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2026 National High School Coach of the Year

Local Fairmont Coach Wins National Award

West Des Moines, IA (June 3, 2026) — The National Speech & Debate Association (NSDA) is proud to announce Kathleen Walker from Fairmont High School is the 2026 NSDA High School Coach of the Year!

The prestigious James M. Copeland Coach of the Year award is presented annually to a high school coach who reflects outstanding leadership and commitment to speech and debate.

From nearly 5,000 member coaches in the NSDA, Kathleen was selected for this outstanding accomplishment.

“The impact of speech and debate coaches goes far beyond the classroom,” said J. Scott Wunn, Executive Director of the National Speech & Debate Association. “They are fostering lifelong skills like critical thinking, effective communication, and leadership. They are empowering students to become engaged citizens and leaders in their communities.”

“Kathleen has established a culture where kids celebrate and support each other,” said Erik Walker, Debate Coach and Assistant Speech Coach at Fairmont High School. “She gives her time back to the speech community beyond the day-to-day coaching to make the activity function better for kids, and her program has performed at an exceptional level for 11 years under her leadership.”

Studies show that students who participate in speech and debate experience a number of academic benefits including communication skills, reading test scores, analytic thinking, and higher self-esteem. The skills learned through speech and debate will impact students years after graduation.

The NSDA High School Coach of the Year is selected from 112 NSDA districts. Each District Committee can nominate a District Coach of the Year. From those nominations, a national winner is selected.

Kathleen will be recognized at the 2026 National Speech & Debate Tournament in Richmond, Virginia, where more than 7,000 students will compete at the world's largest academic competition June 14-19, 2026. To learn more about the National Tournament, visit www.speechanddebate.org/nationals.

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About the National Speech & Debate Association

The National Speech & Debate Association is the authority on public speaking and debate in the United States. The Association builds the infrastructure for speech and debate competitions around the world by providing topics, educational resources, and training for students and coaches. For more than 100 years, the National Speech & Debate Association has built a platform for youth voices that culminates in the National Tournament, the largest academic competition in the world. The National Tournament brings together thousands of students from across the United States and world with different backgrounds and viewpoints to engage in civil discourse. For more information, visit www.speechanddebate.org.