The Tower

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Extracurricular activity fee of $150 passed to address financial concerns

Kyle Chen, **Sakinah Lateef**, and **Aarav Patel**, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

As of the 2026–2027 school year, PPS has implemented an extracurricular activity fee for students at PMS and PHS. The fee will require high school students to pay $150 if they participate in any clubs or sports, while middle school students will pay $100.

High school fees for clubs will be collected starting in November and extend to all activities that are funded by the school, including band, athletic teams, and teacher-supervised clubs such as Model UN, the Tower, and Yearbook, among various others. The fee has been implemented to tackle budget constraints such as transportation, healthcare, and more — with all proceeds going directly to the district general fund where money can be allocated accordingly.

Each year, the school district faces various financial challenges, to which an activity fee was the solution brought up in a budget proposal from last year.

"[The] school budget is often driven by various market factors such as healthcare, transportation cost, and … other contract-based factors such as salary. So a piece of paper may be more expensive this year. The eggs in the cafeteria [are] … a lot more expensive compared to two years ago," said PHS Principal Birge. "Bottom line is that if we don't have more revenue, we cannot keep the school running at the current level. Then we're talking about reduction of hopefully not staff members as well as cancelation of programs. So at the same time, activity fee is widely used as an approach that helps with this budget crunch."

Birge also confirms that the fee will likely continue in following years, even increasing to keep up with rising expenses. However, financial aid options are available, and the fee will be covered for students on free and reduced lunch programs.

Furthermore, although students involved in any activity that puts a cost on the school will be expected to pay the cost, they only have to pay the fee once at the beginning of the fall semester to cover their involvement for the rest of the year.

"A lot of athletes do play multiple sports. So once you've paid for one in the fall, then you don't have to think about it again," said PHS Counselor Diana Lygas.

For students who have not yet participated in any of the included activities but want to join a club, they are given a period where they can try out a club before committing to it and paying. In November, clubs will start to finalize their members, sending a list to administration — all confirmed members will then receive an invoice in MySchoolBucks for the activity fee.

"Probably the most important thing is that students should not [think] 'I am not going to try this club out if there is a fee.' That fee shouldn't … be a deterrent for students not to try something. Trying is okay, but if you're participating consistently, that's when there's a cost, and we want everybody to chip in to help shoulder that cost," said Birge.

Nevertheless, skepticism has arisen amongst students, parents, and the community about the validity of the required fee. Claire McLeod '29, both a field hockey and basketball player for the school team, voiced her concerns.

"I think [the fee] can be important for sports because you have to pay for the equipment, but specifically for clubs, I feel like it's a bit irrelevant because a lot of them are student-run and I have a feeling the money will not be going back to the students to help them with the clubs," said McLeod.

Furthermore, many sports teams have their own booster clubs that require a payment, so some athletes may end up paying more than $150.

"My mom got a little annoyed because she had to pay … a booster club thing ... for field hockey," said McLeod.

The leadership team at PHS remains committed to preserving the school's quality this year while still working on balancing budget concerns.

"I think anything that we can do to support the level of services provided for all of our students, we all consider that important," said Birge. "Our job at the building level … is to make sure that we come up with an approach that makes sense for our students and families, so that we are not in jail with a big bill unexpectedly."



photo: **Katherine Chen**

Left to Right: Emma Dweck '27 and Rachel Kim '29 run the Model UN stand, one of many clubs that will now require a fee to join.

CLUBS THAT REQUIRE ACTIVITY FEE TO JOIN

Bio Olympiad	Generation One	Math Team	Robotics Club	Numina Gallery Club	Speech & Debate
Chem Olympiad	Ivy Magazine	Mock Trial	Science Bowl	Odyssey of the Mind	Student Council
Euro Challenge	LAMP	Model UN	Science Olympiad	Prince Yearbook	Tech Crew
French Club	Latin Club	MSAN	Spectacle Theatre	PULSE	The Tower

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PHS expands social studies curriculum

Uma Kleven and **Anya Kshirsagar**, STAFF WRITERS

Over the summer, Princeton High School's Social Studies Department introduced changes to its curriculum and program of studies. These changes were spearheaded by the district's new social studies advisor, Dr. Rick Miller, a long-time AP US History teacher. These new changes introduced AP African American Studies and lifted restrictions on juniors taking more than one AP social studies course.

APUSH and AP Government and Politics teacher Timothy Campbell believes the previous course restrictions on juniors were implemented to reduce students' school workload.

"They were trying to cut down the stress juniors were under, especially considering those who were taking AP World History at the same time," said Campbell.

Campbell and other members of the history department had been advocating for this change for several years, noting that other departments allowed students to double up on courses. Following the expansion of AP Government and Politics to juniors, the number of class sections rose from three to five.

Campbell also spoke about the importance of making AP Government and Politics a more accessible class for students, given the country's political state.

"I don't think there's ever been a more important time in our nation to take a course like Gov Pol. When I was in high school, for example, we had to take it to graduate. It was a graduation requirement at the state level," said Campbell.

While the humanities program at PHS remains more sequential, the science program allows for more course choice. Jacqueline Katz, head of the Science Department at PHS, attributes this to the different departmental structures.

"I see a lot of synergy there in how departments think about learning progression and how best to move students through the various levels. [But] that looks a little different depending on the content we're dealing with. A transition between US I and US II is going to be different than a transition from Bio to Chem where you're traversing disciplines rather than extending timelines," said Katz.

PHS Principal Cecilia Birge believes that, when restructuring the curriculum, it's crucial to keep changes that don't involve AP course offerings or restrictions in mind.

"It's really important that we're not singling out AP courses, because we offer plenty of accelerated courses. And when we talk about program designs, we're a public school, we're here to serve all students," said Birge. "If we're only talking about AP courses, not only are we marginalizing everybody else, [but] we're only focused on accel students. We end up marketing APs for the label of it."

These departmental differences extend to summer pathways at PHS. PHS offers summer courses for both math and science, but not for English or social studies. According to Birge, these summer programs initially developed during Covid-19 when school shifted online, and a reliable replacement for previously private summer programs was necessary. Today, the income generated from the summer program funds bridge programs for low performing students that aim to close the achievement gap.

Birge emphasized the importance of updating the school's social studies curriculum, as the liberal arts remain extremely important to PHS. She pointed out the tendency students have to overlook opportunities in the humanities, and why it's important for the school to take action to prevent this.

"We are very much for whole child development, [and for] the liberal arts kind of education," said Birge. "It's great that we have opportunities in math and science or languages and arts, but we want to make sure that's extended to all kinds of talents that we have in the building."

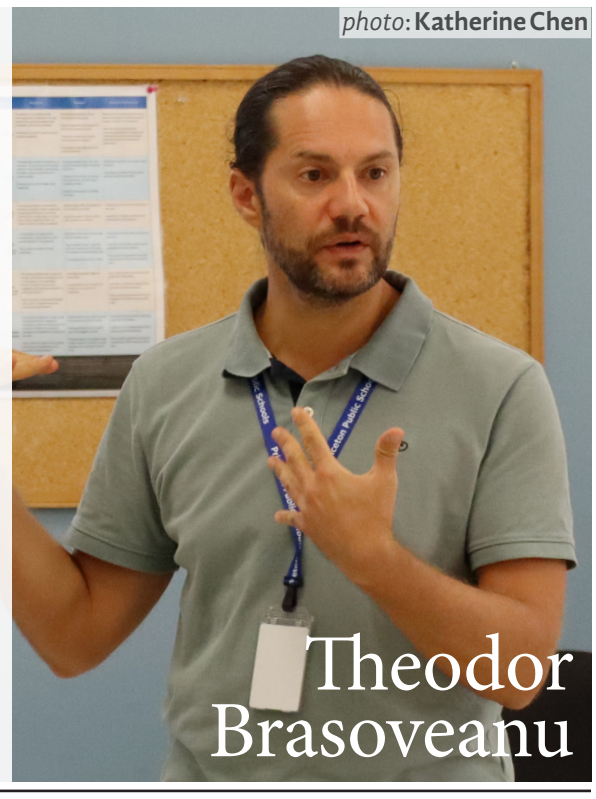

photo: **Emily Kim**

Morgan Pease '29 and Anya Kshirsagar '29 engage in discussion about current events in Campbell's AP US History class, taking advantage of PHS' humanities catalog.

New Teacher Profiles

Aidan Sutphin and **Nikolai Morozov**, STAFF WRITERS
Emily Leng and **Sanya Bhatt**, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Theodor Brasoveanu


photo: **Katherine Chen**

Theodor Brasoveanu, PHS's new computer science (CS) and Python teacher, has been teaching CS for 10 years and has a love for coding and problem solving. He hopes to share his passion and expand on the same principles he learned about CS to his students.

"Some of my goals are to get everybody to see the applications of computer science. … It doesn't mean you're going to become a professional coder, but it helps you create connections between different fields, and helps you solve problems," said Brasoveanu.

Growing up in Romania, Brasoveanu believes that his high school teachers had a large impact on him and in fostering his career in computer science. Their influence was felt in actions as simple as being patient in his ability to learn from lessons, to encouraging him to join competitions and meetings outside of school. Brasoveanu moved to the United States for college, deciding to pursue computer science professionally in graduate school. He later became a Princeton resident and taught CS at Princeton Day School.

In his first few weeks at PHS, he has taken note of several details in the school, emphasizing the willingness of students to help one another as a highlight of these observed behaviors.

"So far, it seems like a great community. … Students seem to be willing to help each other," said Brasoveanu.

Brasoveanu also mentions that the background that an individual has in other subjects may affect their accomplishment in computer science class.

"In computer science, it helps to have a quantitative background, so maybe some students who don't have a really strong math background might find it a little bit harder," said Brasoveanu. "On the other hand, other skills help too, so if you're more creatively inclined, [or] if you like to tinker with things and try different solutions, you can succeed."

Additionally, Brasoveanu emphasizes the value of computer science in today's world and how everyone should make an effort to attain a baseline knowledge of the technology we use daily.

"CS is important because it teaches us how to be technologically literate and how to engage with technology," said Brasoveanu.

Approaching a problem in multiple ways is a key idea in Brasoveanu's teaching philosophy. All attempts, regardless of the level of success, should not be disregarded or forgotten, but rather noted and used in future reference so they can be learned from, according to said philosophy.

"One way would be to keep a journal of all of our problem-solving attempts. … Get into [the] habit of taking good notes so you build your own resource library or just materials," said Brasoveanu.

As for individual interest, animations are among Brasoveanu's favorite creations to make in Python, though this is not the only application of the software.

"We use Python for graphics, for music making, for game design," said Brasoveanu.

Alexa Epstein


photo: **Katherine Chen**

Environmental science and biology teacher Alexa Epstein brings a lifelong interest in marine biology to the PHS classroom, drawing from her own experiences in studying coral reefs. Her hope is to help students develop the same enthusiasm for science that her own high school teachers once inspired in her.

"When I was little, I grew up going to the beach in North Carolina, and there were always sea turtle nests on the beach. And when I was little, I saw them hatching one year, and I was … so obsessed with sea turtles," said Epstein. "[In college], I actually got to live in Bermuda and study coral reefs for three months. … Getting to scuba dive four times a week was … the best experience ever."

Growing up in Hunterdon County, NJ, but then leaving the state to attend college in Rhode Island and getting her teaching degree in North Carolina, Epstein was eager to return home. Coming back to New Jersey, she was drawn to Princeton by the community and school's reputation.

"I saw that the job opened up for Princeton, and I was super excited. I love this town … and all the students are super excited to learn and excited to be here," said Epstein. "I got excited about science from my high school science teachers, and I want to do the same thing for my students.

In the classroom, Epstein estimates that students can expect about a 50/50 split between lab work and outside work around the school property. While that has led to what she believes as a common misconception that environmental science involves less math than other sciences, she emphasizes that the course still challenges students. Instead of relying on heavy math, the course requires a different kind of rigor involving scientific concepts while learning through hands-on experiences.

"I love having students get into the dirt. …We're doing a lot of stuff in the garden this year. We're gonna do some walking field trips, do some water testing … where we will be outside and actually being environmental scientists," said Epstein. "There's also a possibility …we're gonna try to do a field trip to the beach and do a bea ch cleanup and help out the beach community in that sense."

Beyond teaching students about ecosystems and the environment, Epstein also sees environmental science as a chance to develop skills students can use outside school hours.

"We do tons of work with organization, tons of group work, tons of using your critical thinking skills," said Epstein. "Basically, even if environmental science isn't necessarily a topic that you're super interested in, you will learn a ton outside of environmental science in the class."

Outside of the classroom, Epstein enjoys cooking, scuba diving, spending time outdoors, and spending time with friends and family.

Michael Meyer


photo: **Katherine Chen**

Michael Meyer, a new social studies teacher at PHS, was once a PHS student himself — class of '18. Since he graduated, he's taught at various different schools, including West Windsor. This year, in his third year teaching social studies, he has returned to Princeton. Meyer is teaching both the United States History I and Racial Literacy courses at PHS.

"It's like you're sleepwalking and you know all these things. It's been nice to [get] reacquaint[ed] with a bunch of my teachers … When I was here, we brought [Mrs. Birge] on board and she was amazing. … And Rick Miller, who is a supervisor, … was my APUSH history teacher. It's just an amazing thing to work with local, homegrown [teachers]," he said of coming back to PHS.

Many of the teachers who taught him social studies now work alongside him in the history department. In addition to Miller, Meyer also had David Roberts in junior year for AP World History. However, many of the other teachers who he once had have already left.

"[There has been] a lot of retirement," he said. "My freshman year, I had John Baxter. … He retired in 2017. I've only [met with] him a couple times since graduation."

According to him, what hasn't changed is PHS's environment. He takes advantage of his unique vantage point as a past student to try and cater to PHS's students' needs.

"I always kind of think about … the conditions of the school … of this particular culture which I know well … and how I can channel that toward an interesting and fruitful classroom [experience]," Meyer said. "My experience as a student is central to how I approach teaching. … I definitely try to get in the head … of a student. [I look for] what's interesting for them [and] what's challenging for them."

His interest in social studies stems not just from an interest in the past, but also relates to the present and our future. His point of view is that the past acts as a guide for what's to come. It generates context for each succeeding generation.

"We have a tendency, and every generation has this tendency, to think that everything happening right now is so unbelievably unprecedented and untethered to anything that's happened before … We can learn a lot about ourselves in the present and … where we should move in the future from the events [and] decisions of the past," he said.

When he isn't teaching, he likes to play board games, take walks, and sing. As a Princeton native, he also enjoys taking late night walks; one of his favorite places to walk being on Princeton University campus.

"I find that at night, a lot of campus is quite beautiful and quite dramatic — especially if it's raining," he said. "Specifically, I like the fountain at night … there's something very beautiful about the evening, the emptiness, and [the sound of] the running water."

Rachel Santolini


photo: **Emily Kim**

Art teacher Rachel Santolini brings a personal connection to her role and to Princeton. The Studio Art I and II 2D teacher grew up in Hillsborough, and her experience growing up nearby has increased her familiarity with Princeton and transition to becoming a teacher here.

"I love Nassau Street. I've always spent a lot of time in Princeton. So when I saw that there was an opening to work here, I was really excited about it," said Santolini.

As a recent graduate from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, her previous experience had primarily come from teaching at the Pratt Saturday Art School, which primarily caters toward children between first grade and 12th year of high school. This is her first year teaching only high schoolers, an experience that can be very hard to get used to.

"I was really scared of [teaching] high school. But Princeton High schoolers … are all so nice, and [they] are also personable. And so, it's made it really like a nice transition to doing it here," said Santolini.

Her teaching style has also been influenced by her experience as a recent graduate. From this experience, she brings a different perspective on teaching, acknowledging that it is difficult to be a student, but that being a teacher shares similar uncertainty on some level. Both as a teacher and as a student, you never know what can happen.

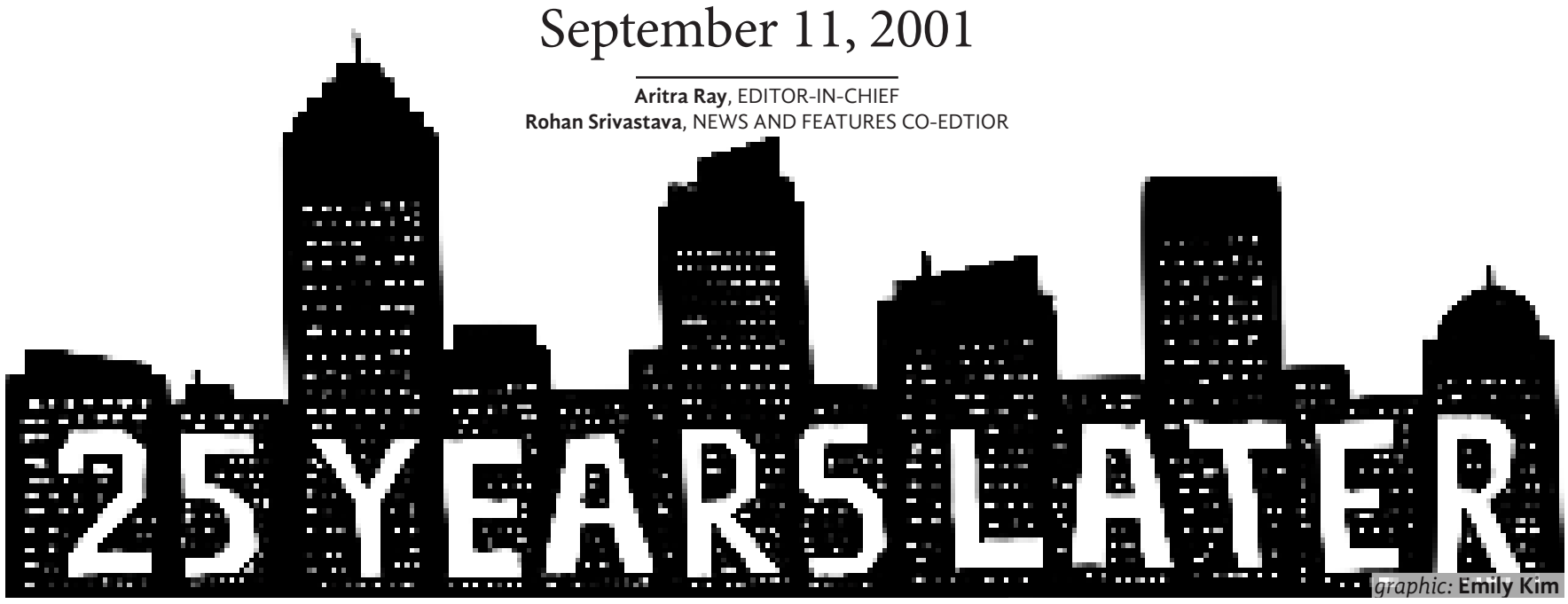
"I think that both are really challenging in different ways. I think it's really hard to be a student and to be actively learning as you go, … but I think that being a teacher is also hard because in a different way, you don't know what the next thing is, and you have all these students in front of you, that could just say anything at any time," said Santolini. "As a teacher, not knowing is being unaware of what needs your kids have, or what they need to learn. Or maybe you try to teach something and they didn't quite get it. I think teaching is a practice and, [like any subject], is thinking on your feet and changing things to the needs of your students."

She discovered her passion in middle school after having a particularly good art teacher. Her main focus within art is drawing, particularly portrait work of family for practice. Santolini explains that she couldn't see herself pursuing anything else in life.

"I don't know. I loved art. I didn't want to do anything else," said Santolini.

PHS REMEMBERS: September 11, 2001

Aritra Ray, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Rohan Srivastava, NEWS AND FEATURES CO-EDTIOR



graphic: **Emily Kim**

Shock. Confusion. An overwhelming feeling of not knowing what came next. These were the emotions that came up again and again in our conversations regarding the moments after hearing about the attacks of September 11, 2001. On the 25th anniversary of the events of that day, PHS educators — some which were students at PHS on that day — reflected on a day that forever lives in their memory.

…

For many, that Tuesday morning began as a crisp fall day. In room 173, English teacher Susan Murphy began her second day teaching journalism with a lesson on hard news. She had asked her students to log onto CNN to analyze the days' headlines. Suddenly, the news site crashed, with her students' screens freezing on a picture of a plane hitting the North Tower.

"They thought it was like part of teaching about hard news [and] that I have done this simulation," said Murphy. "And I'm like, this isn't a simulation."

Down the hall in Room 152, the former Orchestra room, Latin teacher Dr. Lynda Danvers '03, still remembers the moment she first heard the news.

"Someone popped their head in, pulled Mr. Loughran out of the room, and then he had to come back in and tell us individually," said Danvers. "It wasn't like an announcement over the loudspeaker."

Like many throughout the school, Orchestra teacher Robert Loughran initially assumed the attack was the accident.

"I'm thinking of this small single prop plane. [An] amateur pilot didn't know what was going on [and] got the World Trade Center incorrectly in their flight path," said Loughran. The attack on the second Tower eventually confirmed many's worst fears.

With cellular networks overloaded, getting in touch with family members and loved ones proved nearly impossible. Danvers remembered running throughout the school with her best friend in search of a working phone so her friend could reach her father, who worked in Lower Manhattan.

Given Princeton's proximity to New York City, countless students had family members who worked in the city, meaning the attacks struck painfully close to home. Lauren Freedman '04, PHS Assistant Principal, remembers sitting in her Spanish class when a student couldn't reach her father, who worked in one of the Towers.

"She was sprinting through the hallways, freaking out, obviously very emotional," recalled Freedman through tears. "And unfortunately later, we found out that her father had passed away…A lot of people in this community have family members who work in the city and who they lost during 9/11."

Following confirmation of the attacks, counselors were tasked with compiling lists of students with family members in the city and supporting panicked students. Dr. Andrea Dinan, a counselor and field hockey coach at the time, spent the day in her office with one of her players, attempting to call her father while the line stayed busy all day.

"Finding out at night that he had gone downstairs to the ATM machine to get money, so he got out very safely … it was really a happy ending," said Dinan. "But it really weighed on us."

With the scope of the tragedy becoming increasingly clear through the morning, the school was placed in a lockdown – a safety protocol that was largely unheard of at the time. Silence fell over many parts of the building, a single TV in the cafeteria became a focal point for many students.

"There were probably 300 students, everyone just looking up, and it was dead silence. You could hear a pin drop. … It was this perfect crispy day and then the juxtaposition of that out of nowhere … It defied the imagination," said Murphy. "It felt so quiet without any planes going over, which feels like a small detail, but it was something that was also really kind of uncanny."

In the days that followed, the Princeton community came together in support of each other and the recovery effort. Dr. Rick Miller, Social Studies supervisor and volunteer firefighter, drove an ambulance with his crew up to a staging area in Jersey City three days after the attacks.

"I still remember as we drove up, you could see the smoke still billowing from ground zero … seeing the Statue of Liberty and then behind it, the smoke rising up," said Miller. "We ended up staging there for 12 hours … I was there the day that President Bush's helicopter came in, and it was a very eerie sight because there was not a plane in the sky the entire day, obviously, except for two fighter jets."

The aftermath of the attacks left a permanent impact on both Princeton and the country, with the school finding ways to honor the many that were lost in the local community. The Social Studies Department established the Reissman Award, a scholarship named in honor of a PHS parent who loved history and lost his life on 9/11. The community was also forever tied to the memory of Todd Beamer, the Cranbury father who led passengers on Flight 93 with his rallying cry, "Let's roll". His three children later attended PHS.

"I had them, all three, in Homeroom, too. That was another connection, another family. And there were so many family connections that came out in the days afterwards. There were many students who lost parents, it was unthinkable," said Murphy.

Yet teachers also recounted darker societal shifts: a surge of fear, the passage of the Patriot Act, and targeted rhetoric in the days that followed. But the feeling of a country and community united is one they carry forward strongest in their collective memory.

"The climate changed. We were all taking care of one another. It was a beautiful thing. People stepped up in the community because it was a hard time here," said Freedman.

For the staff who witnessed the day first hand, the 25th anniversary is a reminder of the necessity of keeping this history alive. Danvers compared the effort to record 9/11 memories to the Shoah Foundation's work preserving testimonies from Holocaust survivors before they are permanently lost to time.

"As we move further and further away from it, there's now all of these people, a quarter of a century worth of people behind me that never got to experience this," said Danvers. "The collective memory sort of goes away."

Miller echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the broader importance of reflecting on a time of national reckoning as time moves forward.

"I'm glad you're doing this, because I think events like this and, 25 years later, it's important that we keep the memory of what happened alive. We learn the lessons of 9/11. We understand better about events such as this to honor those who have suffered from it, and also as a nation … [to] move forward after a tragedy such as this," said Miller.

Technology Office institutes changes to comply with state law

Aidan Sutphin, STAFF WRITER
Kanishk Mogha, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



photo: **Katherine Chen**

John Bathke reprimands Marina Zappa do Valle Tuler '27 for phone usage.

As students return for the 2026–2027 school year, students may have noticed the effects of PHS's implementation of new technology rules and changes, including a transition to Gmail, new site blockages, and the return of Visigo Agent and GoGuardian.

Earlier this year, former NJ Governor Phil Murphy signed into law S3695, which called for the creation of a bell-to-bell phone ban in New Jersey public schools, leaving it up to each district on how exactly they would enforce it.

In addition to banning phones from 8:20 a.m. to 3:21 p.m., one of the options that PHS has chosen is Doorman, an app that restricts device usage by placing a lockdown on apps, such as social media or text messaging, during school hours.

"It was the high school making the decision to use Doorman. From a tech perspective, we thought it was a promising solution. [However, we] had to restrict the network from student personal devices in general," said PPS Chief Technology Officer Todd MacDonald.

Doorman has encountered some pushback from students, however. Many students have not downloaded the app, stemming from a myriad of reasons.

"I don't feel like I need to use my phone during a school day. But I also have some privacy concerns. I don't like the idea of an app having full control over my phone," said John Patrick-Aguilar '29.

The transition toward these new applications is also an attempt to streamline management of data in the school and will save money for the school in the long-term.

"We're trying to unify the system around a single platform. And Google is a much more modern platform," said MacDonald. "The management tools are a lot simpler."

Due to the state cell phone ban, sites which are considered social media, such as Twitter, Reddit, or Pinterest, have been blocked in order to accommodate the law. In addition, to follow district protocol that AI may not be used on an assignment unless teacher-directed, AI platforms which were previously available have now also been blocked for students.

To facilitate this change, GoGuardian is replacing Mosyle Manager. GoGuardian works by blocking site categories and offering teachers the ability to monitor student screens live. Parents are also able to access student browsing activity. Some students report more websites being blocked in comparison to last year.

"The only real effect of GoGuardian was not being able to find a PDF of a book I wanted to read, or a SparkNotes of it, but that's it. [There isn't really a] difference between Mosyle Manager and GoGuardian in my opinion," said Joshua Dong '29.

Additionally, the school district has applied changes focused on the shift away from technology. As outlined in a letter from PPS Superintendent Michael LaSusa, policies such as a quarterly "unplugged" day and a "lids closed" laptop policy in school have also been implemented this year.

At this time, it is unknown whether or not GoGuardian and Doorman will continue in their current form, but these changes will likely remain a part of PHS life.

BY THE NUMBERS

Spending on apps & services for the 2026-27 school year:

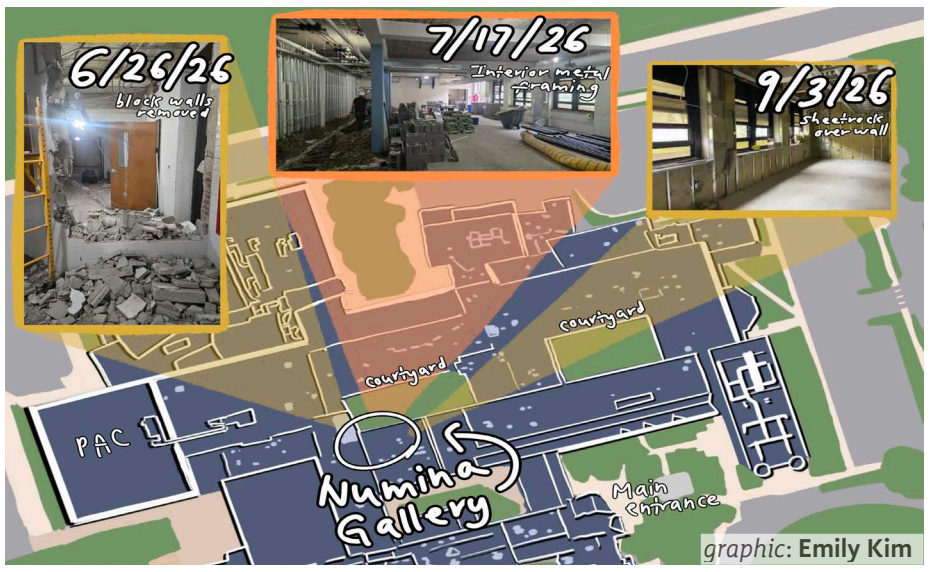
GoGuardian
$44,974.00

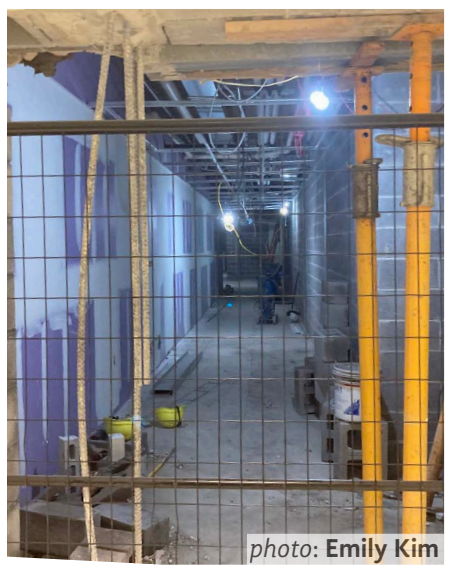
Visigo Agent
$13,300

SchoolAI
$11,100.00

Doorman
$5-6
PER STUDENT

PHS unveils new summer construction





The school's construction has taken place across the property, with much of it still in progress.

Jacob Rogart, HEAD COPY CO-EDITOR
Eloise Weaver, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In the 99-year-old PHS school building, construction and maintenance work is constantly needed and ongoing. At the PAC, materials and a temporary floor protector mark the location of projects that began shortly after graduation, which involves converting the old technology office and the Numina Gallery into new learning spaces. While the construction is visible in parts of the building, students note that it has not affected their school experience.

"I haven't found the construction a distraction at all," said Curtis Tam '28. "I didn't even realize all of this construction was going on."

In addition to the ongoing reconstruction, the other main construction project at PHS this summer was preparatory work for the replacement of the building's boiler and HVAC systems. The district's construction plans are connected to the funding provided by an $89.1 million referendum approved by voters in January 2025.

The boiler and HVAC project is expected to take several years. The work completed at PHS over the summer was mainly preparation and smaller related jobs, as the district's largest construction focus has been at Princeton Middle School. The project was paused during the school year and is expected to resume during the summer of 2027.

"The whole thing is planned," said PHS Principal Cecilia Birge. "We don't want to have construction going on during instructional hours."

As of now, it is too soon to give a finalization date for the completion of the HVAC. On the other hand, the boiler work is expected to continue through the end of 2027.

"At this point, it's too early to tell when the expected completion date will be. It certainly will be in 2027," said Birge.

The former technology office is being reconstructed into three classrooms, but the school has not yet determined which subjects the rooms will be used for. The conversion is connected to the school's need for classrooms, especially in a building where many rooms were built nearly a century ago and for a student population much smaller than the one that PHS hosts today.

"By reconstructing that tech space, that will give us that additional relief that we truly need," said Birge.

Similarly, although the Numina Gallery is also being remodeled, the school still aims retain its original purpose for students.

"It's being converted into two flexible learning classrooms, and we're hoping that it's flexible enough that it will also continue to function as a gallery," said Birge.

The technology office and gallery projects began in late June 2026. The expected completion date is the end of December 2026, although approval processes, including certificates of occupancy, could affect when the spaces can be used. Since classrooms have already been assigned for the new school year, the spaces may first be used for standardized testing, spring musical activities, or other events.

"Different approval [processes] may delay it. … We will not be able to put a classroom because each classroom has been assigned a space already," said Birge.

The construction projects are funded through the 2025 district referendum. The referendum was divided into three separate ballot questions. Voters decided whether to approve each question, and the questions were tiered, meaning projects included in later questions could move forward only if earlier questions were also approved. Funding approved through the referendum must be used for the projects voters approved.

"Once the bond referendum [gets approved], because the voters specifically vote for the stated use, that money cannot be used for other things," said Birge.

The age of the building and previous growth in enrollment have contributed to facility needs at PHS. In 2020, enrollment was close to 1620 students and the building's room utilization rate was in the 90 percent range. Enrollment is now about 1530 students, and changes to the bell schedule have helped with space use. However, the creation of extra classrooms is still both necessary and important.

Now that funding has come through from the 2025 referendum, the school has been able to start construction based on its own needs. Whereas a previous issue surrounding the ability to initiate construction had been a lack of financial support, PHS now has the funds to remodel the building.

"Before 2018, for a couple of decades, the district did not pay a lot of attention to our facility needs … [also as] the student population exploded. … [There was] heavy usage put on the building and the lack of oversight of facilities created this urgent need, this bottleneck of facility needs, and that's why [the] bond referendum process took so long," said Birge.

Other future projects at the PHS include reorganizing the math office, replacing furniture in the Learning Commons, and giving the courtyard more attention, among other plans.

For students, construction has remained in the background during their school day. The technology office and gallery renovations will continue through December and HVAC work is scheduled to return next summer.

"It's nice that the school is renovating all these different parts," said Tam. "It's great that it has not really affected my schoolwork."

Youth group leads white supremacy protest in Princeton

Tyler Fiorentino and **Daniel Gu**, STAFF WRITERS

At 12:48 p.m. on Saturday, August 29, a gathering consisting of roughly a dozen white supremacist protestors formed in downtown Princeton. The individuals were wearing clothing that concealed their faces while carrying flags associated with either their own organizations or American history. The group was photographed with a large banner that read "Keep New Jersey White." According to Princeton Police Captain Thomas Lagomarsino, the protest disbanded by about 1:30 p.m., and police confirmed that the protestors did not possess the necessary permits to hold such a gathering.

The Princeton Police Department has classified the event as a bias incident and is currently investigating the presence of criminal activity that could upgrade this incident to a bias crime. No timetable has been provided as to when this investigation could reach its conclusion. There were no reported confrontations concerning these protestors, and they disbanded naturally shortly after entering Princeton University property.

"A bias incident is any suspected or confirmed offense or unlawful act that occurs to an individual, group of individuals, private property, or public property on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, gender expression, or ethnicity," said Patrolman Luis Martinez-Balbuena of the Princeton Police Department Communications Bureau. "We have to do our job to determine whether or not there was a crime committed in the actual incident."

The Garden State Active Club, a youth-centered white supremacist organization that was founded earlier this year out of South Jersey, announced its participation in the protest on X (formerly Twitter). The organization has posted numerous videos from their participation in similar incidents, while also openly conveying their support for white nationalists and Nazi beliefs. In a social media post, they provided a video from the event complete with a manifesto-style monologue, and credited Atlantic Youth as the organizers. Northeast Action as well as Pennsylvania Action Club were credited as co-participants; however, these two organizations share a near-identical social media footprint and origins as the Garden State Active Club, meaning these organizations are either closely related or the same. An X post also described what the club claims occurred:

"Members marched to the Revolutionary War Princeton Battle Monument where a speech was given. Afterward, the column marched through downtown Princeton before all participants departed the area safely and without incident. … Never before has a nationalist demonstration with such regimentation and numbers been led by teenagers in American history. This was a youth-led effort."

Princeton Mayor Mark Freda asserted that Princeton does not seek to deny anyone their First Amendment rights and that, had the demonstrators applied through the proper channels for a permit, the Princeton government would be unable to deny their right to assemble solely based on the content of their message. However, Freda explains that the message of the protestors stands against Princeton's core values and is contradictory to its diverse community.

"I think the Princeton community, for a very long time, has shown itself to be very open-minded, very respectful of people's rights, very respectful of people's different views and backgrounds," said Freda. "There's people from all over the world with all kinds of backgrounds at all kinds of levels, educationally, socially, economically, whatever, it's quite a mix. … Their message about keeping New Jersey all white just doesn't fly in Princeton."

As the protestors had entered Princeton University's campus, the Tower attempted to reach out to University staff for comment. While the school declined requests for interviews at this time, Princeton University Media Relations Specialist Ahamad Rizvi shared a similar sentiment to that of the mayor in a statement released to the Tower.

"The University is aware of this incident and deplores expressions of hate directed against any person or group. Such expressions are contrary to our community's values," wrote Rizvi.

Princeton has not seen a white supremacy-related protest in recent years,



Sebastian Helbig '27 and Kai Martin '28 discuss the implications of the ideas of white supremacy entering New Jersey.

leading to surprised reactions from some PHS students. Sebastian Helbig '27 said that while everyone is entitled to their First Amendment rights, some messages toe the line between personal belief and outright discrimination towards others.

"There's been so much progress toward peace and no[n]-aggression toward anyone of other races. … Naturally, it's gonna happen, but I don't think you should ever voice those [discriminatory opinions] out in public because [you should] keep it to yourself," said Helbig. "This specific message doesn't belong in any environment, let alone Princeton."

The mayor encouraged both students and members of the Princeton community to reach out to local government representatives while reminding people that the town strives to be a welcoming place for all members.

"We spend a lot of time trying to tell people you can trust us, and whether it's dealing with the police, human services, or health department, or recreation department, … we're not so much worried at all [about] what somebody's status is in this country; if somebody needs help, they can come to us, and if there's a way we can help, we're going to help," Freda said.

If a similar situation were to occur in the future, the Princeton Police Department advises treating the situation cautiously and calling 9-1-1 if there is a perceived immediate danger or suspected unlawful activity. An incident or complaint can also be reported through the New Jersey Division of Civil Rights Portal online.

"If [you] feel that there is something suspicious, alarming, threatening in any capacity, report it. … I would not confront individuals, especially not if you're alone," said Martinez-Balbuena. "There's a telephone number and there's a portal that individuals out in the public could report it [to]."

The mayor encouraged high school students in the Princeton community to take action if they feel passionate about a particular social topic or issue by volunteering with local organizations that he feels teaches valuable real-world information or skills in the process.

"I think the biggest thing for the Princeton high school student community [is to] figure out ways to get involved [and] pay attention to what's going on in town," Freda said. "I think the message is: go work for some nonprofit in town, just go volunteer. … It's just amazing when it opens up to you, and the stuff you're going to learn, real knowledge that you're going to need in life, as opposed to just stuff out of a book."

OPINIONS

Art is not an optimization problem

Anya Kshirsagar, STAFF WRITER

Look at any little kid: they fingerpaint, color with crayons, even scribble on the walls. They are not looking over their shoulder to see if someone thinks what they're doing is pretty. But as we grow up, this creativity gets squeezed out of us. We learn to sort ourselves into categories: the "talented" few and the rest of us. Somewhere along the way, the child who colored outside the lines was not asked if they enjoyed coloring; they were simply reprimanded for not being neat.

There is developmental data to back this up. While IQs and SAT scores are rising, creative fluency — the ability to produce ideas — is tanking. A landmark William and Mary study found that from kindergarten up until third grade, fluency increases, but around fourth and fifth grade, it plateaus. Researchers Elizabeth Rosenblatt and Ellen Winner attribute this to children "self-filtering," or kids checking ideas in their heads for how they will be received before sharing them. When the test was administered 18 years later in 2008, average scores significantly decreased, particularly for the youngest demographic.

> "We learn to sort ourselves into categories: the "talented" few and the rest of us.

The answer to this drop lies in a culture that constantly pressures us to seek external definitions of success, trapping us in an endless cycle of chasing likes, grades, money, status, and compliments. This harmful mindset gets carried over into our creative lives, when work is altered to give others what they like to see, not what we like to make. This is deeply embedded into society. According to a study by psychologist Jennifer Crocker at the University of Michigan, over 80 percent of college students base their self-worth on their grades and other external markers. When we create solely for an audience, the rawness of our inner selves is watered down.

This pressure is only ramped up by artificial intelligence. Right now, in just seconds, an AI can replicate a famous art style or write a complex poem. Artists find themselves trapped in an uphill battle, fighting to prove that their work is better than a machine. But trying to beat AI at its own game — speed and volume — is a losing fight.

Instead, we need to lean into what the AI can never replicate: intuition, vulnerability, and soul. Art is not another optimization problem we need to solve. It's an expression of who you are. Ironically, the more vulnerable and true to yourself you are, the more you connect with others through your work. That's exactly what allows us to form deep connections with paintings and music — we recognize something real, something relatable, something jarring in them that draws us in. Ultimately, it is only when we stop creating for an audience that we can truly connect with one, as we will have finally uncovered ourselves.



photo: **Katherine Chen**

Elsie Davis '27 unleashes her creativity through painting in Studio Art IV.

The phone ban isn't bad, actually

Asha Nag, STAFF WRITER

On August 31, we each lost our personal devices to a long battle: the New Jersey phone ban.

This bill is not a ban on phones in schools itself, but rather an agreement that boards set guidelines for phone use in their schools, and a list of requirements that these guidelines must meet. These requirements include prohibiting the use of an "internet-abled device" — smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, etc. that can access the internet — for "non-academic" purposes during the school day. For the students caught up in this bill, especially older kids who have gotten used to navigating the day with the help of a smartphone, it's disruptive and frustrating. As one of those students myself, I get it. I get it every time I want to use my AirPods in class, and every time I have a silly question I want to Google. But I also know that a lot of the problems — even the fears sometimes — that come with this phone ban can be resolved with just a little bit of perspective.

I've gathered numerous complaints from students around the school: What if I get sick and need to go home? What if I forget my schedule? What if I forget my computer, or my lunch? How am I supposed to find my friends during break? What if something terrible happens and I need to call 911? We use our phones during the school day for a whole myriad of reasons totally unrelated to accessing the internet or social media. We use our phones to set reminders for ourselves, to check the time, and keep us tethered to a world outside of school.



photo: **Katherine Chen**

Each classroom now features a card for students to scan their phone into the optional Doorman app.

All of these worries are valid, and of course it's okay to feel off-kilter. Phones are such a big part of our society nowadays. It's natural that a lot of young people have trouble imagining how their days might go in the absence of the instant connection and information that technology allows. But it's important to remember that issues involving human relations and privacy cannot be black and white. And sometimes, when we are faced with wide-reaching, unprecedented problems, the only thing to do until effective solutions can be found is eliminate the problem at its source. I don't think this bill is going to be a permanent solution to the problem, but while it is in place, there are tons of common sense solutions to the daily annoyances that come along with it.

For instance, you can establish a singular spot to meet up with your friends for lunch every day. Communication problem solved.

Learning to navigate school life without the help of our phones is not going to be seamless. But for ages, people found ways to live and thrive in schools without the use of technology at all. It may seem a little silly or demeaning, but there's no reason we shouldn't be able to do the same today.

PHS SPEAKS OUT

HOW HAS THE PHONE BAN AFFECTED YOU? DO YOU FEEL BETTER OR WORSE?

Stephanie Liao, OPINIONS CO-EDITOR



"IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, IT WAS BASICALLY THE SAME. I BELIEVE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL ... IT STILL HASN'T AFFECTED MY LEARNING. SO I STILL BELIEVE THE PHONE BAN HASN'T AFFECTED ME TOO MUCH PERSONALLY."

-FRANKLIN HUANG '30



"HONESTLY, IT HASN'T AFFECTED ME AT ALL EXCEPT TRYING TO FIND OUT WHERE MY FRIENDS ARE DURING LUNCH. ... I THINK IT'S HAD A POSITIVE IMPACT BECAUSE NOW MY OTHER FRIENDS, PEOPLE WHO USUALLY USE THEIR PHONE, I TALK TO THEM MORE."

-IZZY GUSTUS '29



"NOT REALLY. I MEAN, I NEVER USE MY PHONE AT SCHOOL REALLY, BUT SOMETIMES WHEN I NEED TO CHECK MY SCHEDULE, I CAN'T LOOK AT IT. SO THAT'S THE ONLY DIFFERENCE."

-ISAAC HERMAN '28



"I DON'T REALLY LIKE THE PHONE BAN BECAUSE I LIKE TO BE ABLE TO CONTACT MY FRIENDS AND MESSAGE THEM DURING THE DAY ... I ALSO REALLY LIKE TO LISTEN TO MUSIC, AND SINCE I CAN'T USE MY PHONE, I CAN'T REALLY DO THAT."

-CHLOE HUNT '27

photos: **Stephanie Liao**

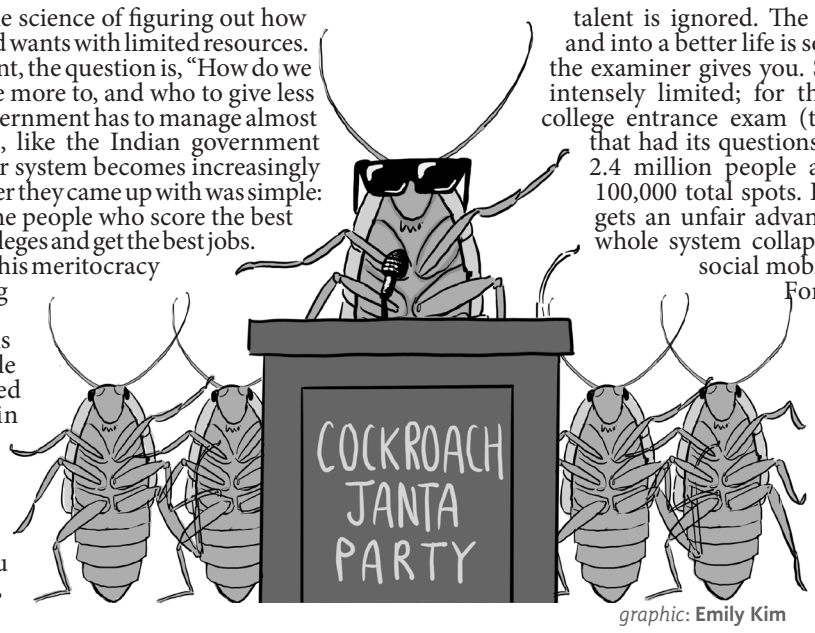
A class of cockroaches

Rohan Srivastava, NEWS AND FEATURES CO-EDITOR

Economics is the science of figuring out how to satisfy unlimited wants with limited resources. For any government, the question is, "How do we decide who to give more to, and who to give less to?" When the government has to manage almost 1.5 billion people, like the Indian government does, making a fair system becomes increasingly difficult. The answer they came up with was simple: make a test, and the people who score the best get into the best colleges and get the best jobs.

Unfortunately, this meritocracy often ends up being dehumanizing.

In America, it is almost unthinkable to riot over a leaked test paper, but in India, that test paper defines your future. The sports you play mean nothing, the charity efforts you run are worthless, and your musical talent is ignored. The ticket out of poverty and into a better life is solely that number that the examiner gives you. Spots are intensely limited; for the NEET college entrance exam (the exam that had its questions leaked), 2.4 million people apply for 100,000 total spots. If anyone gets an unfair advantage, the whole system collapses. The very idea of social mobility disappears.



graphic: **Emily Kim**

> "Unfortunately, this meritocracy often ends up being dehumanizing.

For many students in India, the last two years of their high school experience consists of nothing but studying 10 hours a day. There are schools that feign attendance numbers solely to allow for students to prepare for these exams individually rather than needing to leave the house at all. It is a grueling process that strips students of their humanity, all for the promise of potentially being more than what their parents were able to be.

It isn't very surprising, then, that the government's ignorance to the disintegrity of the NEET paper upset many students. The government then calling the students cockroaches likely didn't help much either. Surprisingly, the students rallied behind the name, creating the Cockroach Janta Party, which is a play on the name of the current leadership in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party. Despite not being an official political party, the CJP has advocated for numerous things, with the primary goal being institutional reform for the schooling system.

The Indian education system is broken, but we can learn from it. Our education system has nowhere near the level of dehumanization that exists in India, but we aren't immune to pressures that created it; everyone has obsessed over a grade or an SAT score and devoted to those factors far more emotional stress than they're worth. We all know what it's like to wonder if we're "enough" for the strangers in the admissions teams of the colleges we care about.

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The pinnacle of male beauty

John Woodfield and **Saanvi Sharma,** STAFF WRITERS

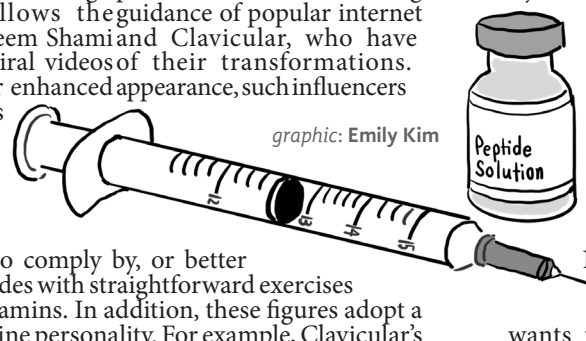
The "looksmaxxing" community is the newest, most controversial trend to hit our TikTok algorithm. The community, composed of predominantly teenage boys, tries to improve their physical appearance through methods that are impractical at best and nonsensical at worst. Influencers target a demographic insecure with their changing bodies — promising a "glow up" that dismisses the natural aging process. The objective is to "ascend" to a higher tier of looks, guided by the hope that improving one's face could enhance a future "predetermined by genetics."

> "Influencers target a demographic insecure with their changing bodies — promising a "glow up" that dismisses the natural aging process.

But why did this trend become so popular? Originating in online forums, looksmaxxing became popular on mainstream social media apps like Tiktok and Reddit. These platforms guaranteed fame to attractive individuals, leading to popular videos of beauty influencers showcasing an ideal life and pushing their routines onto a young audience. Simultaneously, viral "glow up" videos and "mogging" clips led people to equate attractiveness to superiority. Universal standards of beauty spread online via videos of beauty charts and ideal proportions, and the closer one got to this convention, the quicker they became successful.

Participants' looksmaxxing routines frequently initiate with "softmaxxing," which include healthy habits such as daily exercise and skincare. However, the trend infamously encourages a relentless pursuit toward an ideal face, leading individuals into "hardmaxxing" — a set of practices to address genetic constraints by surgery or dangerous activities. Popular practices in this extreme include "bonesmashing," performed by the streamer Clavicular, where he hits his jawbone with a hammer to achieve hollow cheekbones. Though discouraged from a medical standpoint, idolization for hardmaxxing persists among a wide audience.

A large portion of the looksmaxxing community follows the guidance of popular internet figures, like Kareem Shami and Clavicular, who have posted several viral videos of their transformations. Monetizing their enhanced appearance, such influencers sell supplements and personal consultation sessions to their followers. Their videos encourage one to comply by, or better yet purchase, guides with straightforward exercises and quick-fix vitamins. In addition, these figures adopt a misogynistic online personality. For example, Clavicular's live streams on Kick are frequently set in a club, where women act as props to add to his "alpha" persona. In an interview with Adam Friedland, he stated women are "outrageously hypergamous" and have an "exponentially easier time living life." His widespread fame, evident by the million followers on TikTok, suggests the impact of these ideas.



graphic: **Emily Kim**

Another major problem arises with the principles of looksmaxxing, which propagate toxic masculinity. General advice often dismisses feminine men, associating "female features" with inferiority. Instead, a man is encouraged to chase "dominance," reflective of traditional male roles that reject self-expression. This performative masculinity distances men in relationships and prioritizes a hierarchy instead of genuine connection with their partners.

Although looksmaxxing follows the existent lookism in society, recent pushback rejuvenates rejection against this bias. Modern movements toward acceptance and diversity minimize the effects of beauty influencers, while medical organizations such as Johns Hopkins Medicine and the National Institutes of Health warn about the negative side effects of the trend and persistent surgeries. Really, if one wants to look better, there's no beating eating healthy, adopting hygienic habits, and exercising regularly.

Chasing the money

Eva Larsen and **Kanishk Mogha,** CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Today, AI and other modern tech innovations have completely changed the modern work standard, bringing great productivity increases — and even greater fears of falling behind into the eternal cycle of poverty. To attempt to escape these fears, young adults are pursuing what they perceive to be the only path to success in this ever-changing world: grind culture. Grind culture, defined by the belief that the only path to monetary success is constant hard work, long hours, and complete availability, has become a widespread ideology. Although these qualities may seem beneficial to a person's career, the fearmongering that grind culture encourages, alongside its mental health harms, renders it a detriment to society.

Recently, young people are facing numerous economic challenges: housing, fuel, groceries, utilities, education, and healthcare costs have all skyrocketed. Grind culture is, in many ways, a response to the increasing unaffordability of life: survival only comes from working hard all the time. However, constant effort most often results in burnout, anxiety, and lowered productivity — making it counterintuitive for young adults aiming for financial stability.

Though inflation-adjusted salaries have largely remained stagnant since 1960, purchasing power has severely declined amongst younger generations. If one worked hard in previous generations, there was a foreseeable reward, but currently, it has become nearly impossible to buy a home, especially if one is on the federal minimum wage ($7.25/hour). Home prices are just one example of the disparate financial realities between the oldest and youngest generations.



graphic: **Katherine Chen**

Grind culture uses fearmongering tactics to convince people that if one does not follow this lifestyle, they will suffer from an unaffordable world for the rest of their years. The idea of the "permanent underclass," a future where artificial intelligence replaces human labor, while the world is ruled by elites, only exacerbates these fears by promoting a dystopian future. If the stakes are permanently being subjugated, one would be much more willing to follow the lifestyle grind culture emphasizes.

Another motivation to be employed in high-stress, high-paying professions is student debt, composed mostly of federal student loan debt. Federal student loan debt can almost never be discharged through bankruptcy and will dog a person's footsteps for the rest of their lives. When coupled with interest rates, student loan debt is a major barrier for millions of Americans to financial security.

Thus, the increasingly widespread goal of working in professions such as investment banking or consulting is a product of the desire to become financially secure. Both of these careers require incredibly long hours and little work life balance, embodying much of the grind culture. While this may be worth it to those who are simply seeking more wealth, the vast majority of professions do not require the grind culture mentality to be successful.

Especially with the increases in corporate mass layoffs, trust and loyalty to companies is at a very low point. Working hard for a company no longer produces the same results, with millions of people being laid-off annually.

Instead of glorifying grind culture as a mindset encouraging young people to work hard, we should regard it as the manifestation of all our unfounded fears — the idea that success is fleeting and that permanent failure is always just one step away.

It's not wrong to want to work hard and chase an A on a test, or attempt to win a competitive internship, but it can become a vice when it gets excessive. There is more to life than schoolwork or any job. Unlike what grind culture assumes, one bad grade, a slightly lower paycheck, or even being laid off long-term can be recovered from, but trading away your health, time, and satisfaction, is something you can never regain. No one aspect of life should dominate all others: balance is necessary for proper happiness and joy.

The meaning of terror

Rohan Srivastava, STAFF WRITER

What is Terror? I know him when I take a test worth half my quarter grade, when I step too close to the edge of the path on a mountain hike, when a car gets a little too close for comfort while I cross the road. Maybe I also know Terror when a lockdown is called, unsure if it's real or not; when a shelter-in-place is called and I hear something rolling outside while I hope that everyone is okay. I know Terror as a friend who shakes my shoulders when I cannot see him, then, most times, winks and leaves.

Unlike me, my father knows Terror from his days in India, a man who he thought he left behind when he moved to America. Terror was in every Indian railway station that was mobbed as part of a riot, was sat in every train that departed with a bomb disguised as a radio left in it. My father knew Terror as a man carrying a gun, a bomb, an allegiance, and sometimes none of the three.

My father arrived in America in 2000 for a job opportunity here that he could not achieve in India. But more than that, America was a better land for life. Supposedly, here, kidnapping and stabbing didn't lurk behind every dark corner, whereas in his motherland they were comfortable showing their faces even in the light.

Terror was never meant to cross the Atlantic. Terror was never meant to board American Airlines Flight 11.

So we tried our best to make sure this would never, ever happen again. We installed metal detectors, increased surveillance, went to war to kill the man who brought Terror to our doorstep. All of these things helped. We have not since seen Terror like we did on September 11.

But listening to my father's stories has taught me more about who Terror truly is. We have made it harder for Terror to act, but if someone is willing to lay down their life for him, they will do it by any means necessary.

The hands of Terror are present in the idea that politics is "us versus them" just as they are present in bombings and plane crashes and riots and shootings. Terror whispers that some people are our enemies, that they are destroying our country, and that something must be done about them. Terror wins when we believe that violence to innocents is justified.

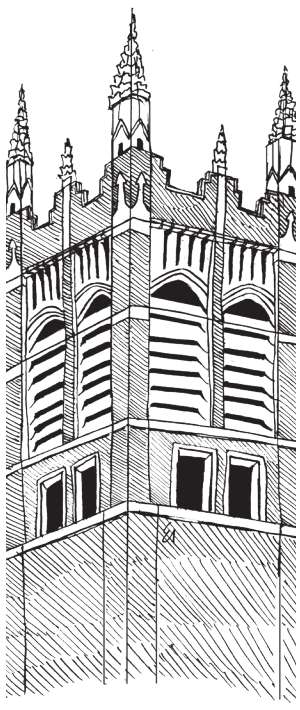
My father thought Terror did not dwell in the U.S. because he misunderstood Terror's range. Terror is not Indian, he is not American, he is not Eastern, he is not Western, he is not old, he is not young, he is not Christian, he is not Muslim, he is not Hindu, he is not left-wing, he is not right-wing. He feeds on division.

I want Terror to remain my friend. I hope that I can live a life where he is only my shaky hands before a test, only the pit in my stomach when I look a long way down, only the feeling I get when I have to speak in front of a crowd. But if we do not seek to understand one another, I fear I will come to know him as the killer my father knew. On this 25th anniversary of 9/11, remember that Terror is not always external. Remember that he can grow within our own community when disagreement usurps humanity. Remember the consequences of allowing division to become hatred and hatred to become violence.

Never forget.


photo: **Rohan Srivastava**

Rohan Srivastava's '28 father lived in India at a young age, witnessing terror in different ways.



Embrace the 'chalance'

Editorial

Despite how much educators enjoy scapegoating AI for impairing modern learning, the role that AI plays is overstated. Specifically, the deeper issue is psychological, lying within the worldview of adolescents, which translates directly to their interpretation of the value of education. As reports demonstrate that youth cynicism is trending upward, the rise in adolescent indifference can be attributed to factors such as a constant overexposure to media, possibly leading to compassion fatigue.

In education, student engagement has begun to decline, with the term "student apathy" being coined to describe the lack of interest shown in classrooms. Worse yet, this disinterest is only being compounded by a feedback loop where students see peers becoming disillusioned with learning and view it as the new norm. Devastatingly, it can lead to choices such as actively lying about how much effort students put into learning. However, this could be only a symptom of a deeper problem: fear. Simply put, the idea that effort is bad can be tied to various fears, such as fear of vulnerability, fear of judgment, fear of incompetence, among others. Lies such as claiming to have not studied before a test serve as a way to cope with poor results before they even see the exam. By doing so, students avoid the negative feelings associated with said poor results, shielding themselves from disappointment. Alternatively, students could also use these lies as a way of trying to seem more intelligent — by putting in less effort to achieve strong results, they seem to learn things faster than others, thus seeming more intelligent. Even though these reasons seem childish, students are often blinded by the pressure to succeed from peers, parents, and themselves. Consequently, they will do their best to appear as successful despite how extra it is.

Unfortunately, this mentality poses serious threats to students and their peers. By downplaying their own effort, students aren't just denying themselves recognition of their work, but they are also actively harming others. More specifically, this attitude leads to a belief that other people are able to do the same level of work whereas they have to put in hours of effort, causing students to feel like frauds despite their achievements. This phenomenon is termed imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome exacerbates the stresses related to school, leading to anxiety, burnout, and low self-esteem. On the other hand, the impacts extend beyond school; in fact, it is a universal fear of being exposed as a fraud wherever they are. Thankfully, imposter syndrome, albeit deeply ingrained, can be overcome by tracking small wins, the opposite of how students are treating learning right now.

Shifting students' mindset around learning is extremely difficult, but it's a necessary step to foster a more inclusive environment where students are able to take pride in their work. Every person learns and does things at their own pace, and that's perfectly fine. You are your own greatest competition, so work hard to beat every old version of yourself. Be chalant.

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.

Editorial Board

The Editorial Board of the Tower consists of a select group of 23 Tower 2026 staff members. The views of board members are acurately reflected in the editorial, which is co-written each month by the Board with primary authorship changing monthly.

Letter and Submission Policy

All letters and articles are welcome for consideration. Please e-mail all submissions to phstowerseniореditors@gmail.com. The editors reserve the rights to alter letters for length and to edit articles. The Editor-in-Chief takes full responsibility for the content of this paper.

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The Tower is available to read online at www.towerphs.com.

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

On PHS's religion policy

Harry Dweck, MANAGING EDITOR
Uma Kleven, STAFF WRITER
Franciszka Czerniak, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In the past few years, PHS has designated new religious holidays as days off (like Eid-al Fitr in 2024) and the US government has introduced new federal holidays in an effort towards inclusion (like Juneteenth). This shift raises a broader question: how can PHS fairly recognize a diverse student body when it's impossible to grant every single religious holiday a day off?

Historically, American school calendars have been based around a Christian-dominated community. Breaks around Christmas and Easter have been standard for generations, which makes sense because the US is a predominantly Christian country. However, with the US becoming home to an increasing number of religions, the question of when to give students a day off becomes increasingly difficult.

As Princeton has become more and more diverse, PHS has addressed this dilemma by adding new holidays to the calendar, like Eid al-Fitr and Lunar New Year. PHS's core values include student diversity and community advocacy, so it seems only fair that these groups vocalize their desire for the same representation as other groups.

However, simply adding more religious holidays to the list may not be the perfect solution. New Jersey is estimated to be home to dozens of religions, and there are too many important observances across different religions for PHS to close for all of them.

PHS currently closes for the following holidays: Yom Kippur, Eid al-Fitr, Lunar New Year, and typically closes for Rosh Hashanah and Diwali when these don't fall on a weekend. Though on the Princeton Public Schools Website our break in December is called "Winter Break," it always falls during Christmas, and our Spring Break typically falls around Easter, emphasizing Christian holidays' continued importance in our school system and nation as a whole. If we choose some but not others we are faced with the question of who gets represented and who gets left out.



graphic: **Emily Kim**

The important thing to recognize is that religious inclusion does not always have to mean a day off. PHS should continue to ensure that students who observe religious holidays while school is in session are still accommodated. PHS should also make sure that students observing a major holiday aren't expected to take tests, give presentations, or meet major deadlines on the days they return to school. This allows more religions to be respected without having to close school every time.

Though PHS's approach solves the issue of major calendar holidays, true religious inclusion means recognizing less visible, daily practices. Commitments such as in Ramadan and Lent go beyond just a single day off, interfering with homework and class hours. If academics and faith clash, students and staff may still have to choose. The real solution lies in deepening cultural awareness so students and teachers understand these varied traditions. Though administrative policies may protect grades on well-known holidays, everyday cultural literacy ensures these ongoing practices are met with basic understanding. PHS's current model works well, but its impact depends on how well the school community understands these traditions, including the quieter ones. Ultimate equity is realized not just through calendar policies, but through an academic environment that recognizes the backgrounds of its students every day.

PREX
PRINCETON RECORD EXCHANGE

Vanguard Presents... Memories

A Reflection on 9/11

Maxime DeVico and **Jaisel Iyer**, STAFF WRITERS

On a day of beautiful autumn weather, tragedy struck, turning the day into one never to be erased from our memories.

On September 11, 2001, four planes were hijacked by the terrorist group Al-Qaeda: two set for the World Trade Center Twin Towers, one for the Pentagon, and one for either the Capitol or the White House. The North Tower was hit at 8:46 a.m.; the South Tower was hit 17 minutes later at 9:03 a.m.; 34 minutes later the third plane crashed into the Pentagon at 9:37 a.m.; and the final plane crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

All 275 passengers on the hijacked planes died, 2,976 people died in New York City, and 125 people died at the Pentagon. To this day, people remember exactly where they were when the disaster was announced around the world.

Twenty-five years later, on the day of the attacks, we gather together to remember the people we lost. Some go to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in NYC where the tragedy happened, while others go back to the field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. There, tender ceremonies of remembrance and grief culminate with the annual name reading of the people who we lost that day.

Around the world, people also participate in moments of silence throughout the day at the exact moments the planes hit. At PHS, at 8:46 a.m., the students and staff stand up in a moment of silence.

Another way NYC pays their respects is by illuminating twin beams of light into the sky from dusk until dawn. The lights are meant to represent the fallen towers, which shows the extent of "never forget." As a society, we have vowed to remember that day and the tragedies associated with it, so that we can make sure nothing like that ever happens again.

Beyond these memorials, 9/11 is remembered as the day of Service and Remembrance. Millions of people honor the memory of those lost in 9/11 by giving back to the community. Volunteers gather to participate in events like food drives, cleaning parks, and supporting the first responders. These events turn 9/11, a day marked by tragedy, into a day for unity, contributing to the idea that serving others is a meaningful way to bring communities together.



photo illustration: **Luna Xu**
photos: **archives.gov**

Ways to Preserve Memories

Jacob Rogart, HEAD COPY CO-EDITOR,
Maya Rogart, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Scrapbooking

Originating during the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries, scrapbooking has always been an enjoyable and creative way to preserve memories. When creating a scrapbook, you can add printed pictures, ticket stubs, drawings, and short captions. You get to decide what goes on the page! Whether it's been one year or 10 years, looking back at all the pages can bring back details that might have otherwise been forgotten.

Keeping a Journal

One of the main advantages of keeping a journal is that your choice of words can capture feelings, thoughts, and emotions that a camera often misses. You can write about small moments, your tough day at school, or new experiences. Even writing a few sentences every week can reduce stress, anxiety, and sharpen your memory by transferring short-term details into long-term memories. A journal not only lets people remember what happened, but also how they felt at the time. Next time you find yourself reflecting on how your day went, journal about it!

Saving Digital Memories

Digital memories can include videos, voice recordings, texts, and photos. A video of a family member telling a story or a recording of friends laughing can feel more personal than a picture alone. However, digital files can disappear if they are not organized or backed up. Saving important files to cloud storage, a computer, or an external drive can help make sure those memories last. Creating labeled folders by year or event also makes them easier to find later.

Time Capsules

At some point in your life, you have probably walked over a time capsule without realizing it. A time capsule is a container filled with items that represent a certain time in someone's life. People can choose to open it whenever they please, whether it's a few years or several decades. Dolly Parton buried an unreleased song of hers, titled "My Place in History," in Dollywood, her theme park in Tennessee, and it will be opened on what would have been Parton's 100th birthday. Often, people include items that hold deeper meaning for them. Time capsules are interesting because they show how much a person, school, or community has changed.

Sharing Stories

Another important way to preserve memories is talking with family members and friends. People can share stories about childhood, traditions, funny mistakes, or important events in their lives. Hearing these stories helps people learn more about their family and where they came from. Recording an interview with a grandparent or writing down their stories can keep those memories from being forgotten. Even simple conversations at dinner can create memories that people will remember for years.

On Nostalgia

Layla Krystofik and **Vitali Wedmid**, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Nostalgia is described as a bittersweet emotional state categorized by a sentimental longing for the past. Although looking back can stir up a sense of melancholy, this longing plays a vital role in shaping our identity and anchoring our sense of self. After conducting interviews with several members of the PHS community, it became clear that this feeling was deeply felt across generations, with students and staff alike revisiting their past memories with both fondness and sadness. Whether it is a favorite childhood snack, the salt air at the beach, or the smell of a family kitchen, these memories are something we all hav in common. They show that while our daily lives at PHS are busy with classes, sports, and test prep, we all share the same simple need to remember where we came from. In other words, while nostalgia brings an aching longing for the past, it ultimately preserves our most cherished memories and reinforces who we are.

What does nostalgia mean to you?

Across all age groups, the consensus remains that nostalgia is a complex emotional "cocktail" rather than a simple happy memory. It acts as a bridge between who we were and who we are now, bringing a wave of mixed emotions. For Spanish teacher Alessandra Clemens-Lores, the feeling is defined by its emotional complexity. She says it is "a mix of many different feelings, like happiness but also yearning for those past times through various memories." Biology teacher Jennifer Smolyn expanded on this duality, describing it as "a feeling of missing things from the past, and missing things both positively and negatively." She notes that this longing ultimately allows us to "create new perspectives on them." Others, like social studies teacher Christopher DeYoung, think that it simply means "looking back on past times with fondness and recalling friends and loved ones."

What memory provokes the most nostalgia for you? Do you know why this is so?

The specific memories that provoke the most nostalgia are deeply tied to comfort, safety, and a simpler, less stressful time in life. For Vivian Xia '29, it stems from a monumental childhood gift: "I think it was on my sixth or seventh birthday where I got my first American Girl doll... I was so excited and couldn't stop playing with it for weeks." For Mia Sethuraman '29 and Smolyn, family vacations — specifically shore trips — provoke the most nostalgia. Sethuraman thinks back to family beach and camping trips, noting, "My family doesn't really go on vacations anymore because my sister is in college." Smolyn echoes this thought, looking back on her time spent with her sister listening to music or visiting the beach together: "I look back on those times fondly and miss them at the same time," she says.

What confuses you about nostalgia, or what do you wonder about it?

The psychological paradox of nostalgia is its most baffling trait. How can an experience be positive yet leave someone feeling down? This strange juxtaposition leaves both students and teachers looking for answers."What confuses me about nostalgia is when I experience it, the feeling is really complicated," Sethuraman shares. "I also don't understand why I feel like I want to teleport back in time." Smolyn is equally fascinated by this emotional puzzle, stating: "I think the most confusing part is how it can make you sad and happy at the same time, right? You can have this feeling of like 'I miss these experiences and these memories,' but they were also such positive things that I enjoyed experiencing... It's this weird juxtaposition of feelings that don't usually come together... That's probably the trickiest part."

When you think of nostalgia, what memories do you associate with it and why?

When the mind wanders backward, it frequently lands on childhood traditions, relationships, and roots that anchor our identities. For faculty members, these memories often revolve around a sense of place or their youth. Clemens immediately thinks of her home country: "I usually think of memories of Peru... the many things I miss about Peru, such as the food and my family." For Smolyn, a '90s kid, the emotion speaks "classically to the '90s," evoking memories of childhood pop culture, fashion trends, and reminding her of her "late childhood [and] teenage... kind of time."

Students, on the other hand, associate nostalgia with the shifting dynamics of growing up. Sethuraman connects it to social roots. She explains, "To me, nostalgia is a feeling I have when I look back on my past friendships with people, or hangouts I used to have with kids from my neighborhood when I was younger before I moved". Similarly, Xia associates it with family closeness that has shifted over time, noting how much closer she and her cousins used to be. "I miss the family functions and the house parties that they would throw," Xia reflects. "But now that they're older I don't really get to hang out with them as much."

What items or sensations provoke the feeling of nostalgia, any smells and noises, any textures?

Nostalgia is an intensely sensory experience. A single scent, taste, or sound can drag us right back into the past. For many in the PHS community, the ocean air and summer elements are universal triggers. DeYoung notes, "The smell of the back bay [Jersey Shore] brings back nostalgia for me... the first thing you notice when you head to the beach is that smell." Sethuraman agrees, explaining that "the smell of sunscreen or hearing the ocean" triggers her memories, alongside the smell of a campfire or cherry blossoms from her old preschool. Clemens says that "smells of food from Peru typically bring back [her] nostalgia about home." For Xia, a nostalgic sensation can be as simple as "the taste of Cheetos, because when [she] was a kid [she] would always eat so many Cheeto bags in one sitting while watching Frozen." Finally, Smolyn credits sound for her senses of nostalgia: "Noises that provoke nostalgia are definitely music — it's the biggest one for me. I can listen to songs from growing up and go right back to where I was or what I was doing... anytime I go back to the ocean it brings me right back to some of those times with my friends and my sister."

The Ninja Turtle Folder

Olivia Fan, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Aisles of vibrant notebooks, smelly pencils, and rubbery erasers crowded my eyes. It was the week before my first day of preschool and my first time shopping for school supplies. I only had so much freedom of choice as a four-year-old, but my mother gracefully presented me with the opportunity to at least pick out my very own folder.

I gazed upon the hundreds of options, but the plain colors, Disney princesses, and basic designs did not interest me. As I made my way through the second shelf of boring folders, one suddenly caught my eye. I picked up the folder and found four infamous turtle faces staring back at me: Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael, and Michelangelo. Specifically, it was an image of the 2012 Nickelodeon TV show version of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles gang. The dark, realistic, and shadowy turtles immediately told me that this was the one. There was no competition; I had found my folder.

I felt like the coolest preschooler walking into the classroom with my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles folder. When the teacher announced it was time to collect our folders, I was the first to whip mine out. I wanted everyone to know how loud and proud I was of my selection.

That feeling quickly faded. The folder made me feel like I stuck out like a sore thumb. I could feel the sliminess of the turtles seeping onto the table. I felt as though every other preschooler was looking at it in disgust. I glanced around the room. My folder covered in scary, enormous turtle faces deeply contrasted with the other girls' preppy, flowery, simple folders. Suddenly, mine looked ominous and vile compared to the rest. I began to slump in my seat, holding my folder under the table and wishing I had picked something less noticeable. Although Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles meant everything to four-year-old me, this was the first time I felt embarrassed of what people might think of me. Thoughts plagued my head of being judged for liking a show that they might deem boyish or weird. Even though Leonardo's handsome turtle-self was idolized in my child mind, the potential stares of other kids were ingrained in my head.

From then on out, every time the teacher handed out folders, I was the first to put away my papers. Then I would proceed to cover as much of my folder as I could with my miniature hands, especially Leonardo's face. The other kids were definitely not judging me for having a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles folder, but my mind twisted every glance from others as a moment of extreme judgement. One kid even came up to me and told me how much he liked my folder. But a boy complimenting my ominous folder made me crumple it up even more.

Just the thought of being associated with a boy at that time was foul in my mind.

I began to crumple my folder, hoping the folds would distract everybody from the scaly faces of turtles. The folder I was once so excited to buy and show off began to slowly crumple into a big lumpy mess. I tore small pieces of it off whenever I could to make each character unrecognizable.

Eventually, it became such a problem that I returned home to find my sister and mom handing me a brand new folder. A folder that was simple and a magnificent hot pink. I asked what happened to my old folder and they replied they finished my job of destroying it. Later, I saw the living roof floor covered with scraps and pieces of what once were four turtle gangsters. The pink folder was perfect. I had assimilated into my classroom as what I thought was now a proper girl. But a small part of me began to miss my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles folder. I reminisced about Leonardo's handsome face and the excitement I had felt when I first spotted it on that shelf. But I was supposed to be happy now. I had gotten rid of the thing that made me stand out.

It took me much more than the wisdom of my four years of living at the time to realize that the folder was never the problem. The embarrassment I felt did not come from a childish folder of turtles. It came from myself. I went from loving something to hating it simply because I imagined someone else might think it was strange. No one had actually told me that girls could not like a show about turtles. No one laughed at me. No one had even asked why I had that folder. The only person judging was myself. This imaginary judgment was somehow powerful enough to make me destroy something I loved.

The image of the little girl with the crumpled folder is vivid in my mind to remind myself to not abandon parts of myself before anyone else ever gets the chance to reject them.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Princeton's 5th annual Porchfest features indoor performances due to inclement weather

Yunsheng Xu, HEAD COPY CO-EDITOR

The sounds of classical, pop, rock, alternative, and folk music resonated across the inside of businesses around Princeton as musicians performed their sets in venues very different from what they expected: instead of neighbor's porches, 9 indoor venues served as the new stage. Crowds were ferried from venue to venue with a provided free shuttle to stay out of the rain, all while listening to all different genres of music while also enjoying lunch and snacks from the sponsors of Porchfest. While the venues were an unexpected change, the goal remained the same: to build community connection.

On Saturday, September 26, from 12:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., people from all over New Jersey gathered at indoor venues around downtown Princeton to celebrate the town's fifth annual Porchfest. Organized by the Arts Council of Princeton and sponsored by various local businesses, Porchfest is a departure from the traditional concert hall venue of performances and instead offers a community-centered approach to hosting music.

"Our mission at the Arts Council is to build community through the arts, and [Porchfest] exemplifies our mission," said Porchfest organizer Melissa Kuscin. "[These venues] are totally putting their trust in us and in the musicians that are signing up in equal goodwill to bring people happiness."

After the need to shift indoors, several local businesses and organizations offered up space for performances under their roofs. The Princeton Public Library, the Princeton University Art Museum and Kristine's were among the venues that hosted indoor performances.

"It can be hard to find an open mic space or a place to perform music if you don't have an established place [where] you're learning," said Eve Kavookjian '27, a volunteer at the 2025 Porchfest. "So I think [Porchfest] is really great for people who just want to … have a time to perform. … It's really good to help younger artists get themselves out."

Princeton's Porchfest is part of a much larger, national stage. Although the event is now held all over America, the first Porchfest was held in Ithaca, New York, in 2007. Beginning as a small gathering of just 500 people in 2022, Princeton's Porchfest has grown into a staple event.

The event has also evolved beyond just featuring music. The Arts Council promoted local businesses in return for their sponsoring and funding Porchfest, allowing attendees to grab snacks and meals as part of the experience. Additionally, poets and storytellers now also get a stage.

"It's a super intimate, welcoming group of poets and storytellers. … Porchfest is a way for us … to feature these storytellers and poets outside, [and introduce] them to a whole new group of listeners," said Kucsin.

Originally scheduled for April 25, this year's Porchfest was initially cancelled for the first time in the event's history after the day brought intense storms, despite the event being typically rain-or-shine. The indoors rendition of Porchfest was also caused by last weekend's nor'easter.

"We can put up with a little rain, we can put up with a little wind, but it was going to be just a very powerful combination of all the things, and when you're working with musicians that have electronic instruments and equipment, it was determined to be the best course of action," Kucsin said of the April postponement.

The itinerary of the event was affected by both the weather and the date change from the spring. When performers lined up in April were unavailable to perform on the new date, the organizers pulled from the waitlist of performances to fill in the gaps.

Though the event will in the future likely retain its annual April date, the organizers are interested in how the audience reacted to the new setting.

"September is feeling really good. There's always a lot of events going on this time of year, though, so I'd like to just to do a little bit of analysis … say, 'did we notice any decline in attendance?' … It's always nice to make sure that it worked just like we wanted to," Kucsin said.

This year, Porchfest ended with a final performance at Graduate by Hilton Princeton. Beginning with a performance by the band Tony & The Trees at 5:15 p.m., the final event also offered a beer afterparty at 6:30p.m.

"[My favorite moment at Porchfest is] to hear all the people recuperating with their friends or family [after] they met up and they had gone in different directions," said Kavookjian. "They [said], 'Oh, I heard this great thing, and I heard this great thing,' and they're able to share that with each other, and then connect over that."

Porchfest was an opportunity for performers and attendees alike to connect with one another and share a day filled with music, food, and poetry.

"You could wander around and do no planning at all, and you're going to have a good time, so come with an open mind and stop for snacks along the way," said Kuscin.



photo: Emily Kim

The Princeton Tigerlillies A Capella group performed at the Princeton University Art Museum during Porchfest last weekend.

Two clubs using art to serve their community

Kelly Cenci, STAFF WRITER

Mural Club

The walls of Princeton High School weren't always as colorful as they are today. Thanks to countless students across different generations, the white and gray color scheme of the inside of PHS has slowly been filling up with creative art projects that represent the school community and showcase the talents of our students. Recently, Mural Club has been bringing life to the hallways all across the school.

The Mural Club follows a system of planning and execution that allows them to finish a full mural within a single school year. With multiple artists focusing on each part of the process, the group can piece together different ideas until a completed design is agreed upon and put onto the walls of PHS.

"The club leaders usually have an initial idea as to where they could have a mural, … and then from there, we just kind of brainstorm ideas together," said Milla Petrecca '28, a member of Mural Club. "Once we have a design, we meet up, and then we project it onto the wall, and we do tracings first, and then we just kind of go back and forth, referencing our photo, and the traces that we have when we fill it in [with paint]."

Mural Club members meet often during each stage, collaborating to create a design, and then working together to paint it in sections as the year comes to an end. The club serves as a welcoming space for students to express their artistic talents and relax at the end of long school days.

"Everybody was so helpful and nice. There wasn't any conflict, everybody kind of went with the flow, but they still offered their ideas." said Petrecca. "I think it was just a good space to get your artistic kind of side out. ... We just kind of talked it through, and it just flowed really well."

A lot of time is put into creating a mural, but in the end the members and the students of PHS alike get to enjoy the finished product created by the club.

"My favorite part [is] meeting up every paint session and just seeing it slowly come to life from the rough sketch to the final full thing. It was pretty great to see what we had [drawn] on this iPad be projected onto an actual wall in the school," said Petrecca.

During the 2025—2026 school year, the Mural Club painted a language-themed design above the lockers in the 260s hallway. As spring rolled around, members of the club could be seen painting during Flex Time and after school every few days, slowly filling in the artwork until it was completed. When the piece was finished, those who worked on it got to sign their names on the wall next to the final mural.

"It felt great. I mean, I felt so part of the community. … I felt so involved and happy to see our masterpiece and to get to sign my name and be part of it," said member Elliana Levitskiy '29.

As the club leaders begin to prepare and brainstorm for this upcoming year, they have a few hallways in mind. One hallway that the club members mentioned was the Twilight Zone, or the 200s hallway.

"I just have some ideas and I'm really excited to … plan those and actually get them onto the school [walls] and leave my mark in a cool way," said Petrecca.



photo: Winston Jung

The Mural Club's most recent project in the language hall of PHS.

The Bibimbops

Established in 2018, the Bibimbops are a K-pop cover dance group. This club is a sub-group of PHS's Korean Club, a club that is known to co-host the PHS Asian Fest. Once named the Korean Cover Group, the Bibimbops recently rebranded their name, choosing to be called the Bibimbops instead.

Meetings for the Bibimbops are a mix of practicing skills and group bonding. The members often meet in the dance studio during break or Flex Time, and spend time talking while eating their lunches. After that, they dive into the specifics of the dance they are focusing on that day. Sometimes the group will isolate specific sections that they find troubling, and other days they will do complete run-throughs of everything they have worked on.

"I think my favorite part [of the club] is dancing, and also just getting to know a lot of people that have the same interests as me, and just forming a tight-knit group of friends. … This club is really nice," said leader Jeemin Kim '29.

The group performs at a few different venues, such as PHS's Asian Fest, Princeton Public Library, Day of Dialogue, and PHS Got Talent. Last year, at the school-wide talent show, the Bibimbops received the "Student's Choice" award.

"Asian Fest is near March, and we start late September to October. It takes us maybe about a month or two to … know the basics of the dance, … and then we spend those other months really articulating how to solidify our dances and focus on certain details," said Kim.

Learning every dance is different, but the Bibimbops have a few strategies they've found to help learn and practice a dance. The members make use of online recordings of the original groups practicing or performing to help figure out the correct moves and steps. They also focus on breaking the dance down based on body parts, focusing solely on the arm movements or leg movements, and then combining them to ensure a clean and synchronized dance.

"Sometimes we follow a tutorial, but other times, we just look at the group's dance practice, but we use a mirror version, and then we just slow it down and then learn it step by step, and then we practice it and get it faster," said member Hanlin Ren '29.

In many dances, specific moves are delegated to specific people within the original group that is performing. Because of this, the Bibimbops have to assign specific "roles" to their members for certain dances so that the parts can work smoothly together.

"We usually go by who wants to be who. … If you have a bias, a person that you really like in the group, then you can probably do that," said Ren, "And usually the people who are older get to pick who they want, but it's usually just pretty random."

The group is excited to meet all of their new members and start their pieces for this year. With the club leaders already picked out, the Bibimbops are prepared for the 2026—2027 school year's dance covers and events to come.



photo: Winston Jung

The Bibimbops perform at PHS's Asian Fest 2026.

Student artist of the month: Eve Kavookjian ’27

Yunsheng Xu, HEAD COPY CO-EDITOR



Growing up in an artistic family, Eve Kavookjian ’27 has always been surrounded by art since a young age. From Pottery Club to Tech Crew, Kavookjian constantly immerses herself in art, making it into an essential part of her life. As a leader of Pottery Club and a member of stage crew since eighth grade, Kavookjian hopes to continue finding community in these activities in college.

photo: **Katherine Chen**

What attracted you to pottery? What about Tech Crew?

I first started doing pottery in fifth grade, [when] I did a summer camp at a local place where I used to live, and [it] kind of just really spiraled from there. I got to do more classes locally and work on it in school and take three art classes. [As for tech crew], when I first moved here in eighth grade, my friend joined it, and I had interest, and I was like, “all right, why not?” So I [joined] it then, and I was like, “Wow.” I’ve always loved painting and I really enjoyed the painting part of it. And I just got very immersed in that world. It was nice to be in such an artsy environment, and so many people working on this one big project.

Does this unique blend of Pottery Club and Tech Crew affect one club or the other?

Tech Crew definitely has more influence on the function of Pottery Club, because Tech Crew was a system I already walked into. Pottery Club is something that I got to build up and have more influence over, like when we meet and what we do and how that’s handled. So I think my experience with group dynamics in Tech Crew have had an influence on how I run Pottery Club. Just seeing what works and what doesn’t and observing those group dynamics there.

Who do you look up to for inspiration?

A lot of my family is very artistic, and I think that it’s just intrinsic, but also fostered by being surrounded by [art] so much when we were little. Especially getting social media, being able to see all these artists posting in real time and not just seeing works from hundreds of years ago, is really, really cool. I just always had an interest and always loved making things and sort of expressing [myself] with that.

[In Tech Crew], there’s two people I very much looked up to, who were the two head painters before me. Pearl and Isabella, they were a senior and a junior when I joined in freshman year, and they were also the old presidents of Pottery Club. … They were very big idols and still some of my closest friends, which I think is great. They taught me all the things that I now teach all the little freshmen how to do, and they were great guiding figures within Tech Crew and Pottery Club and just high school artsy life.

How would you say Tech Crew and Pottery Club affected your high school experience?

You’re really just who you surround yourself with and the community you curate. And I think I’ve surrounded myself in the Tech Crew community and started to curate this Pottery Club community and just being around so many artsy high schoolers and exploring that with everyone. I think it’s really great and has been a huge part of my life the past few years and I hope it will stay a big part of my life.

What’s a favorite memory from these clubs?

Probably when we unload the kiln and everything’s all finished being fired and people get to see their final products from all the projects they’ve been working on the past couple weeks; getting to hand it to people and watching them be like “Oh my gosh, no way I made this.” Their faces light up. They’re so happy, and so excited. I just think that’s awesome to see people so proud of themselves and realizing what they can do. And similarly, with Tech Crew, just getting to watch after everything has been loaded onto the stage and putting the finishing touches on everything and just looking at this massive product that you’ve spent months working on. … Just seeing it all together is awesome.

Do you see yourself joining Pottery Club or Tech Crew in college?

Definitely. I think Tech Crew in college might be a whole other level of commitment. But I do want to go to art school and then I do really, really want to continue doing some sort of ceramic stuff in a pottery club … and definitely still do stage crew or engage with shows. Because it’s been such a big part of my life for so long and it’s hard to lose it after all this time.

Summer concert memories

Maeve Walsh, ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT CO-EDITOR

As the sound of tickets being scanned echoes throughout the halls of Madison Square Garden, eager fans file through merch lines and concession stands to find their seat. Beyond the balcony, past the floor seats, the empty stage waits for action. Summertime is peak concert season, with seemingly everyone posting on their social media a different concert each week. Throughout my summer, I attended four concerts, each varying in location, size, and my knowledge of the artist. Despite this, all were equally enjoyable, proving to me that no matter the what the concert is and where it is, the experience of listening to music with others can be gratifying and entertaining.

June began with two performances that were a part of the Princeton Festival by the Princeton Symphony Orchestra at Morven. The first featured Queen Nation, one of the leading Queen cover bands in the country. Since I have been listening to Queen on vinyl since I was young, I was curious to see how the band would compare to the original Queen. While some cover bands put their own spin on songs, this band is determined to replicate each note and voice inflection of Queen. For this performance, I had front row seats and was constantly being given necklaces, boas, guitar picks, and other memorabilia the band members had with them on stage. The interactiveness of the concert only added to the personality the members developed on stage. The four bandmates had wigs, costumes, and accessories that demonstrated their understanding of Queen’s 70s and 80s era. Most memorably, the lead singer Greg Finsley wore tank tops, shorts, and hats that looked like they came straight from Freddie Mercury’s closet. Songs like “Don’t Stop Me Now,” “Bicycle Race,” and “Bohemian Rhapsody” had the crowd out of their seats dancing, spilling into any free space available. At the end of the concert I was covered in pearl and gemstone necklaces from the bass player and lead singer, I had two guitar picks from the lead guitarist, and sore legs from jumping around with everyone to classic rock songs from my childhood.

The second performance at Morven featured the Bacon Brothers, a folk rock band with Hollywood actor Kevin Bacon and his Emmy-award-winning brother Michael Bacon. Arriving at the performance pavilion with my family friends, I had no clue what type of music I would be listening to for the next two to three hours. As a fan of Kevin Bacon, I was excited to see him perform in a completely different light, and only a few feet in front of me rather than on my television. Most songs were originals and were a fusion of folk, rock, country, and soul. My favorite songs were “Dark Chocolate Eyes” and “Old Bronco.” In between songs, the brothers would explain their song writing and producing process, with both of them bouncing off each other. While leaving the concert venue, I reflected on the fact that even though I didn’t recognize a single song, I enjoyed being exposed to a new band with music I don’t generally listen to with the people that I care about.

In contrast to the Bacon Brothers concert, the following concert was of Madison Beer, an artist I listen to religiously, and it was at Madison Square Garden, my seats being somewhat in the nosebleeds. On the train ride to Penn Station I was blasting her album Locket through my headphones, mouthing every lyric like it was the Pledge of Allegiance. This was my second time seeing Beer live, the first time at Radio City Music Hall in 2024. Throughout the concert, I was constantly dancing around, watching everyone around me do the same. Emotional ballads like “Reckless” and house-inspired “Make You Mine” had the crowd belting one minute and then jumping up and down in unison the next minute. Beer’s outfits, set pieces, and ad-libs only added to the experience. As the confetti cannons erupted with white confetti over the pit, one of my favorite artists had just performed all the songs I listened to on repeat for the past year, my voice was gone, my legs were sore from jumping, and my camera roll was full.

To finish off the summer, I got to see Bruno Mars at MetLife Stadium along with Raye, his opening act. Similarly to Madison Beer, I had listened to Mars throughout the summer and was prepared to sing my heart out. Despite the constant battle to get concert tickets, I scored floor seats 20 rows away from the stage. I had seen clips of his performances online and was excited to see his on-stage personality and his dance ability in real life. As expected, Mars and his band kept the audience engaged and on their feet for three hours plus an extensive encore. One of my favorite set pieces included a red Cadillac Allanté that Mars stood on to sing “That’s What I Like.” From up-beat romance songs to emotional breakup tracks, confetti canons, and flame jets, I was constantly surprised by the level at which Mars was performing. However, the most enjoyable aspect was experiencing this performance alongside my family. For some, it was their first concert, and I could see the amazement in their eyes. We sang and swayed together, we sang to each other, and we took photos that now are hung up in my room.

Throughout the summer, live music created lasting memories for my friends and family, exposed me to new styles, left me with new songs to add to my playlists and photos to hang up on my walls.



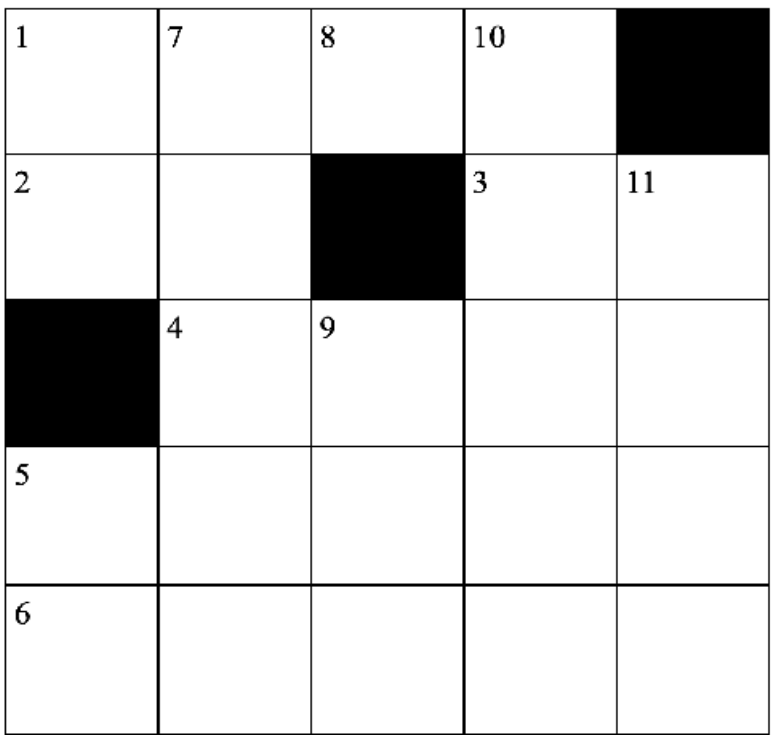
graphic: **Katherine Chen**

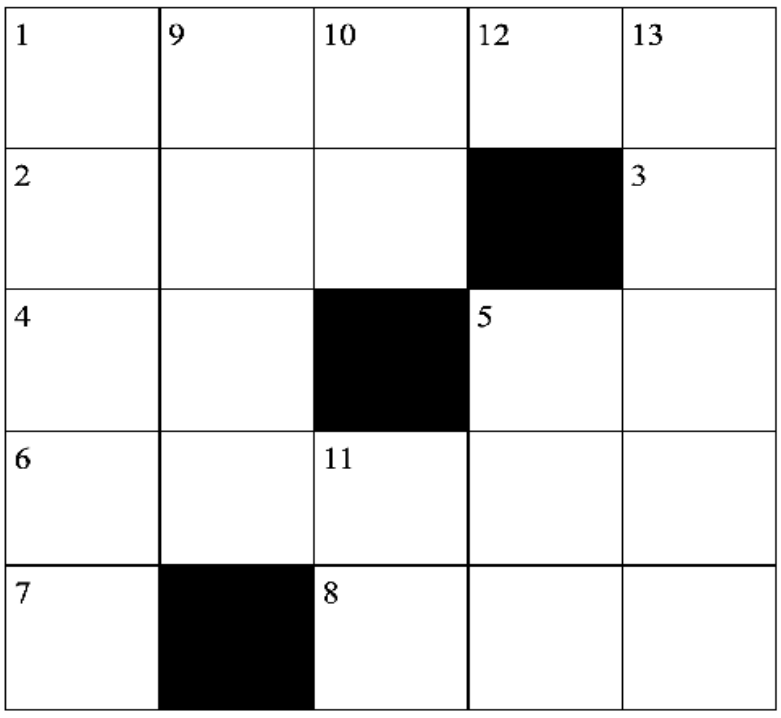
Back-to-school mini crosswords

Aritra Ray, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ACROSS
1. Staple part of the PHS freshman experience, first word
2. Hope you're not texting them…
3. Person making original post, to a Redditor
4. Dirt-cheap Chinese online shopping platform
5. PHS's version of lunch
6. Scrambled, 2000s British alt rock band; sounds eager

DOWN
1. Most skipped class at PHS?
5. Cliché advice: ___ you!
7. More than asked for
8. Most common letter
9. Surprised interjection
10. Inhabitant of the "City of Seven Hills"
11. To throw up





ACROSS
1. State transition going from liquid state to gaseous state
2. ___-al-Fitr
3. TB_
4. Initials of female Tower advisor
5. Gym class, for short
6. Something relationships often want to go without
7. Letter often ending a plural noun
8. Reason to call out of school

DOWN
1. Signifying transition between classes; turned off during testing
5. First 3 letters of famous federal need-based financial aid grant
9. Last 4 letters of authentic Japanese matcha shop in Princeton, opened in 2025
10. Item needed to enter PHS
11. Attracted to both genders
12. Take the _
13. ExxonMobill, Chevron, BP, Valero, _____

Student Takes: What is your preferred way to read?

Aariyana Patel, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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SPORTS

Homecoming: No longer 'under the lights'

Kyle Chen, STAFF WRITER
Winston Jung and **Kailey Yun**, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS



photos: **Winston Jung**

After being disqualified from last year's playoffs, the PHS football team is trying to make the playoffs once more. The rescheduled homecoming game against Trenton on October 17 will be crucial in determining guaranteeing a spot and determining their seeding once the playoffs start.

The Homecoming football game is often seen as a Friday night tradition, played under stadium lights after the sun has set. However, PHS's rendition of homecoming this year will look markedly different. Originally scheduled to be played last weekend on September 26, the game was delayed until October 17 due to heavy rain. Both game dates scheduled Homecoming for a Saturday afternoon, deviating from the Friday night tradition.

According to Principal Cecilia Birge, the decision was a result of scheduling conflicts, who attributed the change to a combination of factors beyond the unforseen weather.

"There was a significant referee shortage in the state," said Birge. "So that's what drove the decision to make it into Saturday."

The decision to move kickoff to the daytime was largely the product of budget constraints. Coordinating the necessary support from volunteers, teachers, and custodial staff, paired with the event's steep financial price tag, made the logistics of a Friday night game unsustainable, according to both PHS Director of Athletics Brian Dzbenski and Birge. Dzbenski estimated the price tag of the single night game to be approximately $26,000.

"There are lots of moving parts when you organize a community-wide event, and we simply just couldn't pull it off from a logistic perspective," said Birge. "Lights [have become] a lot more expensive...and we always rent lights."

Although the daytime setting might alleviate financial pressures, the change in atmosphere has become a concern for the team. According to quarterback Quinton deFaria '28, the hype around Homecoming is a big moment for the team, especially the seniors.

"I bet the [seniors are] way more frustrated than I am." said deFaria. "It's their last chance to really have a Friday night [game] at home, and I bet it's frustrating for them because they've had some good seasons coming into it."

Indeed, the climate of the game won't just be noticeable to the players; rather, it will force supporters to adapt.

"It's one of the bigger games of the year for us," said deFaria. "It's [this] kind of the atmosphere that [players and fans] feel. Because, you know, under the lights at a home game when you have the whole school in the stands, it's one of the most surreal feelings, to be honest."

In the future, there is still a possibility that Homecoming will return to the traditional nighttime kickoff.

"Next year, we'll have a better chance to get a night event," said Birge. "But, beyond that, I don't know because each year the schedule changes...we [also] continue to struggle with budget constraints and transportation costs."

Similar to the changes surrounding the game, the events proceeding the game have also been significantly modified. In the past, PHS hosted a dance for students to attend after the game, a nearly universal tradition across high schools in the country. However, this year will feature events such as a Spikeball tournament and a movie, both of which will be organized by our Student Council. Shaan Patel '29, the sophomore class president, explains that the decision, however, isn't related to costs.

"In recent years, we struggled heavily with getting students from all four grades to come," said Patel. "It is very heavily freshman populated, and some sophomores will come. But besides that, juniors and seniors don't really find it compelling."

Therefore, they decided to redirect their efforts into new events. Specifically, they believe that the movie will be a success amongst the student body.

"We're putting flyers around that promote both the homecoming football game and the movie itself," said Patel "I don't think there's a solid replacement to the Friday night football game…but I think this is very close second. If we can find a way to get a lot of people there, then it can be just as good for our school spirit and our collaboration across all four grades."

Ultimately, the longstanding Homecoming tradition still attempts to live on at PHS—albeit in a new form. The new date, October 17, will coincide also with the previously planned Senior Day, meaning that seniors will experience a unique combination of events for Homecoming game.While the football team hopes that the game returns under the lights, they will still be depending on the community to turn out and show their support.

"When you see the true school spirit that comes out of it ... it's a chance for the whole school to come together as one and just support a team that's been working really hard," said deFaria.

$26,000

The total cost of the Homecoming game in 2025 including staff, added security, and lights rental



Langsdon Hinds '27 will seek to win his final home game, despite the lack of the traditional stadium lights.



After celebrating a touchdown, deFaria jogs back up the field during a game against Robbinsville on September 10th.

How the new phone ban has affected student-athletes

Joshua Huang, SPORTS CO-EDITOR
Johanna Kraft, STAFF WRITER
Meilan Hagt, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

At PHS, student-athletes must be able to transition from the classroom to practice within minutes, balance academics and their sport, and be responsible for maintaining their health. Consequently, strong communication is essential, whether that be in the form of notifying teachers about games or meets beforehand, scheduling their day, or adapting to last minute changes. Unfortunately, the new statewide phone ban has forced student-athletes to change the way they communicate.

> "The new statewide phone ban has forced student-athletes to change the way they communicate.

Before the ban, team communication was simple. If practice details were changed, a captain or coach could send a message out. If athletes needed to know what to wear, someone could text the team. If there was a team bonding activity, everyone could be notified almost immediately. Now, much of that communication is done through email or has to wait until the end of the school day. That might not sound like a huge problem, but when it comes to organizing an entire team, it can become one.

"We email now, which just sucks because no one ever sees it, and we always have to remind people in person, which is just so stunting in all our plans, [for example] team bonding," said Camila Barbosa '27.

Moreover, Director of Athletics Brian Dzbenski explains that technology issues hinder communication for sports that have more participants.

"We're working right now, with tech support, on enabling our coaches to do mass emails," said Dzbenski. "Because of phishing, we are limited to 50 [recipients], so coaches can't actually email the whole team and parents."

Indeed, Rio Giamerese '27 explains that the football team was impacted by these technical difficulties during the first week of school.

"Our coach had difficulty with his emails," said Giamerese. "He could not send emails out, so everyone really didn't know what was happening."

The phone ban has also affected aspects of sports that make practices and games special for players. Barbosa explained that her team uses psyches, or team activities meant to build excitement and team spirit.

"It's been a very important part of our team culture," said Barbosa. "The fact that we're not able to take pictures and post … makes the team environment [less] together."

Christine Giacino, the PHS girls soccer coach, has a different perspective. She has found the ban to be mostly positive because of the negative effects phones have on student-athletes.

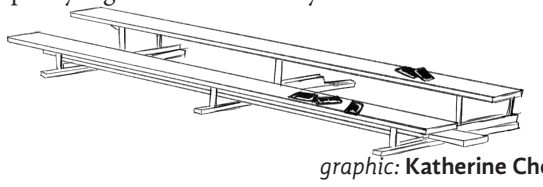
"I think it's a big distraction for kids, so I think that not having their phones is just kind of taking that temptation away and making it a lot easier to focus on school and what they actually should be doing throughout the day," said Giacino.

Furthermore, Dzbenski adds to this perspective, arguing that the phone ban wasn't implemented solely for educational reasons.

"Students believe that the phone ban occurred because in education it was just seen as a distraction to learning," said Dzbenski. "But that's not really encompassing the full reason why the phone ban occurred. I think that it comes down to excessive screen time and your mental health and [..] how that affects you over the course of your life."

Essentially, the absence of phones can strengthen focus by removing a primary distraction as well as improving mental health broadly.

However, there are still downsides to the ban. As aforementioned, communication has been heavily compromised, at least for the near future, affecting camaraderie, efficiency, and clarity. Unfortunately, the phone ban is here to stay and athletes must learn to adapt to a policy regardless of how they feel about it.



graphic: **Katherine Chen**

The college sports recruiting process

Meredith Fan and **Johanna Kraft**, STAFF WRITER

For high school athletes, playing a sport in college can seem like a simple goal: work hard, get better, reach out to coaches, get recruited. In reality, the college recruiting process can start years before an athlete ever steps onto a college field or court. Between tournaments, emails, visits, academics and contacting coaches, athletes have to figure out how to stand out in their sport while also balancing their demanding high school schedules.

For squash player Eric Zhang '27, ranked third in the state, the idea of playing in college started early. His parents originally put him into squash partly because they thought it could help with college admissions, but Zhang said he did not seriously consider being recruited until his freshman year.

"I love competing," said Zhang. "I love practicing. I love playing, and I guess I was just good enough to play at the college level, so why not."

Zhang's recruiting process officially finished around October of his junior year. Looking back, he said much of the process involved communicating with coaches. He was in contact with six or seven coaches at the time, usually having a call with each coach about once every two weeks. Eventually, he went on several college visits that lasted one or two days.

For Zhang, getting noticed by coaches came down to three main things: competing at high level tournaments, attending college showcase camps, and reaching out to schools himself.

"I went to two summer camps [to] meet the coaches and see the campus, and then lastly, once recruiting started, I emailed all of the prospective schools that I wanted to attend," said Zhang.

Tournaments, rankings, and statistics were especially important for Zhang because coaches often attend competitions looking for potential recruits. He said that having strong results can help athletes stand out when coaches are deciding who they want to recruit.

Academics are another major part of the process. Zhang mainly spoke with Ivy League schools, where grades and test scores can play an especially important role.

"For most schools, your academics are more of a threshold that you have to meet rather than a differentiating factor," said Zhang.

While Zhang has already completed the recruiting process, now commited to Yale University, Greta Knierim '27 is still working through it. Although Knierim also plays basketball and volleyball, she plans on committing to play softball.

After suffering a major knee injury as a freshman, she began thinking more seriously about playing softball in college, but she did not really start focusing on recruiting until the summer before her junior year, a choice that she regrets in hindsight.

"Start now. If you're a freshman, [or] if you're a sophomore, start now," said Knierim.

One of the biggest lessons Knierim has learned is the importance of exposure. She said playing in large showcases and attending prospect camps can make a difference because college coaches and recruiters are more likely to be at those events.

She also emphasized the importance of consistently communicating with coaches. Knierim uses recruiting platforms such as Sports Recruits and Field Level, along with email and social media, to contact and stay connected with coaches.

"Consistency is definitely key," said Knierim. "People aren't going to notice you, or colleges aren't going to reach out to you, if you email them once a month. I'm talking twice a week, once a week, for four weeks consistently."

The process can also be difficult mentally, forcing athletes to be pragmatic about which schools are actually possibilities. She originally hoped to play at the University of Florida, but being a New Jersey athlete made regularly attending showcases and camps in Florida difficult.

"Being realistic, I want[ed] to go to the University of Florida for softball," said Knierim. "That's an SEC school in Florida, it's D1 … [but] the more I [went through] my recruitment process, I was like 'yeah, this is not gonna work.'"



photo: **Katherine Chen**

Zhang has been recruited to play squash for Yale University.

Both athletes agreed that academics should not be forgotten while pursuing athletics. Knierim said that athletes need to be strong both academically and athletically, while Zhang found that academics were one of the biggest factors in his eventual college decision.

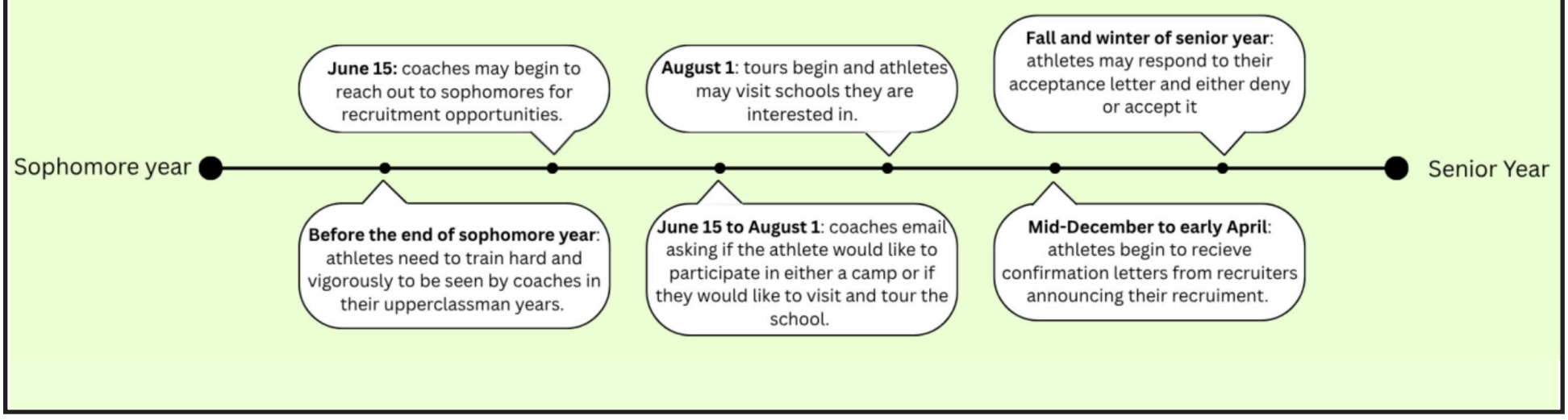
Although recruiting can feel overwhelming, Zhang said there is little reason for athletes who have the ability to play in college not to try.

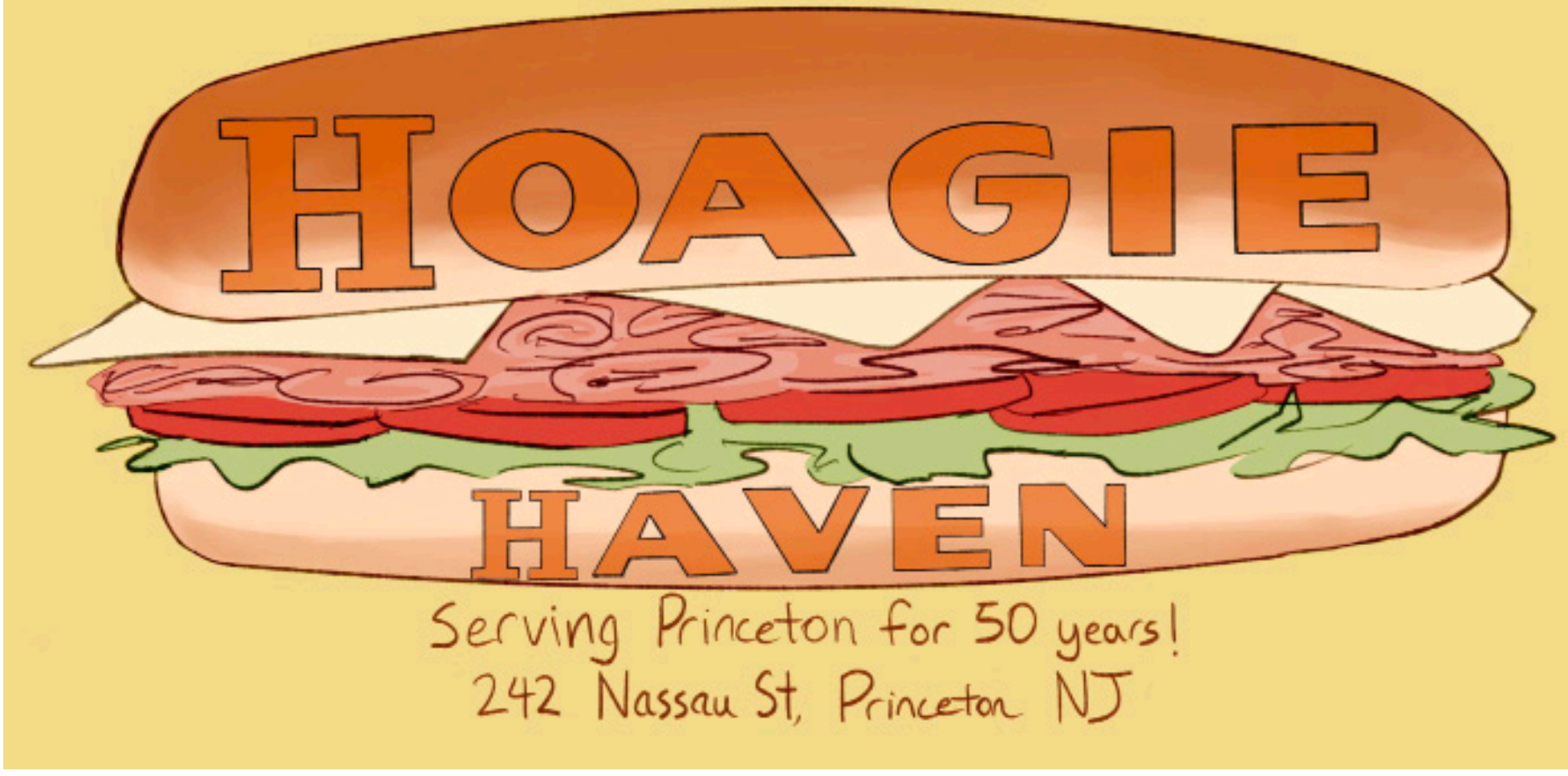
"I [would] say [just] go for it. There's nothing to lose, there's really no risk at all, so why not just try? Even if you change your mind, no one's forcing you to play," said Zhang.

For younger athletes, the recruiting process is not something that has to be figured out all at once. It can begin with simply researching schools, improving their sport, keeping their grades up and learning how to communicate with coaches. As athletes get older, their list of potential schools can become smaller and more realistic.

College recruiting may look different for every athlete, but the same basic idea remains: preparation matters. Starting early, staying consistent, and finding the right balance between academics and athletics can make the process much more manageable.

Mapping out the college sports recruiting process





The role of superstition in athletes' lives

Aarav Patel, STAFF WRITER
Mira Sethuraman and **Haley Oakman**,
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

For many athletes, the match does not start when the whistle blows — instead, they start mentally and physically preparing for a game hours or even days beforehand. Habits such as eating nutritious foods and doing recovery exercises mostly constitute this preparation. However, many athletes have also developed rituals or routines that seem to have no apparent benefit to their matches. For example, Lebron James routinely tossed a handful of chalk into the air at the scorer's table before games started. Other athletes, such as former MLB relief pitcher Turk Wendell, had quirkier routines: Wendell would brush his teeth in the dugout between innings.

These rituals may appear strange to others, but they can serve an important role in a player's mental state during a game. Through a psychological system known as priming, rituals create a sense of focus and control while also stimulating muscle memory in athletes. They also assist in managing an athlete's nerves when going into a game. For Chloe Rice '29, drinking a cup of water before a match helps calm her.

"It helps the outcome of the match, because if I'm more nervous during the match, I'm more likely to mess up. But if I'm more calm then I'll feel and play better," said Rice.

In order to be effective, participants must perform rituals consistently. According to a 2019 Colombia study by Alana Mendelsohn, the consistency builds neural pathways in an athlete's brain and allows them to enter "flow state" quickly. It also makes athletes more productive during their training by reducing the friction it takes to start a task

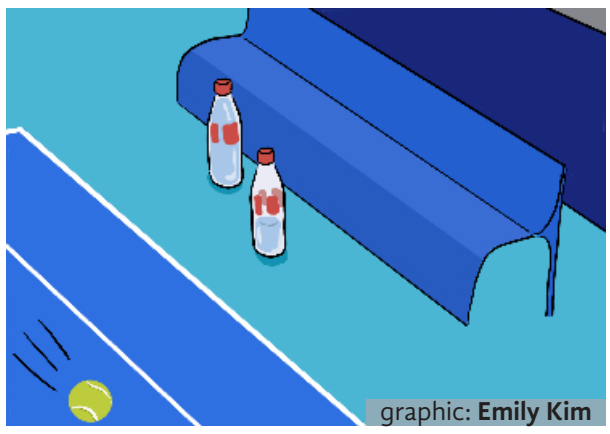
"I think people like habits. I think habits can form really good structures for athletes," said Girls Basketball and Lacrosse Coach Steffanie Shoop. "For example, when they eat, when they work out, when they sleep, when they drink, things like that, I think that's just an extension of it."

Rituals and routines are not always performed individually however. The New Zealand national rugby team performs a traditional ceremonial performance called the Haka that comes from the indigenous people of Māori before every international game. The purpose of team rituals differs from the purpose of individual ones because team rituals also boost overall morale and increase chemistry between players. They could also work to intimidate the other teams.

"We have a couple pre-match rituals, but probably my favorite one is when we all get on one knee we pray, and then Coach Gallagher says 'Here we go, Tigers' as we all get up, that's pretty hype in the locker room," said Simon Hancock '29.

Although these routines might not directly improve an athlete's physical ability, many players feel that they indirectly lead to a better performance. The predictability of a routine usually gives players a sense of control, and because the outcome of a game is usually anything but predictable, it can help build up their confidence as well. Repeating the same actions before a competition can also help athletes transition from their everyday life to a more competitive mindset.

Some athletes also have superstitions that they carry with them to game day. These superstitions could include only wearing certain colored socks for matches or having



graphic: **Emily Kim**

a lucky charm or lucky water bottle. Superstitions serve the same purpose as rituals in that they provide a sense of control for athletes. However, superstitions usually are not actions and can sometimes be more eccentric than rituals.

"I have two things. I got a lucky pair of goggles that I wear, and they're my first mirrored goggles that I wore when I got second in states," said Michael Chorba '27. "And a charm that I have is a bracelet that my grandma gave me before I got third in states."

While these rituals and superstitions may appear superfluous, they are a powerful tool for athletes looking to build focus and consistency. They also bring teams closer together both on and off the field, proving their versatility and effectiveness.

Upcoming games

Michael Yang, SPORTS CO-EDITOR

Girls Soccer
10/01/26 4:00 p.m.
v. Hightstown HS (H)

Boys Soccer
10/01/26 4:00 p.m.
@ Hightstown HS

Cross Country
10/03/26 9:00 a.m.
@ Holmdel Park

Girls Tennis
10/01/26 4:00 p.m.
@ Princeton Day

Girls Volleyball
10/03/26 3:00 p.m.
@ Immaculate Heart

Girls Field Hockey
10/02/26 4:00 p.m.
@ Princeton Day

Football
10/01/26 6:00 p.m.
@ Northern Burlington



Coach's Corner

Isaac Son, STAFF WRITER
Bella Feng and **Hannah Chang**, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Cross Country



photo: **Bella Feng**

"I think our goal is to provide an environment where each of our athletes has the ability to grow into the athlete they hope they want to be. The other goal is for them to try to realize that they're more capable than maybe they thought when they came in."

- James Smirk

Girl's Soccer



photo: **Hannah Chang**

"I just think they should be enjoying soccer. That's my biggest takeaway. Just, like, it shouldn't be stressful. It's always just a game, no matter how the competition is."

- Derek Connors

Volleyball



photo: **Bella Feng**

"I think everyone on varsity, their goal is a fourth state championship. That is always the bar. It's what we've done over the past three."

- Patricia Manhart

Girl's Tennis



photo: **Hannah Chang**

"Don't take losses to heart and try to learn from them and get better, but that they shouldn't ruin your day, your life. You have other pieces of who you are and it should help make you stronger and better, and you should learn from it."

- Sarah Hibbert

Football

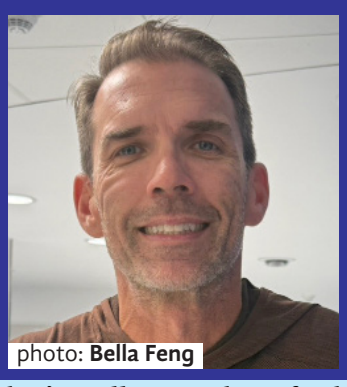


photo: **Bella Feng**

"What's really nice about football is that we can really focus, get better during the week, offensively, defensively, and special teams, and then try to put it all together on a Friday or a Saturday."

- Charles Gallagher

Cheerleading



photo: **Hannah Chang**

"One of the biggest changes that occurs each year is the coming in of new freshmen who usually don't have much experience in cheerleading...which means we have to prepare them."

- Veronica Foreman

Field Hockey



"My primary goal is for everyone to get along and have a good time. That's number one, and I think that, in my experience ... that tends to result in success on a scoreboard."

- Heather Serverson

Searching for the four-peat: PHS volleyball returns for more

Jonina Hou, STAFF WRITER
Kelly Cenci and **Sakinah Lateef**, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Entering the 2026 season as the NJSIAA Group 3 State Champions for the third consecutive year, the PHS volleyball team is looking to continue their streak by adding a fourth title to the mix.

Although a fourth title would make them one of the most successful programs in the area in recent years, the district has overlooked the program since its inception, when players had to pay for equipment out of pocket.

They must quickly rebuild after they lost key players Naomi Lygas '26, Kaelin Bobetich '26, and Charlotte Woods '26. Despite their importance, the team possessed sufficient depth across the two teams, allowing other players to step up. For instance, senior Captain Sedona Arminio '27 highlights Lily Cao '28, who has seen her responsibilities on the court shift this season.

"I'm really excited to see Lily play all-around outside," said Arminio. "Last year, she only played [in the] back row and it's very interesting to see her completely take on this big role of being an all-around outside, which is a huge responsibility."

Beyond individual changes, the team is adopting a change in their rotation system, a crucial component in balancing offense and defense. Specifically, the rotation system now plays to the strengths of setters Ruhi Zhou '30 and Leah Wang '28.



photo: **Noah Lebowitz**

(L-R) Cao, Camila Barbosa '27, Claire Hua '27, Wang, Arminio, and Zoe Ghaim '28 in a huddle during a match at home versus Lawrenceville.

"Compared to last year, we only had one setter on the court, which is called a 5–1 rotation where we have one setter who would play all six rotations on the court," said Cao. "This year, however, we're running a 6–2 rotation where we have two setters and both our setters will always stay in the back row. This is mainly because our setters this year are on the shorter side and they have really strong defense, which is why we keep them in the back row."

While losing their stars from last year has been acknowledged as a loss for the team, their absence has opened up new opportunities for variety.

"Especially this year, a lot of the upperclassmen and everyone on the team in general has stepped up to take on these positions, and everyone on the team has playing time this year," said Cao. "I think having everyone be able to step up and be able to play on the team with everyone has allowed us to diversify our offense so that we don't just have to rely on one or two people on the team and we can all really connect with each other."

To help facilitate these position changes, the team is emphasizing team chemistry to help acclimate both new team members and returning upperclassmen to their new responsibilities.

"Everyone is trying out different positions and different spots and learning to work with a whole new team," said Arminio. "Right now we're really working on communication and team bonding. We're doing a lot of dinners and after-game lunches to really form those connections."

Beyond changes within the team, their schedule reflects the team's desire for a fourth title with the inclusion of more games against opponents outside of the Burlington County Scholastic League (BCSL), the conference that the Princeton volleyball team plays in.

"We've got big out-of-conference games [against teams like] Westfield, Williamstown, [and] Morristown, all those games go beyond the BCSL," said Head Coach Patricia Manhart. "I'd love to do well during [those games] because that kind of shows how we compare to people from other parts of the state."

On the other hand, the team is also looking ahead toward next season. Currently, six of the 11 members on the varsity team are seniors, meaning that the program will graduate more than half of its lineup. Although juniors like Cao have shown their ability to step up, there are no sophomores on the varsity roster.

"I think that [the lack of sophomores will] impact the team's connection, especially on varsity, since there is a gap between JV and varsity and how it works," said Cao. "I think it's really important that there are enough upperclassmen, especially next year, that are able to help the upcoming sophomores come into program as well and and be able to adjust to high school and the team overall, and I think that having that gap of a year hurts the team a little bit."



photo: **Noah Lebowitz**

Lily Cao '28 serves the ball in a home game versus Lawrenceville.

Even though there may be concerns about upperclassmen helping underclassmen adjust, overall playing experience is not the greatest concern for a team like Princeton, which has benefitted from being more affluent.

"The fact that there are so many people in this town or area that are able to pay for playing experiences and opportunities outside of the regular season makes a huge difference," said Manhart. "It's hard to have the time and the resources and the ability to play outside of your high school team."

Regardless of concerns for next season or ambitions for a "four-peat," the team is also aiming to maintain a good record in their section. So far, they have accumulated six straight wins and no losses in the BCSL. Overall, the team is looking forward to having a very successful season, to build up a team with many new players, and above all, a potential fourth consecutive state title.

Athletes of the Month

Zachary Nelson ’27: football

Nathan Bansal, BUSINESS MANAGER
Cole Grainger, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



photo courtesy: **Chase Williams**

Despite sustaining various injuries throughout his career at PHS, Nelson has always made the most of each opportunity he’s been given, establishing himself as a key player.

Hearing Travis Petrone ’25 snap the football, tight end Zachary Nelson ’27 explodes down the field, bulldozing his way to the endzone. As the ball spirals toward him, he watches its path before snatching it out of the air as it dips in front of him.

“Smiles, smiles everywhere. Everybody was happy,” said Nelson.

In a 41-6 victory against Robbinsville in his sophomore year, Nelson’s first-quarter touchdown helped extend the team’s lead to 19-0, but that’s not why it’s Nelson’s favorite memory on the team.



photo courtesy: **Chase Williams**

Nelson calls a play, directing his teammates during a drill.

“My body’s really fragile, and I get injured a lot,” said Nelson. “Sophomore year, I got a concussion—I was out for three weeks. Last year, I broke a part of my hand—I was out for last year.”

Indeed, Nelson’s touchdown came during his first game back after the aforementioned concussion. Similarly, despite being unable to play, Nelson was still able to impress Head Coach Charles Gallagher with another aspect of his game: his dedication and commitment to the team.

“[After] he broke his hand last year, he came to every single one of our practices,” said Gallagher. “He ended up taping [his hand] up, getting a cast, [and] saying, ‘Coach, I can still play.’ You get banged up pretty seriously [in football]—your football season could be over—[yet], he made it back in the last couple weeks to play and was great.”

Although Nelson isn’t one of the senior captains on the team, it hasn’t prevented him from setting a strong example with younger players. For instance, Sam Carter ’29, the tight end behind Nelson on the depth chart, regards Nelson highly.

“[Nelson] is a real leader,” said Carter. “He gives good advice; he’s very willing to interact with players and doesn’t act like he’s better than the freshman and sophomores. He is grounded on a real level with everyone else.”

However, Nelson doesn’t just lead with his words, he also is willing to put in the work needed to earn his place on the team.



photo courtesy: **Chase Williams**

Nelson has been commended for his work ethic, giving each practice his full effort.

“I was supposed to be a receiver, but freshman year I wasn’t that athletic,” said Nelson. “I took that personally, and in the off-season after freshman year, I did what I could. I got my speed up, I got stronger, and [the coaches] saw it.”

On the contrary, Gallagher remembers Nelson standing out from the rest of the freshman in his year.

“He had played the game, he knew how to tackle and how to hit guys,” said Gallagher. “Sometimes that takes a little bit of getting used to...but he came in much more acclimated than other freshmen.”

In any case, this only highlights Nelson’s strong mentality and work ethic. Specifically, this mentality has earned the respect of not just his peers but his coaches as well.

“Zach is just a good, humble young man that has been brought up the right way,” said Gallagher. “He does the little things... when no one’s watching. It just shows great character.”



photo courtesy: **Chase Williams**

Nelson discusses tactics with teammates Joseph Murray ’27 and Rio Giamarese ’27.

Earlier this month, Nelson finished with 3 total tackles and 2 receptions for 24 yards, demonstrating his versatility on the pitch.

“On the football field, we really depend on him,” said Gallagher, “He’s one of our premier players. He can catch, he can throw the football, even though we’ve never asked him to throw the football. He’s great at tackling. He’s kind of a utility knife.”

Although Nelson doesn’t intend on pursuing football in college, his example has made a lasting impact on the teammates he has played with, who will remember his dedication and leadership.

Helena Murray ’27: soccer

Chenxi Gao and RuoXi Yu, CONTRIBUING WRITERS



photo: **Winston Jung**

Throughout her time at PHS, Murray has established herself as both a reliable member of the team and a leader and role model for younger players.

Silence takes over the PHS crowd as an opposing team is making a strong attack, in search of a goal. They swarm the box, hoping to set up a shot, but Helena Murray ’27 is there to make a play. She sprints over to the ball and slides to make a tackle, stopping the momentum of the opposition and giving her team a needed reset.



photo: **Winston Jung**

Murray, who plays center back, sends a long pass from the back third, transitioning the team onto offense.

Murray was introduced to soccer at seven years old, beginning a connection with the sport that would continue throughout her childhood. Growing up, soccer was a big part of her family, which helped spark her own interest in the sport.

“I only started playing [soccer] because both of my older brothers played throughout high school and college,” Murray said. “Definitely my brothers and my older sister playing it got me really into it.”

After moving to Princeton in 2019, soccer became one of the first ways she made new friends. Through her local club team, she quickly built connections with her teammates that lasted beyond the field.

“It was honestly mostly about the team environment and the friends I made,” Murray said. “I’m still really good friends with some of the girls that I made on that team.”

Murray played on the PHS JV girls soccer team during her freshman year before earning a spot on varsity as a sophomore. Playing as a center back, she gradually became a steady presence on the Tigers’ defense. Since then, Head Coach Christine Giacino has watched her develop both as a player and teammate.

“My first impression [of Murray] was [that she was] a quieter sophomore, but now she’s really changed and grown into this amazing captain,” said Giacino.

As a senior captain, Murray takes an active role in communicating with her teammates on and off the field.

“Her confidence and her composure and calmness has really spread [to her teammates] through her kind personality,” said Giacino. “She’s very friendly to everyone she meets not only on the field. She welcomes the underclassmen [and] I think that just creates some better culture within our program.”

Leah O’Neill ’27 has played with Murray since freshman year. At first, a shy but friendly teammate, O’Neill has seen her grow to be more confident, vocal, and dependable on the field.

“She’s always super positive, and she’s always working her very hardest until the end of the game [and] the end of the practice,” said O’Neill.

That growth and consistency has made Murray someone O’Neill looks up to, despite the two being in the same grade.

“We’re the same age, but she’s a role model to me,” O’Neill said. “ I think she can also be a role model to the younger girls too.”



photo: **Winston Jung**

Murray drags the ball back as an opposing defender tackles her.

Murray has become more confident both on and off the field, and it taught her skills extending beyond the field.

“Through soccer, I’ve been able to find a space where I am able to talk to people [that] I wouldn’t usually [talk to],” Murray said. “It’s helped me be more outgoing and helped me with making friends and making connections.”

Her teammates have also seen that growth reflected in the way Murray supports the group during games and how she interacts with new players.

“At halftime, she always encourages us and motivates us for the second half,” said O’Neill. “And I think she really found her voice and grew more confident on the field and off the field. I remember her being a little bit more shy our freshman year, but she really came out of her shell.”

The sport has left a lasting impact on Murray’s life. From helping her build friendships after moving to Princeton to becoming a captain and leader on the field, soccer has played an important role in shaping who she is today.