, deteriorating their mental well-being and decreasing their motivation to enact change.

With teenagers' dependability on social media comes the increased risk of being exposed to misinformation or biased content, making it nearly impossible to discern what is true from false. A 2022 study conducted by the Common Sense Media found that on average, teenagers spend around eight and a half hours

on social media platforms each day. Moreover, reports from the World Press Institute in 2022, found that about 50 percent of teenagers use Facebook or YouTube over credible news sources to obtain their news. As a result of engaging with such distorted and inaccurate content, teens often feel overwhelmed by the negativity, and they see this feeling reflected in the "doomer," an internet character that depicts a man living a life of helplessness and despair.

While it may be convenient to indulge in this doomer mindset, the more effective approach to combating personal

and global issues is by embracing positivity, which can improve one's mental health as well as their problem-solving skills. Focusing on positivity helps lower stress levels and anxiety, which is important for both emotional well-being and physical health. For instance, a study done by Kansas University in 2012 found that smiling and fake smiling both reduce heart rate and blood



photo: Emily Kim

Azusa Sato '28, Heidi Johnson '28, Charlie Flanagan '28, Selin Tuzun '28, and Vivian Lutkowski '28 chat and laugh while eating lunch.

pressure in stressful situations.

Importantly, students who remain optimistic, rather than pessimistic, are more confident and creative when approaching problems, as they're better at handling their emotions. Research done by Edward Chang of Oxford University in 2013 also revealed that individuals exposed to optimistic thoughts demonstrated significantly better problem solving skills than those exposed to neutral or negative thoughts. This means that promoting critical thinking and problem solving skills starting as teenagers will take us towards a solution for our global problems much more effectively.

It is essential to identify what PHS can do to help embrace optimism. One way to spread positivity is by incorporating it into our daily lives. The school can recognize and reward efforts to build a more positive environment, not just achievements, to build morale. For example, in PHS Principal Cecilia Birge's weekly newsletters, there could be a section dedicated to sharing motivational stories or uplifting quotes. In a world where negativity is more prevalent than ever, building a positive mindset is the most crucial step towards solving our global problems.

CHEERS

STUFF WE LIKE

STUFF WE DON'T

JEERS

SECRET SANTAS

HOLDING SPACE

Sleep DEPRIVATION

SUNDOWN AT 4:30 P.M.

PLAYA BOWLS

First SNOWFLAKES

EMBARASSING SPOTIFY WRAPPED

Mamoun's FALAFEL

SECOND derivatives

DEFYING gravity

The WINTER CONCERT

School WI-FI



Tress to Impress!

Get wiggy with it

Vanessa He, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Under the bright stage lights, wigs are not just an accessory — they facilitate the transformation of actors into unforgettable characters. Behind these flawless hairstyles is Sylven Waldman '25, who is in charge of designing, styling, and maintaining wigs for PHS productions. As both Secretary and Hair and Makeup Leader of Spectacle Theater, Waldman has been able to transform his hobby into a key role to help bring the worlds of “The Great Gatsby” and “The Little Prince” to life.

“We wanted each character to have a recognizable look,” said Waldman.

To achieve this, extensive planning and research was used to make sure each character embodied their characters’ appearance shows like “The Little Prince” or “The Great Gatsby”.

“There were over 20 wigs for all the female characters in [‘The Great Gatsby’] and duplicates were needed for the double casting,” said Waldman.

Even with practice and skill, the time each hairstyle takes varies depending on the intricacies.

“The Daisy [hairstyle] was complicated because it was an updo ... It took [around] an hour and a half [to] two hours. But then a non-complicated [hairstyle] would take around 20 minutes,” said Waldman.

Despite the long hours and maintenance, Waldman takes pride in his backstage role.

“It’s definitely a hard job,” Waldman explained, “but it’s very rewarding ... I love what I do.”



photo courtesy: Vanessa He



Faculty hair icons

Zoe Nuland, VANGUARD CO-EDITOR

Maxime DeVico, STAFF WRITER

Hair is a reflection of an individual’s personality, style, and experience. For many people, maintaining healthy and vibrant hair takes much time and effort. However, the challenge is even bigger for the teachers, considering their busy schedules. Finding the time to style hair and to make it stand out is very challenging for most teachers. Those who manage to become “hair icons” demonstrate creativity and self-expression while dealing with a time-consuming profession.

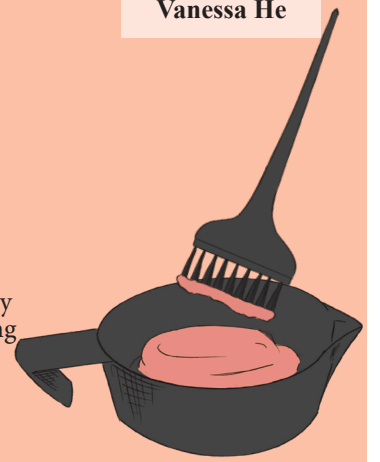


photo courtesy: Maxime DeVico

Torie Esposito

PHS special education teacher Torie Esposito is known for her flashy and stylish hair, the color of which she regularly changes.

“I’ve [dyed my hair] the rainbow, but I like to stay within the blue, pinks, and purples,” said Esposito. “My favorite color has been blue.”

Her love for dyeing her hair comes from when she shaved her hair off for Saint Baldrick’s, a non-profit organization aimed at raising money for child cancer research, in 2020.

“I realized after working with [Saint Baldrick’s] that life is too short, and why not be creative, and I feel like hair is not just an expression, but a cool accessory,” said Esposito.

However, since she began regularly dyeing her hair, Esposito’s maintenance routine has changed.

“I wear a bonnet, I use a lot of dry shampoo, I take cold showers to keep the color [of my hair], and I try not to bleach,” said Esposito.

After dyeing her hair with a stylist since 2020 and recently transitioning to doing it herself, she knows the ins-and-outs of hair dye and hair care. Esposito said that she uses anything by Brad Mondo, specifically XMONDO, because they are vegan products. Additionally, she has many tips and tricks for beginners trying to dye their hair.

“Start with a semi- or demi-permanent hair color. For those who have recently dyed their hair, wash with cold water, [wear] hair wraps or bonnets to prevent breakage, and do not shy away from the occasional hair mask. Anything organic and paraffin free would be best,” said Esposito.

Nicholas Heller

PPS computer artwork technician Nicholas Heller has always had a special relationship with his hair. Having had long hair, short hair, curls, locs, and even no hair at various points in his life, Heller knows the ins and outs of all things “hair care.”

“I went through so many hair care regimens over the years,” said Heller. “It’s gotten to a point now where I feel like I can really take care of it. [Instead of] straightening it, dyeing it ... now I just treat it as it naturally is.”

His biggest piece of advice for anyone struggling with a hair maintenance routine is to limit washing it.

“You can’t wash your hair every day. That’s the number one thing,” said Heller. “I figured that if I wasn’t washing it everyday that it would feel gross, but that’s not the case at all.”

Now, Heller considers his hair care routine to be rather simple.

“Shampoo and conditioner — [that’s it] And sometimes when it’s a rainy day or really humid out, my hair will frizz,” said Heller. “So I’ll put a product in called CurlFriend by Cake, which is relatively inexpensive.”

Beyond basic care, Heller also donates his hair to organizations, such as Locks of Love, to help people suffering from hair loss regain self-confidence by giving them free wigs. Heller’s passion for this cause stems close to home.

“My mom ... had cancer a couple of years ago [and] she lost all her hair ... She was fortunate enough to catch breast cancer early and have all her hair come back,” said Heller. “To look at someone who had [their] hair and then not have it anymore, whether it’s from chemo or not, just to be able to say ‘here’s what you so rightfully deserve’ [is so beautiful].” Heller hopes to donate again when his hair reaches the right length.

To Heller, hair is a privilege. It’s a way to express all facets of your individuality whether it be your cultural heritage, personality, or just for plain fun.

“We’re lucky to live in a time where it’s okay for guys to have longer hair and have painted nails, and that’s how it should be. People should be able to express themselves however they see fit,” said Heller.

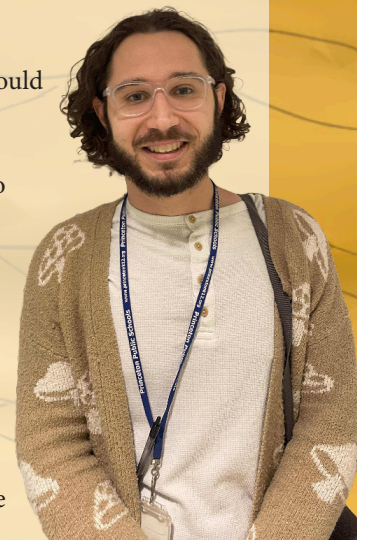
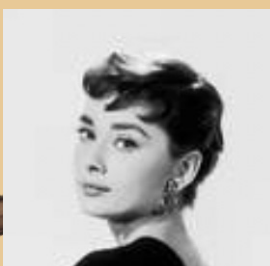


photo courtesy: Syra Bhatt



Iconic hairstyles throughout history

Angela Chen and Kenzie Miller, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS



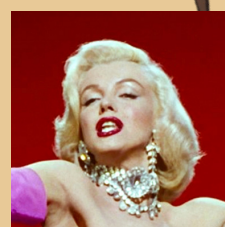
The pixie cut:
First made popular by 1920s flappers, and then Audrey Hepburn in the 1950s, this short hairstyle continues to serve as a symbol of change and individuality.



The Farrah Fawcett blowout:
Big, bouncy tresses with numerous layers and curls, this blowout exploded in popularity during the 1970s when Fawcett debuted in "Charlie's Angels."



The Rachel cut:
An icon of the 1990s, a short layered bob was made popular by Jennifer Aniston in Season 1 of the smash-hit show "Friends."



Short and blonde:
Marilyn Monroe's beach blonde curls became an icon during the 1950s. This classic bob is now synonymous with the old Hollywood style.



The Karen cut:
A short bob-like hairstyle, characterized by long side-swept bangs in the front and chunky blonde highlights, became associated with "Karens" (confrontational middle-aged white women) in 2020.



Slicked-back styles:
Space buns and other slicked-back hairstyles have made a reappearance through social media and television. These model-worthy looks — though requiring copious amounts of gel — last throughout the day, perfect for photos.

graphics: Charley Hu



Hanfu and headwraps

Anna Petrova, STAFF WRITER

Guan Li, a traditional coming-of-age ceremony for the Han Chinese people, marked the transition into adulthood, and into the age where they could no longer cut their hair. This is in accordance with the Confucian teaching that one should not damage their body, skin, or hair, because it is received from one's parents. Once a young man had reached adulthood, he was obligated to tie his hair into a bun and cover it with a headdress. Hanfu headdresses came in various styles and materials, such as jade, gold, and silk, among others. Different levels of detail could indicate the wearer's social status and wealth. While women did not have the same obligation to cover their hair, they commonly wore Hanfu hairpins which played an important role in Chinese marital customs. For instance, when a woman was engaged, she would provide her fiancé with her own hairpin, which he would return to her after marriage.

The origins of the African headwrap can be traced back to the early 1700s, when women in sub-Saharan Africa would wear them to protect their heads from sunlight. African women typically wrapped and tied a rectangular piece of cloth atop their head, tucking it in on the sides, resembling a turban. These headwraps served as a sign of respect. On the other side of the Atlantic however, headwraps took on a different connotation. As slavery became entrenched in the United States, various places passed Black Codes, some of which required Black women to wear headwraps as a symbol of subservience. Different styles of headwraps conveyed the relative social statuses of enslaved women.

Women working in fields wore different styles than those who worked as house servants. After slavery was abolished, headwraps were temporarily abandoned by Black women in the United States, as they came to be associated with the mammy stereotype, a caricature of Black women. Instead, many switched to European-style hats, especially on festive occasions. However, in the 1990s and 2000s, headwraps increased in popularity due to singers like Erykah Badu, who, during this time, celebrated Black womanhood by proudly wearing headwraps to pay homage to their cultural roots. Today, Black women in the United States wear headwraps to express pride in their heritage as well as a practical and are fashionable protective hairstyle.

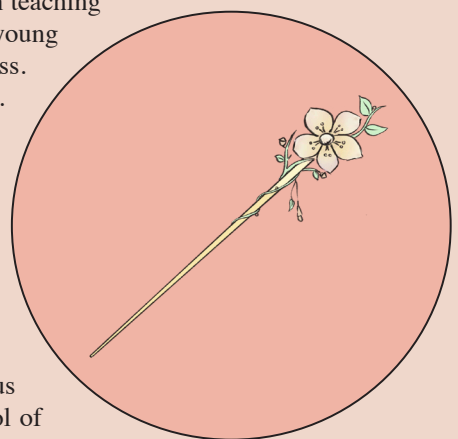


photo courtesy: ABC Signature, Columbia Pictures Television, Paramount Pictures, Lifetime, 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros. Television



Interview with Salon Pure Princeton

Aritra Ray, STAFF WRITER

Princeton is full of barbershops and salons, all offering their customers unique services. I visited Salon Pure, located in Palmer Square above the bustling Princeton streets, to talk with Samantha Kemler. Kemler is the salon's curly hair specialist, and she emphasized her value of protecting those luscious locks.

What are the best ways to take care of your hair at home?

Using the right products. Always ask your stylist what products are going to be best suited to answer some of your needs. For taking care of it at home, stay away from box dye. Box dye is going to be your number one worst enemy.

How does box dye treatment differ from getting it at the salon?

Box dye is just fabric dye and fabric softener. The salon's color [is made of] many different types of hair colors. Here, we're also able to customize colors. If you want a specific shade, [go] to a hair salon. Some people that even have some clients that come in and ask [to] use henna instead for hair color.

What is the healthiest color to dye hair? Are bright colors more harmful for your hair compared to toned down shades?

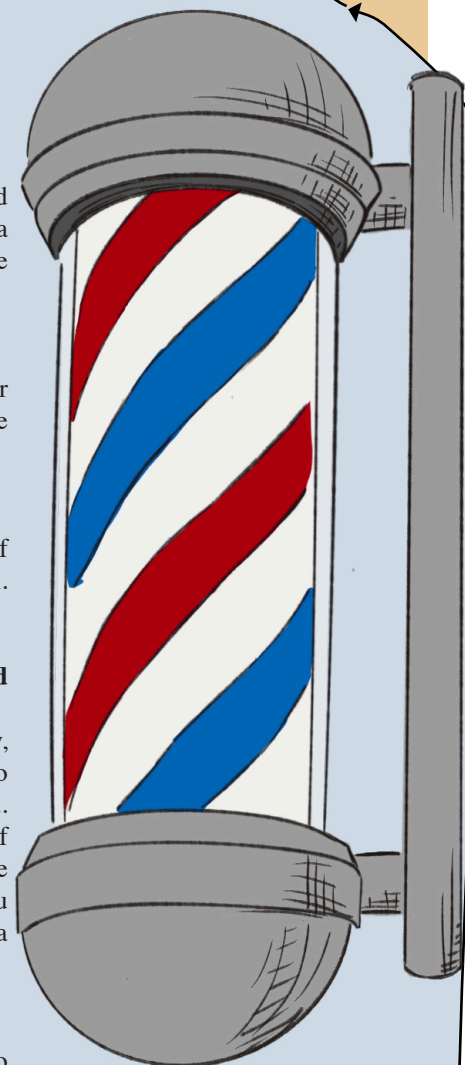
I wouldn't necessarily say that bright colors aren't good for your hair. It depends on hair history, what services you've had [done], as well as your goals. If you have jet black hair, and you want to go platinum blonde, you're not going to get that done in one session without your hair being damaged ... you have to do it gradually. You'll probably get your platinum blonde hair by like two years. And if somebody wants a certain color, like if they want blue, for example, [it's] going to wash out after some time. Blue [is] what we call [a] fantasy color ... anything that is not like a natural hair color. If you like your hot showers, don't get a fantasy color because the way to preserve them for longer is using a color safe shampoo and taking cold showers.

For people with different hair textures, what do they ask their stylists for specifically?

Well, I'm a natural ginger, and I have curls ... if somebody has curly hair, they're probably going to want a deep conditioning. They may want something that's going to help them with frizz. A lot of times that can also be addressed with a deep conditioning as frizz can result from weather.

What advice would you give to people to help them take care of their hair?

If you want to do highlights, [that's] perfectly fine, but don't go to the beach right after. Give your hair some time. If you're planning on going to the beach, get the highlights the week before. If you're gonna go to the pool ... [which has] chlorine, go to the pool all you want but just make sure you're protecting your hair.



The power of patterns

Aarna Dharmavarapu, STAFF WRITER

Cornrows are more than just a hairstyle. For centuries, they've been a powerful cultural symbol in African societies, holding value that goes far beyond appearance. The hairstyle initially started as a way to represent tribal identity and social status, but during times of enslavement, they transformed into a way of hidden communication and resistance. For enslaved African American women, cornrows became a tool of navigation, serving as a way to communicate escape routes and preserve heritage from the forces that strived to erase it.

The roots of cornrows can be traced back to about 3000 B.C. in Africa, where they were worn across the continent from West Africa to Sudan. Cornrows signified tribal affiliation, social rank, and one's role within their community. Warriors and kings, for example, wore intricate braids as a sign of their status and leadership.

In other African cultures, the way a person styled their hair could also indicate their age, marital status, and even their personality. The practice of wearing cornrows, aside from being a tradition, was a way of preserving identity and cultural practices, which became increasingly important in times where these ideas were threatened.

When Africans were enslaved and brought to the Americas, they were forced to abandon much of their culture, including their hairstyles. Enslavers cut the hair of the enslaved, in order to strip them of their traditions and heritage. The act of cutting was often a deliberate attempt to erase the enslaved individual's past and force them away from their cultural roots.

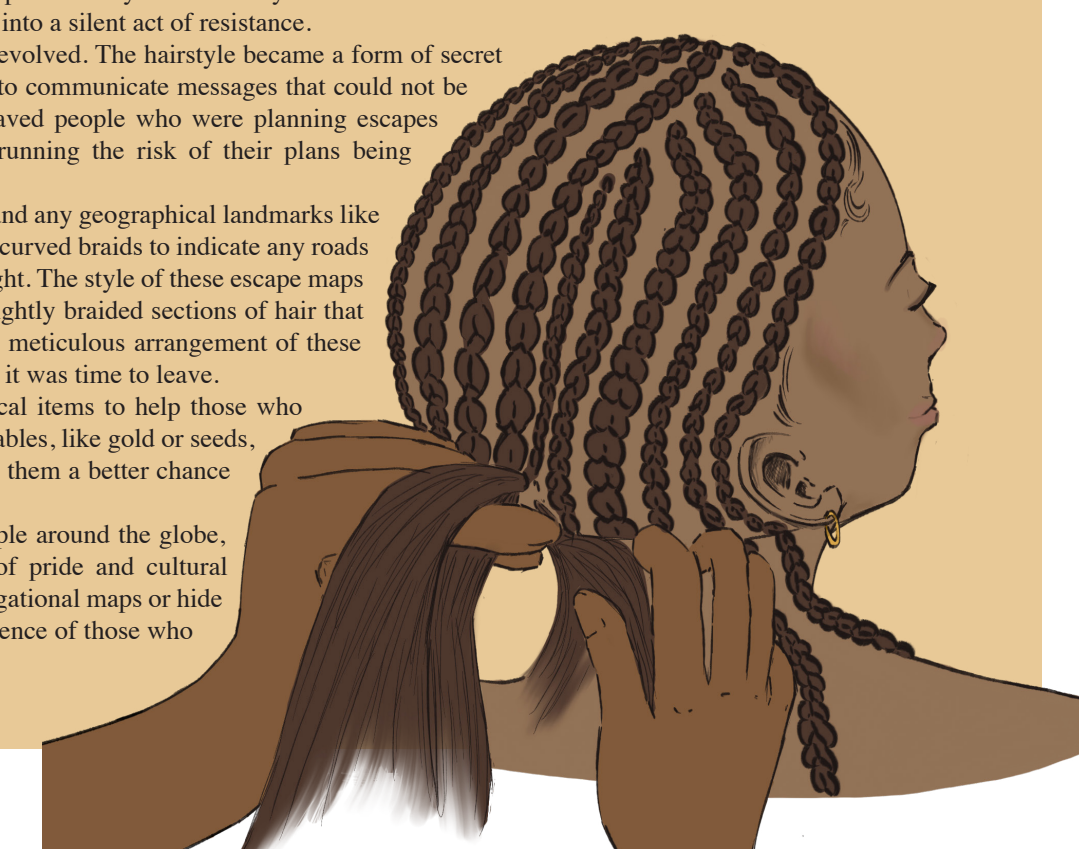
However, despite these efforts, cornrows remained a part of daily life for many African American women. These braids became more than just a way to preserve identity; they evolved into a silent act of resistance.

During the era of enslavement, the role of cornrows evolved. The hairstyle became a form of secret communication, like a special language that was used to communicate messages that could not be spoken aloud. This was especially important for enslaved people who were planning escapes or revolts, as they needed to communicate without running the risk of their plans being compromised.

Cornrows were then styled to represent roads, paths, and any geographical landmarks like mountains or rivers. For instance, women would create curved braids to indicate any roads or trails that escapees should follow to avoid being caught. The style of these escape maps was referred to as "departes," and consisted of thick, tightly braided sections of hair that were pulled into tight buns at the top of the head. The meticulous arrangement of these braids was a code for those who knew, indicating when it was time to leave.

Beyond maps, cornrows were a way to hide practical items to help those who escaped start a new life. Women would hide small valuables, like gold or seeds, to help them buy food or grow their own crops, giving them a better chance of survival after escaping.

Today, cornrows are worn by millions of Black people around the globe, where the style has evolved as a powerful symbol of pride and cultural identity. Though the braids may no longer serve as navigational maps or hide valuables, they are a reminder of the strength and resilience of those who wore them.



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Choirs and orchestras unite to fill Princeton University Chapel with music

Joy Chen, STAFF WRITER
Asma Frough and Dhruv Khanna,
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS



Orchestra director Robert Loughran conducts a rehearsal with Sinfonia.



Choir director Vincent Metallo leads Chorale 2 rehearsal on the piano.

On December 19, Princeton High School held its 79th annual winter concert at the Princeton University Chapel. The event featured performances from the three orchestras, Repertoire, Sinfonia, and PHS Orchestra, and the five choirs, Chorale I and II, Cantus, PHS Choir, and Chamber Choir.

The orchestras performed pieces by various composers from England, Germany, Czechia, Argentina, and Italy. The Sinfonia and Repertoire Orchestras opened with pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach and Gustav Mahler, while the PHS Orchestra played pieces by composers such as Astor Piazzolla and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Among the selections, Piazzolla's works stood out to performers.

"My favorite piece is 'Oblivion' by Astor Piazzolla, because I like how the orchestra is connected [with] each other in providing the base beat," said Helen Yu '27, a violinist from PHS Orchestra. "The sound of the flute sings above the orchestra, with the harmonies making the piece delicate and beautiful."

The choir groups also performed music from various languages, styles, and periods, featuring Christmas carols and unique sacred songs from Italy. Their concert selections were influenced by their upcoming trip to Italy, where they will perform music reflecting the country's rich traditions.

"Many of our songs are in different languages, so they require some extra time to learn [the] words," said Chamber Choir member Maya Halcomb '25.

To prepare for the winter concert, the choirs and orchestras started rehearsals in October and practiced four days a week, in addition to preparations with friends and individually outside of school.

"There are some extra [rehearsals] here and there when there is an upcoming event," said Jessica Carrera '27, a member of Cantus. "Overall, practice [ran] smoothly, and learning new songs is always rewarding."

While the concert at the chapel is an annual event, featuring the same format communal compositions

every year, each performance still provides a distinctive experience.

"It is the different personnel, different repertoires, and the audience there that evening that make it very special," said orchestra director Robert Loughran.

The blending of all of the choir's voice parts was essential to the style of music they performed.

"I hope [the audience] appreciated the work we put in and gained an ear for the style of music we perform," said Halcomb. "While it may not be pop music, there is something to be said about the harmonies and magic of singing with so many people."

The winter concert is shaped by the audience. Every year, these performances aim to create memorable connections between the music and the listeners.

"I hope the audience enjoyed our performances and came out with a personal connection, like a new perspective, inspiration, or curiosity," said Carrera.

Elliot Block '25 finds his voice with the viola

Angela Chen, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

For Elliot Block '25, music has always been an integral part of his life. His passion for classical music began at an early age, sparked by his love for both the viola and the piano. Now, as the first chair violist of the PHS Orchestra as well as co-president of its cabinet, Block continues to explore his passion in chamber groups and on stage.

When did you start playing the viola and why did you choose it?

I started viola when I was seven years old, [but] I didn't choose it. My mom chose it for me and I didn't like it at first, but when I was 10 or 11 years old, I started playing in chamber groups at summer camps, and I realized I really liked that. That got me into it a little more.

Who would you consider your inspirations?

I also play piano, [which] is my [preferred] instrument. Some of my inspirations are the top performers for piano, like Martha Argerich, Rubinstein, [and] Horowitz. But there are a ton of great performers and musicians.

Why are these artists your inspirations?

I think it's primarily their playing style. All the musicians that I find inspiring are able to approach their instrument in different ways, but always successfully put their feeling into the music, and also bring feeling out of the music. I really admire that, and I always try to do that whenever I'm playing in practice and performance.

What do you like about classical music?

There are a ton of things I like about classical music. It's what I

listen to most. The range of emotions that classical music can feature is really vast, and there's always a piece that fits the mood I'm in.

What do you consider the most challenging aspect of classical music?

I think the most challenging aspect is the combination of technique and sensitivity to feeling. It's sometimes easy to focus on one or the other, but both are necessary to be really great, and that can be tough.

How do you handle pressure from auditions or performances?

I used to be really bad at that, and I kind of still am really bad at that, but I make sure that there's no tension in my body, and I really practice clearing my head before playing, so that I can replicate it in front of an audience. It never really is easy, but I think clearing the tension is the most important thing.

What is your favorite memory from PHS orchestra?

Going on the European tour last spring was really fun and [I bonded] with the orchestra. Through that, I made a lot of new friends ... It's made this year a lot more fun too.

Are you planning on pursuing music in higher education or as a career?

Definitely. I want to study piano and classical music in college. Ideally, it would also make a career. But I know that music will be with me for my entire life, either way.



Elliot Block '25 plays the viola in a practice room.

PHS Choir performs Holiday POPS! concert with Broadway singer Andrea Ross

Chloe Lam, STAFF WRITER
Yunsheng Xue, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS



Andrea Ross sings "O Holy Night," accompanied by PHS Choir and Princeton Symphony Orchestra.

On Saturday, December 14 at the Richardson Auditorium, PHS Choir performed this year's holiday POPS! concert. In collaboration with Broadway singer Andrea Ross and the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, allowing audiences to enjoy repertoire from various ensembles.

Since 2003, PHS Choir has been performing at the annual POPS! concert with the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, giving generations of choir students the opportunity to perform with a professional orchestra. Previous vocalists included Morgan James, Janet Dacal, and Laquita Mitchell, as well as the New Jersey Tap Ensemble, a non-profit professional tap dance group.

"[The concert was] so popular that it was sold out with standing room only. So now they've added a second

performance in the last three years," said Sarah Pelletier, a choir teacher at PHS.

Assembled by Princeton Symphony Orchestra, this year's program deviates from their usual classical repertoire, featuring lighter, longtime holiday favorites such as "Santa Claus is Coming to Town."

"[The program] is a combination of holiday songs, festive songs, mostly pop and jazz and traditional carols with cool arrangements," said PHS Choir director Vincent Metallo.

In addition to classic holiday tunes, the song selection featured iconic Christmas soundtracks, such as "Believe" from "The Polar Express" and "Somewhere in My Memory" from "Home Alone."

"I really like 'Somewhere in My Memory,'" said Raima Srivastava '25, a member of the PHS Choir. "In the movie [there are] a bunch of children singing, and it's kind of like us. It sounds really cute [and] beautiful, and I really like the way the conductor conducts it."

A tradition of the concert is for the audience to sing-along at the end. Not only do the choir students get the opportunity to lead, the audience is also able to feel truly engaged.

"I hope that the audience enjoys the music, and [that] it's an experience," said Marcus Strum '27, who's a member of PHS Choir.

The event joined the singers together in holiday spirit, and provided learning experiences for the choir students.

"[It's an] absolutely great experience for our kids to sing with a professional orchestra. Most schools don't ever. [It's] been really great [and it] teaches them a little bit more about performance etiquette, what it's like to collaborate with professionals," said Metallo.

The different interpretations of the music between the choir and orchestra allowed them to collaborate, building off of each other.

"It's really cool to just kind of go off of the orchestra because they do the pieces a little differently than how we rehearse them in choir," said Srivastava. "Sometimes I watch the orchestra perform and I'm so encapsulated by how they perform that I just forget to actually try when I sing, but they're really good every year that we perform with them."

In coming together with Princeton Symphony Orchestra and Andrea Ross, the performance allowed for a blending of various vocal ranges and instruments.

"We've worked really hard on it," said Jenna Stucky '25, a member of PHS Choir. "We often rehearse [as just] sopranos [and] altos. More recently, we've been coming together ... and it's just super cool to see all those voices coming together and [the] people in choir this year. So I love hearing everyone's voices together."

“ The performance allowed for a blending of ranges and instruments.”

Handmade gifts for the holiday season

Jane Hu, STAFF WRITER

The winter holidays are often a time for giving and receiving gifts. However, sometimes we might not have the time to go out shopping, or would like to make personal gifts. Here are three fun handmade gifts to make over the winter holidays.

Mini yarn hat ornament

Supplies:
Scissors
Yarn
1 core of a toilet paper roll
1 cotton ball (optional)



Steps:
1. Cut the core of the toilet paper roll into one-inch sections.
2. Depending on the thickness of your yarn, cut around 10–20 pieces of yarn, each 10 inches in length.
3. Fold a piece of yarn in half and insert it into the opening of the toilet paper roll cut-out
4. Take the open ends of the yarn and pull them through the loop until the knot is tight.
5. Repeat these steps until the entire ring is covered.
6. Pull the ends through the inside of the ring to the other side.
7. Gather the ends and tie them with an extra piece of yarn, about halfway from the ends.
8. Using the scissors, trim the ends of the yarn to make a pom-pom.
9. Optional: If you wish to give the hat more shape, you can place a cotton ball inside.

Sock snowman

Supplies:
1 white sock
1 colorful sock
3 cups of rice grains
2 rubber bands
2 black buttons
1 pom-pom
2–3 colorful buttons
Scissors
Hot glue
Orange pipe cleaner



Steps:
1. Take a clean white sock and cut the sock right before the heel.
2. Flip the sock around so that the fluffy part of the sock is on the outside.
3. Pour three cups of rice into the sock and use a rubber band to secure the top tightly.
4. Take another rubber band and wrap it around the middle of the sock to separate the head and the body of the snowman.
5. Grab a colorful sock and cut under the heel and a few inches above the toe.
6. Trim the extra sock off the top of the snowman and use the toe piece as a hat.
7. Place the other sock piece over the body of the snowman as a sweater.



Honeycomb ornament

Supplies:
1 piece of 10-inch string
8 pages of cardstock paper
1 glue stick
1 pencil

Steps:
1. Trace out 16 circles, each four inches in diameter.
2. Fold each circle in half.
3. Apply glue to the outer side of the folded circles.
4. Stack the outer side of the folded cut-outs on top of each other and glue each piece together.
5. Before forming the craft into a sphere, glue a piece of folded string in the center.
6. Glue the ends of the ornament together. The loop of the folded string should be at the top of the ornament.




graphics: Madison Charles

Our soundtracks of the year

Gabby Kaputa, STAFF WRITER

Jane Sajan '25

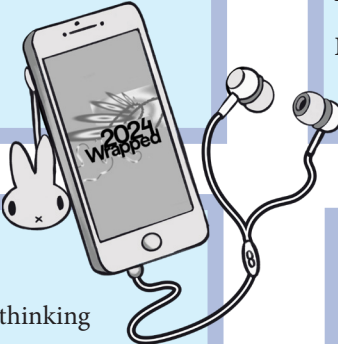
What were you most surprised about your Spotify Wrapped?
I was in the top 0.005 percent for my top artist so I felt like it was so cool that I was part of that. I never thought I would be, so [this is] definitely [giving me] bragging rights.

Who were your top artist and song this year?
Yeat and "500 lbs."

Kanishk Mogha '28

What is your favorite part about Spotify Wrapped?
Probably just the fact that it recaps it and I'm shocked that it is even able to determine what my top song is because god knows how many times I've listened to some of these songs.

Do you think your Spotify Wrapped this year was accurate?
Yes, very much so. I'm a big fan of psychedelic rock and that was very accurately reflected.



graphic: Elizaveta Khristoforova

Erin Pilicer '26

How often do you think about your Spotify Wrapped year-round?
A few times a month. I have earbuds, so that keeps me thinking about it.

Who was your top artist and song this year?
Clairo and "Birds of a Feather."

Sonya Allee '27

What's your favorite part about Spotify Wrapped?
[My favorite part is] seeing my [different] moods each month.

Who were your top artist and song this year?
Florence and the Machine and "Motion Sickness."

Who were your top artist and song this year?

Iaroslav Baicev '25
Oasis and "Don't Look Back In Anger."

Eve Kavookjin '27
Adrienne Lenker and "Acolyte."

Hayah Mian '25

What's your favorite part about Spotify Wrapped?
I have Apple Music replay, [and] my favorite part is being surprised by my top artist, because every year I try to vary it, and every year at least three of my artists are the same. It's always kind of fun to see what accumulated over time. Harry Styles was my fifth favorite artist, and I didn't know I listened to him that much, but [it] turns out in February I got sad and listened to his album over and over again. It makes you reflect [on] your year.

What do you use your Spotify Wrapped for?
I usually post it on my story so people can know my top artist, because I really think that gives a good indicator of what I like to listen to and the type of person I am. [I like] to compare with my family and friends, and also [to realize] what a year I've had.

Who were your top artist and song this year?
Taylor Swift and "Not Strong Enough."

Christina Metaxas '25

Do you think Spotify Wrapped is an important part of the platform?
I think it's fun, and you get to see [what you listened to]. But is it going to change who I listen to next year? Not really.

graphics: Charley Hu

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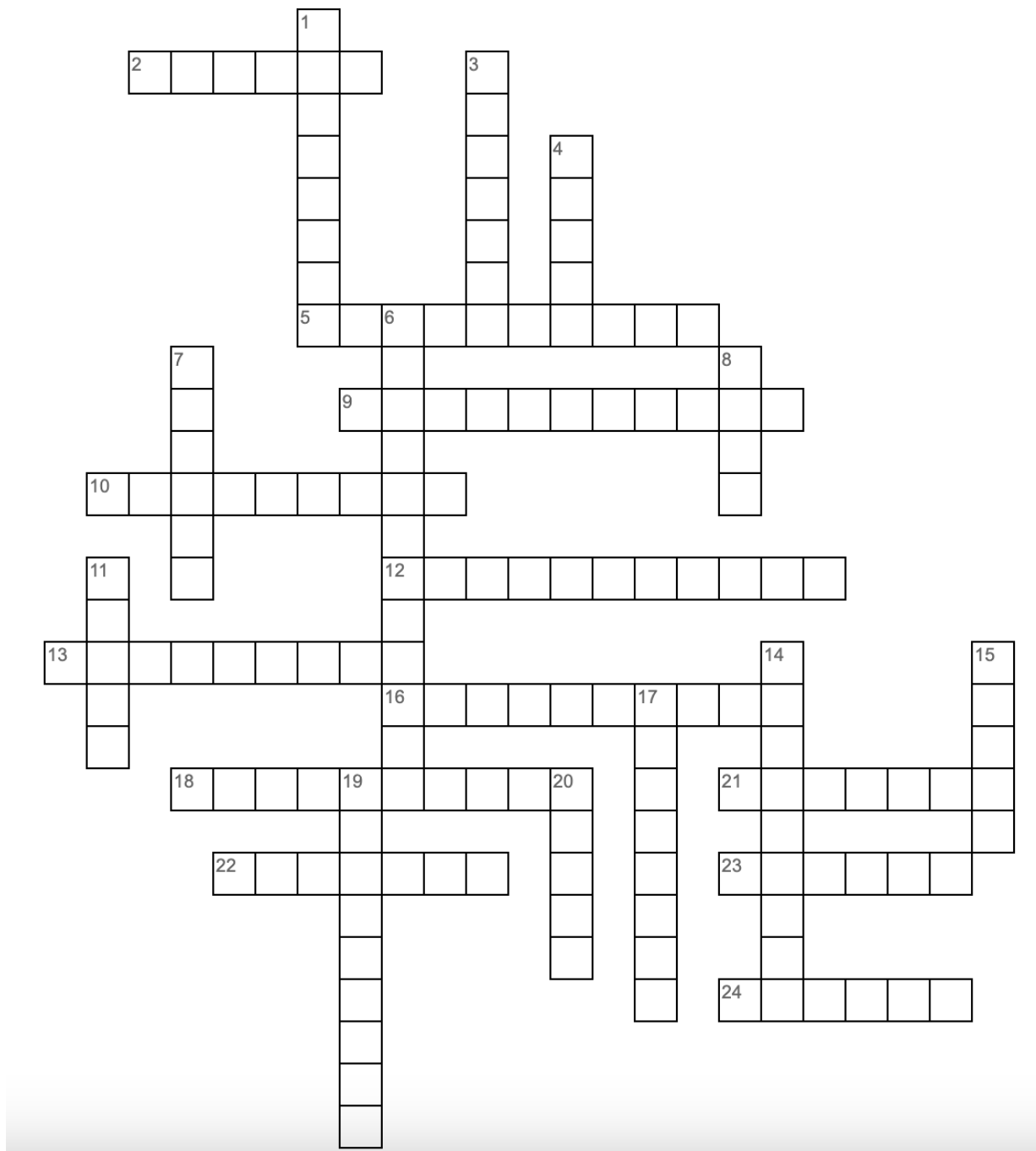
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Winter word-erland: a holiday crossword

Phineas McCulloch, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Across:

- 2. A hot and spicy type of cider
- 5. A jelly-filled doughnut eaten on Hanukkah
- 9. It's a _____ world!
- 10. A traditional holiday dish symbolizing abundance
- 12. A holiday that shares the same title as a Taylor Swift song
- 13. Accompanies a pear tree
- 16. A classical holiday ballet originating in Russia
- 18. A type of flower sold during PHS Choir's flower sale
- 21. A decorative holiday wreath
- 22. The most famous reindeer of all
- 23. A somewhat extinct decorative stringing material
- 24. The principal branches of a tree

Down:

- 1. A temporal holiday celebrated on December 23 using a pole
- 3. A holiday created in the 1960s
- 4. The final principle of Kwanzaa
- 6. A symbol of divinity; citrus aroma
- 7. The most intimidating spirit of Christmas
- 8. "There's no place like ___ for the holidays"
- 11. Eat this fruit 12 times for good luck
- 14. The animal that Ross from "Friends" dressed up as for the holidays
- 15. A common seasonal hot beverage (usually for adults)
- 17. A traditional Victorian food roasted over a fire
- 19. Stuffed with mini-presents
- 20. A symbol displayed both on Christmas trees and Valentine's Day

Around the world in winter: international holiday films

"A Christmas Story"

Suroor Menai, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"A Christmas Story," directed by Juha Wuolijoki in 2007, is a perfect family movie for the holidays. Filmed in Finland, this movie incorporates some of Finland's holiday traditions, setting itself apart from traditional American Christmas movies.

The film tells the story of a boy named Nikolas, who was orphaned when he was young. A village took him in, and each year on Christmas day, he moved to a different family's house in the community. The movie follows his childhood as he eventually becomes Santa Claus.

The plot of the movie intertwines feelings of sadness and hope, which was one of the things I loved about it. For instance, Nikolas' sister, Aada, died along with their parents. Later in the movie, a character is named

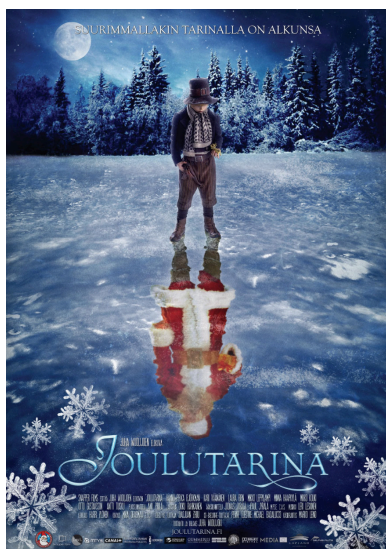


photo courtesy: Snapper Films

after her, symbolizing her importance in Nikolas's happy ending and reminding him of her absence. The ups and downs throughout the entire movie made it unpredictable, which I find to be one of the key aspects in any good movie.

I also really appreciated the character development in the movie's key figures, because it gives the movie structure and really draws the viewer into the movie. One such figure was a character named Isaac, who was initially portrayed as mean and bitter, but developed with each passing scene, and began showing more of his true personality, which was much less hostile.

This is a fantastic entertaining holiday movie to watch with friends and family, while also being captivating and meaningful.

"Santa & Cie"

Maeve Walsh, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"Santa & Cie," directed by Alain Chabat, is a French film released in 2017 about Santa's journey through the real world in hopes of curing his elves of a mysterious disease. Landing in France, Santa is desperate to find a remedy for his elves and get back to the North Pole in time for Christmas. As time is running out, Santa is arrested after ransacking a pharmacy. His lawyer, Thomas, soon realizes Santa's true identity and allows Santa to stay at his family's apartment as he helps him acquire the cure for the elves. Thomas and his family must now work together to get enough medicine before Christmas Eve.

Throughout Santa's adventure in the beautiful city of Paris, he sees people's stress around the holiday season. Considering the elves' sickness is the only problem he's faced in hundreds of years, Santa is confused when he sees that Thomas and his wife Amélie have to deal

with many challenges. Especially around the holidays, it appears that everyone is in a hurry, socializing becomes tiresome, basic chores seem impossible to get done, and people are often short on money. All these difficulties portrayed in the film are accurate depictions of what many people experience during the holiday season.

Even though there is a deeper meaning to the plot, there are also many lighthearted moments throughout the film. Amusingly, Santa is quite the comedian, constantly teasing his reindeer and making witty comments to Thomas and Amélie, who reciprocate Santa's sense of humor. Combined with fantastic visual effects, the storyline is entertaining and makes for a great family movie that would appeal to all. Although I had to read the English subtitles, I think this will become a seasonal classic for my family and me.

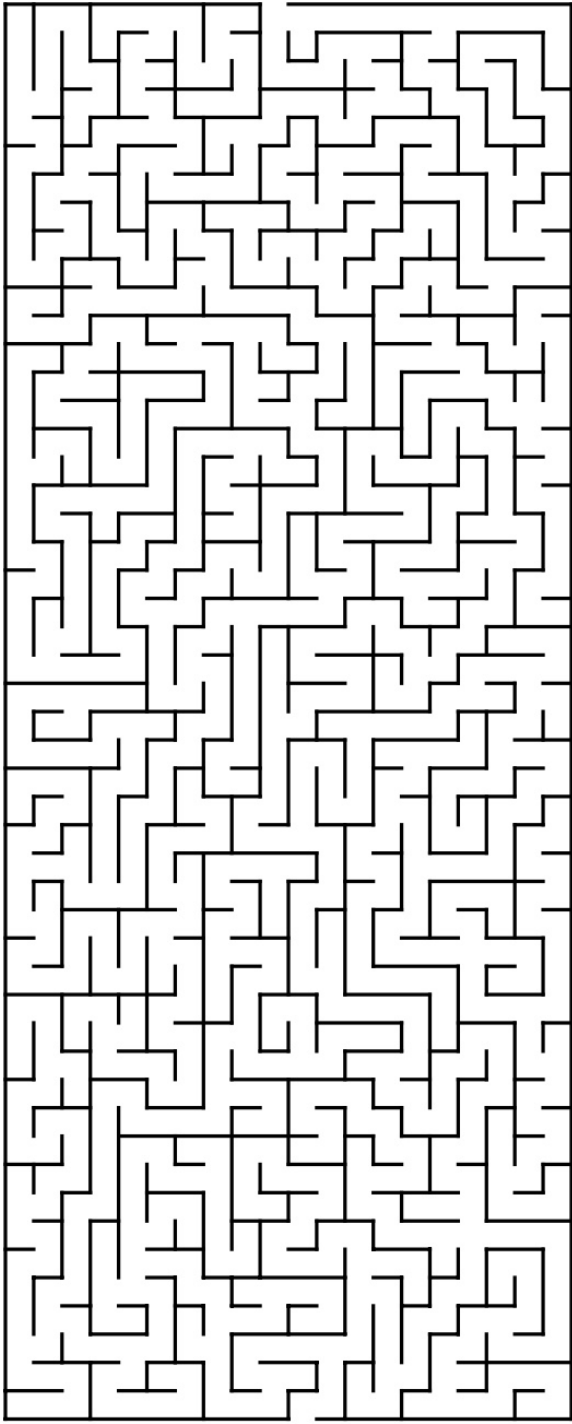


photo courtesy: Entourage Ventures

Smörgåsbord

Get lost in this month's maze!

Matthew Chen, MANAGING EDITOR



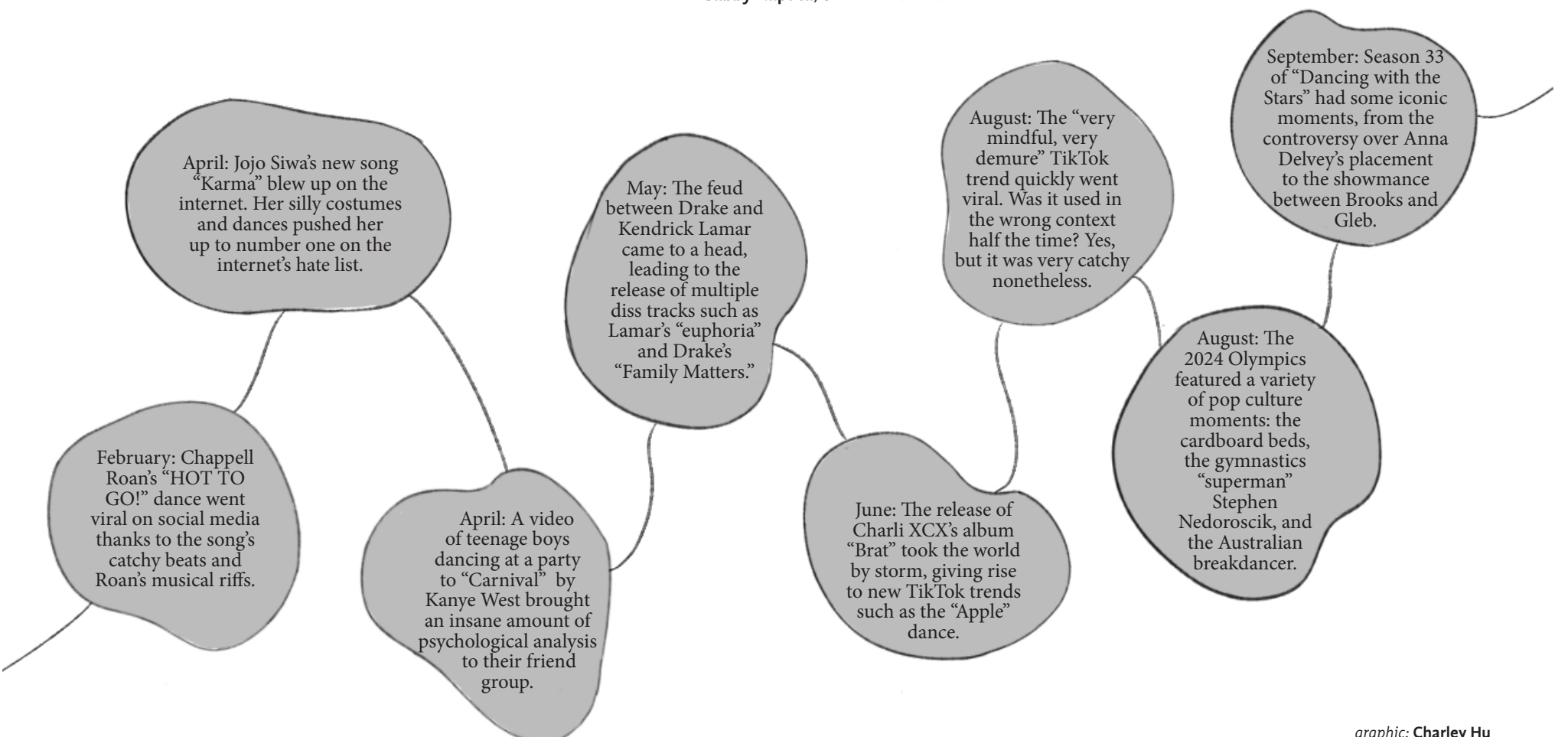
This or that: movie edition

Tamar Assayag, MANAGING EDITOR

THE 1996 MOVIE "ROMEO + JULIET"	FAVORITE VERSION OF "ROMEO & JULIET?"	THE 2011 MOVIE "GNOMEO & JULIET"
"10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU"	FAVORITE 1990S ROM-COM?	"NOTTING HILL"
HALLOWEEN	"NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS" IS BEST FOR WHICH HOLIDAY?	CHRISTMAS
"THE SUBSTANCE"	BEST HORROR MOVIE RELEASED IN 2024?	"SMILE 2"

Recapping 2024: best pop culture moments of the year

Gabby Kaputa, STAFF WRITER



graphic: Charley Hu

SPORTS

A look into the lives of PHS sports team managers

Katie Qin, SPORTS CO-EDITOR
Claire Yang, STAFF WRITER

This past fall, PHS athletic teams were successful in their respective seasons, with the girls volleyball team winning their second state championship in a row and the boys soccer team becoming sectional champions. Successes such as these occur because of the players' skill and talent, coaches' guidance, and parents' support. Team managers, however, are often forgotten, despite the many ways in which they contribute to a team's success.

Team managers take charge of tasks that coaches and teams often do not have time to handle, lessening the pressure on the team. Osbaldo Morales '25, the head team manager of the girls volleyball team, has spent four years managing the team.

"I help with setting up ... so everything is ready," said Morales. "I make sure [the] scoring [and] the stats for our team is ready before we start the game."

During intense matches, coaches and teammates cannot focus on keeping track of every spike or goal. Team managers make sure data is recorded accurately — a task made difficult by the constant activity on and around the playing field.

"For soccer, I keep track of shots on goal and who scores ... and the goalie saves," said Brooke Palumbo '25, one of the team managers of the boys soccer team and the baseball team. "I report all of it to NJ Sports. For baseball, I keep track of the plays on an app as well."

Team managers also make sure that the data they collect reaches players. Katie Callen, one of the managers

for both boys and girls wrestling, talks about how she records videos of matches to use for analysis later.

"Film is for personal use of the wrestler, so they can reflect on their match," said Callen.

Besides statistics, equipment management is one of the most important jobs of a team manager, especially in sports like volleyball and soccer which involve overseeing multiple pieces of equipment. During away games, keeping track of the equipment can be difficult.

"People usually take the bus, and the bus gets pretty crazy ... we just have to keep track of all the equipment," said Palumbo.

When a game begins, managers immediately take to their different roles depending on the situation. Palumbo, for example, rotates with other managers, one of whom live streams the game. When a team has multiple managers, communication is essential.

"Me and my other managers, we have a group chat," said Palumbo. "The team [has] their own group chat, and if I need to figure stuff out with them, I'll text one of them and they'll let the [others] know."

Team managers are also responsible for uplifting team spirit. According to Camila Barbosa '27, a member of the girls volleyball team, Morales has always gone the extra mile to make sure the team is in good spirits.

"He jumps in during practices [and] gives out water bottles for everyone. He's always cheering, hasn't missed a single practice all year, and he just overall is such a supportive figure that everyone can talk to about their problems," said Barbosa.

The positive energy each team manager brings to their team can really help a team feel motivated and succeed.

For this to be possible, though, it is crucial for the manager to truly be dedicated to the sport.

"It's just one of those things that if you're gonna do, you have to really be able to commit [to]," said Callen. "[Manage] a sport that mirrors your interest."

Team managers make an impact by supporting their team every step of the way, whether it is by cheering during competitions, keeping track of equipment, or writing down game statistics.

"I love just being able to be a part of a team without actually being a part of it," said Palumbo. "I'm not really sporty, but being on the manager side is a lot of fun for me because I can still bond with the team."



photo courtesy: Eddie Chen

Osbaldo Morales '25 watches over a volleyball team practice game.

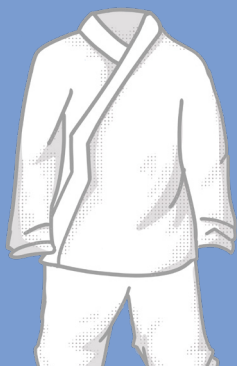
Team managers make an impact by supporting their team every step of the way.

Sports fashion timeline

Asya Morozov, SPORTS CO-EDITOR
Gabriel Andrade, STAFF WRITER

Pre-19th century

It was rare for athletes to wear uniforms before the 19th century. One exception was Greek athletes, who competed nude in events such as wrestling or javelin throwing. This dress code was intended to show off athletes' physiques and remove any distinguishable symbols of social rank that could cause divisions between participants. In most other places, though, athletes would typically compete in their regular clothing, such as Japanese martial artists, who wore kimono undergarments, such as jubans and han-jubans.



Early 20th century

In the early 20th century, sports uniform designs shifted towards practicality. Most jerseys were made of plain cotton with basic numbering and lettering. Style was second to functionality with the popularization of breathable and synthetic fabrics such as polyester.



Early 21st century

Athleisure clothing such as yoga pants, tracksuits, and hoodies have exploded in popularity over recent years. Athleisure's comfort and style contributed greatly to this popularization, along with its versatility in both casual and athletic contexts. Additionally, sports jerseys, whose neon colors and baggy silhouettes turned away high-fashion fans for many years, are making their way into mainstream fashion.



19th century

Uniforms were first designed for sports in the 19th century. The first baseball uniform was worn by the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club in 1849, and consisted of a straw hat, white shirt, and blue wool pants. Cricket and tennis were also among the first sports to instate uniforms, with many players wearing white clothing to deflect the sun's heat.

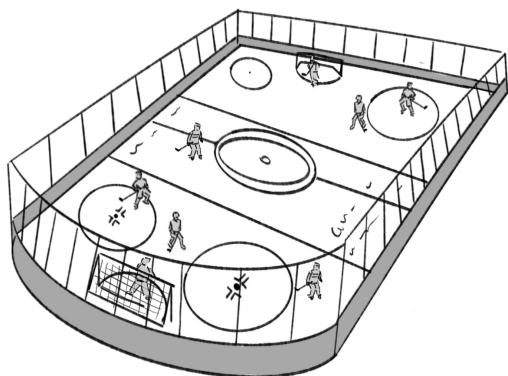
Mid-20th century

In the mid-20th century, sports started to become a major global phenomenon. Brands became much more involved, with sponsorship symbols showing up on uniforms. As sports were popularized by mass media, teams chose brighter and more unique colors for their uniforms. This was also when numbers and names started being added to players' uniforms to differentiate them.

graphics: Madison Charles

Where to go when the weather gets cold

Nia Zagar, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

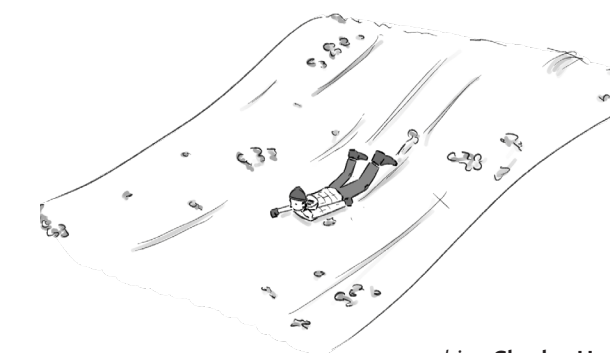
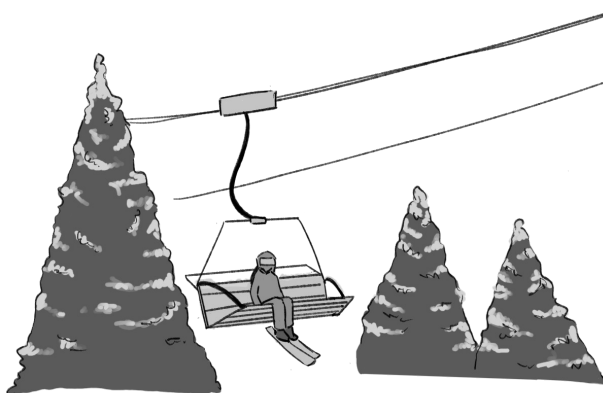


Ice skating: Hobey Baker Memorial Ice Rink

Hobey Baker Memorial Rink in Princeton is known for its rich history, advanced facilities, and its role in the PHS community as a place for competition for both the girls and boys ice hockey teams. It is the only ice rink on Princeton University's campus, hosting a wide range of activities, from competitive varsity hockey to recreational skating, for both athletes and enthusiasts. It has historical significance, being the second-oldest arena still used for NCAA Division I hockey. It was also renovated from 2015–2018, improving dry stalls and stick rooms in locker rooms, a team video room with luxury seating and a smart board, and a new sound system. This rink, named in honor of Princeton University ice hockey legend Hobey Baker, is a space that honors tradition while supporting modern activity.

Skiing and snowboarding: Blue Mountain Resort

Blue Mountain Resort is an ideal destination for snowboarding and skiing in the Pennsylvania Poconos. Just two hours from Princeton, it offers a blend of accessibility and diverse terrain. The resort features 43 trails, a vertical drop of 1,082 feet, and five terrain parks to suit all levels of experience. Amenities include 13 lifts and a snow tubing area with 39 lanes, ensuring minimal wait times and maximum enjoyment. The lodge itself is also comfortable, with quality food available to all visitors. Its charming setting in the Pocono Mountains further enhances its beauty, while nearby lodging and dining options in their Blue Mountain Village make it a convenient and relaxing getaway.



graphics: Charley Hu

Sledding: Springdale Golf Course

Princeton's massive golf course, near the university's graduate college, certainly does not go unused in the wintertime. Local children and even university students flock to its slopes whenever it snows as the course's carefully manicured and maintained hills and greens make for a smooth base for sledding. One particular highlight of the course is a small creek that sits between two tall hills, creating a natural half-pipe that not many other sledding locations have. The creek also provides a unique challenge — if it is not frozen over, sledders have to try to avoid it on their way down. Beyond the creek, though, the sheer size of the course means that there are always new areas to sled on and discover. A sledding spot as special as the Springdale Golf Course is hard to find.

Behind the scenes: athletics department

Katie Qin and Dester Selby-Salazar, SPORTS CO-EDITORS
Kaelan Patel, STAFF WRITER

The sports faculty are an important part of any sports team. On game day, coaches can be seen leading the team out onto the field, organizing tactics, and acting as a mentor for every player. When an athlete gets hurt, a trainer is called to assess and treat the injury, and if serious, counselors and administration are made aware to streamline their physical recoveries. This is just one of the many scenarios that the department has to prepare for, on top of the upkeep of the many sports programs, health curriculum, and general well-being of students.

Shannon Koch is one of PHS's physical trainers, and she has to account for hundreds of students nearly everyday while they practice. During matches, you'll see her ready to help out any players who go down injured. When she's not available on the pitch, she is still available at school.

"Day to day, we have the rehab clinic downstairs so they would come in, check in with us, let us know how their progress is," said Koch. "We set up rehabilitation programs that they can do in the office and also at home."

Koch believes that one of the most important parts of her job is her communication with the rest of the coaches. To her, if she cannot stay up to date with the coaches, then she will always be behind at her job.

"Most of the time, I like doing face to face, one on one, so I go up and check with all our coaches at the beginning and end of practices, just to make sure everything's okay," said Koch. "I like to see if they have any questions, making sure that the kids that are saying they're coming to us are actually coming to us and doing the rehabilitation that they need."

To ensure an athlete's swift recovery, Koch makes sure those who see the student on a daily basis are always informed of any conditions.

"If we have a student with a concussion, I will notify their counselor and their teachers, usually through the counselor, and then the counselors notify the teachers and the nurses what's going on," said Koch. "And if [the student] is not acting properly, they can help that student, pull them out of class, send them down to the nurse's office, and, if need be, send them out for further care."

The web of support for athletes is extremely extensive. PHS Principal Cecilia Birge is always on the same page as the managers and physicians. This involves knowing everyone in the athletics department so that she is always up to date with what she can do. Her main source of information is the Supervisor of Physical Education and Athletic Director Brian Dzbenski.

"Mr. Dzbenski manages everything related to athletic programs — what kind of sports programs that we want to have, or if we should have facilities," said Birge. "He monitors the conditions of the field, because coaches report to him almost on a daily basis, certainly seasonally, about the condition of the fields."

Currently one of the issues facing the school is a reduced budget. At PHS, costs are reduced as much as possible due to the sheer amount of sports that are being played.

"We're in the budget season now, planning for next year, and our budget has been cut each year," said Birge. "I'll take transportation for example. You have to plan for the maximum number of games allowed by [the] NJSIAA ... Volleyball, for example, went to the postseason."



photo: Charley Hu

Shannon Koch prepares tape for Luna Bar-Cohen '25.

Soccer went to the postseason. There's no way to budget for the postseason because you don't want to budget every single game to go to the state championship."

Creating the budget requires many considerations, such as playing field conditions and equipment quantity and quality. This is more than just one person can handle. One of the coaches that are more directly involved with the management of the department is Dominic Capuano. Along with being the coach of the varsity baseball team, Capuano also has another job in the fitness department.

"I help Mr. Dzbenski and Principal Birge with day-to-day operations as far as helping the department so that it runs smoother with the different activities that we do within the school," said Capuano. "I help out with things which are more or [less] outside of day to day teaching, such as the mental health training that all sophomores go through. Athletically wise, I help make sure all students and coaches are submitting their certifications."

In addition to being a baseball coach, Capuano also helps out at the fitness center. He cites that his many experiences have ultimately helped him improve as a member of the sports faculty.

"I think it helps being a coach, because it gives me the perspective that the administration team as a whole don't always have," said Capuano. "As a coach, I can communicate it in ways that make it more efficient for the school."

Given his many roles in the sports department, it is not surprising that all of these jobs can be difficult to manage, but Capuano embraces these responsibilities.

"It's definitely more time consuming to balance when you have an added job, so there's a little less free time at home, but it's not bad, it's something good," said Capuano. "I have my master's degree in administration, so it's something that intrigues me. It's something that helps other people out, and so the balancing act isn't too hard."

It's easy to take for granted the organized competitions, prepared ice water, and transportation to games. But if you look closely, you will find that the sports staff are busy all year long, putting a lot of thought and time into different programs and processes for the convenience of students.

Winter season statistics

Katie Qin, SPORTS CO-EDITOR

Girls swimming

Game date: 12/5/24
Opponent: Lawrence
Score: 94-61 (Win)

Game date: 12/9/24
Opponent: Steinert
Score: 93-64 (Win)

Game date: 12/10/24
Opponent: Hopewell Valley
Score: 100-65 (Win)

Game date: 12/13/24
Opponent: Hightstown
Score: 96-69 (Win)

Boys swimming

Game date: 12/5/24
Opponent: Lawrence
Score: 113-57 (Win)

Game date: 12/9/24
Opponent: Steinert
Score: 98-44 (Win)

Game date: 12/10/24
Opponent: Hopewell Valley
Score: 95-75 (Win)

Game date: 12/13/24
Opponent: Hightstown
Score: 123-44 (Win)

Boys ice hockey

Game date: 12/6/24
Opponent: Notre Dame
Score: 6-3 (Win)

Game date: 12/9/24
Opponent: Hopewell Valley
Score: 2-4 (Lose)

Game date: 12/11/24
Opponent: East Brunswick
Score: 3-4 (Lose)

Game date: 12/13/24
Opponent: Robbinsville
Score: 0-8 (Lose)

Game date: 12/16/24
Opponent: Hillsborough
Score: 2-12 (Lose)

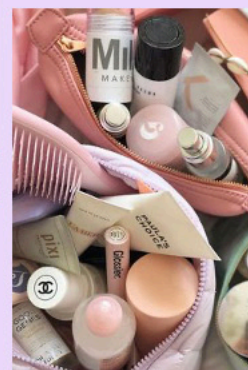


Title: Personal Care Product Use in High School Students
PI: Emily Barrett, PhD

Rutgers School of Public Health & PHS are collaborating on a research study about personal care product use in teenagers

What personal care products do you use?

All current Princeton High School students are eligible to participate!



What does the study involve?

- 1) An online survey about the products you use (20 minutes)
- 2) Upload photos of your products (10 minutes)

Participants will receive up to \$15 in Amazon gift cards

For more information about the study, scan the QR code or go to

<https://redcap.rwjms.rutgers.edu/surveys/?s=TXARP7MPAJ7DFFK9>

Questions? Please email: ResearchStudy@eohsi.rutgers.edu



Athletes of the Month

Cassie Speir '25: ice hockey

Gabriel Andrade, STAFF WRITER
Aarna Dharmavarapu, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



photos: Katherine Chen

Speir is looking forward to another successful season, both on and off the rink.

As the puck drops, Cassie Speir '25 glides across the rink with unwavering focus, her eyes sharp and her grip firm. She closes in on the net and shoots, sending the puck into the back of the posts and marking her 31st goal of the season.

Speir, a senior and forward, first discovered her love for hockey at the age of nine. "I started in a rec league ... [because] one of my really good friends from elementary school was doing it ... ever since I started, I just loved it," said Speir.

She soon transitioned into playing travel hockey, which introduced her to competitive play and extensive travel, allowing her to go to different states such as Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Although Speir also dabbled in lacrosse and softball throughout middle and high school, it was hockey that she was most passionate about.

"Quitting has never really been an option for me ... hockey is an outlet for me," said Speir. Many athletes have role models they admire, and Speir is inspired by two renowned hockey athletes: Hilary Knight, who has won a gold medal at the IIHF World Women's Championship and the 2018 Winter Olympics, and Sarah Fillier, a former Princeton University standout now playing in the newly formed Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL).

"I would go watch [Fillier's] games when I was younger ... they did have [the PWHL back then], but the women didn't really get paid much, and wasn't super known. But this one's being marketed really well, so they are good role models to girls who want to play," said Speir.

Speir's commitment to hockey is year-round, as she competes for both the PHS girls ice hockey team and the Princeton Tiger Lilies, a club team in the National Girls Hockey League.

"[I play hockey] basically every day," said Speir. "At school, I play defense, but for my club, I'm usually a forward. Playing both positions has been great for understanding the game better."

Last season, Speir played a crucial role, leading her team to a 3-11 record to qualify for the Annis Cup semifinals. She led not just her team, but also the state, in number of goals in one season, embodying the team's spirit throughout the season.

"She's definitely more down to earth and she connects personally with the players on our team, and she's really great for morale. She's very inspiring. The energy she brings to the game inspires other people to be more energetic," said Co-Captain Maya Hagt '25.

Christian Herzog, head coach of the girls ice hockey team, who witnessed Speir's journey from an ambitious freshman to a leading scorer, reflects on her success.

"She's had a lot of success in this sport because she's been playing quite a while, and she works extremely hard," said Herzog. "I would expect to hear about her accomplishments playing in college as well. She's definitely going to be a tough personality to lose next season."

Hagt expresses Speir's importance to the team, not just as a hockey player, but as a person as well.

"She's so inspiring to have on the ice. But even off the ice, she works so hard. You can tell that she puts a lot of effort into everything she does. I think she's also a very empathetic person. Having her as a friend and a teammate is really, really special," said Hagt.

Looking forward, Speir has set personal goals for this season, aiming to continue her streak by increasing the number of goals she scores and improving her assist count.

"I'm always working on improving my game all-around, skating, shooting, and handles. On my travel team we've been working on some new o-zone faceoff plays," said Speir.

For the rest of the season, Speir aims to continue her streak by increasing the number of goals she scores and improve her assist count. As for her future beyond high school, Speir seeks to keep playing the sport she loves.

"I just want to continue to play, probably at the club level ... [and also] keep introducing new players to the game," said Speir.

As she enters her final season at PHS, Speir is determined to make every game count and build lasting connections with her team. Preparing to skate off into a new chapter of her



Speir takes a shot at the goal during practice.

life she remembers and appreciates all of the moments that have led her to become the player and person that she is now.

"Ice hockey has taught me that hard work makes good things (goals and other life things)," said Speir. "It has taught me a lot about being a very supportive teammate and friend and my experiences have made me a more confident leader."

To Speir, every game, tournament has meant more to her than her team. Most important of all, Speir knows that hockey

has given her more than skills — it's given her unforgettable friendships and memories that will last a lifetime.

"In the future I hope that I can continue to play for fun and that I will be able to bring in new players to the game," said Speir. "Hockey is where I've made my best friends in the world."

Blase Mele '25: wrestling

Daniel Gu and Josh Huang, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS



photo courtesies: Blase Mele

Already committed to Princeton, Mele is hoping for one more great high school season.

The gym falls silent as Blase Mele '25 squares off with his opponent on the mat, eyes locked. He shifts his stance, a subtle bounce in his step, tension building in the audience with every move. He goes for a single leg takedown, causing his opponent to go down, and the crowd roars. He just won against a top-ten nationally-ranked wrestler, and his victory is a moment that has encapsulated the years of perseverance and sacrifice that Mele has offered to wrestling.

Introduced to the sport at a young age by his father, Mele found his calling early. He attributed his success to his parents, recalling that they encouraged him to do the right things and had a great support system throughout his whole career.

"All [my family] talks about is wrestling, so I'm in an environment where it's easy to stay focused," said Mele.

Jess Monzo, the PHS boy's wrestling team coach, was immediately impressed when he saw Mele's skillset as an incoming freshman.

"I was excited. I knew he could do really, really good things by what he brought to the program and to the team," said Monzo.

Despite his success at both the state and national level, where Mele placed sixth at the NJSIAA/Rothman Orthopaedic State Wrestling Championships, making him the third PHS student to ever place, Mele constantly strives for improvement.

"My club coaches are starting to implement a lot of techniques from foreign wrestlers and stuff that was used at the Olympics," said Mele. "I am just trying to focus on getting bigger, getting stronger, getting better."

Blase is not only able to train hard, but he works hard at school as well. Blase credits his parents and family for raising him in an environment that worked for him.

"I think being a good student makes me a better wrestler, and I think being a good wrestler makes me a better student," said Blase.

However, his success did not come without adversity. He had faced multiple injuries over his career that caused him to take time off of practice.

"I dealt with some knee problems. I had to have two knee surgeries. It was fine in the long term, but at the time, it was really frustrating," said Mele.

Despite a rough setback, Mele believes part of overcoming challenges is to have faith and recover as diligently as possible, while also taking time off as needed.

"When you sign up to go play sports, you're not signing up to automatically win. You're signing up to test yourself," said Mele. "You have to be prepared for things to go wrong, and you have to be ready to put yourself back on track."

This tenacious mentality has allowed him to rank in the top 20 nationwide while placing at the state level. Monzo saw Mele grow as both an athlete and person, especially during his Junior year after Mele won one of his biggest matches.

"He always believed in himself, that he could be that guy ... from that day forward ... he saw it was true. He believed it into fruition, and he knew he belonged at that level," said Monzo.

During the season, practices are demanding and many students quit the team before the end of the season. Mele affirms that even though it's difficult to stay motivated because of the long season, by the end, those who stuck around are good friends and work even harder together.

"Blase is always on everyone about working hard and putting forth your best," said Mele's fellow teammate Chase Hammerschlag '25. "He is both assertive and supportive ... I admire his work ethic."

After his strong junior season, Mele committed to Princeton University to pursue a degree in economics while fulfilling his dream of competing at the Division I level. His successful career is the result of long years of consistent hard work and dedication.

"[Consistency] allowed me to

accomplish a lot of my goals. I do not think I would have done that without wrestling," said Mele. "I've encountered a lot of failure in my career — both failure and success in my career. And through it all, I've been able to remain consistent and just pursue my goals."

Mele is able to find this consistency for practice because of his love for the journey. "The process of achieving a goal is just as fun and just as rewarding as achieving the goal itself," said Mele. "When you start to find enjoyment in the [process], then your performance will increase, and you'll just feel better about where you are as an athlete."

Before going to college, Mele has been able to reflect on what wrestling has given him.

"Wrestling taught me the importance of consistency. [Consistency] allowed me to accomplish my goals," said Mele. "I don't think I would have done that without wrestling."



Mele at the NJ State tournament last March.



Mele with Kwabena Afrifah '24 at the MCCC tournament.

winter concert and it's the same except it's not.

Sophie!!!, live laugh love A&E

Long revered for its heavenly harmonies and crystalline notes, chamber music has been part of the Winter Concert for years. However, on December 15, 2024, PHS Choir and Orchestra announced that their annual Winter Concert would become a rave. Gone are the usual cerulean silken robes and black slacks, along with the classical repertoire which choir and orchestra students have spent two months perfecting.

Instead, the Princeton University Chapel will be receiving a makeover with neon lights and DJ booths for the "Brat Winter Rave," inspired by up-and-coming songwriter Charli XCX.

Who was the mastermind behind this shocking revamp? It was none other than Meiya Xiong '25, who hoped to bring her sheep over to the concert but couldn't because of the Chapel's new parking restrictions. Now, with the rave on the way, everyone — and yes, that means everyone — is invited.

"There's something supercalifragilisticexpialidocious about funky EDM music and the way it brings people together," said Xiong. "We were listening to the 'Brat' album in class, everyone was having the time of their lives, and I thought, 'Why aren't we raving right now?'"

Some have reported that the choir room is now brimming with sound systems, glow sticks, Gentle Monster sunglasses, and LED lights lying on the floors.



Kylie Sek '26 plays the piano as she frat-flicks to the beat of Charli XCX's "Everything is romantic featuring caroline polachek."

"I was so excited when the orchestra asked us to join," said Aishwarya Vedula '25, the DJ for the Choir section. "Carols are so last season. I can't wait for everyone to hear our 'Apple' remix."

The announcement was initially shocking, but choir and orchestra students support the shift wholeheartedly as they prepare for performances.

"We're moving on from Renaissance music," said Juha Lee '26, who's performing a rendition of "Club Classics." "It's not 'Brat' summer anymore, so this is like a revival. We're hoping to perform some songs inspired by the album for everyone to enjoy."

Still, some students are skeptical that the rave will be a complete success considering the rapid changes.

"I'm honestly really hyped for this," said Ben Li '28. "But also, I'm worried all our families are going to have heart attacks — I mean, especially my grandma! Lime green is really not her color," Li added, grimacing at a lime green "Brat" T-shirt pulled from a cardboard box.

Despite the uncertainty, around 360,000 people and 360 pets are reportedly pulling up to this innovative event. Orchestra students are already preparing for a smoke machine, and plan to DoorDash bratwursts, crunchy ice-cold grapes, and guacamole dip. Meanwhile, the choirs have started decorating the Chapel, lining the pianos and microphones with glow-in-the-dark paint and are transferring the rest of their decorations to the venue.

"I hope everyone is ready for our rave," said Xiong. "It's time to get bratty."

PHS set to stage "Gladiator II" as a musical for the first time ever

Marina!!!, love laugh live A&E



Quinn Gallagher '27 and Ellora Taylor '27 struggle with writing the score for "Gladiator II: The Musical."

Early this week, PHS Spectacle Theater Club announced this year's spring musical: "Gladiator II: The Musical." Although this production has never been done before,

Paramount Pictures has chosen PHS to turn the newly released film "Gladiator II" into a musical, and has given PHS exclusive performance rights.

Many members of Spectacle Theater at PHS were shocked by the news, as when they heard they'd be receiving the right to stage a musical at the high school level for the first time, they expected it to be "Wicked." After the musical's success on the big screen, students were hoping to bring the musical to the next best thing: the PHS PAC.

"It's an interesting decision," said Spectacle Theater President Noa Zacks '25. "I was expecting to wear a witch's hat, black cape, and green skin, not a toga."

Other students have shared similar complaints, worried that the characters in "Gladiator II" simply aren't as strong and powerful as those in "Wicked."

"Personally, I'm devastated that I don't get to play Fiyero anymore, you know the guy that turns into the Scarecrow? But I guess war-hero-turned-gladiator General Acacius is okay-ish," said Will Ponder '25.

Interpreting these characters isn't the only thing that the actors need to do in preparation for the performance.

Since "Gladiator II" doesn't have a musical score yet, Spectacle Theater Club has decided to hold daily meetings between 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. to compose the songs, beating the Tower's infamous 3:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. productions.

"I know I've had some composition experience, but I didn't have a whole musical in mind when admin said they had a fun little project in store for Spectacle Theater," said Sebastian Bongiovi '25. "This is off the record, but I might have to copy the 'Gladiator II: The Musical' skit from Saturday Night Live for my big solo number, just to make sure it's a real showstopper."

Although some students, like Bongiovi, have expressed distress over the announcement, others are looking to this decision as an opportunity to do something new.

"Honestly I'm relieved that we chose 'Gladiator II: The Musical.' I spent so much time holding space ... in my vocal chords for the lyrics of 'Defying Gravity,' that I was starting to strain my voice. It even forced me into vocal rest," whispered Zacks. "Once I get my voice back I'm hoping to beat Sebastian for the role of Lucius. I'm ready to make this my Roman Empire."

Block Blast athletes fight for school funding

Katie and Dester!!!



graphics: Katherine Chen

Block Blast has swept over the entire school like a tidal wave: students are seen in the hall and during class time completing columns and rows, their eyes glued to an 8x8 grid filled with colored squares. The craze over the game has created a competitive scene. In mere days, a petition with over 400 signatures pushed the creation of not just a Block Blast club, but sports team made up of PHS's top scorers. Tarquin Wood '25, founder of the Block Blast Club, and the rest of the 100+ members, are now looking for funding.

"We're ranked internationally. Each person has to pay \$150 for every tournament we go to ... We get top three consistently in a bracket of 50-ish teams. I can't see why the school won't support this," said Wood.

There are debates whether or not Block Blast can even be considered a sport. Who cares? These kids are finding something that eats up time out of their day, and have found an adult willing to take an hour of their time out of their day to help build this club.

"There is strategy behind every move," said Wood. "We have to use our brains for this. It's educational."

Many teachers think otherwise. They have noticed that, even with phone pockets, people bring another phone just to play Block Blast, and there have even been more than a handful of cases where teachers have seen students sneaking in their phones during tests not to cheat, but to play Block Blast. Physics teacher Oren Levi feels particularly frustrated.



"I'm always taking [phones] away, but they keep on popping up," said Mr. Levi, after banning all electronics from his classroom. "On laptops, on iPads, even on their calculators! How is that possible?"

Many players are aware that some teachers may see the game as a waste of time, but to them, they have found a purpose to strive for, and they wish the adults in the building were more supportive of their achievements.

"One time, I was about to beat my personal record of 1.2 million, then my teacher snatched my phone out of my hand, which made me put the block in the wrong spot and lose," said Wood, "It was really ... rude!"

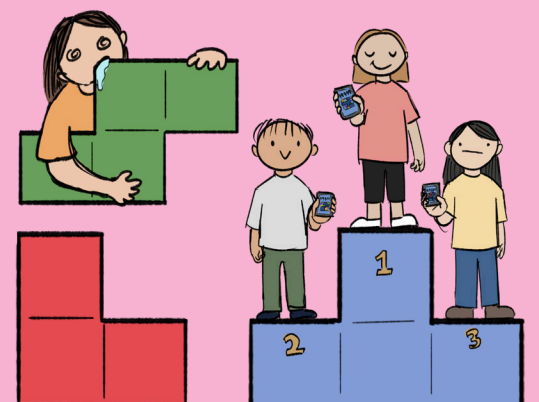
Another reason fundraising might be difficult to get is the pushback from other game enthusiasts. Tetris, Chess, and NYT Games also have a large following, and have asked for funding earlier but were rejected.

"We've been asking for it since more than a year ago! Block Blast is brainrot. At least we're spelling words out and not just making lines of rainbow squares. If they're able to get funding, I'm going to—" said Ksenia Petuh, who runs the PHS Wordle club, before breaking down into sobs.

Efforts have been made to try to start the club outside of school, but, characteristic of the people who play Block Blast, there has been very little followthrough to engage in constructive efforts once they are allowed to go home.

Ultimately, the fate of the Block Blast club is very much in limbo. School officials have had too much negative experience from reprimanding kids, and the kids themselves couldn't care less whether or not the club receives the necessary funding.

"Either way, I'll still be playing. Wait, I'm close to setting a new world record," said Wood, making a three-column combo. "What was this interview about again?"

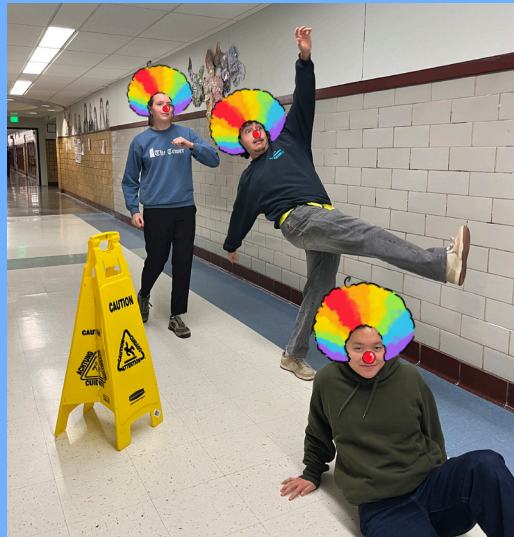


Super-Tower-latives!



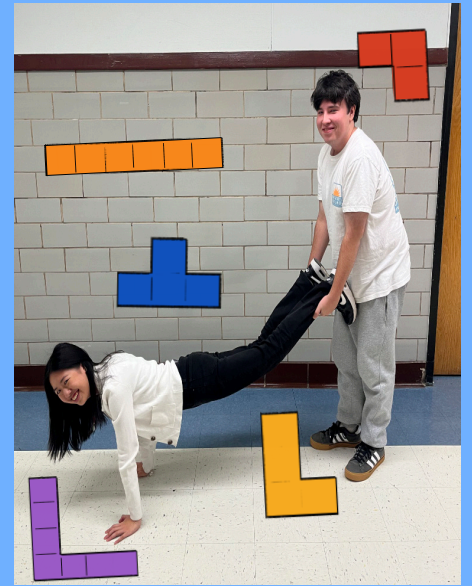
Senior Editors

Best Third Wheeling Trio



Sports

Most accident prone



Copy

Most likely to play BlockBlast at production



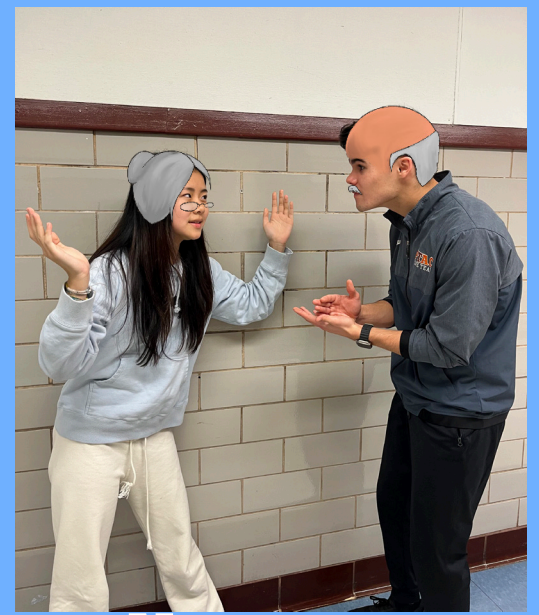
Arts & Entertainment

Most likely to win The Great British Bakeoff



Vanguard

Best duo



News & Features

Bickering old married couple



Visuals

Most likely to be in Forbes 30 Under 30



Opinions

Most likely to get into a brawl with the entire PHS student body



Multimedia

Heart of gold



Advisors

Most likely to become full-time bus therapists



Online and Business

Most likely to miss out on the fun

