



# direct

WINTER 2026 NEWSMAGAZINE

## Holding on to your Purpose

School Directors Converge on  
Seattle for the Annual Conference



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| Chimacum School Board Steers a Remarkable Turnaround | p. 18 |
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Produced by the  
Washington State School  
Directors' Association

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# WSSDA direct WINTER 2026



## On the Cover

The Shorecrest Hip Hop Dance Team energized attendees of WSSDA's 2025 Annual Conference. Catch more highlights of the conference, including keynote spotlights and photos.

Learn more \_\_\_\_\_14



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# Board Development for Student Success

## FROM THE WSSDA BOARD PRESIDENT

In just one year, remarkable transformations can unfold, and we rely on this potential for our students. We celebrate when they surpass expectations, achieving more than a year's worth of growth in a single school year. As your president, I am eager to guide us through a year of extraordinary growth for our school board members.

The link between increased student achievement and strong governance training is undeniable. Conversely, a lack of training often leads to higher superintendent turnover. WSSDA is committed to leading the charge in continuously enhancing our public education system, ensuring effective learning for every student. We are here to support you on your journey as a school board member, just as educators support each student in your district. Strong governance is the bedrock of our educational framework.

When I was asked how I would champion equity as president, my immediate response was to expand training and learning opportunities for school board members who have yet to benefit from them. Every student deserves board members who are well-informed and effective. Yet, I am mindful of budget constraints. We must innovate in

delivering training and expanding learning opportunities. Your ideas are invaluable—please share them.

As we navigate a legislative session with potential budget cuts, remember that while legislators may seek changes that don't cost the state, they can impact us financially. WSSDA provides numerous resources to keep you informed about proposed bills through weekly Zoom calls and emails. Engage with your superintendent about potential costs and communicate with your legislators early.

Let us embrace the spirit of lifelong learning, exemplify the behaviors we wish to see in our students, and collaborate to ensure every student has the opportunity to thrive. Together, we can make this a year of unprecedented growth and achievement for our students and schools.



Melissa Beard, WSSDA President



## What You Do Matters

### FROM THE WSSDA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Winter break is now behind us, but, I hope you took some time to slow down and reflect on the past year.

As we head into 2026, be assured that your leadership matters. Research consistently shows that leadership beyond the classroom — the people who set the policies and goals, hire and support the district's leader, and set district culture — is a major lever for student success. Studies by the Wallace Foundation found that leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its impact on student learning. That's you, school directors. Your efforts help build a stronger and more effective education system to prepare tomorrow's leaders.

Elected service is noisy right now. Headlines tell us conflict is on the rise at school board meetings, and public conversation about schools has become more polarized and intense. But we have the opportunity to demonstrate that disagreement can be civil, that compromise can be principled, and that public service is about duty to others. Boards that maintain clarity around their role, focus meetings on student outcomes, and cultivate a culture of respect for each other and the public are better able to

navigate contentious issues and keep the work moving forward for the success of the students they serve.

This work is hard. You may face parents who are angry, staff who are exhausted, and political noise that seeks to turn your meetings into theater. You may be tempted sometimes to answer anger with anger. But leadership is less about bold answers and more about steady stewardship.

Your leadership is the slow, steady work of enabling futures. That is the work you are entrusted with.

So let's enter 2026 with a promise — to make our meetings places of listening, to center students' visions of their future, to work constructively with people whose views differ from ours, and to model the civility our children deserve. If we do that, we will not only protect public education; we will expand the space of possibility for every child who walks into our classrooms.



Tricia Lubach, Executive Director





## Leadership Development

Dr. Heather Curl

We're excited to kick off the year with programs designed for board members at opposite ends of the spectrum: the New Director Network (NDN) for newly elected members and Leadership WSSDA for experienced directors seeking deeper development. The NDN provides monthly newsletters and virtual gatherings to support directors in their first years of service. Leadership WSSDA offers applied learning through five overnight, in-person sessions held across the state. Both programs culminate in a celebration at this year's Annual Conference in Spokane.

What makes these programs special is how they honor the diverse insights and experience participants bring while introducing frameworks and strategies to strengthen their effectiveness. Throughout, we focus on the three essential functions of board service: visionary leadership, effective governance, and strategic advocacy.

We'd love to hear from you—whether you're interested in participating or have questions and ideas to share. Please reach out!



## Strategic Advocacy

Logan Noel-Endres

As we begin the new year, I hope each of you is feeling refreshed and energized for the work ahead. Advocacy for public education matters at all levels, especially as we enter the 2026 legislative session in Washington. As you consider how to engage in this work, I hope you will think about the needs of your students, your district, and your community. It is more important than ever to take an intentional approach to this work that centers the needs of those you represent.

Times are tough right now for Washington state, so while advocacy might not always lead to a "win," it will always build relationships, deepen understanding, and educate decision-makers about what's actually happening in our schools. With that in mind, I hope to see you engaged in advocacy work to champion public education on behalf of your communities.



## Policy and Legal Services

Christine Geary, J.D.

We're excited to share what's coming in 2026 as we work to better support you with enhanced resources and improved accessibility.

**Improved Online Experience:** We're going to revamp our webpages, improve inquiry tracking, and streamline the layout of Policy & Legal News to make it easier to find what you need.

**Quicker Support:** A comprehensive FAQ resource will address your most common questions and inform ongoing website improvements. Our new online inquiry form will funnel your questions directly to policy staff—no more voicemail delays—ensuring your questions get prompt attention.

**Clearer Communication:** The Policy & Legal newsletter will get a makeover with a format optimized for online reading and better highlighting of critical policy changes and updates you need to see immediately.

**Empowering Board Leadership:** We're developing online training to help directors understand model policy and engage more effectively in community-driven leadership.

Kelsey and I look forward to serving you in 2026!



Evaline students show off books received from the WSSDA book drive. Evaline is both a school district and a single school building—there has been a schoolhouse on the site since 1883.

## Books, Smiles Arrive at Evaline’s Historic Two-Room School

On Schoolhouse Road in Winlock sits the Evaline School, Lewis County’s oldest continuously operating school district. One of the last remaining two-room schools in Washington, Evaline serves about 45 students each year, from kindergarten through sixth grade. Many are third and fourth-generation students, reflecting deep family ties to this historic institution.

Small schools like Evaline thrive on community support, and last November, their community grew to include WSSDA. The school was the beneficiary of the 2025 WSSDA Annual Conference Book Drive, receiving about 100 books delivered by WSSDA board member Whitney Smith, from Eastmont School District.

The annual book drive began in 2018, initiated by former Manson school director Aurora Flores and supported by the Hidden Spring Book Company, which stocks the conference bookstore each year.



Photo: Nancy Keaton



Right: Conference attendees browse, purchase books, and chat with Sam McCracken of Hidden Spring Book Company.

# 2026 Regional Meetings Calendar

## Director Area 6

Host: Evergreen PS  
Thursday, April 16  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 1

Host: Arlington SD  
Monday, April 20  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 3

Host: Clover Park SD  
Tuesday, April 21  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 2

Host: Tahoma SD  
Wednesday, April 29  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 5

Host: Tenino SD  
Thursday, April 30  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 8

Host: Wapato SD  
Wednesday, May 6  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 4

Host: Bremerton SD  
Tuesday, May 12  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 11

Host: Walla Walla PS  
Monday, May 18  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 10

Host: Ritzville SD  
Tuesday, May 19  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 7

Host: Wenatchee SD  
Wednesday, May 20  
6–8:30 pm

## Director Area 9

Host: Spokane PS  
Thursday, May 21  
6–8:30 pm

Learn more at  
[wssda.org/  
regionalmeetings](https://wssda.org/regionalmeetings)



Learning and Development Specialist Rassamy Smith assists a training participant at the WSSDA Annual Conference.

## Fresh Starts Ahead: Reflections on Learning, Leading, and Celebrating



**Rassamy Smith**  
Learning & Development Specialist

**A**s we step into a new year of fresh faces joining school boards across Washington, I have been reflecting on what the past nine months at WSSDA have taught me. Maybe it is the season of beginnings, the wave of new directors stepping into leadership, or the fact that I myself am celebrating a special decade birthday in January (yes, I am a Capricorn). Either way, the theme is clear: renewal.

Since joining WSSDA as the learning and development specialist, I have watched school directors engage with a blend of courage, curiosity, and even “Wait... what did I just sign up for?” energy. It is one of my favorite parts of this work. Their questions and openness mirror my own journey this year, including learning the culture, strengthening our training systems, and committing to the belief that equity is something we practice daily and not something we simply profess.

My epiphanies have been both practical and personal. I have seen how effective school governance thrives when people feel welcomed, respected, and equipped. As someone who has lived, learned, and worked in Washington my whole life, this work feels deeply personal. I have rediscovered how much I love creating learning environments that invite people to show up fully as humans whose lived experience enriches the conversation.

As I celebrate a new season in my own life, I am carrying forward the reminder that change does not have to be intimidating. It can be energizing, grounding, and even a little fun with some birthday sparkle.

So here’s to the year ahead, to new directors stepping into service, to new systems we will build together, and to new personal chapters shaped by growth, purpose, and equity-centered joy. My hope is to make this year one of bold learning and even bolder leadership.

# WSSDA Welcomes Two New Team Members

The Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) is excited to welcome two new staff members whose skills, passions, and professional experiences will strengthen our mission to support Washington's locally elected school boards. With these additions, WSSDA's professional staff now includes 14 full-time and two part-time employees.

## Meet Cynthia, Legislative Policy Specialist



Cynthia Tamayo joins WSSDA with deep experience in nonpartisan policy, advocacy, and community engagement.

A Skagit Valley native now living in Lacey, Cynthia earned her Bachelor of Arts in psychology with a minor in sociology and cultural anthropology

from Saint Martin's University. Motivated by her lived experiences and a deep desire to address inequities impacting underserved communities, she later pursued a Master of Public Administration with a concentration in government and policy.

Growing up in a low-income household and becoming the first in her family to attend college shaped her belief in the power of education. She brings that passion to her work, emphasizing the importance of amplifying community voices in shaping meaningful policy solutions.

Cynthia's professional background includes service at the Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs, where she led a bilingual civic-engagement campaign to help community members understand and participate in the legislative process. She also advised on policy initiatives for Hispanic and Latino communities. Prior to that, she supported National Guard members at the Washington Student Achievement Council with applications for the National Guard Post-Secondary Education Grant.

Outside of work, Cynthia volunteers with the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the Washington State Leadership Board. When not advocating for equitable policy, she enjoys hiking with her dogs, Indi and Zola, reading, and spending quality time with family.

As Director of Strategic Advocacy Logan Noel-Endres shared, "Cynthia comes to us with a strong background working in nonpartisan policy and advocacy spaces. She is a strong communicator who weaves meaningful conversations and personal stories into advocacy messages."

## Meet Emily, Administrative Assistant



Also joining WSSDA is Emily Manganello, our new administrative assistant, whose experience blends public administration, technology, and organizational support.

Emily brings several years of experience supporting local government operations and IT service management. During her time with the City of Colorado Springs, she played an important role in process improvement, training development, and the creation of technical and policy documentation used across departments. Her work often bridged the gap between internal technical systems and the employees who rely on them, ensuring that information was accessible, accurate, and easy to understand.

With a Master of Public Administration and an academic background in information systems, Emily combines analytical skill with a commitment to community service. She values clear communication and collaboration, believing that strong internal systems are essential to good governance.

A Colorado native, Emily moved to Washington state in 2021 in search of "greener pastures"—though she still misses the snow. She's an avid traveler and makes fast friends when gifted with a unique deck of playing cards!

Members can look forward to Emily's hours and responsibilities expanding to full time starting this spring.

WSSDA is thrilled to welcome both Cynthia and Emily. Their experience and enthusiasm will help us continue supporting school directors and advancing public education across Washington state.



# Planning with Purpose: How Boards Can Turn Community Voices into a Clear Vision

*This article reflects the combined experience of WSSDA staff and Mary Fertakis, former school director, WSSDA president, and current State Board of Education chair. WSSDA's strategic planning model was developed through close collaboration with her.*

## Strategic Planning, Uniquely for School Boards

Strategic planning is often described as essential to effective governance—but for school boards, it's more than a best practice. It shapes decision-making, community trust, and long-term student success. Recognizing how unique this work is for public entities like school districts, WSSDA is excited to offer a strategic planning model designed specifically for school boards.

Unlike strategic planning in other sectors, like for-profit business, school district planning must balance multiple—and sometimes competing—inputs. School boards are charged with analyzing data that tells the story of how students and systems are performing, listening deeply to the lived experiences of families, staff, and students, and engaging the full board in each phase of the work. No single group can do this alone, and no single data source tells the whole story.

## Turning Data and Community Voices into Clarity

WSSDA's approach is built around the reality that the entire

community needs to participate. The model weaves together three critical elements: authentic community engagement, rigorous data analysis, and consensus-building. The result is not just a document, but a shared vision that reflects district priorities and the values of the community the district serves.

By grounding conversations in district data and pairing that information with insights gathered through community listening sessions, boards begin to see where students are thriving—and where they are not. This approach can highlight where there are gaps—where students are not thriving.

That clarity helps boards focus their energy and resources where they can make the greatest difference.

## Building Trust That Lasts Beyond the Plan

Just as importantly, inviting community members into these conversations builds lasting relationships. When people feel heard—and see their perspectives reflected in the final plan—they become champions for the district beyond the boardroom.

That trust doesn't end when the plan is adopted. It can strengthen community engagement, improve transparency, and create shared ownership of the district's direction—long after the planning process itself is complete.

## Why an Outside Facilitator Matters

A key part of this work is the role of an outside facilitator. Acting as a neutral, trusted partner, WSSDA facilitators listen for themes, help organize feedback, and support groups in navigating conversations that can be difficult without an outside perspective.

Facilitators compile notes, analyze findings, and help align diverse viewpoints into a coherent whole—always focusing the effort toward a strategic plan the board, district, and community can be proud of. The facilitator's presence can create space for honest dialogue and helps ensure every voice is heard.

## A Plan That Makes Board Work Easier

The benefits of strategic planning don't stop once the plan is complete. A strong strategic plan makes the work of governance clearer and more manageable.

It provides a framework for asking the right questions, a calendar for monitoring progress, and a foundation for oversight. The plan also plays a critical role in superintendent evaluation, ensuring that progress on strategic goals, action plans, and objectives is central to that process.

## Anchoring the Work That Matters Most

In the end, strategic planning isn't an extra task—it's the work that anchors all the rest. With the right structure, support, and intentional engagement, school boards can move from vision to action, creating a shared roadmap that reflects community priorities and keeps student success at the center.

## Content Developer Highlight



**Mary Fertakis, M.Ed.**  
Current SBE Chair, WSSDA Facilitator,  
and Former Tukwila School Board Member

"I've done strategic planning with non-profits, a Fortune 500 company, and my school district. After I got elected to the school board, I was the one who said, 'you don't have a strategic plan.' So I got that started in Tukwila. Then, I was the WSSDA president when we had to renew that strategic plan.

I've developed a firm belief that having a strategic plan is essential to the wellbeing of a school district because it's a roadmap and provides focus. It's essential for helping school boards avoid feeling like they're constantly trying to catch up or that they are reacting instead of being proactive. It also provides the baseline for your superintendent evaluation."

# Evaluation with Intention: Supporting Superintendents and Strengthening Districts

*WSSDA is excited to offer a new superintendent evaluation model. It wouldn't have been possible without an extensive, multi-year collaboration with WSSDA consultant and former Northshore board member Amy Cast.*

Superintendent evaluation is one of the most important responsibilities of a school board. When done poorly, it can strain relationships, create confusion, and divert attention from student outcomes. When done well, it becomes a powerful governance tool—one that supports alignment, growth, and shared leadership.

In listening to districts across the state, WSSDA heard a consistent message: boards wanted more support not only in what to evaluate, but in how to conduct evaluations that are clear, fair, and grounded in the real work of the district. That feedback led to a review of best practices and the development of a strategic goal-centered superintendent evaluation model.

## Starting With Purpose, Not Paperwork

At its core, the goal-centered model reframes superintendent evaluation as an extension of effective governance rather than a standalone event. Instead of starting with a checklist or rating form, the process begins with a foundational question: What is the board trying to accomplish on behalf of students and the community?

By anchoring evaluation in the district's strategic goals, boards can assess superintendent performance in ways that are meaningful, transparent, and future-focused. When a district has a current strategic plan—and engages in regular board self-assessment and goal setting—the evaluation process becomes a natural continuation of ongoing governance work, not an isolated annual task. This approach clarifies expectations from the outset and aligns the superintendent's work with the board's vision, values, and priorities.

## A Thoughtful, Structured Process

WSSDA's model illustrates three phases: alignment, process, and outcomes.

First, boards are encouraged to align with the superintendent and amongst themselves on their collective hopes and expectations for the evaluation process.

Next, the model outlines a clear structure, including suggested timelines, opportunities for reflection and feedback. Rather than rushing to an end-of-year conclusion, boards are encouraged to treat evaluation as an ongoing cycle that supports mid-course adjustments and deeper conversation.

Finally, the process arrives at outcomes. Instead of ending with a summary or rating alone, boards identify actionable next steps that inform future goal setting, professional development, and board-superintendent collaboration.

## Balancing District Success and Leadership Growth

While district goals remain central, the model also

incorporates leadership and operational goals that support the superintendent's professional growth. This dual focus recognizes that strong district outcomes depend not only on results, but on the superintendent's capacity to lead people, manage complexity, and adapt to changing conditions.

By including leadership development in the evaluation process, boards reinforce their role as partners in growth—supporting the superintendent while maintaining accountability for district performance.

## Creating Space for Honest, Productive Conversations

Boards often cite similar challenges with superintendent evaluation: unclear expectations, uncomfortable conversations, or feedback that feels too vague or punitive. The goal-centered model addresses these concerns by providing structure and shared language around performance.

Grounded in district goals and reviewed regularly, the process supports candid, constructive conversations about progress, strengths, and areas for growth—for both the superintendent and the system they lead. Evaluation becomes less about surprises and more about continuous improvement.

## Built from the Field, for the Field

WSSDA's strategic goal-centered superintendent evaluation model reflects what boards across the state asked for: practical guidance rooted in real governance work. Flexible enough to adapt to local context and structured enough to provide consistency year over year, the model reinforces the board's core responsibility—keeping the focus on students and community by aligning superintendent evaluation with the district's most important goals.

## Content Developer Highlight



**Amy Cast**  
WSSDA Facilitator and Former  
Northshore School Board Member

“Before my final board meeting, I was sifting through papers to clean my home office. I found the folder from when I started trying to find a superintendent evaluation solution for Northshore in 2014. It’s an inch and a half thick!

It was a really painful process in our district that caused a lot of stress for the superintendent and the board. So now, literally 10 years later, to have a tool that can take that stress away, I’m very glad we figured it out. Even if boards don’t implement the tool right away, just reading the background information in the first couple pages is beneficial.”

# 2026 Brings New Slate of Officers

Each year toward the close of the WSSDA Annual Conference, new WSSDA board officers are sworn in. For 2026, Dr. Melissa Beard of Tumwater School District became president, Nikki Otero Lockwood of Spokane was sworn in as president-elect, and Julie Bocanegra of Evergreen was sworn in as the vice president. Hear directly from Dr. Beard in her President's Letter on page 1.



Top right: New WSSDA officers are sworn in.

Right: Dr. Beard (lovingly) roasts outgoing WSSDA president Derek Sarley, reminding him that he promised to tattoo "1,477" on his forehead, the number of school directors in the state.

## Meet the Newest WSSDA Board Members



### DA1: Joe Greenheron, South Whidbey School District

Lifelong Washingtonian and proud product of public education (Bellevue School District and UW), I've been serving on the South Whidbey School Board since 2022. My wife and I have a sophomore at South Whidbey High School (Go Falcons!) and two adult children. In addition to representing Director Area 1 on the WSSDA Board, I also serve as board liaison to the Interscholastic Activities Committee and DA1 rep to the Annual Conference Planning Committee. No matter what role, in committee or board meetings, my north star is always improving student outcomes. I'm always here to help problem-solve or just be a listening ear, whether or not you're in DA1. Please reach out to me for anything, but especially to talk about music, books, and goats.



### DA2: Avanti Bergquist, Renton School District

I am honored to join the WSSDA Board! This is my ninth year on the Renton School District Board. For the past 5 years, I also served Director Area 2 on the WSSDA Legislative Committee. Advocacy is a passion. As a child psychiatrist, a parent, and an alum of my district, I bring those perspectives as an advocate for DA2. I strive to represent the diverse students and communities in our area. With my added perspective as a child psychiatrist, I also bring that expertise to one of our biggest issues as school directors: youth mental health and wellbeing.

## WSSDA Election Results

### WSSDA Officers

Pres-elect Nikki Otero Lockwood, Spokane  
Vice President Julie Bocanegra, Evergreen

### WSSDA Board of Directors

DA1 Joe Greenheron, South Whidbey  
DA2 Avanti Bergquist, Renton  
DA5 Tim Browning, Centralia  
DA8 Bruce Drollinger, Naches Valley  
DA9 Michael Cannon, Mead  
DA10 Mark Scott, Cheney

### Resolutions Committee

DA1 Ryan Swinburnson, Blaine  
DA2 Arlista Holman, Auburn  
DA2 Cristina Martinez, Mercer Island  
DA3 Natalie Wimberley, Peninsula  
DA5 Tanya Naillon, Onalaska  
DA9 Anniece Barker, Central Valley

DA11 Lydia Lyon, Paterson

### Legislative Committee

DA1 Sheri Kelly, Arlington  
DA2 Dave Larson, Tukwila  
DA2 Sara Betnel, Shoreline  
DA3 Marisa Peloquin, University Pl.



## DA5: Tim Browning, Centralia School District

I believe public education is the essence of a successful democracy. Public education is essential to a dynamic economy. Our children are our most important legacy. We define their futures and their future family's futures. Successful students must be nurtured in a community that respects each student's individuality, values, and heritage.



## DA6: Sandra Zavala-Ortega, Vancouver Public Schools

I'm honored and excited to serve Director Area 6 on the WSSDA board of directors, and I am currently in my second term on the Vancouver Public Schools board of directors. I'm a first-generation Latina, a VPS graduate, and the proud mom of a thriving 6th grader on the autism spectrum—an experience that brings deep joy and purpose to my advocacy. I joined the WSSDA Board to uplift diverse voices and strengthen equitable governance statewide. I've deeply enjoyed the leadership opportunities and growth WSSDA provides, including serving as a consultant, Legislative Committee member, Leadership WSSDA participant, and attending General Assembly, Legislative Conference, and Annual Conference. My focus is always on creating student-centered experiences where every child feels seen, supported, and able to thrive.



## DA8: Bruce Drollinger, Naches Valley School District

Thank you, directors, for your commitment! I live near the town of Gled in the Naches Valley School District, and I am starting my seventh term as a director. I have been married to my wife, Diane, for 46 years and have three grown daughters and four grandchildren. I am a retired station captain from the City of Yakima Fire Department, and I miss the excitement and my fellow firefighters. I like to volunteer Wednesday afternoons at our middle school working with our eighth graders, and they are a challenging bunch! I have served on the WSSDA Board previously and its various committees. I will work on making our Director Area 8 regional meetings meaningful by sharing our success stories along with our challenges. I will also be giving away my famous Gled honey so please attend.



## DA9: Michael Cannon, Mead School District

First elected to the Mead School Board in 2019 and re-elected in 2023, I have served as board president while helping guide our district through unprecedented challenges. During that time, my work has focused on returning students to in-person learning, ensuring legally sound and student-centered policies, and maintaining fiscal responsibility. I have prioritized cost-effective budgeting while investing in teacher recruitment and retention. I am dedicated to putting students first, standing up for parental rights, and fostering safe, high-achieving schools. Through WSSDA, I am committed to supporting strong local governance, fiscal accountability, and academic excellence for Washington's students.



## DA10: Mark Scott, Cheney School District

I have served on my local school board for the past four years and was recently reelected to a second term. I live on a small farm with my wife and our three children and am a proud member of the Washington Air National Guard. I played college football at Whitworth University and enjoy hunting, fishing, and spending time with my family on the water. I have also served on WSSDA's Resolutions Committee and am passionate about special education, innovation in public education, and challenging the mindset of doing things simply because they've always been done that way. I encourage directors in my region to reach out to me. I want you to feel like you have an avenue to communicate ideas and concerns, so all voices are heard.

DA4 Karen Bolton, Bremerton  
DA4 Megan Higgins, South Kitsap  
DA5 Teresa Ekdahl-Johnson, Mossyrock  
DA6 Terry Tate, Battle Ground  
DA7 Martin Wachtel, Waterville  
DA7 Bryce Cox, Warden  
DA8 Luke Jenne, Wahluke

DA9 Rhonda Dormaier, Loon Lake  
DA10 Elizabeth Winer, Cheney  
DA11 Frank Vermulm, Prosser

**Nominating Committee**  
DA6 Amanda Miller, La Center  
DA8 Craig Sabin, Wahluke

DA9 Jennifer Killman, Mead

**Interscholastic Activities Comm.**  
DA4 Nicholas Thomas, North Mason  
DA6 Sadie McKenzie, Washougal  
DA8 Chad Christopherson, Naches Valley  
DA10 Ron Cooper, Medical Lake

DA10 Brian Weinmann, Prosser

*For State Board of Education and Education Service District results, visit [wssda.org/elections](https://wssda.org/elections)*



Public education advocates spend a busy day learning and meeting with legislators at the Capitol for WASA/WSSDA/WASBO's Public Education Advocacy Day.

# Key WSSDA Resources to Help you Keep Up with the 2026 Legislative Session

Advocacy for K-12 is a year-round effort. In fact, as we learned from legislative staff at the January 29 Public Education Advocacy Day with WASA, WASBO and WSSDA, the most successful proposals for new legislation typically emerge from work completed during the interim.

WSSDA encourages every board to advocate, and whenever

possible, to amplify their message with WSSDA's priorities (next page) and positions, which are adopted by a vote of school boards at the annual General Assembly.

Below are two valuable resources to support school boards during the interim and while the Legislature is in session. They are free and available to all champions of public education.



## Subscribe to WSSDA InSession

Our InSession email and InSession Live webinar happen on Fridays while the Legislature is in session. The webinar gives the added benefit of live Q&A with staff or guest speakers and chances for board members to share some of their insights.



Scan QR to subscribe or visit [wssda.org/insession](https://wssda.org/insession)



## Download the Legislative Impact Toolkit

Boost your legislative impact with this comprehensive toolkit designed for educational advocates at every level, featuring proven strategies and practical tools that work across all district types.



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# Three Ways to Safeguard Public Education in 2026



## Fulfilling our Legal and Moral Obligations

- Keep K-12 education funding at current and inflation-adjusted levels. Re-invest any declining enrollment amounts equitably into the K-12 system.
- Increase funding for Materials, Supplies, and Operating Costs (MSOC) allocations for each school district by \$100 per student or \$100,000, whichever is greater.
- Complete the job of fully funding special education to ensure that allocations recognize the needs of each student.
- Begin shifting the funding system toward equity by implementing a tiered approach for the Learning Assistance Program (LAP), and the Prototypical School Funding Model, and fully funding transportation for special education students and students experiencing homelessness, ensuring funds are distributed based on student need..

## Relief and Flexibility for School Districts

- Pause on new policies and provide flexibility on existing ones so that schools can focus on core academic needs.

## Safe, Healthy, Contemporary School Facilities

- Fund the remaining project list of the Small District Modernization Grant Program.

School directors serve diverse communities across Washington and are guided by WSSDA's Equity Statement, which affirms our responsibility to ensure that every student—regardless of zip code, background, or circumstance—has equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities. To do this, we must have stable, equitable, and flexible funding. Yet, Washington's public education system continues to operate without the staff or resources needed to serve students.

The state's current education funding formula does not reflect the actual needs of students, or the rising costs districts face to meet their legal and moral obligations to serve each and every student. School directors across Washington state need your commitment to **fully, amply, sustainably, and equitably fund K-12 education.**

# What Salmon Teach Us About School Communication

Tove Tupper, APR, Chief Communications Officer  
Highline Public Schools

In January, long before we see them in our rivers, some salmon have already begun their journey home. They don't wait for perfect conditions. They move steadily with purpose, preparing for the work ahead.

Strategic school communication works the same way. Our most important work happens before anyone sees it—setting direction, anticipating challenges, and preparing the ground for what's to come.

Public education faces significant challenges: declining enrollment, tight budgets, and political strife to name a few. In this environment, communication isn't a soft skill—it's essential infrastructure that fortifies your district's reputation, stabilizes your community during crisis, and builds the public support you need to govern effectively.

Strong communication strategy helps you:

- Prevent crises before they escalate by getting ahead of concerns with transparent, timely information
- Strengthen levy and bond campaigns through sustained community engagement and trust-building
- Counter misinformation with clear, consistent messaging across all channels
- Navigate controversial policy decisions—from boundary changes to curriculum updates—with stakeholder engagement that reduces conflict
- Tell the truth about public education when negative narratives dominate headlines

Communication is not an add-on after decisions are made. It is strategic work that shapes how your communities understand who you are, what you do, and what the district stands for. At a time when public education is under intense scrutiny, what we communicate and how we communicate it

matters more than ever.

The most effective school boards recognize that communication professionals are strategic partners, not just publicity departments. They bring expertise in crisis management, change leadership, and community engagement that directly supports governance priorities.

Across Washington, school communication professionals—including members of the Washington School Public Relations Association (WSPRA)—are working alongside you, stabilizing conditions, building trust, and keeping communities connected to their schools. For smaller districts without dedicated communication staff, WSPRA offers resources and support that superintendents and key staff can access.

School boards and superintendents have a powerful role to play. Your active participation in amplifying positive stories of innovation, student success, and educator dedication creates a counterweight to mis-informed critiques of public schools. Positive stories must remain a steady drumbeat.

Like salmon returning upstream, this work requires persistence through cold water and strong currents because the way we communicate today will create steadier waters for the students who follow.

The question for boards: Are you positioning communication as the strategic asset your district needs right now?

*Tove received the 2025 Communicator of the Year award from the Washington School Public Relations Association, a nationally recognized professional organization of K-12 education professionals that strive to improve communication among all stakeholders in Washington's public school systems.*



From left: Curtis Campbell, WSPRA Past President, Tove Tupper, APR, Chief Communications Officer for Highline School District, and Jessica McCartney, WSPRA President

# WSSDA's 2025 Boards of the Year

## SMALL DISTRICT (UNDER 2000 STUDENTS)



### Chimacum School Board

The Chimacum School Board turned data into action and action into results. From discipline and attendance rates to achievement gains among their most underserved students, the impact is clear. When boards do the hard work of examining opportunity gaps and committing to closing them, students will thrive.

## MEDIUM DISTRICT (2001-9000 STUDENTS)



### Oak Harbor School Board

The Oak Harbor School Board has shown how the strategic plan can become a living tool for change that amplifies student voice, strengthens community partnerships, and puts a shared sense of belonging at the center of what success looks like. When faced with tough choices, this board used a disciplined review of data to drive its budget decisions while putting students first.

## LARGE DISTRICT (OVER 9000 STUDENTS)



### Spokane School Board

Based on their district's strategic plan, the Spokane School Board made Native student success a districtwide priority and embedded it into every governance decision they make. As a result, the district has seen dramatic increases in graduation rates, attendance, and academic growth. That success has been fostered by a systemic, equity-focused approach built on authentic partnerships with tribal leaders, students, and families.

Watch videos of each board at [wssda.org/2025BoY](https://wssda.org/2025BoY)

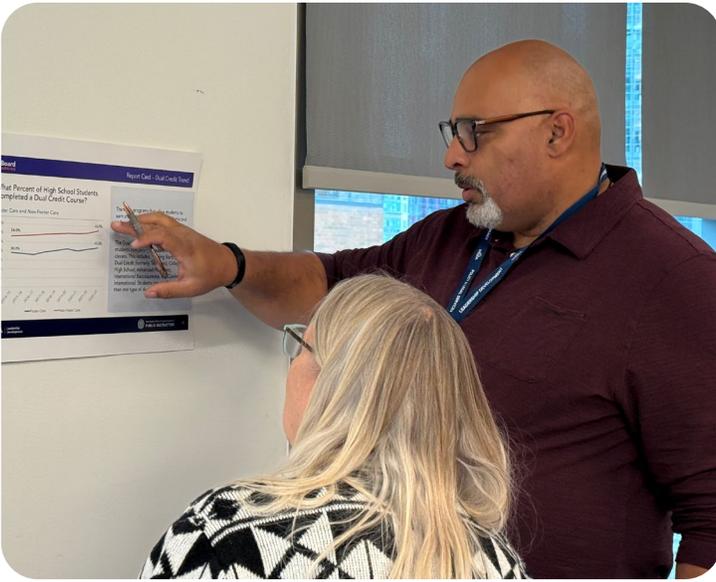
**“Every single decision you make has a human being behind it. Governance is human; policy is human; every single agenda item has a heartbeat... The purpose is the anchor for everything we do.”**

**Dr. Mary Hemphill**  
Leadership Strategist



# PURPOSE

**Highlights from the 2025 Annual Conference**



**“Boards that cultivate a culture of respect and clear governance practices are more likely to remain focused on student learning and well-being.”**

**Tricia Lubach**  
WSSDA Executive Director



**“When we’re being purposeful about the work we’re doing in our schools, it’s essential that our vision lives as a heartbeat, not a tagline...every single decision that we make is going to be supported and connected to that very distinct vision.”**

**Cathi Davis**

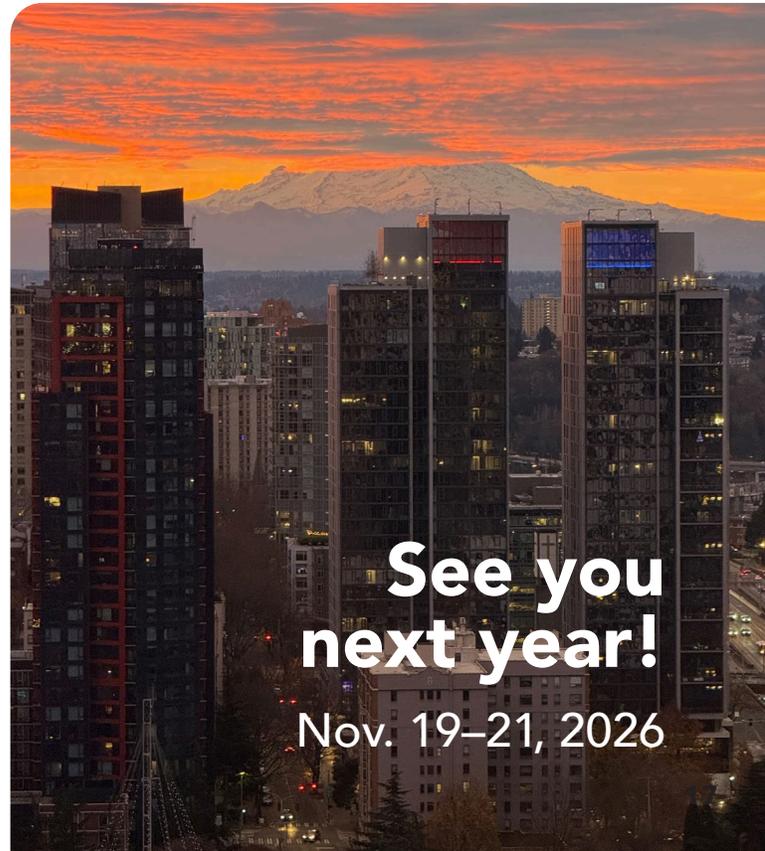
Principal, Ruby Bridges Elementary  
2025 Washington State Principal of the Year





**“How can we expect our students to embrace lifelong learning if we, as leaders, do not model it ourselves?”**

**Dr. Melissa Beard**  
WSSDA President



**See you next year!**  
Nov. 19–21, 2026



View our newly expanded conference photo album at [wssda.org/2025AC](https://wssda.org/2025AC)



# Chimacum Board's Persistent Focus Pays Off

**W**ith a relentless focus on engagement, the Chimacum School District has improved student attendance, academic achievement, behavior, and community support. The district nestled in the scenic Olympic Peninsula is WSSDA's 2025 Board of the Year, Small-Sized District.

## 'Relentless Focus' Brings Results

Chimacum leaders and staff credit their gains in school climate, discipline, and achievement to persistence and paying attention. Board members believe students are successful when their needs are met and barriers are removed.

Superintendent Scott Mauk acknowledges the school board's "gentle, relentless focus" on drivers that would meet students' needs and lead to change. Improving attendance, reducing disciplinary incidents, and increasing engagement are among the board's priorities.

"We've had to have hard, brainy conversations. The board is always working to get it right," Mauk said.

## Data Opens Doors to Progress

In the past, publicly sharing and discussing academic achievement data wasn't part of the Chimacum district's culture. One goal of Board Chair Roxanne Hudson, Ph.D, was for the group to review data and share information more clearly with the community.

Data sharing has helped build engagement and trust, Hudson said. To ease the transition to more transparency, the board chose to share data focused on growth rather than achievement level.

Ongoing equity audits over four years highlighted three groups that needed more support: male students, students with disabilities, and those living in poverty. Those populations were not finding success in Chimacum's system, so board members, school leadership, and staff committed

to changing that.

Here's a sample of their actions:

- Teachers helped develop and implement interventions to engage all students.
- Early childhood programs expanded. Transitional Kindergarten began, and free preschool services were supported through fundraising.
- More professional development opportunities for staff include Universal Design for Learning, wellness, social and emotional learning, new core curricula adoptions, and support systems in academics and behavior.
- An inclusive educational program emphasizes students receiving the education they need as much as possible in the general education classroom.
- Strategic community partnerships have broadened access to resources, cultural knowledge and opportunities.

In the past four years, attendance has been up, discipline rates have been down, and achievement has improved. Hudson said students are finding success and a greater sense of belonging. "But more than that, kids are smiling and happy and enjoying school," she said.

## Make Every Moment Engaging

A common denominator for the success is student engagement. Board member Kathryn Lamka noted that engagement is at the core of the board's five strategies: relationships, instructional quality, inclusion and belonging, wellness and collaboration.

"If we continue to measure these things and track our progress, we'll be successful," Lamka said.

Superintendent Mauk makes student engagement a focus

*Continued on next page*

of his work. For example, he frequently has informal conversations with students and shares short videos as part of his weekly social media posts to the community.

“From the time students step on the bus in the morning, we want to make sure every moment is cool, fun and engaging for them,” Mauk said.

**Supporting young men is especially important, he added. Jefferson County has the state’s highest rate of young adults ages 18-24 who aren’t working, attending school or serving in the military. “We want to do what keeps kids excited, so they cross the graduation stage with a diploma and a plan.”**

### Success Begins in Early Education

Chimacum leaders identified high-quality early education as one way to improve student engagement and outcomes. Early intervention is often the key to later success.

“Because we are in a child care desert, we see ourselves as an important part of efforts to improve early childhood outcomes,” Mauk said.

Chimacum implemented transitional kindergarten in 2023 and free preschool in 2022. Through both programs, the district’s WA Kids scores markedly improved, increasing from 17% kindergarten-ready in 2022 to 83% in the fall of 2025.

Among students living in poverty, kindergarten readiness increased from 8% to 71%. Students with disabilities improved from 20% to 40% readiness.

### Across-the-Board Growth in English Language Arts

In its Board of the Year application, Chimacum shared student achievement growth in English Language Arts as a

reflection of its success.

Chimacum Creek Primary School (pre-K to grade 1) uses Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) to measure alphabet, reading and other skills. At the end of 2024, kindergarteners were in the 84th percentile for growth. First graders were in the 74th percentile for growth, up from 44th for first grade in 2023.

Chimacum Elementary School (grades 2-6) assessments showed growth in students’ reading skills as measured by MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) computer-based tests and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), the state-required standardized tests.

Chimacum Junior-Senior High School monitors growth through MAP testing, final exams and other assessments. Tenth graders taking the SBAC scoring above Level 3 in English Language Arts showed impressive growth from 2024 to 2025: Females improved from 40% to 51%, and males improved from 31% to 36%.

The school board’s focus on responding to data has improved other measurements as well:

- Disciplinary incidents have declined steadily since 2018. Suspension rates for low-income students were reduced by more than half.
- Ninth-grade boys passing all their classes increased from 70% (2020) to 83% (2024). Among all ninth graders, 78% passed all classes in 2024, up from 65% in 2020.
- Enrollment in dual-credit classes doubled in a five-year span. In dual-credit courses, students earn high school and post-secondary school credit.

High school students enrolled in dual-credit classes	2019	2024
Boys	28%	58%
Lower-income students	34%	53%
Students with disabilities	37%	47%

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## Unified Policies Allow Autonomy

To move the board's initiatives into practice, the district established leadership coalitions at each school. These groups of committed administrators, teachers and staff have some autonomy in deciding how to implement districtwide policies and procedures at the building level. While the district has one shared purpose, promise, strategic plan and even a common student handbook, each school's leadership team has some decision-making flexibility, Mauk said.

The autonomy within each building increases the

opportunities to customize engagement approaches. Enhancing that approach, Chimacum leverages its small size to know students by name, strength, and need throughout their school experience.

## Board Members Continue to Learn

While relentlessly working on behalf of Chimacum students, the board members also invest in their own professional development to be more effective. All board members take the state-required equity trainings and attend the annual WSSDA conference. At the conference, they participate in the legislative advocacy pre-conference, Law Conference and Board Boot Camp to strengthen their governance skills, deepen their policy understanding, and promote student-centered legislative priorities.

Every August, they participate in a local board retreat, where the group sets goals and direction for the coming school year. The retreat includes equity-centered learning and exercises to help them grow as a group. Through monthly discussions of a common reading, they hope to improve their knowledge of how to engage all students and the community.

Equity conversations are also ongoing and embedded in every board decision. These discussions led to policy updates on wellness, social and emotional learning, and inclusiveness practices.

## Communication is a Catalyst

Board members are strengthening ties with the community, too. Their monthly meetings often include an hour-long roundtable discussion with five community partners. Attendees get to know each other and find opportunities to support students and families. Mauk said these conversations have been catalysts for connecting community partners who haven't met each other before.

The district has also deepened its partnership with the Chemakum Tribe, whose cultural knowledge enriches learning and community connection.

In recent years, the district has brightened its reputation by finding and sharing positive stories. Residents have approved levies in back-to-back years, news coverage been more positive, and Mauk's video updates on social media have contributed to Chimacum's upswing.

In closing, Mauk encourages all board members to look at relevant aspects of the Chimacum board's model to emulate.

**"Move resources where needed and work on policies that matter," he said. "Don't spin your wheels doing something that won't make a difference."**



Yakima Superintendent Dr. Trevor Greene supports the Student Voice Council and Fellowship meeting.



## Yakima's Recipe for Success: Student Voice, Board Efficiency, and Strategic Focus

Students should not only be participants in their education, but active decision makers who shape the policies and practices that affect them.

That's a commitment by Yakima School District board members. Their priorities for equity and student success are shifting the culture toward student-driven governance and policy co-creation.

WSSDA honored these efforts by naming the Yakima School District Board its 2024 Board of the Year, Large District.

**Student voice surfaced as a priority with the board's commitment to identify and close opportunity gaps by fostering an inclusive environment where student input is valued. Board members recognized that the traditional model of having a student board representative did not necessarily give all students a voice.**

The gateway to more student involvement was the Superintendent Student Voice Council and Fellowship. The

group brings together district staff, board members, and community representatives. Students have the leading role.

"Previously, we weren't putting students in position to do valuable work," said Superintendent Trevor Greene. "Now they're learning about policy governance and better understand the system."

Students responded to the chance to have their voices heard. In the first year, more than 200 students applied to be part of the council. Participation opportunities have grown, and now every school has a student leadership team.

Board President Ryan Beckett said more than 30 students were involved in the initial Student Voice Council work. Many spent a year drafting the policies and presenting them to the board.

"I was impressed by the students' relentless commitment to the project, even when troubleshooting through some issues," Beckett said.

### **New Policies Ensure Student Voice and Equity**

Two key policies emerged from the Student Voice Council and Fellowship. The Student Voice Policy formalizes students' role in district governance, and the Equity Policy promotes fairness and justice across all the

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district's educational practices.

Students within the Student Voice Council and Fellowship drafted both policies. They gathered feedback from over 1,000 students, staff and community members. The resulting policies were endorsed by 80% of stakeholders.

Since their successful program launch, students have presented the initiative to regional superintendents and administrators, sparking interest in duplicating the program.

**The board's key takeaway is that creating structured, meaningful opportunities for student input can significantly improve the board's understanding of student needs and lead to more effective decision-making.**

For students, drafting policies directly with district staff leads to deeper engagement and a greater sense of ownership over the decisions that affect them. Board members are committed to continuing the model of co-creation for future initiatives, supporting a broader culture shift toward student-driven governance in the district.

In addition to student voice, Yakima's school board reflects the community. Members include a district alum, a former

district employee, and a district parent: Beckett. "It's a perspective I'm proud to bring to the table."

He observed that while board members have different viewpoints, they're committed to hearing each other out.

Board members' strengths add up to the greater good for students, Greene added. "The board members keep students first in different ways, and they are committed to all students."

Beckett said board members also are modeling for students what it looks like to be involved in the community.

### **Efforts Create a More Efficient Board**

Yakima School Board members used to meet five times a month, and their regular board meetings often lasted three hours. They agreed that change was needed and identified areas to fix that were under their control.

Trainings and retreats through WSSDA and other organizations helped board members clarify roles, improve decision making and strengthen equity policies and governance systems. Training sessions led by Dr. Mary Alice Heuschel improved communication channels and aligned strategic goals with district leadership. Board members also participated in training that strengthened their ability to address concerns such as budget issues and student achievement gaps.

Within 18 months the culture shifted and the board was

*Continued on next page*

working more efficiently. Some tactics included:

- Setting time limits for presenters at school board meetings
- Encouraging fewer staff members to attend board meetings; sometimes too many staffers attended in case questions came up during a presentation. “Some people were afraid we’d lose the knowledge base, but we really haven’t,” Beckett said. “We still have the information we need to make decisions.”
- Focusing on being more purposeful and diligent in conversations.
- Designating meetings for more thorough conversations about specific topics. Yakima schedules these deeper dives three times a year.

The meeting format changes were rolled out slowly, and the response was positive.

“How we operate is a celebratory win,” Greene said. The changes make it less daunting for people who’d like to serve on the board, he added.

“I’m grateful for the board’s service. To do what they do is a labor of love,” Greene added. “They’re in the trenches, working with district leadership to make the system better. They have made impactful improvements.”

### Always Learning

Yakima School Board members also participate in WSSDA’s Onboard trainings and Board Boot Camp.

Staff work together on curriculum and goals. Some evening and virtual learning opportunities are open to Yakima community members.

“We have the right mix of professional development programs. They don’t take away from family obligations or careers,” Greene said.

For his time on the board, Beckett has three main priorities:

- Continuing the board’s work to run more efficiently. In the past, some board meetings ran three hours long, and there was confusion about board members’ roles and the amount of commitment the job required. Through professional development efforts in the past 18 months, the culture has shifted and the board is operating more effectively, Beckett said.
- Engaging with the community. More involvement and accountability will strengthen the district’s partnership with families, organizations and residents.
- Improving academic performance.

Beckett grew up in the Yakima School District. He’s always been interested in political science and was inspired to join the school board so he could be more involved in his son’s education.

As a board member, “I get a kick out of the small things. Small successes add up, and it makes a difference

for kids individually.”

Beckett has seen the details of school operations on tours of food service, school buildings and other facilities. He’s met some of the district’s 2,000 employees and enjoys learning about their roles.

### Strategic Plan is a ‘Compass’ to Improvement

When Greene became superintendent, the Yakima district had a “road map” rather than a more defined strategic plan. So they created one.

The “Our Compass” strategic plan for 2020-2026 includes five cornerstone commitments and goals:

- Early years: By 2026, at least 95% of children meet the state criteria for kindergarten readiness.
- Engagement: By 2026, at least 95% of students attend school at least 171 days out of 180 days per school year. (2019 baseline: 50%)
- Achievement: By 2026, 75% of students meet state standards in English language arts and math (grades 4, 7, and 10) and science (grades 5, 8, and 11).
- Bilingual: By 2026, 75% of pre-K to 5th grade schools have access to a two-way dual-language program; 50% of middle school students participate in a world language course or cultural exchange program; 50% of graduating seniors attain the Seal of Biliteracy.
- Graduation: By 2026, 95% of high school students graduate on time, and 100% graduate within six years.

**“Our priority is ensuring that we have a strategic plan that challenges us,” Greene said. “Compared with the previous road map, the strategic plan provides more clarity and purpose – and the staff like it.”**

With the strategic plan nearing the end of its term, the school board and district leaders have started talking about the update for 2026 and beyond.

Priority topics for the new strategic plan include student attendance, belonging, dual languages, dual-credit programs, and community partnerships.

Beckett and Greene look forward to the refreshed strategic plan. They’re also realistic about the challenges that make it difficult to “dream how we want to dream” without sustainable, equitable state funding.

Beckett said the district’s progress toward current goals is an opportunity to connect with the community. “We have to be our own cheerleader and keep sharing about what we’re doing,” he said. “People are often surprised about what we’ve achieved.”

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# direct

WINTER 2026 NEWSMAGAZINE

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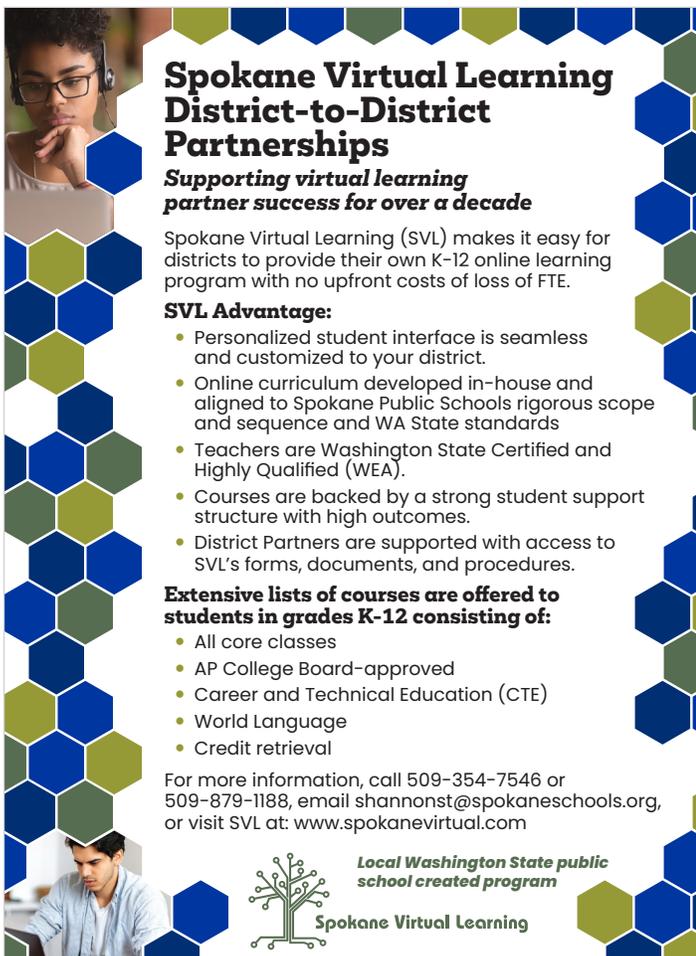
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