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2026 National Student of the Year Finalists

Local Students Selected as Finalists for National Award

West Des Moines, IA (May 28, 2026) — The National Speech & Debate Association (NSDA) is proud to announce the finalists for the National Student of the Year Award.

The William Woods Tate, Jr., National Student of the Year award, presented by Richard Bitner in memory of Bob Stockton, is one of the most honorable and renowned awards given by the NSDA. To be eligible for the award, students must represent the tenets of the NSDA Code of Honor: humility, equity, integrity, respect, leadership, and service. They should also exhibit strong academics, a deep commitment to speech and debate, and a genuine dedication to the community.

From more than 100,000 student members across the country, five students have been selected as finalists for this honor.

Alessia Carrales – Clay Center Community High School, KS

Alessia discovered speech and debate her sophomore year of high school. After a successful novice season that included competing at the National Tournament, she returned the following year inspired to help reshape the team as captain. Since then, she led her team to some of the most competitive tournaments, returned to the state tournament, earned first place in Congressional Debate at the 2025 national qualifier, and captured first place in Lincoln-Douglas Debate this year.

Alessia is also very active in Grow Clay County, a local economic development group focused on community improvement. She is a passionate advocate for mental health and has lobbied for expanded student mental health services at the local, state, and national level. Through YLINK, she was a member of the Policy and Advocacy Committee in Washington, D.C. She frequently

uses her speech and debate skills to advocate for Latino Affairs to local and state politicians, activists, and government officials. She has held leadership roles at Girls State and her local FFA chapter. She plans to study economics at George Mason University next year.

Izayah Christopher – Battle High School, MO

Izayah believes that speech and debate is a platform to advocate for change. Over the past four years, he has used his voice to champion causes he is passionate about.

He qualified in speech for the 2025 National Speech & Debate Tournament, won fifth place in the state for informative speaking, and qualified for the National Individual Events Tournament of Champions. Izayah has also won several debate tournaments in Lincoln-Douglas Debate and has placed in numerous competitive acting events. He has been captain of the Battle High School speech and debate team for two years.

Izayah was the keynote speaker at Columbia Public School's Convocation in 2024, where he gave a moving speech in front of thousands. After presenting his powerful message, he earned two additional speaking engagements with teacher organizations at Missouri University.

Matthew Collins – Episcopal Collegiate School, AR

Matthew believes speech and debate is a powerful pathway to opportunity. His leadership has transformed the culture of his speech and debate team. He has helped build a program rooted in mentorship, access, and respect. He is known for arriving early and staying late to coach novice students, run practice speeches, and offer thoughtful, specific feedback. His dedication to the activity has significantly helped grow the speech and debate program at Episcopal Collegiate School.

Matthew is also the Founder of the Arkansas chapter of Equality in Forensics, where he has worked hard to increase access to speech and debate for fellow students. He has recruited new schools, mentored emerging programs, and volunteered his time to judge and provide feedback for students across the country. He helped design and implement a free statewide speech and debate camp, where he developed and taught curriculum to ensure that all students had access to high-quality instruction.

Amna George – Aberdeen Central High School, SD

When Amna first moved to the United States, communicating in English was a challenge. Today, she uses speech and debate as a platform to advocate for others.

Amna has many speech and debate accolades, including fourth place in Expository at the National Speech & Debate Tournament in 2025 as well as back-to-back state championships in Informative Speaking. Her passion is advocating for other students.

Behind the scenes, she is a consistent volunteer and community leader. From packing food for the Salvation Army and serving as an elementary math mentor to helping at the museum and re-starting the International Club at Aberdeen Central High School, Amna is dedicated to improving the world around her and empowering others to do the same. She recently attended the ACLU National Advocacy Institute, where she learned more ways to bring change to her local community.

Brooks Heiser – Sioux Falls Jefferson High School, SD

Over the last two years, Brooks has overcome a lot of challenges with a smile on his face. A week before starting his junior year on the debate team, he was diagnosed with Ewing Sarcoma, a type of bone cancer. Due to treatment, he only participated in one tournament that year, but he made it count, placing in Domestic Extemp and Lincoln-Douglas Debate. With his cancer in remission this year, Brooks made finals in Domestic Extemp and International Extemp five times, placed second in the state tournament, and qualified to the National Speech & Debate Tournament.

Brooks is a leader on his team. He is known across the community and state as a friendly opponent who students love talking and debating with others, both in and out of rounds. He is also active in Symphonic Band Ensemble, Jazz Band, Pep Band, and Symphony Orchestra. He is a member of NHS, an AP Scholar of distinction, an NSDA Academic All American, and Homecoming King!

“These students have already made meaningful impacts in their schools and communities,” said J. Scott Wunn, Executive Director of the National Speech & Debate Association. “I have no doubt their leadership, advocacy, and voices will continue to shape a better future.”

The five finalists will be interviewed by an esteemed panel of educators during the National Speech & Debate Tournament in Richmond, Virginia, this June. They will be recognized during the National Tournament Awards Assembly on Friday, June 19, where the 2026 National Student of the Year winner will be announced. To learn more about the National Speech & Debate 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.