

# Richland Schools

## Office of the Superintendent

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### Memorandum

**Date:** 10/13/23  
**To:** School Board  
**From:** Shelley Redinger  
**Subject:** Friday Packet

Enclosed please find the following documents:

- Board Dates to Remember
- Community Events/Activities
- Media



**TO: Board of Directors**  
**RE: Event Dates**  
**DATE: 10/13/23**

**October:**

- 10/17...Board Meeting-Board Room-6:30
  - **6:00-6:30-Ex Session**
- 10/31...Board Meeting-Board Room-6:30
  - 5:30-6:30-Ex Session-(only if needed)

**November:**

- 11/14...Board Meeting-Board Room-6:30
  - 5:30-6:30-Ex Session-(only if needed)
- 11/28...Board Meeting-Board Room-6:30
  - 5:30-6:30-Ex Session-(only if needed)

# Upcoming Events/Activities

This list is suggestions of RSD and community events to attend as a Board Member. By no means is it a comprehensive list of all activities in the District. Future events will be added weekly.



## October

**Thursday  
12 -  
Saturday  
14**

**One Acts Festival**  
7:30 - 10:00 PM  
Hanford High School  
[www.hanforddrama.org/](http://www.hanforddrama.org/)

**Tuesday  
17**

**College and Career Expo**  
5:00 - 7:00 PM  
Hanford High School

**Wednesday  
18**

**College and Career Expo**  
5:00 - 7:00 PM  
Richland High School

**Tuesday  
24**

**RHS Fall Choir Concert**  
7:00 - 8:30 PM  
RHS Auditorium

**Thursday  
26**

**Fall Red Cross Blood Drive**  
8:00 AM - 2:30 PM  
Hanford High School  
(Small Eyrie Gym)

**Thursday  
26**

**RHS Orchestra Concert**  
7:00 - 8:30 PM  
RHS Auditorium

## November

**Thursday  
2**

**RSD Facilities  
Community Update**  
12:00 PM  
Zoom

**Thursday  
2**

**Careers & Financial Literacy  
Mock Interviews**  
All Day  
Hanford High School

**Friday  
3**

**Much Ado About Nothing**  
7:30 PM  
HHS Black Box Theatre  
[www.hanforddrama.org](http://www.hanforddrama.org)

**Saturday  
4**

**Twelfth Night**  
7:30 PM  
HHS Black Box Theatre  
[www.hanforddrama.org](http://www.hanforddrama.org)

**Thursday  
9**

**Twelfth Night**  
7:30 PM  
HHS Black Box Theatre  
[www.hanforddrama.org](http://www.hanforddrama.org)

**Friday  
10**

**Much Ado About Nothing**  
7:30 PM  
HHS Black Box Theatre  
[www.hanforddrama.org](http://www.hanforddrama.org)

**Saturday  
11**

**Much Ado About Nothing**  
2:00 PM  
HHS Black Box Theatre  
[www.hanforddrama.org](http://www.hanforddrama.org)

**Saturday  
11**

**Twelfth Night**  
7:30 PM  
HHS Black Box Theatre  
[www.hanforddrama.org](http://www.hanforddrama.org)

# League of Women Voters forums to feature Tri-Cities candidates

BY ERIC ROSANE  
*EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM*

Richland, WA

The League of Women Voters of Benton and Franklin Counties will broadcast its local candidate forums starting Oct. 16.

The forums will be broadcast at 7 and 11 p.m. daily Oct. 16-20 on Northwest Public Broadcasting and KTNW TV. The interviews also will be available to watch on demand on the League's [Facebook page](#) and [NWPB's YouTube page](#).

Ballots will be mailed to registered voters on Oct. 20 and must be returned by the general election on Tuesday, Nov. 7. Ballots postmarked after that date don't get counted.

In all, 141 candidates in the Tri-Cities filed for 100 seats on local city councils, fire district boards and school boards.

But here are the races that the League of Women Voters will highlight during the candidate forums:

## **MONDAY, OCT. 16**

- Port of Benton Commissioner 2 (Christy Rasmussen and Scott Keller).
- Richland City Council Position 2 (Theresa Richardson and Elizabeth Vann-Clark).
- Richland City Council Position 5 (Shayne VanDyke and Gregory Levy).
- Richland City Council Position 6 (Kurt Maier and Kent Madsen).

## **TUESDAY, OCT. 17**

- Kennewick School District, Director 3 (Dustin Petersen and Michael Connors)
- Kennewick School District, Director 4 (Brittany Gledhill and Aaron Michele Massey)
- Kennewick School District, Director 5 (Josh Miller)
- Benton City Mayor (Len Burton and Jake Mokler)
- West Richland Council, Position 7 (Kate Moran and David Cole)
- Kennewick City Council, Position 7 at-large (James Milbauer and Ted Owens)



## **WEDNESDAY, OCT. 18**

- Richland City Council, Position 7 (Ryan Whitten and Joshua Short)
- Richland School District, Director 3 (Chelsie Beck and Nino Kapitula)
- Richland School District, Director 4 (Kari Williams and Katrina Waters)
- Richland School District, Director 5 (Jill Oldson and Gene Nemeth)

## **THURSDAY, OCT. 19**

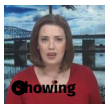
- Pasco School Director, District 1 (Vincent Guerrero and Steve Norberg)
- Pasco School Director, District 2 (John Kennedy and Gabriel Lucatero)
- Pasco School Director at-large (Rosa Torres and Steve Simmons)
- Pasco City Council, District 2 (Joseph Campos and Charles Grimm)

## **FRIDAY, OCT. 20**

- Pasco City Council, District 3 (Irving Brown Sr. and Leo Perales)
- Pasco City Council, District 5 (David Milne and James Czebotar)
- Pasco City Council at-large (Peter Harpster and Kim Lehrman)

## 'Dream big dreams, Wildcats' | Pasco elementary school unveils new outdoor classroom

Erin Wencil, Anna Trejo  
Oct 7, 2023



mes still  
fly Gorge...

WATCH FULL  
VIDEO

PASCO, Wash. - Students at Mark Twain Elementary School celebrated the opening of its new outdoor classroom Friday.

The idea for the classroom started years ago after a suggestion was made to the school's PTO board. However, it was the drive of one of Mark Twain Elementary's students that helped make the dream a reality.

Emmalmagene "Genie" Hernandez, who is a 5th-grader, was at Parr Lumber with her mother when she got into a conversation with its manager, Travis Tholstrup.

"Genie is a student here who over the last five years has gone out to seek donations from local business for numerous PTO events," said Carlee Black Esparaza, President of Twain Elementary PTO. "Genie is a girl with a big heart and even bigger dreams."

While at Parr Lumber, Tholstrup asked Hernandez what she dreamed she could do for her school -- and immediately, Hernandez told him of the dream of an outdoor space where kids could read, play and create messy science projects.

Tholstrup said Parr Lumber is always looking for ways to help the community and he felt Hernandez's idea was a great chance to get involved.

ADVERTISING



"I think it's so important that we give back to our communities and be a part of it," Tholstrup said. He said Friday's unveiling is just the beginning. "This is just a small piece. This is going to be added on to."

Parr Lumber donated the shade structure, essential materials for the concrete and volunteers helped install the structure and the railing.

Capital Lumber contributed to the shade structure donation, International Wood Products donated the railing and American Rock Products donated 15 yards of concrete for the foundation.

The project, estimated to cost \$25,000, was finished on September 16, 2023. Mark Twain Elementary's PTO donated over \$15,000 to the project and the rest of the funding was secured through community partners.

"This is still sinking in that this is actually happening for us," said Black Esparaza. "I just want to thank you all for being here and helping us celebrate this accomplishment." She also credited Hernandez's drive as being the key to making the project a success. "The PTO is so happy to have you involved in the beginning. Without your initiative, we wouldn't be here."

✕

Hernandez said it wasn't just about creating a space for students that was important. It was about creating a space for students of all abilities that really made the difference for her. "It's really special because I have two boys who are in wheelchairs that I've been friends with since Kinder," Hernandez said. "I think it's really special to them to that they get to be a part of this. I'm really proud that this happened because my friends can finally participate in something they didn't get to participate in when they had to do it inside."

Hernandez finished her speech to the students Friday with a special thank you to Tholstrup and Parr Lumber and a special message to her classmates. "Dream big dreams, Wildcats. You have people all around you who are ready to listen."

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**Two teens die, four others hurt in crash in Benton County**  
Erin Wencil



**Timeline of gas leak investigation in Walla Walla, post office and hotel expected to reopen Oct. 10**  
Erin Wencil

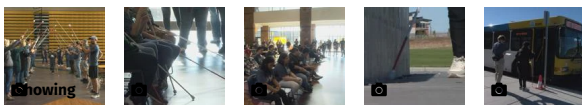
**Head-on crash in Benton County sends one person to the hospital Friday**  
Erin Wencil, Morgan Huff

[https://www.applevalleynewsnow.com/news/education/back-to-school/second-annual-cane-quest-pnw-comes-to-rsd-for-visually-impaired-students/article\\_b4797914-649a-11ee-8e2c-93b3e3b14df7.html](https://www.applevalleynewsnow.com/news/education/back-to-school/second-annual-cane-quest-pnw-comes-to-rsd-for-visually-impaired-students/article_b4797914-649a-11ee-8e2c-93b3e3b14df7.html)

## Second Annual 'Cane Quest PNW' comes to RSD for visually impaired students

By Rylee Fitzgerald

Oct 6, 2023



WEST RICHLAND, Wash. — For the second year, the Richland School District (RSD) hosted a competition for visually impaired students. 'Cane Quest Pacific Northwest' took place Friday at Leona Libby Middle School in West Richland.

The nationally-recognized orientation and mobility competition is aimed at empowering and testing the skills of students with visual impairments from across the region.

Linda McFall and Mandy Carpenter are the event coordinators for this competition. McFall said Cane Quest is about gaining independence, and using their white canes not as a barrier, but as a tool for autonomy.

"Independence, first and foremost. That's what we're after. We want them to be able to grow up and be whoever they want to be and travel and go to the store or the mall or the airport and not have to rely on others, and that the white cane is their ticket to that freedom and learning those skills as a young person and building them along the way. They'll be ready for college and life," said McFall.

One of the challenges of the day is to board a transit bus and take a trip around the school's campus. Ben-Franklin Transit was one of the partners for this event, rolling to West Richland to be a part of the important day. There were other activities and challenges throughout the day as well.

McFall has her own experience with loss of sight. She said she did orientation mobility training, and learned to use a cane after losing her vision as an adult. She gained some ability to see after a corneal transplant, but still has a visual condition.

"I had to learn it myself and then I found out I could not only learn it myself, but serve students and others in the same fields," she said.

There were participants as young as 2 years old, through grade 12. Twenty students competed this year. The competition also included navigating designed routes through instruction and the assistance of volunteers.

Not only is it a chance to put their skills with a cane to the test, but also to be around people who are like them, a rare experience for visually impaired students.

"A chance to get together and be with others, you know, the same age peers, that are learning and practicing the same skills. They are usually isolated in our buildings. There's maybe one in an entire district. So, there's no one else that looks like them, that travels like them, and this is a chance for them to just really feel like they belong and that they have this tribe around them," said McFall.

According to McFall, the best part of the whole event is how it makes the students feel.

"The joy on their faces. They kind of look at each other and they're just like, 'Wow, they're doing the same things, and their cane is just like mine,' and they immediately relaxed and the joy and the laughter between them is just beautiful," McFall said.

McFall also said it couldn't happen without the support of the Richland School District. Among volunteers, families and others, were faculty members and RSD Superintendent Shelley Redinger.

"Our administration supports us 100%. They understand what we do, they understand why it's so important, but they're also willing to support the time and dedication it takes to bring all of these students together," said McFall. "Most districts don't have an opportunity to even bring their one, two or three students together, and this is a chance for us to be that entity that can bring all of them together."

They compete based on grade level and the level of visual impairment. Students participating are from those without any vision, to those with 20/70 vision.

The Cane Quest was developed by the Braille Institute of America, and has primarily been held east of the Mississippi River, in the Southwest U.S. and in California. RSD's Cane Quest PNW is the first competition to be held in the region, serving students from Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana.

Find more information from the Richland School District [here](#).

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**Washington State University Tri-Cities to renovate engineering lab**  
Morgan Huff - Apple Valley News Now



**Richland's Spudnut Shop owners explain upcoming expansions**  
By Rylee Fitzgerald



**Upgrades made to Little Theatre of Walla Walla ahead of 79th season**  
Jill Sperling



**Extradition on hold for West Richland woman accused of murder**  
Erin Wencil



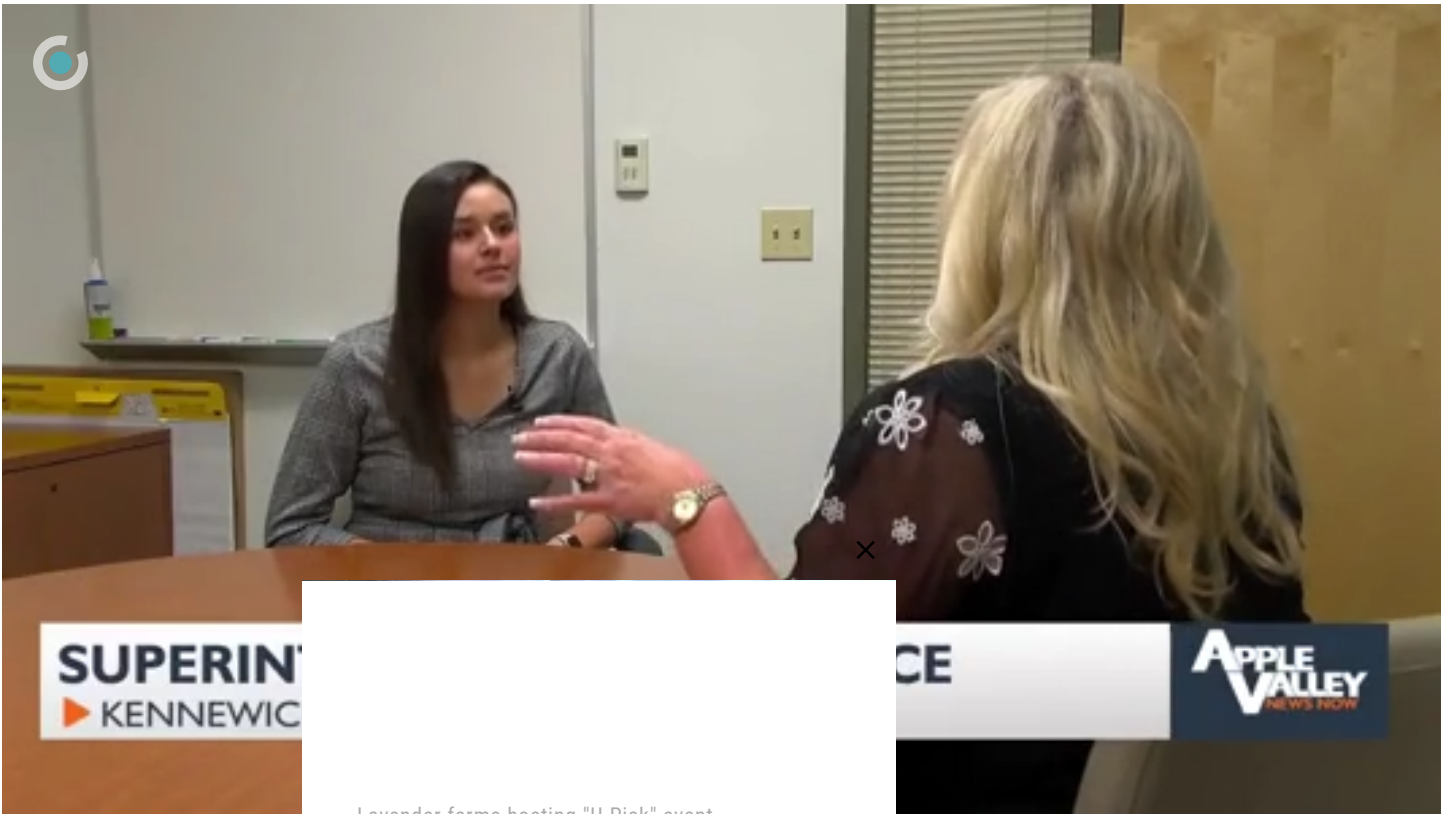
**Ziply Fiber launches high-speed internet service in Tieton**  
By Emily Goodell

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## Superintendent Sit-Down: Kennewick School District

By Rylee Fitzgerald  
Oct 10, 2023



4 Lavender farms hosting "U-Pick" event in Burbank

WATCH FULL VIDEO

KENNEWICK, Wash. — We are sit s school year. We’re asking what the most important things are to school districts and what problems education systems are facing.

In this edition of the Superintendent Sit-Down, we spoke with Kennewick School District Superintendent, Traci Pierce.

### Interview transcript:

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*RYLEE FITZGERALD: We're talking about the upcoming school year. So, what are some of the goals for the 2023 to 2024 school year for the Kennewick School District.*

SUPERINTENDENT TRACI PIERCE: Our big goals for our school district remain the same each year. We've got three big goals for our students, that all students are safe, known and valued, all students are engaged learners and all students who are ready for their future. And then we also have a community-focused goal, district-focused, a staff and a family-focused goal that I'll work toward helping us meet our goals for students. So, from a big perspective, our goals remain the same, and then we do a different work every year to help accomplish those goals.

*RF: It's scary to send a kid to school in this day and age, let alone, be that student that's attending those classes.*

TP: One thing I would want to say to parents and to assure parents is that safety is our top priority. And it truly is. We know that our students need to feel safe and be safe and our staff need to be safe in order for learning to happen, and so that's why we invest in the safety efforts that we do. The levy passed last year, which is great and that community support is enabling us to expand safety, and we've had really, really good positive feedback. There's been lots of comments on our social media about parents feeling good about sending their students to school, and we know we've got data that shows that our students feel good about it as well. Every spring we survey our students grades 3 through 12, and one of the questions we ask is whether they feel safe at school, and we have 86% of our students reporting that they do feel safe at school and that was before the addition of the safety officers and expanded SRO program. We also have more counselors in our high schools this year as well, because part of being safe isn't just physical safety. It's about that social emotional safety and having someone to talk to if you've got concerns and we've got good systems for students to report safety concerns through their administration. We've got an anonymous safety alert system that people can use. So, all of those efforts combined, really, to help assure families that we take safety really seriously and we invest resources in that because we know how important it is.

*RF: How would you say that COVID impacted teachers in the Kennewick School District?*

TP: It was an extraordinarily challenging time for everybody. For our students first and foremost, with, you know, the governor, closing schools. You know, the shift for staff from face-to-face learning to remote learning to hybrid learning and all of those changes. So, there was no doubt that it was a difficult challenging time for our students, for our families, for our staff. I'm really proud that you know, we were able to persevere through it and learn from it and I think emerge better for it in some ways, in that, you know, our staff have been able to really implement technology, new learning management systems, new strategies for communicating with parents that maybe we didn't need to if it hadn't been for COVID. Now, nobody wishes COVID happened or anything like that. But, you know, just looking for the silver lining. It's like, 'what did we learn from that?' And 'how can we use what we learned to make our educational experience even stronger for people.' Nationwide, there is learning loss that occurred for students, there's no question. We've been able to take some of our COVID ESSER dollars, the the learning recovery dollars that we received from the federal government, to really target areas, for example, elementary mathematics. We're doing a new adoption of curricular materials this year to help strengthen our math program, and we're using those ESSER dollars to help fund that. So, we've also implemented, this will be our third year of implementation of tutoring. It's free to families. It's real time online tutoring, and it's available to everyone and we want to make sure we get the word out about that. We've had really good feedback about that and that's something that we offer, again, using those learning recovery dollars to help our students, you know, recover from some of the lost learning that they experienced during COVID.

*RF: You were talking about that silver lining that kind of came with a pandemic. Would you say that schools have kind of learned how to better adapt to things, roll with punches, adapt and change quickly?*



TP: Yeah, you know, it's interesting when you go through something that's really challenging and you come out the other side, you realize, you know, we can do hard things right. We can persevere through difficulty and come out stronger for it. So I think just the amount of flexibility and adaptability and just, you know, we would get new information from the state and have to act on it, like, practically the next day. All of those things, I think, contribute to that feeling. 'Well, okay, we were able to, to live through that, and we made it through and so we can face other challenges as well.'

*RF: Do you feel like there's been a wave of learning loss throughout our communities with students being behind because they didn't get that in person experience with their educators?*

TP: Thankfully, in this community, in this side of the state, we were one of the first districts and one of the first areas to return to hybrid and full time learning whereas some school districts and other parts of the state, in other parts of the country, didn't return to full time learning that second year of the pandemic. That being said, we look at that data and we say, well, how can we use our resources then to address this lost learning, to address these gaps? And so, as I said, you know, we've used funding for providing tutoring, no cost tutoring to all families and students in our district, we're using it to adopt new math materials that will strengthen our mathematics program at the elementary schools for our students, and we've also invested in mental health therapists through partnership with Comprehensive HealthCare, and those people have been in our high schools and middle schools. This will be, I believe, the second year of implementing that program, because some of the challenges that are connected to learning also have to do with just what other kinds of social emotional needs students have, and so we want to be able to address those along with the academic needs with the ultimate goal that they're going to be more successful academically with all of those supports.

*RF: Would you say there's been higher needs since the pandemic for mental health care?*

TP: We definitely saw a peak, you know, especially coming right after the pandemic, coming right back to school. I think the need was there pre-pandemic and the need continues to be there now. And so, you know, our goal is just to be able to have the resources to provide students with the help that they need when they need it.

*RF: Have there been discussions within the school district about how we can use AI, if we should use AI, should we limit AI? How is it being addressed in the Kennewick School District?*

TP: We are having those conversations. It's interesting because it seems about every other email I get, not from parents or community members, but more from educational organizations has to do with AI and how districts are dealing with AI, and what policies and procedures. I know that there are some districts across the state who developed policies, I think, pretty much, banning AI last year, and now they're reversing course on some of those policies, because I think what they're discovering as I'm reading is that really we need to—AI is here and we need to help students and staff members understand how to use it appropriately. So, anytime I think there's new technology, we have to acknowledge that there is that technology and help students know how to navigate it. Whether, you know, when the internet first became a thing, right? We needed to incorporate digital citizenship and Internet safety into our teaching with students and knowing even now, like, you can't just copy something off of the internet and turn it in as your own work and so, you know, 'how can you use AI in a responsible manner without plagiarizing' and those kinds of things, is what we're discussing and have on our plans to develop a policy for this year.

*RF: I know Washington maybe isn't dealing with this as strongly as other states are, but are we seeing a teacher shortage here in the Kennewick School District?*

TP: I wouldn't necessarily characterize it as a shortage, but definitely, there are harder to fill positions than others. Special education continues to be an area in our state and probably across the nation that's a harder to fill position. And then there's other staff categories too, like bus drivers and paraeducators that we're always, you know, looking for as well. Our teacher shortage probably isn't as pronounced as it is in other areas of the country. I think part of that is, yeah, it's a great place to live and work in Washington State, and there's been efforts in recent years to ensure that teachers are fairly compensated and all of those kinds of things. I think it does play into making it, you know, an attractive state to work in. We also do some things locally, to try to attract and recruit and retain teachers.

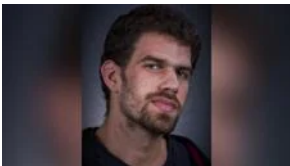
*RF: DARE is not exactly what it used to be. It used to have a little bit of a worse rap than it does now. Have there been program shifts?*

TP: Yeah, so I think maybe what some people have in their mind when they hear DARE is what DARE used to be and it kind of came about in the 80s. I think with the whole 'just say no,' and that kind of thing, but it really has evolved over the years and it's really, you know, a curriculum focused on helping students make good choices and, so, it really has evolved with the times and you know, this last spring, I was able to go to a number of DARE graduations. Officer Canada had been our DARE officer through KPD. He's a KPD officer, and he is mainly the officer who taught DARE in our elementary schools, and then there's a graduation every spring and it's a really great event because all the fifth graders are a part of that and families are there and they talk quite a bit during that ceremony about how it's, you know, what the program is all about and how it's different from maybe what it started out as, and there's still clearly a focus on keeping kids safe and having kids make good choices and staying away from drugs and alcohol. So, it's a really great program to have and we're going to continue it in our middle schools.

*If you have any questions for your local superintendents, send them to [rfitzgerald@applevalleynewsnow.com](mailto:rfitzgerald@applevalleynewsnow.com).*

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**University of Washington grad student killed in Israel**



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**Wet and Windy Through Wednesday!**  
Stacy Lee, Weather Anchor



**Superintendent Sit-Down: Richland School District**  
By Rylee Fitzgerald

# Nine names are finalists being considered for Pasco's 2 new schools



ERIC ROSANE [EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM](mailto:EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM)

Future students of Pasco's third comprehensive school district flip soil on the first tree sapling to be planted at the site. When it opens in fall 2025, the new school will serve 2,000 students living in the northwest neighborhoods of the Pasco School District.

**BY ERIC ROSANE**  
[EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM](mailto:EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM)

Pasco, WA

The [school board in Pasco, Wash.](#), will consider a slate of nine names for two new high schools that will open in fall 2025.

During a special study session held Tuesday, [the Pasco School Board heard from](#) district staff as well as members who served on two naming committees for the schools.

The naming committees were tasked with [submitting to the board 3-to-5 recommendations](#), and the teams sifted through more than 200 names suggested by the community.

Here are the five finalists made to name the district's third comprehensive high school:

- Desert Vista High School
- Great Forks High School

- Harvest View High School
- Sageview High School
- Sunset High School

And here are the four finalists to name the district's new choice career and college academy:

- Orion High School
- Pathways High School
- Sun Willows High School
- Tradewinds High School

The power to name the two schools rests on the school board, which will decide during the Oct. 24 regular school board meeting. The district hopes to have the details wrapped up by Nov. 1 to incorporate the names into the design of the schools.

Voters earlier this year [approved a 21-year, \\$195.5 million bond measure](#) to build a third comprehensive high school to serve 2,000 students and a technical high school to serve 600 in-district students.

These new schools will aim to not only alleviate overcrowding in Pasco schools, but also provide more program options for high school students.

Fowler General Construction [has already begun work to construct](#) the 300,000-square-foot high school, which will sit on a 65-acre campus at 6091 Burns Road.

Construction of the college and career high school [will begin in spring 2024](#). In addition to their high school diploma, students there will also graduate with workforce-ready credentials, industry certifications and hands-on experience.

Many of the names [suggested by the community over the summer](#) included those of notable Pasco leaders, historical figures, and social justice and labor rights icons.

The committees used data and community feedback to narrow the list of names down, and also took into account changing perceptions and associations that a school's name may carry.

Mascots and school colors will be picked at a later date.

The district has also [begun the process to redraw its boundaries](#) to incorporate the third high school among Chiawana High School and Pasco High School. A committee of community members will meet monthly from November to March to weigh feedback against boundary scenarios.



# Washington state has safest high schools in America, says new report

BY KARLEE VAN DE VENTER  
*KVANDEVENTER@TRICITYHERALD.COM*

Washington state has been ranked the [safest state for high school students](#) in 2023, according to a recently published study from [Scholaroo](#), a resource site for high school students.

Rankings were calculated based on 11 safety metrics, which all contributed to an overall score out of 100. States were ranked in order of their total score.

The study evaluated the following safety metrics at:

Regular weight:

- Bullying
- Cyberbullying
- Exposure to illegal drugs
- Forced sexual intercourse
- Weapon carried at school
- Threats of physical attack with a weapon

Half weight:

- Feeling safe at school
- School safety plans
- School resource officers

Double weight:

- Physical fights on school property

Triple weight:

- School shootings

“Prioritizing safety is of paramount importance for high school students as they navigate through their educational journey,” states the Scholaroo study introduction. “Ensuring a secure environment not only fosters a conducive atmosphere for learning but also allows young individuals to focus on their studies and personal growth without unnecessary concerns.”

## WA HIGH SCHOOLS RANKED SAFEST

The study found that Washington state had the greatest overall safety score of all U.S. states. The Evergreen State is followed in the top five by:

- Delaware
- Kentucky
- Oklahoma
- New Jersey

The five lowest ranked states are:

- Texas
- Pennsylvania
- North Carolina
- Louisiana
- Georgia

Across the 11 safety metrics, here's how Washington ranked:

- Bullying: 26
- Cyberbullying: 21
- Exposure to illegal drugs: 9
- Feeling safe at school: 45
- School shootings: 36
- School resource officers: 5
- Forced sexual intercourse: 1
- Weapons carried at school: 14
- Threats of physical attack with a weapon: 1
- Physical attack or fight with a weapon: 3

There were only two rankings for School Safety Plans, 1 and 45. Washington was one of over half the states to be ranked 1 in any category.

*Karlee Van De Venter: 509-416-6035, @KarleeVNews*

# Superintendent Sit-Down: Kiona-Benton School District

By Rylee Fitzgerald  
Oct 12, 2023



BENTON CITY, Wash. — We are s  
things are to school districts ar

is school year. We're asking what the most important

3 Suspect identity, victim's names still  
not released days after deadly Gorge...

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In this edition of the Superintendent Sit-Down, we spoke with Kiona-Benton School District Superintendent, Pete Peterson.

Interview transcript:

*RYLEE FITZGERALD: What are some of the goals for the Kiona-Benton School District for the 2023 to 2024 school year?*

SUPERINTENDENT PETE PETERSON: I think one of the biggest schools is trying to refocus around KiBe as a community and as a school system within the community. We're taking very important steps to recognize that our kids don't necessarily look like other kids either up or down the valley or in the Tri-Cities, and making sure that we're affording them the best opportunities for our kids. So, trying to design some programming and some opportunities that may not exist in other places, but our kids have a need. So, we're trying to focus on that a little more this year.

*RF: What are some of the challenges that this school year is bringing?*

PP: To be honest, the school year has started off, knock on wood, as well as the school year has started in quite a while. As I talked to other superintendents and other school personnel around the region around the state, we're getting a lot of the same things. Kids have fallen back into a routine. You know, last year was really the first kind of 'go back to real school post-COVID,' and it had its own unique set of challenges, as a lot of people will tell you from last year. This year, things were a little more known, and so, expectations for kids have been higher and the kids have jumped up to meet them. It's kind of nice to go into a school year, and really have an expectation, 'Oh, yeah. We're doing school again, the way that we were trained to do it before COVID.'

*RF: How would you say that COVID impacted teachers?*

PP: I marveled at the fact that our teaching staff was able to do as well as they could on very short notice. That being said, some of the things that our teachers are utilizing every day, quite frankly, wouldn't have been there unless COVID had happened. So, we have a lot more teachers using interactive software. We get used to the Teams and the Zooms for meetings. Well, those have very good ways of being utilized in the classroom. So, all of our kids have access to Teams, and quite frankly, we were able to get kids computers and go one-to-one much faster than if we'd been simply asked to implement it over a number of years. The necessity of COVID in the things that it forced upon us have actually turned out to be, in some cases, a positive because it really made us come up to speed quicker.

*RF: Did COVID kind of make teachers and faculty and staff kind of be able to think quicker on their feet and adapt to changes faster?*

PP: I don't think that any teacher would be accused of not having to think on their feet on a daily basis, regardless of the circumstances. I think what it brought up were unique challenges and new challenges that they hadn't had to think about before, make some adaptations and then realize that they could utilize some of those things that they adapted into regular classrooms as we've come back.

*RF: How did COVID affect students in the Kiona-Benton school district?*

PP: It had, in my opinion, it had higher level of impact here in Kiona-Benton City than in a lot of places and I think any of the school systems around the small rural-based, faced a lot of those same unique challenges. A lot of our kids are on a free and reduced lunch, so we had to work around making sure that our kids were fed during COVID. We ran our food service and our transportation virtually nonstop for the better part of two years. No summer break, no spring break, no Christmas break because we were trying to account for some of those unique needs that we face here. A lot of our kids have the responsibility of taking care of younger siblings. So, once their parents went back to work, in many cases that left kids home to take care of younger siblings. So, we've had a unique set of challenges, but also I think that our



community as a whole and again, I think this is attributable to the graciousness that most small communities have, is we take care of our own and community members really stepped up to help out during that time and quite frankly, they still are.

*RF: Did you see in the Kiona-Benton school district, a wave of learning loss through the school year? You said that you've kind of caught up a little bit?*

PP: Well, we've gotten used to the routines and how we do school. I don't think you're going to find a school district anywhere, not only in the state, but probably the country that didn't have some sort of, of an impact from learning loss, and now it's really a matter of just trying to catch up and I don't think that is anything that's going to happen in this district or any of our neighbors, in the next six months, next year or next two years. We repeatedly tell our principals these groups of kids that missed out on that two or three years of regular learning are going to be impacted for the rest of their careers. You're going to see those kids moving up into middle school, moving up into high school, and it's not simply a learning loss. In many cases, kids lost social time, they lost social learning, they lost the ability to interact with people and that's a slow process to get back. So, I think we're gonna see the impacts of this go on for the next five to 10 years, quite frankly, until those kids move through the system. But hopefully, and I know whether our teaching staff, we're doing the right things along the way to catch them up academically, and hopefully socially as well.

*RF: That was one of my questions was, emotionally and socially, was there also a wave of loss?*

PP: I think there was and quite frankly, there were for adults, too. No one had been through a period of time where, for the better part of six months people were stuck at home, or the only social interaction were through our computers and through cameras. So, those types of things for everyone coming back had to be relearned, and I think that was the biggest challenge for us last year, was getting students, staff and parents<sup>X</sup> used to those social interactions again, and this year, we're seeing that the hard work—and it was hard work last year—we're seeing that pay dividends because people kids parents, teachers are falling back into that rhythm.

*RF: I've seen a push for mental health resources for everybody, but a lot for teenagers as well. Have you seen this represented through the school district?*

PP: Yeah, I believe so, and, I think again, that was a scenario that we were talking about before COVID. COVID simply exacerbated the problem, and so, we as most districts have have really tried to focus on social-emotional learning and getting kids up to speed and, and taking care of those needs because when you're talking about needs of students, if you're not taking care of some of those personal needs, those foundational needs, it's impossible to not throw academic learning on top of them. That's always been a challenge in education in general. I think that COVID really pushed us, though, to try and try and meet those needs first. I think a lot of districts and a lot of school systems, ours included, probably tried to do those side-by-side for a long time, and coming down to COVID, we realized if we don't get the social-emotional right, any academic goals or academic desires simply aren't going to take until we meet those more basic needs.

*RF: How are those resources being handled through the school district to meet students' needs?*

PP: Well, we're pretty fortunate in, again, we have a community that's very outgoing and a lot of our needs as well as being social-emotional are simply some of those foundational needs. We have a pantry system where we have kids who come in and they may need to take some extra food home over a weekend. They may need some more school resources, things like that, that we get donations for. But when you're kind of looking at, not simply an academic need or a social-emotional need, we just have needy kids in general, and we've run the gamut from kids and what those needs are. So, I

think one of the things that we've been taught is that we have to take a much more personal accountability for each kid and not simply assume that all kids need the same things. Coming out of COVID, we've kind of had to take a very basic look at each kid and say, 'Okay, this student really needs X, Y or Z but the student over here doesn't need that, but boy, they could use some help in these other areas,' and again, being part of a small community, we have some resources available here locally, and some people who are really willing to step up and help us provide that, but we're also fortunate because we've got great partners in Columbia Basin College, WSU Tri Cities, the Washington Student Achievement Council. I mean, everybody's kind of coming around to see that there are things that each individual partner, whether it's social or academic, does successfully and does very well. Not everybody has all the answers. So, trying to get everybody in a room to discover 'where are some of our challenges, and where some of our strengths?' and then learning from each other. I think those are new conversations that didn't always happen before COVID that now we realize, no one group is going to be able to fix this problem. It's going to take a community effort, whether it's a small community, just Benton City or part of the larger region is something that superintendents talk about regularly at our meetings, when we all get together is, 'What are we doing as individual districts that could help other districts?' and so we have a lot of those types of conversations.

*RF: We've also seen a lot of violence across schools across the country. Have we seen anything like that in the Kiona-Benton School District?*

PP: We've been very fortunate. We consider our schools to be safe. But we've had no major violent outbursts, no major acts of violence in the schools, and quite frankly, we didn't before COVID. Our staff is very aware of safety as a primary focus of our school system, and I think again, in a smaller district, kids are more comfortable coming forward because they have a much more personal relationship with most of the adults in the school. I know some of our other schools in the region have seen and had issues. You know, luckily, we haven't been ~~there~~ there, and we don't treat that as a foregone conclusion. We train our staff and we train our kids on what to do when you have problems or you hear things, say things you know, speak up and let us know about the problems before they become so big that we have to address them immediately. Let's try and address them as they come up and get them out of the way.

*RF: Is there more anxiety in students and staff in the school district? Because of those national trends?*

PP: I think there's an anxiety amongst all educators right now. I think it's, again, not a local phenomenon. I think it's a nationwide phenomenon. We tend to though focus on the big items that get blown up in news and we all have rather personal reactions to those, but I think at the end of the day, I think our students and our staff would tell you we're in a better position to be able to deal with that because of our size and the 'close-knitness,' if you will, of the community, not to say we don't have problems. We simply tried to identify them earlier before they become unmanageable.

*RF: Have there been conversations regarding artificial intelligence?*

PP: I would say no. They haven't been topics that have been high up on our list of concerns either brought to us or concerns by staff. Again, I think that's more of a case of, we try not to wait to react to things when they become a big thing. You know, we haven't had a lot of discussion around AI but I know you know, we have people going on strike in Hollywood over those types of things. But, yeah, they haven't been, they haven't been huge, but we don't try and sweep those types of conversations under the rug either. If someone wants to come out of the conversation, we're more than willing to have it. But I think we're in a good spot, again, because I think people feel good about having those types of conversations, knowing that we know each other. The community knows each other well. They know the students well, and it's also terribly hard to keep a secret in small districts. So, if something happens, most everybody's going to hear about it.

*RF: At the very beginning, we had mentioned new programs. Is there something that you're specifically excited about?*

PP: I think probably one of our things that we're working on very hard these days, it's around the Washington Student Achievement Council, and we received a grant through the STEM Foundation, and so we're working really hard to create new opportunities for our kids here in Benton City. When you have partners like CBC and WSU Tri-Cities that are willing to come here to talk to kids, as opposed to us going there, it's a really good dynamic and it feeds into the idea that as a small district and a small community, we understand there's a challenge of preparing our kids not only for life outside of school, but oftentimes life outside of this community and we want to really refocus on giving kids opportunities to stay in the community, to hit those those lifetime achievements and outcomes that we want to see, with the realization they can do it here locally and not have to travel 100 miles or even to the Tri-Cities to do it, and that's been rather refreshing to be able to see there are people in the state and the region who want to have those types of conversations, because a lot of rural districts will feel like they've been kind of left out of those conversations. So, when you have the opportunity to grab a hold of them. Even though we're still in the talking and discussing phase, I think it holds some promise as to what could be done in small districts, when all the resources aren't going to the biggest players in the state.

*RF: If you've got a kid who's about to join the Kiona-Benton School District, what's the top thing parents need to know?*

PP: You know, I think the main thing that parents need to know as they send their kids to our schools is we've got a very caring staff and that we're going to do everything we can to meet individual needs of kids. I think in education as a whole, the days of being a number as a student, I think those are gone. Because, if you're not meeting the individual needs of kids, you're not setting them up to be able to benefit from your academic teachings that we have to offer, and, so, regardless of what the problem is for individual kids or families, we have to meet kids needs where they're at. We can't expect everyone to come here and simply fall into line. In education, we've been in a position where we kind of advertise ourselves as 'we take everyone and everybody comes to us for certain reasons.' We have to be on our A-game, because there are so many other educational opportunities out there. It's not just a one-horse town anymore. If we don't recognize that it's not up to students and families to meet our expectations, but sometimes, we have to meet theirs and meet them halfway. I think that's going to be the next significant barrier that we have to overcome in education in general, is that, as kids get computers and get access and through their phones to a wide, much wider world, and have to be prepared to meet everybody where they're at and not expect everybody just to jump on board with the way we think and we do things.

*If you have any questions for your local superintendents, send them to [rfitzgerald@applevalleynewsnow.com](mailto:rfitzgerald@applevalleynewsnow.com).*

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