

2026 IJEА NEWSPAPER & DIGITAL NEWS MEDIA CONTEST

DIVISION 3 INDIVIDUAL WINNERS — Enrollment 1,300 to 2,099

BEST ADVERTISEMENT

No entries in this category from Division 3 schools.

BEST ALTERNATIVE STORYTELLING

Place Name: First Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community High School
Entry Title: Keep it Rolling
Entry Credit: Anna Change
Judge Comment: Good Q&A. I loved the fast facts element to supplement the story as a whole.

Place Name: Second Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community High School
Entry Title: Century Mark
Entry Credit: Parker Maurer, Yusuf Abbed
Judge Comment: Good Q&A. Some of the technical wrestling terms took away from the understanding of the story, though.

Place Name: Third Place
Contestant Name: Washington Community High School
Entry Title: Q and A
Entry Credit: Isabella Rogers, Bella Sank
Judge Comment: Good Q&A. I liked the use of photos to help us know who said it.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST AUDIO JOURNALISM

Place Name: First Place
Contestant Name: West Chicago High School
Entry Title: [AUDIO] A singing success: the choir strikes again
Entry Credit: Ja'Nyah Villa, Milly Mora-Zarco

Judge Comment: Excellent structure and production—but watch grammar/delivery. (“Has ran around”; and “—WEGO’s choir director, Brandon Fantozzi, said” isn’t broadcast style.)

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: [AUDIO] Beyond Bishop Gym: how WEGO gym class measures success

Entry Credit: Alyson Dusing

Judge Comment: Solid reporting and actuality. Work on scripting—so your words don’t sound like they were written and don’t sound like they’re being read. Contractions can help a lot!

Competition Comment: Two excellent contenders. This coulda been a tie.

BEST CENTERSPREAD STORY PACKAGE

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Small Shopping, Big Support

Entry Credit: Antonia Gomez, Angelina Madathil, Mia Williams, Rayaana Bhatti

Judge Comment: The coverage provides readers with a good sense of their community.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Chicago's Vibrant Venues

Entry Credit: Kara Lindenmuth, Yarden Amir

Judge Comment: The topic is a challenge in deciding which venues to cover in a city filled with them.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST EDITORIAL CARTOON

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Terminating Tylenol

Entry Credit: Noah Abero

Judge Comment: None

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: Stay informed, or stay comfortable?

Entry Credit: Milly Mora-Zarco Judge Comment: None
Place Name: Third Place Contestant Name: Maine West High School Entry Title: The Age of Beige Entry Credit: Noah Abero Judge Comment: None
Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST FEATURE STORY

Place Name: First Place Contestant Name: Normal Community High School Entry Title: Extra! Extra! Miguel Patiño-Díaz: Inside the transformation into 'Newsies' lead Entry Credit: Andrew Naour Judge Comment: Everything about this story, from a lead that pulled us right in, to the natural flow with beautiful transitions, to the ending, that brought the piece full circle, was well done. Good use of quotes and description to take us into a process most never understand.
Place Name: Second Place Contestant Name: West Chicago High School Entry Title: Latin musicians shape West Chicago's sound Entry Credit: Jason Merino, Leonel Villegas Judge Comment: Latin Musicians... Excellent story. Well written, good interviews and steady story-telling of students and passions unique to your school. Nice job!
Place Name: Third Place Contestant Name: Maine West High School Entry Title: Expanding Potential: Life Skill Students Provide a New Kind of Refreshment Entry Credit: Samantha Amar Judge Comment: Such a perfect feature writing topic, relevant to your school and filled with detail. Provides a picture of these students and their experiences. Nice job!
Place Name: Honorable Mention Contestant Name: Washington Community High School Entry Title: Game Club involves strategy, friendly comp Entry Credit: Adam Eid Judge Comment: Nice story about something specific to your school. Good feature lead and excellent interviews. Perhaps bringing the story back to the sights and sounds of the

club would have been a nice ending, a frame for the piece. Just curious: Is the librarian a fan of the club?

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: Dragon for dinner: a Dungeons & Dragons tale

Entry Credit: Ja'Nyah Villa

Judge Comment: Cute feature story with good relevance to your school. Good lead, nice tone, and solid interviews. Showed some fun personality, both of the teachers and others.

Competition Comment: There were some really fun stories that did not make the final cut. A strong field. Two notes for the advisers to remind the reporters: some sources important to the story were not identified in relevance to the schools, i.e., were they teachers or community members or what?? We need more than just a name. Also, avoid editorializing. It might be the best event on earth or a controversial issue, but let your reader decide by the sources or the information you present.

BEST FRONT-PAGE DESIGN

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Volume Up (Special Issue)

Entry Credit: Maddie Rowland, Noah Abero

Judge Comment: Truly fantastic; great dynamic illustration; an incredible example of alternative mag design; keep it up

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Oct. 8

Entry Credit: David Johnson, Siya Iyer

Judge Comment: Really clean page; super engaging photos; good dominance; decrease line spacing in headlines/decks to limit distracting white space

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Slice of Holiday Favorites

Entry Credit: Noah Abero, Maddie Rowland

Judge Comment: The choice to tilt the photos to fit the "slice" theme was a high-level choice; dynamic and fun to look at; great job

Place Name: Honorable Mention
Contestant Name: Washington Community High School
Entry Title: March 11
Entry Credit: David Johnson, Siya Iyer
Judge Comment: Good organization, but it looks a little cramped; give the LA more room to breathe; decrease line spacing in headlines/decks to limit distracting white space

Place Name: Honorable Mention
Contestant Name: Proviso East High School
Entry Title: "To protect our republic, we must save our democracy."
Entry Credit: Adrian Nunez
Judge Comment: Good teaser, but where's the story? Good quotes.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST HEADLINE

Place Name: First Place
Contestant Name: West Chicago High School
Entry Title: Wait 'til Thursday because Wednesday cereal is awful
Entry Credit: Jason Thunberg, Andrea Vazquez, Yurem Siu, Ny'Ara Tate
Judge Comment: So much is happening here, including the fact that the show "Wednesday" can be defined as a serial, so the audience MUST continue on to find out exactly what the content is all about -- exactly what a headline should do. Fantastic play on words.

Place Name: Second Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community West High School
Entry Title: Raising the bar: Normal West weight room transforms into an inclusive space for all students
Entry Credit: Ayushi Patel, Halle Blakney
Judge Comment: "Raising the bar" has both the obvious connection to weightlifting equipment but also to standards that continue to challenge society to be inclusive to all. Nicely done.

Place Name: Third Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community High School
Entry Title: Signed. Sealed. Dismantled.
Entry Credit: Malachi McCool
Judge Comment: The switch of the third word from the anticipated "Delivered" is

effectively jarring. We tend to create groups of 3, and it would be easy to gloss over the entirety of this grouping, too, but the unexpected forces the audience to invest, not ignore.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Almost Famous: 3 artists on the brink of a breakout

Entry Credit: Bryce Hickman

Judge Comment: "Almost Famous" is a great nod to the movie, which (of course) is about the music scene. Maybe a younger audience is aware of that already, maybe not, but it's a clever incorporation for those "in the know."

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Gateway to Broadway

Entry Credit: Nicole Kaner

Judge Comment: The repetition and rhyming pattern of the two connected words dovetails very well into the content of the story. The design element of the page does effectively lead the reader's eye into the headline placed in the center, giving it an additional sense of attraction for the reader.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: The Age of Beige: Modern parenting in a monochrome world

Entry Credit: Yarden-Alexandria Amir

Judge Comment: The rhyming of "age" and "beige" effectively catches the "ear" of the reader, and the play on the use of "monochrome" against "beige" combined with the alliteration of "modern" create a holistically-pleasing headline that serves very effectively as an entry point into the story.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST HUMOROUS COMMENTARY

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Low-rise legends

Entry Credit: Olivia Lively

Judge Comment: This is great! Such an original idea. Absolutely LOVED the "handbags, miniskirts and heels" line. This was such a delicious read -- keep on writing!

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: The glove that won't go away (and why it's kind of awesome)

Entry Credit: Leon Castañeda

Judge Comment: I laughed through the entire piece. My daughter is a senior at ISU and WE MUST go see this famous glove! Loved the details you provided to give this inanimate object a life of its own, Keep up the creative writing, seeing stories in the smallest details.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: [EDITORIAL] Turkey is overrated

Entry Credit: Milly Mora-Zarco

Judge Comment: Thank you for saying so well what we're all secretly thinking! You went beyond the usual ratings of Thanksgiving food stories with a fresh angle -- and you even had stats to back it up!

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST ILLUSTRATION

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Students weigh in on pros, cons of tracking apps

Entry Credit: Isabella Sank

Judge Comment: Eye-catching, strong art. The parent-art angles cleverly to the text, directing readers to the story. One object needs to be more dominant.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Resources, not enrollment, are driving the IHSA competitive gap

Entry Credit: Andrew Naour

Judge Comment: Clever collage of ideas that makes the point of the story clear and showcases the story. Lots to look at, maybe the IHSA logo should be more dominant.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Scares Screams & Smiles

Entry Credit: Noah Abero

Judge Comment: Nice, clear and simple illustration that leads reader to the text.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: Separate Rooms, Shared Questions

Entry Credit: Ruby Guerrero

Judge Comment: Interesting, clear art and clever ideas. The illustration is too dominant and the wording is difficult to read.

Competition Comment: Art is impressive in this category; the work shows an understanding of the story and directs the reader's attention skillfully. The work shows an understanding of writer's message. Some entries are cartoons NOT illustrations.

BEST IN-DEPTH NEWS STORY

Place Name: First Place
Contestant Name: West Chicago High School
Entry Title: More than grades: The pressure and expectations honors students face
Entry Credit: Ruby Guerrero
Judge Comment: This was a well-written take on a topic I don't see written about enough. Well researched and the interviews are what propelled this story.

Place Name: Second Place
Contestant Name: Maine West High School
Entry Title: Bear-ly Available
Entry Credit: Eric Pabian
Judge Comment: A future business reporter in the making! This had all the good bones of a well-researched, in-depth business news story. It did so in a succinct way and got out the how and why that trend was occurring.

Place Name: Third Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community West High School
Entry Title: Unit 5 enrollment planning: updates from the superintendent
Entry Credit: Raya Radoslavova, Aashna Patel, Mariana Monzon, Regina Aduku
Judge Comment: This is a great way to format a clearly evolving story on a topic important to the school community. It got to the heart of it and continued to expand upon that with updates.

Place Name: Honorable Mention
Contestant Name: Washington Community High School
Entry Title: School-wide celebration highlights success
Entry Credit: Ethan Coons, Siya Iyer
Judge Comment: I enjoyed reading this story and getting some of the behind-the-scenes insight from school leaders.

Place Name: Honorable Mention
Contestant Name: Washington Community High School
Entry Title: PE dress code enforced
Entry Credit: Annalee Sprenkle
Judge Comment: Renting shoes, that was a new one I'd never heard of before. Really

interesting piece on educators trying to help those students who genuinely forget while enforcing compliance on those who aren't taking the rules seriously.

Competition Comment: Very well-rounded stories all around that touch on a lot of interesting stories impacting their school communities.

BEST INFOGRAPHIC

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: Absolutely Not

Entry Credit: Alyson Dusing

Judge Comment: Nice infographic! The text is a little hard to read but the illustrations make up for it.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: From seed to soil

Entry Credit: Joey Murphy

Judge Comment: Simple but powerful and informative.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Executive order threatens protections across 112 million acres of U.S. Forests; Science teachers react

Entry Credit: Bryce Hickman

Judge Comment: The map is great! However, the Florida parks are interfering with the text below.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Levelling up the playing field

Entry Credit: Joseph Murphy, Noah Abero

Judge Comment: Nice graphic. I think there may be a couple of typos. (Levelling is the British spelling, and should Blinding Layer be Binding Layer?)

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: [INFOGRAPHIC] What's in your backpack?

Entry Credit: Romeo Alfaro

Judge Comment: Excellent, but technically it is stand-alone and should have been entered in the "Best Alternative Storytelling" category.

Competition Comment: All were very well done! Hard to pick a winner so I had to eliminate some on technicalities.

BEST MULTIMEDIA STORY PACKAGE

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: WEGO goes to Hollywood

Entry Credit: Alyson Dusing, Dennise Garcia, Janet Gonzalez, Ana Hurtado, Jason Thunberg, Ruby Guerrero, Joselyn Duran Corona, Roxanna Santiago, Rachel Knaack, Miley Pegg, Allison Komaniecki, Magdalena Schave, OJ Mercado, Flor Leal, Gabriella Castro, Ronyiah Newcombe, Alan Garcia, Kimberly Rangel

Judge Comment: well done. Great, thorough coverage of Homecoming activities. Lots of really good images. Video should have been edited tighter--don't need to hear that we missed the announcement of HC King

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Romcom Vs Reality

Entry Credit: Nicole Kaner

Judge Comment: interesting entertainment piece. good to survey students to get their opinion. Could have done more with the survey--

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Senior leads classmates in double dutch, sharing passion for jump roping [photo gallery]

Entry Credit: Bella Green

Judge Comment: good feature article--unfortunately it just ends. need to have a conclusion. What's the Why of the story--

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Global 'Hands Off' protests draw millions, including over 1,000 in Bloomington

Entry Credit: Malachi McCool

Judge Comment: None

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: Got brainrot?

Entry Credit: Jonathan Saucedo, Leo Mendez, Gabriella Castro, Damien Lopez

Judge Comment: None

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST NEWS OR FEATURE PHOTO

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Max S. Tessier Day

Entry Credit: Siya Iyer

Judge Comment: Strong work with this photo of a veteran receiving recognition. The emotional reaction of the veteran is powerful, and photographer's angle allows us to see the high school crowd's reactions, too. Well written caption adds clear information and details that help the reader know the story behind the image. Well done.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: In the final matchup, senior Brian Nguyen defeated Morales to win the game of rock-paper-scissors.

Entry Credit: Alyson Dusing

Judge Comment: A euphoric moment captured well in this crowd shot. Good work keeping the background clean, and using a shallow enough depth of field that the far background isn't distracting. Caption is informative and clear. Suggestion: when cropping for publication, take a moment to align the horizon to get rid of slanting horizon.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Every Drop Counts

Entry Credit: Isabella Rogers

Judge Comment: Blood drive photos are an important way to de-mystify the process and help school community consider participation in future drives — but it requires a photographer who will show up to shoot this, and also get the permissions of Red Cross staff and those donating. Good work here in this image.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: State Senator Karina Villa of the 25th District opened the celebrations with a speech, addressing residents who showed up to support fellow community members.

Entry Credit: Ruby Guerrero

Judge Comment: Nice work in showing up at this event and capturing the people who participated, with clear captions providing more info and detail.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST NEWS STORY

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Unit 5 enrollment study aims to create more equitable boundaries

Entry Credit: Audra Wolf, Vidushi Shukla

Judge Comment: A well-written news story. Good use of authoritative sources. Some good quotes, but try to avoid using so many partial or single-word quotes. Very well organized -- it's clear what was, what is and what's next. Very informative.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Freshmen benefit from exam waiver changes

Entry Credit: Siya Iyer

Judge Comment: This story is well written and well organized. Good flow of details. Good use of quotes. Numbering the criteria seems cluttered; punctuation is probably sufficient. Good, solid news article about a topic relevant to your audience.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Before and after school, C-lot chaos continues

Entry Credit: Kara Lindenmuth

Judge Comment: A well-written and well-organized news story with clear relevance to your audience. Good use of quotes, student and admin. Take care with spellings of names (O'Malley/O'Mally) and be mindful of style (e.g. single quote marks only within other quotations).

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Investing in Local Prosperity

Entry Credit: David Tomov

Judge Comment: A solid news story about an ongoing issue with clear relevance to your audience. Lots of great quotes to support your own survey data. A very dense story on the page; your paragraphs run long, which detracts a bit from reader-friendliness. Closed quotes missing from the last sentence.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Proposed 1% sales tax would fund Unit 5 repairs, relieve property taxes

Entry Credit: Beatrix Alvarez, Audra Wolf, Vidushi Shukla

Judge Comment: A decently written news story with a few style hiccups that affect readability. Be mindful of comma placement. Avoid fragments like "Something Unit 5 Education Association President Mrs. Julie Hagler confirmed" and "Enhanced school safety. Additional mental health support. Modernized classrooms. Relieved property taxes," the latter of which reads like a "key takeaways" sidebar. Also, constructions like "\$28 to

\$29 million" --to be accurate, need to say million both times. Greater attention to detail will make good efforts great ones. That said -- very good use of quotes, facts and data.

Competition Comment: The top winners in this division delivered well-organized, informative articles with great details relevant to their audiences. Stories built around surveys and data are impressive but should take care not to overwhelm the narrative.

BEST OVERALL DESIGN

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Volume Up (Special Issue)

Entry Credit: Noah Abero, Antonia Gomez, Chase Nelson, David Tomov, Eric Pabian, Evelyn Mau, Jakub Urban, Joey Murphy, Kara Lindenmuth, Lazar Mitic, Lily Ulbert, Maddie Rowland, Nicole Kaner, Piper Taccona, Sammi Amar, Yarden Amir, Lily Ngo, Nejra Golic, Macaria Mendoza

Judge Comment: SO GOOD! Excellent flow, dynamic design, fun yet mature choices; really something to be proud of

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Warriors look for HOCO VICTORY

Entry Credit: Noah Abero, Antonia Gomez, Chase Nelson, David Tomov, Eric Pabian, Evelyn Mau, Jakub Urban, Joey Murphy, Kara Lindenmuth, Lazar Mitic, Lily Ulbert, Maddie Rowland, Nicole Kaner, Piper Taccona, Sammi Amar, Yarden Alexandria, Abby Scott

Judge Comment: Really good use of different fonts together to direct the reader's attention to important elements; demonstrates clear understanding of dominance; fun yet mature choices once again; keep up the good work!

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST PERSONALITY PROFILE

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community West High School

Entry Title: Not just a run: Normal West safety monitor commits to safety for every child through St. Jude run

Entry Credit: Jo Brown, Regina Aduku, Mariana Monzon

Judge Comment: This profile of a hall monitor and coach who is also a runner for St. Jude's Children's Hospital humanizes the subject by delving extensively into her years of

running from Memphis to Peoria, helping her team to raise millions of dollars. The story works through carefully reported facts and details and strong storytelling.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: A final bow on the wire

Entry Credit: Olivia Lively

Judge Comment: This interview with a high wire performer at the ISU Gamma Phi Circus uses considered and open-ended questions to draw the subject into a detailed exploration of her aerial life while a full-time college student.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Bovenkerk's Bears connection fits in the palm of his hand

Entry Credit: Inkspot Staff

Judge Comment: This profile uses a treasured object (an old football card) as the center of a family story of a teacher whose great uncle was an All Pro and a Chicago Bear. The story is aesthetically strong with an emotional core clear from the start.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Local weatherman retires after 38 years

Entry Credit: Siya Iyer

Judge Comment: This story opens by recalling the day a tornado hit Washington, IL. It uses that much-remembered news story to tell about a weatherman so devoted to his work that his "adrenaline starts pumping" when storms blow up. This is an engaged profile with an eye to what makes a career matter.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST PHOTO GALLERY OR PHOTO SLIDESHOW

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: [PHOTO ESSAY] One win away: WEGO wrestlers compete at IHSA State

Entry Credit: Cesar Munoz

Judge Comment: Outstanding sports photography! Excellent action shots. Nice variety. This gallery really tells a story! Nice job!

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Friday Night Frames

Entry Credit: Lyra Townsend

Judge Comment: This is really a collection of galleries. I focused on the strongest of the galleries, Week 5 (58-6 victory). Great variety of shots. Loved the low angle on several of the action photos. This gallery in particular really told a story well.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: [PHOTO ESSAY] Rain, cheers, and grit: Wildcats bounce back against Ridgewood

Entry Credit: Joselyn Duran Corona

Judge Comment: Each photo in isolation was well composed and impressive, but when viewed as a gallery there's a lot of repetition here. Many of the photos are from the same distance and angle, and many point in the same direction. Given the similar look of many of the shots, the gallery would have been stronger with fewer photos overall and the inclusion of at least one or two good closeups.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Ironmen open season with balanced offense, stifling defense in win over Richwoods [photo gallery]

Entry Credit: Lyra Townsend

Judge Comment: Some really good action shots here. The gallery as a whole would have been stronger with a few more shots of non-game action — band, cheerleaders, fans.

Competition Comment: Strong entries overall! Keep photographing!

BEST PHOTO STORY

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: A glimpse of WCHS victories

Entry Credit: David Stevenart

Judge Comment: Good, strong photos and adequate captions. There's a little competition for dominance among the two left photos (top and middle): Remember, one photo should be clearly dominant to draw the reader's eye into the page.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Community Night highlights Panther spirit

Entry Credit: Annalee Sprenkle

Judge Comment: Good photos, showing range of aspects of community night. In terms of design: Avoid stacking photos, meaning we shouldn't be able to see a gutter of white space

from (almost) top to bottom. i like the long horizontal; good dominant photo in the grouping below head. Maybe a small copy block is needed for outsiders: What is community night?

Competition Comment: Photo quality is excellent across all divisions. The next step is to focus on the storytelling side of this category: Which photos best advance the story? And what copy is needed, either as a copy block or as captions, to make the story clear to the reader? Focus on both photos and story, and you'll have a winner.

BEST REVIEW

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: When focus beats the feed

Entry Credit: Andrew Naour

Judge Comment: I interviewed Damien Chazelle about "Whiplash," and I feel he would be impressed by this writer's skill in conveying the essence of his film through the prism of modern technology.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Photo Illustration Cinemojis [game] Arwen Georgas, Senior Staff Reporter Jan 13, 2026 Click to play the Inkspot's newest game, Cinemojis, where Arwen Georgas challenges you to figure out the title of a 2025 film using emoji clues. Continue Reading A dri

Entry Credit: Elijah Conda

Judge Comment: A marvelous review that zeroes in on specific aspects of the craft, such as sound design, to build its persuasive case.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: La Birria Loca delivers bold flavor – and the best tacos in town

Entry Credit: Josh Ptak, Lesly Correa

Judge Comment: My mouth was watering along with that of the writer while reading this enticingly immersive restaurant review.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: Trader Joe's chips are Thanksgiving stuffed into one bag

Entry Credit: Allison Komaniecki, Magdalena Schave, Flor Leal, Milly Mora-Zarco

Judge Comment: Never have I read a more thorough analysis of a potato chip brand's value to consumers.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Review: "Sunrise on the Reaping"

Entry Credit: Annabelle Hiel

Judge Comment: A fine assessment of what the writer perceived as being "more of the same" in the new "Hunger Games" book.

Competition Comment: You know a review is working its magic when you find yourself wanting to watch the movie or eat the food being analyzed, which happened to me multiple times while reading these impressive submissions.

BEST SERIOUS COMMENTARY

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: [OPINION] The loss of single-use bathrooms harms queer students

Entry Credit: Ja'Nyah Villa

Judge Comment: Raises an important issue — having to ask for a key is in itself a form of targeting or discrimination.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Opinion: WCHS needs an auditorium

Entry Credit: Annabelle Hiel

Judge Comment: Persuasive and well reasoned — I like the implication that the school got out of having to provide an auditorium by its support of the other facility.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: The cost of conformity

Entry Credit: Yarden-Alexandria Amir

Judge Comment: Tighter editing at top would solidify the embarrassment theme — otherwise good content and observations.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST SINGLE-PAGE STORY PACKAGE

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: What Actually Sounds Good?
Entry Credit: Jakub Urban
Judge Comment: I like the subheadline categories. They grab my attention.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST SPORTS COMMENTARY

Place Name: First Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community High School
Entry Title: Resources, not enrollment, are driving the IHSA competitive gap
Entry Credit: Andrew Naour
Judge Comment: The author wrote an excellent piece with solid facts to bolster his strong opinions. Well done.

Place Name: Second Place
Contestant Name: West Chicago High School
Entry Title: Was it really a 'good. better. best.' season?
Entry Credit: Jason Thunberg, Milly Mora-Zarco
Judge Comment: The writer recaps the Bears season with opinions on how it could have been better and what the team needs to do moving forward.

Place Name: Third Place
Contestant Name: West Chicago High School
Entry Title: Caitlin Clark: Her impact on women's sports
Entry Credit: Juliet Payton, Gabriella Castro
Judge Comment: The author uses good quotes from others to bolster their opinion on the impacts of Caitlin Clark and women's sports. Nice job.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST SPORTS FEATURE STORY

Place Name: First Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community High School
Entry Title: Jonah Roper's next pitch
Entry Credit: Zachary Knox-Doyle
Judge Comment: Very good story about a baseball pitcher's inspirational comeback from Tommy John surgery. Well written and informative. Effective use of a strong human interest

element to tell a bigger story about the history and current status of a now relatively (and surprisingly) common procedure.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community West High School

Entry Title: West girls basketball captain overcoming POTS diagnosis through vocal leadership

Entry Credit: Eden Hafermann, Taylor Delaere, Olivia Ziemer

Judge Comment: Very good feature about a student athlete excelling while also managing a sometimes debilitating chronic disorder. Very informative. Well written. Strong quotes.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: [IN-DEPTH] When pressure meets execution: The struggle of performance anxiety

Entry Credit: Juliet Payton, Miley Pegg, Ana Hurtado

Judge Comment: This informative story allows student athletes to recount their personal experiences with performance anxiety. Insightful comments from experts and coaches -- as well as statistics -- add broader context. Well written and well organized.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST SPORTS NEWS STORY

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community West High School

Entry Title: Local lacrosse team to be banned from 2027 postseason with IHSA ruling

Entry Credit: Ayushi Patel, Makinzee Boyer

Judge Comment: Great work telling the reader how the team will be impacted. Included all key details and balance about the decision.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: Ironmen basketball resets around speed, shooting, experience after Webber/Walker era

Entry Credit: Brady Phelps

Judge Comment: Loved the background to show how this team has changed for this season. In depth reporting and use of stats were effective as well.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community West High School

Entry Title: An 'electric' start and bench involvement drives the Wildcat girls basketball team to a 50-19 win against Rochester

Entry Credit: Eden Hafermann, Taylor Delaere, Olivia Ziemer, Ayushi Patel, Jayden Jones, Makinzee Boyer

Judge Comment: Good work telling the story of the game and how the players and coaches felt about it. Transitioned nicely into the rest of the season as well.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Boys Golf wins State runner-up after tie-breaker

Entry Credit: David Stevenart

Judge Comment: Good use of key moments from the journey to the state tournament to give context and help illustrate the journey this team went on.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: “Right to Play” Act set to take effect January 2026

Entry Credit: Ana Hurtado

Judge Comment: Great story about a change coming to the IHSA. Could have used a source that is in favor of the rule change allowing players to compete in both.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST SPORTS PHOTO

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Runaway Success

Entry Credit: Madelyn Rowland

Judge Comment: This flag football action shot puts the viewer right into the game, with a stacked foreground-to-background action moving right through the frame. Great image of an up-and-coming new girls sport, and for showcasing it with this kind of sports photography.

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Washington Community High School

Entry Title: Ace!

Entry Credit: Tristen Mullen

Judge Comment: Good volleyball action shot of a key game moment. Be aggressive in cropping for publication: come in from the edges to crop out any non-relevant image content to keep focus on the main subject. Also, take the time to write more informative sports captions — when a player scores an ace, tell us what the final game-set results were. Sports fans read captions!

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: Prepping for the Post-Season

Entry Credit: Toby Lee Juarez

Judge Comment: Solid in-game action shot that gives a sense of not only the game, but the fans in the stands. Keep an eye on focus for action shots, and keep shutter speed high to make sure that shots are tack-sharp.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: Shared Victory

Entry Credit: Caleb Salzman

Judge Comment: Lovely sports reaction moment on the field, telling a moment in an image. Watch shutter speed and focus, especially in non-action shots — use manual focus, and focus on subject's eyes when aperture is giving shallow focus options.

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: The Pass

Entry Credit: Caleb Salzman

Judge Comment: Nice action shot of flag football, at the moment of the pass. Great to see coverage of this new sport that's gaining in popularity. Be aggressive in cropping tightly — in this frame, about 50-60% is athlete's, and the rest is croppable turf and dark background. If you have access to a long lens, try shooting some close-up shots of individual players to give more attention to players' expressions.

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.

BEST STAFF EDITORIAL

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: Maine West High School

Entry Title: ACT faster

Entry Credit: Piper Taccona

Judge Comment: None

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: [EDITORIAL] Good idea, flawed execution: Improving the cell phone ban

Entry Credit: Gabriella Castro, Caleb Salzman, Miley Pegg, Juliet Payton, Ja'Nyah Villa

Judge Comment: None

Place Name: Third Place
Contestant Name: Maine West High School
Entry Title: Parking lot has a lot of problems
Entry Credit: Yarden-Alexandria Amir
Judge Comment: None

Place Name: Honorable Mention
Contestant Name: West Chicago High School
Entry Title: [EDITORIAL] Powerlifting at WEGO only needs one thing: action
Entry Credit: Aaron Hernandez Granados, Adrian Alanis, David Weber, Jeffrey Mendoza-Romero, Ja'Nyah Villa
Judge Comment: None

Place Name: Honorable Mention
Contestant Name: Washington Community High School
Entry Title: Students, staff make history
Entry Credit: Staff
Judge Comment: None

Competition Comment: I really liked this winning entry. It was timely and something that would be top of mind for most, if not all, students at Maine West. I like that it offered recommendations for the school and didn't shy away from getting at a topic that is very important for students' futures.

BEST USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Place Name: First Place
Contestant Name: West Chicago High School
Entry Title: Wildcat Chronicle
Entry Credit: Ronyiah Newcombe, Gabriella Castro, Miley Pegg, Rachel Knaack, Magdalena Schave, Cesar Munoz, Roxanna Santiago, Malaz Elamin, Juliet Payton, Tommy Weber
Judge Comment: None

Place Name: Second Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community High School
Entry Title: @NCHSinkspot
Entry Credit: Inkspot Staff
Judge Comment: None

Place Name: Third Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community High School
Entry Title: NCHS Inkspot

Entry Credit: Inkspot Staff
Judge Comment: None

Place Name: Honorable Mention
Contestant Name: Proviso East High School
Entry Title: Pirate News 209 (Instagram)
Entry Credit: Adrian Nunez, Savannah Roby, Zariah Hinkle, Jackeline Rodea, Bryonna Jackson, David Rojas, Mariel Morales-Montiel, Diana Villegas, Citlali Munguia, Leslie Aviles, Yeriel Villegas Ortiz, Brianna Jones, Lorenzo Jones, Camiya Marshall, Monae Williams, JaiBrion Smith, Zaryah Taylor
Judge Comment: None

Competition Comment: None.

BEST VIDEO STORY

Place Name: First Place
Contestant Name: Normal Community High School
Entry Title: Cell phone ban in schools? Community responds to proposed legislation [video]
Entry Credit: Bella Green, Audra Wolf, Leon Castañeda
Judge Comment: Easy to see why this won an IHSA sectional last year! Very well done. Hits all of the main points on the topic, with a good range of student and administration voices.

Place Name: Second Place
Contestant Name: West Chicago High School
Entry Title: [VIDEO] Leaving a legacy: The art of taxidermy
Entry Credit: Ja'Nyah Villa
Judge Comment: There was a lot of potential here that I don't think was fully realized. Very interesting subject, and the student who is featured has a great presence in front of the camera. The inclusion of his mother and one of his friends added nice perspectives to the story. However, I was a little puzzled by the video as a whole. I thought taxidermy was the art of preserving an animal's body by stuffing or mounting. I didn't think the preservation of bones counted as taxidermy. And I assumed from the title of the video that the student had learned to do taxidermy himself, but I didn't see any evidence of that. When he displayed a stuffed deer's head, was that an example of his taxidermy work? It's not clear. If the student DOES do taxidermy (as opposed to cleaning and preserving bones), then the video missed a golden opportunity to show us the student at work. And if he DOESN'T do taxidermy, then the title and written intro are misleading. Overall, this could have been a much stronger piece if those questions had been clarified.

Place Name: Third Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: [VIDEO] Cold recovery: Why athletes are turning to ice baths

Entry Credit: Gabriella Castro

Judge Comment: An extremely interesting and well-reported story that would have placed higher but for the following things: (1) At the 1:00 mark, the video goes black for about 10 seconds. What happened there? (2) The intro was a missed opportunity. Just as the journalist and athlete got into the ice bath, the video cut to another scene. I was waiting for the two students to react to the ice bath and engage in some repartee. We needed another 10 seconds for that intro to be truly effective. (3) The audio quality varied throughout the piece. In some places it was too loud and had too much treble, and in one instance (around the 2:00 mark) the narration overlapped with an interview soundbite. The audio as a whole should be consistent throughout in terms of volume and technical quality. (4) The lighting for the nurse segment was too dark. (5) The outro with the students in the ice bath missed the same opportunity for conversational back and forth as the intro. Had these issues been addressed, this video would have been a strong contender for first place. As it is, the video is solid, but with room for improvement. Overall, nice job!

Place Name: Honorable Mention

Contestant Name: Proviso East High School

Entry Title: Class of 2025—It's a Wrap!

Entry Credit: Elizabeth Mendoza, Alexandra Romero

Judge Comment: Fascinating look at a group of seniors reflecting on their final year at Proviso East. Well edited. Compelling personalities. Nicely done! Could have benefited from a shorter run time.

Competition Comment: Strong entries overall! See judge comments above for specific points and advice.

BEST WEBSITE

Place Name: First Place

Contestant Name: West Chicago High School

Entry Title: Wildcat Chronicle

Entry Credit: Gabriella Castro, Ja'Nyah Villa, Alyson Dusing, Miley Pegg, Ruby Guerrero, Ana Hurtado, Juliet Payton, Jason Thunberg, Milly Mora-Zarco, Aaron Hernandez Granados, Caleb Salzman, Joselyn Duran Corona, Leo Mendez, Audrey Rostowsky

Judge Comment: Header with the Latest Stories ticker & socials are well placed. Top skinny nav. is a great way to always include about, policies, letters options. Sticky nav with ham menu and scroll to top arrow work well. Main navigation is organized well. Thoughtful design layout and breaking out content on the homepage. Each landing page/section has its own style, which can sometimes be problematic, but in this case is cohesive and done well. SEO elements with internal/external linking, tagging, in-article photos with proper

credit/source, alt-text, optimized photos are present. Nice long-form story layout. Accessibility options for multi-language support. Interactivity throughout the site: vlogs, playlists, polls, recent comments module, story likes. Spotlights on artist/athlete of the week, sport events & scores modules, countdown to graduation, current playlist. Work on core web vitals and page load time. Well done, Wildcats!

Place Name: Second Place

Contestant Name: Normal Community High School

Entry Title: NCHS Inkspot

Entry Credit: Audra Wolf, Andrew Naour, Maddie Lane, Arwen Georgas, Brady Phelps, Vidushi Shukla, l'Aria Blackmon, Elijah Conda

Judge Comment: Header with social icons and ticker stand out with an organized navigation bar and sticky header on scroll. Nav drop down is nice. Sport results module works well, as does the newsletter sign-up form. Homepage may need some restructuring. Limit the rotator to just one section as they can slow down page load time. Possibly just latest stories in the rotator at the top, then utilize other module options below. Post layout looks consistent and some stories have internal/external links & info boxes, which help SEO. Additionally, try adding tags. Work on optimizing photos & graphics as this can also help with page load time. Good use of multimedia elements: livestream, videos, and podcasts. Good job, NCHS!

Competition Comment: See judge comments above.