

Ring in the New Year: A Celebration of Success

Four years ago the Walla Walla School Board and I embarked on a significant journey together, spending nearly a full school year developing a 5-year strategic plan to chart the future course for our school district. This comprehensive undertaking was framed into phases by asking our educational community three critical questions; where are we now, where do we want to go, and how are we going to get there?

The first phase included deep engagement with hundreds of stakeholders. It included review of 11 internal and external surveys, a significant dive into 35 diverse performance indicators and multiple face-to-face listening sessions with various stakeholder groups. In addition, as your superintendent, I engaged one-on-one with over 200 community members probing what we were doing well (and maybe not so well). While we affirmed many strengths across our system, we also uncovered some sobering performance trends. Additionally, during this first phase, critical insights from our staff, students, parents and community identified areas where we could improve.

We then focused on where we wanted to go. Themes quickly began to emerge from the feedback received, crystallizing into the following four core pillars that now frame our efforts: to support high quality instruction across all of our schools; to create a better aligned and coherent system; to integrate strategies and training to better support student social and emotional needs; and lastly, to incorporate deliberate measures to ensure a safe and engaging environment for all students.

The final phase focused on identifying specific strategies we would implement to support the four areas of focus. We took measured steps to marry the hopes, dreams and wishes for our students with research-informed practice, prioritization, and deliberate actions. Indicators of success were identified for each focus area and bold decisions were made to intentionally align our efforts, district-wide, on achieving identified outcomes.

Since the adoption and implementation of the Walla Walla Public Schools Strategic Plan effective the 2017-18 school year, your Walla Walla School Board reviews progress nine times throughout the year. These intentional engagements keep our district focused on our efforts as we learn about growth being made, as well as opportunities for continued improvement.

Finding ourselves halfway through our 5-year plan, we are beginning to witness incredible successes resulting from this inclusive and focused approach. Your Walla Walla School Board and I could not be more proud of the efforts from our students and staff. Following are just a few of our recent accomplishments:

- We have already exceeded the School Board's lofty 5-year graduation goal after only 3 years. Now at over 90%, Walla Walla's graduation rate is up 11% in the last few years, over 9% above the state.

- We have closed the Latino/a graduation rate gap. Latino/a rates are up 19% in recent years, nearly 14% above state average.

- Third through eighth grade reading and mathematics growth scores are on the rise, reversing what had been a multi-year decline.

- English language learner students are mastering English faster than ever, surpassing state results for the first time in years.

-District dropout rates continue to decline, now more than 4% below the state average for an all-time low of 7%.

-ACT composite scores increased by .6 overall. Even more impressive, our Latino/a students revealed a 1.3 increase, surpassing statewide results for all Hispanic/Latino students.

-Staff feedback based on annual surveys continue to reveal strong support across all measures, outperforming the nation's highest achieving schools across every indicator on the same survey.

-Fee elimination for all students participating in sports and electives, continued community partnerships like the Adopt-a-Blue-Devil Program, and a new activity bus put into place with savings gleaned from transportation efficiencies, continues to remove barriers for students. As a result, the percentage of students involved in extra-curricular activities and electives continues to increase at both the high school and middle school levels.

-A focus on inclusion, engagement, and program enhancement has resulted in remarkable accomplishments for students identified for special education. As a result, graduation rates are at an all-time high at 88%, 26% above the state, while boasting one of the state's lowest special education dropout rates.

-Parent and community feedback on annual surveys continue to reinforce a strong perception that the School Board and district operates in an open and transparent manner and parents and non-parents alike are very pleased with our progress.

We realize these accomplishments do not happen in a vacuum. It takes a village - students, faculty, parents and community coming together to ensure student success. This support includes the passage of our replacement school bond in 2018 to preserve our facility infrastructure, over fifty consecutive years of "learning levy" approval that ensures music, arts, honors programs and student supports are offered, in addition to volunteerism and partnerships with many community organizations providing real-world experience and exposure to our students.

Working together, we continue the 163 year legacy of educating some of the state's finest students as we strive to achieve our vision of "Developing Washington's Most Sought-after Graduates."