

Richland Schools

Office of the Superintendent

Memorandum

Date: 3/15/24
To: School Board
From: Shelley Redinger
Subject: Friday Packet

Enclosed please find the following documents:

- Board Dates to Remember
- Community Events/Activities
- Safety and Security Bids Memo
- Media



TO: Board of Directors
RE: Event Dates
DATE: 3/15/24

March:

- **3/26/24...Board Meeting-Board Room – 6:30 PM**
 - **Ex. Session-(only if needed)**

April:

- **April 1-5...SPRING BREAK**
- **4/9/24...Board Meeting-Board Room – 6:30 PM**
 - **Ex. Session-(only if needed)**
- **4/23/24...Board Meeting-Board Room**
 - **Ex. Session-(only if needed)**

May:

- **5/14/24...Board Meeting-Board Room – 6:30 PM**
 - **Ex. Session-(only if needed)**
- **5/28/24...Board Meeting-Board Room – 6:30 PM**
 - **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.

March

Friday 15th:

- Bingo Night
5:30 – 7:30 PM
White Bluffs Commons
- The Addams Family
7 PM
Leona Libby Middle School
<https://gofan.co/app/school/WA85702>

Saturday 16th:

- Spring Craft Show
9 AM – 3 PM
Chief Jo Middle School Gym
- The Addams Family
2 PM
Leona Libby Middle School
<https://gofan.co/app/school/WA85702>

Monday 18th:

- Parent & Guardian Advisory Committee
6 – 7:30 PM
TLAC or Zoom
<https://rsd400.zoom.us/j/3594836952?omn=82048265506>

Tuesday 19th:

- Band Concert
7 PM
Hanford High School Auditorium

Tuesday 26th:

- Walkathon
Leona Libby Middle School

Thursday 28th:

- Jazz Concert
7 PM
Hanford High School Auditorium

April

SPRING BREAK – APRIL 1 - 5

Hanford + Richland High School
Athletics Calendars

<https://hanfordathletics.com/events>
<https://bomberathletics.com/events>



MEMORANDUM

DATE: Friday, March 15, 2024

TO: Board of Directors
Superintendent

FROM: Richard Krasner, Executive Director of Operations

SUBJECT: Safety & Security Projects – Informational Update

The first round of safety & security upgrade projects included in the February 2023 Capital Project Levy were recently bid on by general contractors.

The first round was for three project packages that bid separately as part of the upgrades for the Elementary, Middle, and Choice schools.

Project 1 includes Enterprise Middle School and William Wiley Elementary.

Project 2 includes Chief Joseph Middle School, Jason Lee Elementary, White Bluffs Elementary, and Three Rivers HomeLink Lynx Campus.

Project 3 includes Carmichael Middle School, Three Rivers HomeLink, and Rivers Edge High School.

Competitive bids for the above Safety & Security Upgrade projects were solicited through the advertised process according to specifications from ALSC Architect of Spokane. The bid due date was Thursday, March 7, 2024. In a meeting open to the public, staff opened the sealed bids at 12:00pm for Project 1, 2:00pm for Project 2, and 4:00pm for Project 3. One bid was received for each project.

The lowest bidder for Project 1 is Siefken & Sons Construction of Richland with a total bid (including alternates) of \$354,629 (without taxes).

The lowest bidder for Project 2 is G2 Construction of Kennewick with a total bid of \$1,267,000.00 (without taxes).



OPERATIONS

The lowest bidder for Project 3 is G2 Construction of Kennewick with a total bid of \$1,215,000.00 (without taxes).

Staff will now proceed with the construction phase of these projects with the anticipates substantial completion date of August 16, 2024.

The Hanford High School Safety & Security project received competitive bids solicited through the advertised process according to specifications from Design West Architects of Kennewick. The bid due date was Wednesday, March 13, 2024. In a meeting open to the public, staff opened the sealed bids at 3:00pm and five (5) bids were received.

The lowest bidder for the Hanford High School Safety & Security project was Booth & Sons of Kennewick with a total bid (including alternates) of \$1,089,800 (without taxes).

Staff will now proceed with the construction phase of these projects with the anticipates substantial completion date of August 16, 2024.

The Richland High School safety & security project will bid March 26, 2024.

Once we have awarded the Richland High School project, we will follow up with a complete budget analysis.

Thank You.

Kennewick union treasurer admits to embezzling dues

BY CAMERON PROBERT
CPROBERT@TRICITYHERALD.COM

Kennewick, WA

A Kennewick school employee has promised to repay \$14,000 after admitting to [years of stealing](#) cash from her bus driver union.

Karen Ann Steele, 64, the union's former treasurer, started this week by paying \$2,500 as part of an agreement that will keep her out of jail even after pleading guilty to second-degree theft.

Deputy Prosecutor Tyler Grandgeorge said in court that Steele's payment was one of the key reasons prosecutors agreed to a first-time offender sentence.

"Ms. Steele has been trying to make efforts to pay back the full amount," he said, adding that she hasn't been able to yet, but he appreciated the effort.

10-YEAR-OLD THEFT

Steele was initially accused of embezzling \$18,000 in union funds over the course of her 10 years as the treasurer, according to court documents.

She initially stepped into the role in 2013 and was the only person in charge of handling the chapter's money. The dues paid by the employees are divided between Washington state and local union chapters.

Starting early in her tenure, she began using the union money to make thousands of dollars in purchases at various stores, including Rite Aide and Costco, according to Benton County court documents.

Chapter president Peggy Morgan discovered the missing money and reported it to police in March 2023.

Steele told investigators she used the fact that no one checked the finances to take money from the chapter's account. She said she started stealing money after she was the victim of a scam and she owed a "substantial amount of money," according to court documents.

She created a bank account where she would transfer the money and could take cash withdrawals using an ATM.

Steele admitted to Morgan that she took the money and tried to repay some of it.

SENTENCING DEAL

As part of the agreement, Steele will serve six months on probation and is required to pay \$14,000 in restitution to the [Kennewick Transportation](#) 103 chapter of the Public School Employees of Washington Local 1948. She still works for the district.

Grandgeorge said union officials are happy to get some of the money back and signed off on the agreement.

While Steele didn't talk during the sentencing, her attorney Karla Kane said her client is very sorry for her conduct.

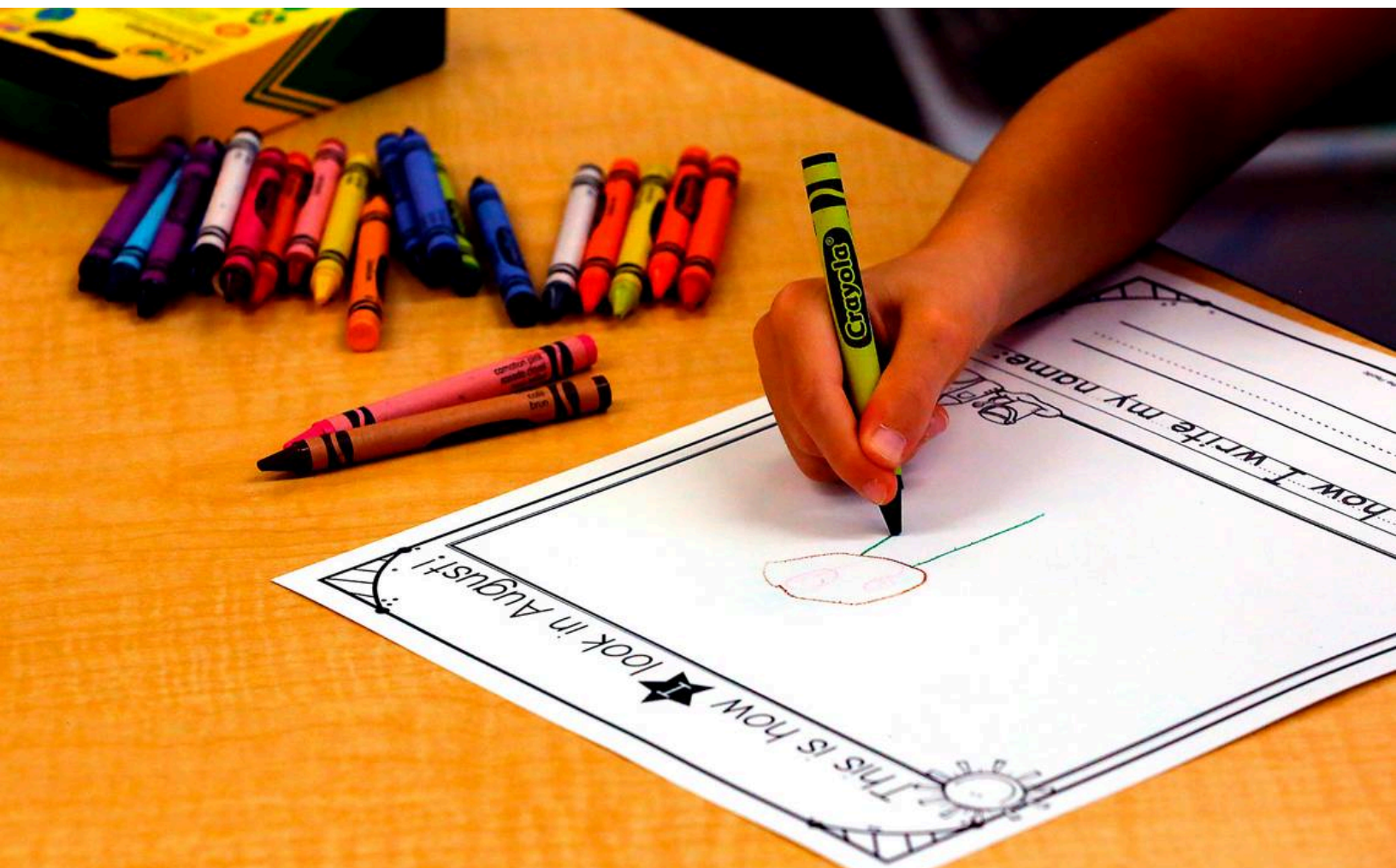
"I think initially when it started, she had every intention of paying it back," Kane said. "She is going to work hard to pay it back."

Steele, who was initially charged with first-degree theft, has no criminal convictions. She faced up to two months in jail after pleading guilty.

The agreement called for her to be sentenced under a first-time offender waiver. Judge Jackie Shea Brown followed the agreement.

Cameron Probert: 509-416-6478, @cameroncprobert

Several K-12 education bills heading to Gov. Inslee's desk



BOB BRAWDY • BBRAWDY@TRICITYHERALD.COM

Several key education-related bills were passed by the 2024 Washington state Legislature and are headed to Gov. Jay Inslee for his signature.

BY ERIC ROSANE
EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM

Washington lawmakers had a laundry list of K-12 public education priorities when they opened for the 2024 legislative session on Jan. 8.

And while they didn't get around to everything this 60-day session, the Legislature still made progress.

The state updated its match formula for new school construction, which is expected to add an additional \$103 per square foot for school districts that pass local bond measures. It's the first significant increase to the allocation in the history of the program.

For the second consecutive session, lawmakers passed a cap increase on special education funding. The cap increased a point up to 16% of school populations, likely to bring in millions more in state dollars for local special education programs and services.

"This session, the Legislature made meaningful progress for our students across many critical areas," Washington Superintendent Chris Reykdal said in a statement. "Through their final budgets, the Legislature has made clear their commitment to sustaining evidence-based investments in student learning and well-being that are targeted to having the greatest impact."

Here are some key education-related bills headed to Gov. Jay Inslee for his signature. In most cases, bills take effect three months after they're signed into law.

Inclusive materials

Two bills in particular caught the ire of conservative Washington school boards this session, both passing on party-line votes in the state House and Senate.

The first, [Engrossed Senate Bill 5462](#), requires the inclusion of histories, contributions and perspectives of gay and queer people in age-appropriate school curricula after a review of learning standards by OSPI and the state LGBTQ Commission.



ERIC GAY • ASSOCIATED PRESS

It also directs the Washington State School Directors' Association to draft policy for school boards to adopt instructional materials covering such groups as Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, people of different religions and immigrants.

School districts, charter schools and state-tribal compact schools would be required to adopt practices that align with this bill by Oct. 1, 2025, if signed into law.

“The contributions of gay Washingtonians deserve recognition, and just as importantly, students deserve to see themselves in their schoolwork. That leads to better attendance, better academic achievement and better overall quality of life,” the bill’s sponsor, Sen. Marko Liias, D-Edmonds, [said in a January statement](#).

Book bans

The second bill strongly opposed by conservatives, [Engrossed Substitute House Bill 2331](#), introduced by Rep. Monica Stonier, D-Vancouver, would bar school boards from discriminating against and banning books or materials on the basis that they include the contributions of people from a protected class.



JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

Republicans and conservatives have lambasted the bills, saying they erode the rights of parents to pick and choose what their children learn in the classroom, while Democrats have said these bills would uplift and protect the stories and histories of historically marginalized groups.

A few school boards in recent weeks passed resolutions against the bills, [most prominently the Kennewick School Board](#), which wrote that the bills were peddled by “activist state commissions pushing sexual agendas and politics and subverting the vote of the local community.”

Zero-emission buses

[Engrossed Second Substitute Bill 1368](#) will help school districts get students onto brand new, zero-emission school buses and start the state on a path to phase out their fossil fueled counterparts.



SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES

If signed into law, the bill would create a grant program for districts to buy electric or hydrogen fuel cell buses, and install the necessary infrastructure. Funds awarded would be prioritized to school districts overburdened with air pollution and with buses manufactured before 2007.

In most cases, these buses will reduce fuel, operations and maintenance costs for school districts. Democratic lawmakers, including bill sponsor, Rep. Tana Senn, D-Mercer Island, argued it will keep students healthy and prevent them from breathing in carbon emissions.

The bill also requires OSPI, with help from the Department of Ecology, to survey school districts, charter schools and state-tribal education compact schools on the cost and maintenance of owning zero-emission buses.

It also requires, with few exceptions, new school buses be zero emission emitting once it’s determined that the total cost of ownership is lower than that of diesel buses. But no specific timeline is given.

About 8,000 school buses are on the road every day, OSPI tells the Tri-City Herald.

Richard Lenhart Act

The Washington Legislature this week [passed the Richard Lenhart Act](#), making it a gross misdemeanor to trespass on a school bus.



COURTESY THE LENHART FAMILY

Richard Lenhart, 72, was a school bus driver for the Pasco School District for six years.

Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5891 is named for Dick Lenhart, the 72-year-old Pasco bus driver stabbed to death by a stranger in front of 35 students outside Longfellow Elementary in 2021. The bill was sponsored by Sen. Matt Boehnke, R-Kennewick.

Washington would be the ninth state in the U.S. with a similar law.

A previous version of this bill [would have made it a class C felony](#), punishable by up to five years in jail and up to a \$10,000 fine, for those arrested of bus trespassing.

Dual Language funding

A grant program could be established to expand dual language and tribal language learning programs.

[Third Substitute House Bill 1228](#), sponsored by Rep. Lillian Ortiz-Self, D-Mukilteo, lays the groundwork for expanding and establishing two-way dual language programs in every school district by 2040 with the goal of sustaining a bi-literate workforce statewide.



ERIC ROSANE • ERIC ROSANE EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM

Venessa Miranda, a second-grader at Mark Twain Elementary School, studies a book on animals in a Pasco dual language classroom.

It builds off previous investments by awarding new money to school districts and state-tribal schools to establish new dual language programs that begin in kindergarten or to expand an established program. It prioritizes schools in the educational opportunity gap and with more than 50% students of color.

About 141 schools offer dual language programs, [according to the Seattle Times](#). Of those, 122 teach Spanish. Pasco School District is the largest provider of dual language programs in the state, with 2,200 students enrolled in two-way Spanish-English or Russian-English classes.

The Legislature plans to annually fund 10 new dual language education programs with an average award of about \$40,000.

The bill also establishes the “Office of Native Education” within OSPI that will be responsible for establishing and expanding tribal language programs.

Opioid reversal medication in all schools

[Substitute Senate Bill 5804](#) would require at least one set of opioid overdose reversal medication doses in every public school in Washington.



MARK SCHIEFELBEIN • AP

Narcan is a brand name version of the opioid overdose-reversal drug naloxone.

Currently, only the largest high schools must carry the lifesaving medication. High schools are allowed to obtain, maintain and order the medicine. Only school nurses, health care professionals and trained school personnel can administer it.

The bill also encourages public schools to carry them in first-aid kits, and install a public map showing their location.

Another bill that also passed the Legislature this session would [require OSPI to make available substance use prevention and awareness materials](#) for schools to address fentanyl and other substances. Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 1956 would also add opioids to the list of drugs included in drug-related health and P.E. standards.

Bleed control equipment

Starting the 2026-27 school year, all public school campuses will be required to make available bleeding control equipment to staff and volunteers.

[Under Engrossed Senate Bill 5790](#), these kits must include an approved tourniquet, compression bandage and other materials and documents detailing how to prevent blood loss during physically traumatic events.

Two employees in each school will have to undergo additional training on how to use the equipment. If a school has more than 1,000 students, it must have one trained employee per 500 students.

Richland school board weighs policy to honor students who have died

BY ERIC ROSANE
EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM

Maria Vasquez Reyes was one of a kind.

The [Richland High School senior](#) loved spending time with her siblings, dancing, singing and making everyone laugh.

“She was the life of the party and could light up any room with her beautiful smile,” [her family recounts](#).



Maria Moreno-Reyes

That's why her death in November struck at the heart of her community. She was on her way home with friends when [the car she was riding in flipped on Highway 240](#), killing her in the crash. The 18-year-old driver was charged in her death.

Three months later, her family is asking the school board to award her diploma, letting Reyes posthumously graduate so they can celebrate an important milestone that can be cherished for years.

"It would help me complete this last memory of her, and I would really appreciate it if you guys do," said her father, Gabriel Moreno, [at a recent Richland School Board meeting](#). "Not just calling her name in some room — I want to call it everywhere and bring closure to the last goal that she wanted to do and finish her Bomber years."

It's not the first time the Richland School District has been petitioned by the loved ones of students who have died before they graduated.

Two years ago, a Hanford High School father lobbied the district to allow the [names of dead classmates to be read out loud](#) during the graduation ceremony as part of a "spoken recognition" of his son, who died by suicide his junior year.

And in 2018, classmates decorated the empty graduation chair of a Hanford student [who drowned just days before he was due to walk](#) with classmates. His name also was called out at the ceremony.



Hanford High School students and staff take a moment of silence to honor their classmate Dmetri Kennedy-Woody during the 2018 commencement ceremony at the Toyota Center.

The [Richland School Board](#) is considering adopting a graduation ceremony policy that guides schools through the process of responsibly and safely acknowledge the lives of students who've died.

The issue is [up for discussion at its meeting Tuesday, March 12](#). It would be the first of its kind in the Tri-Cities.

Most school districts in Washington state do not have a set policy on the books because of the nuanced nature of death and grief. Many also fear traumatizing or harming classmates during an event normally seen as a celebratory.

Some school districts have long-held, often unwritten policies on not acknowledging the deaths of students during graduation ceremonies. Others have opted in recent years to make graduation remembrances with the support of the

community.

At a minimum, the board agrees Reyes' name will be read at the Class of 2024 Richland High commencement and she will be included in the program.

"There is not a right answer to this," said board Vice President Jill Oldson.

Last month, the board agreed it needed some uniform guidance on remembrances that provides schools a little flexibility to commemorate how they see fit. Family requests have ranged from a chair with the student's photo at the ceremony to the reading of the student's name or to the awarding of a diploma posthumously.

While graduation remembrances can be used to help families grieve, they also have the potential to harm students, some professionals believe.

"I think that we've heard a lot of people say that there isn't a right answer, but I think that doing nothing is definitely the wrong answer. Not doing any recognition of students who have passed is definitely a wrong answer," said board member Bonnie Mitchell.

Remembrance feedback

Richland School District staff asked for feedback from five organizations that offer social services on [how they should approach graduation remembrances](#).

The organizations — which included Tri-Cities Chaplaincy, Lutheran Community Services Northwest, the Youth Suicide Prevention Coalition, Forefront Suicide Prevention, and Underwood and Associates Lifelines — agreed that the district should promote safety and not linger on the topic of death.

- "The district should follow a path that offers the least aversive approach to grief and loss possible. Community care is available for family grief and loss recovery, and does not necessarily need to happen in a large group event such as graduation," one unidentified organization was quoted in materials supplied to the board.
- "A student attending graduation, who lost a parent during their high school career, might experience the empty chair as a reminder of their parent who is not there to celebrate with them. A student who is close to the deceased or a witness to their death might experience the chair as a reminder of that tragedy and might be in crisis thinking the entire ceremony, unable to regulate their emotions," said another source.
- They "really like having a graduation program that includes the names of students that would have been members of the high school's graduating class, with family approval. This allows acknowledgment of the loss but makes it clear that providing more details can have negative affects," another source said.

Since the COVID pandemic, student mental health has become an acute concern of administrators, teachers and students in Richland schools.

Deaths by suicide are of particular concern and pose challenges for districts to strike the proper balance for honoring a student.

About 1-in-5 seniors across Washington state have seriously considered suicide within the past 12 months, [the state Healthy Youth Survey finds](#). Statistics are similar for Richland and other Tri-Cities school districts.

Suicide remains the second-leading cause of death in the U.S. for people age 10-14 and 25-34, according to the [most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death for all people ages 1-44.

Here are some places to turn for help and advice on suicide and grief:

- Lourdes Counseling Center at 509-943-9104.
- Comprehensive Healthcare crisis line 509-792-1747.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK or 800-273-8255 for English and 888-628-9454 for Spanish.
- Crisis Text Line: text "START" to 741-741.

- Trevor Project for LGBTQ youth: 866-488-7386, or text “START” to 678-678.

Tri-Tech to offer high schoolers 2 new programs and more with \$45M from the state Legislature



BOB BRAWDY

The Tri-Tech Skills Center offers 20 different career-connected programs, including culinary arts, automotive repair, broadcasting, computer science, construction, cosmetology, pre-nursing, early childhood education, digital arts and film making.

BY ERIC ROSANE

EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM

Tri-Cities high school students will be able to get a jump on two new careers thanks to \$45 million approved by the Washington Legislature this session.

The money will create hands-on learning in the fields of pre-pharmacy and heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration systems (HVAC-R).

And the Kennewick School District's aging 43-year-old facility will undergo a major modernization project.

Tri-Tech Skills Center is a tuition-free technical and professional training academy that serves all Tri-City students ages 16-20 who have yet to receive their high school diploma. About 1,000 students are enrolled in the school, spending half their days at the center and the other half taking classes at their high schools.

Students at Tri-Tech are paired with instructors with years of industry experience and knowledge, and are regularly placed in job shadows, internships and clinics throughout their time in the program. The goal is to graduate students with

work-place relevant skills that give them a leg up in the job market.

The campus offers 20 different career-connected programs, including auto body and systems technology, broadcasting, computer science, construction trades, culinary arts, cosmetology, pre-nursing, early childhood education, digital arts and film making.



BOB BRAWDY • TRI-CITY HERALD

A culinary arts student at Tri-Tech Skills Center concentrates on carving flower in a melon during a 2019 presentation.

School officials told the Herald in a statement that the 66,000-square-foot facility needs energy and safety code upgrades and to be reorganized to serve current programs.

Maintenance costs over the last decade have required significant investments from the Kennewick School District, and they continue to rise. Since 2016, more than \$375,000 has been spent on HVAC repairs, roof patches and fire sprinkler system repairs alone.

“These dollars, while necessary, are resources Tri-Tech Skills Center is not able to spend on program development — limiting equipment replacement, technology and furnishing upgrades,” Kennewick staff wrote in their capital project request to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.



BBRAWDY@TRICITYHERALD.COM

Tri-Tech Skills Center is at 5929 W. Metaline Ave. in Kennewick and partners with area high schools to offer advanced technical and professional training to students ages 16-20.

Modernization of Tri-Tech's main building is part of a larger multi-year effort by the district to expand the campus as interest in non-traditional classwork grows.

In September, the school opened [a new 9,500-square-foot, single-story building](#) that included two new classrooms, a shop, lab, exam room and a kennel for pre-veterinary and pre-electrical programs.

Between 2027-29, construction of two 16,000-square-foot buildings will begin on the east side of campus, [according to previous Herald reporting](#).

The money for Tri-Tech was included in the 2024 supplemental capital budget passed by the Washington Legislature last week.

The budget allocates \$1.3 billion in new construction spending for projects all over the state, including investments in the Housing Trust Fund, grants for community behavioral health projects and investments to expand affordable childcare access.



FILE • TRI-CITY HERALD

A student prepares dental instruments for sterilizing during a dental assistant class at Tri-Tech Skill Center in Kennewick.

The school's \$45 million was the largest single allocation passed for the 8th Legislative District this session.

Other projects include \$235,000 for an emergency communications radio microwave, \$240,000 to the Port of Benton, \$174,000 to renovate the Children's Developmental Center and \$3 million for the HAPO Center in Pasco.

Pasco School District unveils Orion High School branding concepts



COURTESY PASCO SCHOOL DISTRICT

An updated architectural rendering from Design West shows what the exterior of Orion High School in Pasco, Wash., might look like when it opens to students in fall 2025.

BY ERIC ROSANE
EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM

High school students in Pasco will learn tools of various trades underneath tones of sky blue and copper orange.

Pasco School District staff and administrators are [unveiling new branding concepts for Orion High School](#) at Tuesday's school board meeting.

That includes the school's logo, which features a Lockheed P-3 Orion plane flying through a colorful and star-studded "O."



ORION

HIGH SCHOOL

COURTESY PASCO SCHOOL DISTRICT

Pasco School District staff and administrators will unveil preliminary branding concepts this week for their new technical high school opening fall 2025.

The imagery is meant to emphasize the metaphorical connection between flight and an education centered in trades education.

Orion High School is one of two schools being built this year thanks to passage of a 21-year, \$195.5 million construction bond that voters approved last year.

When it opens in fall 2025, Orion will serve 600 in-district students, who will graduate with workforce-ready credentials, industry certifications and a hands-on learning experience.

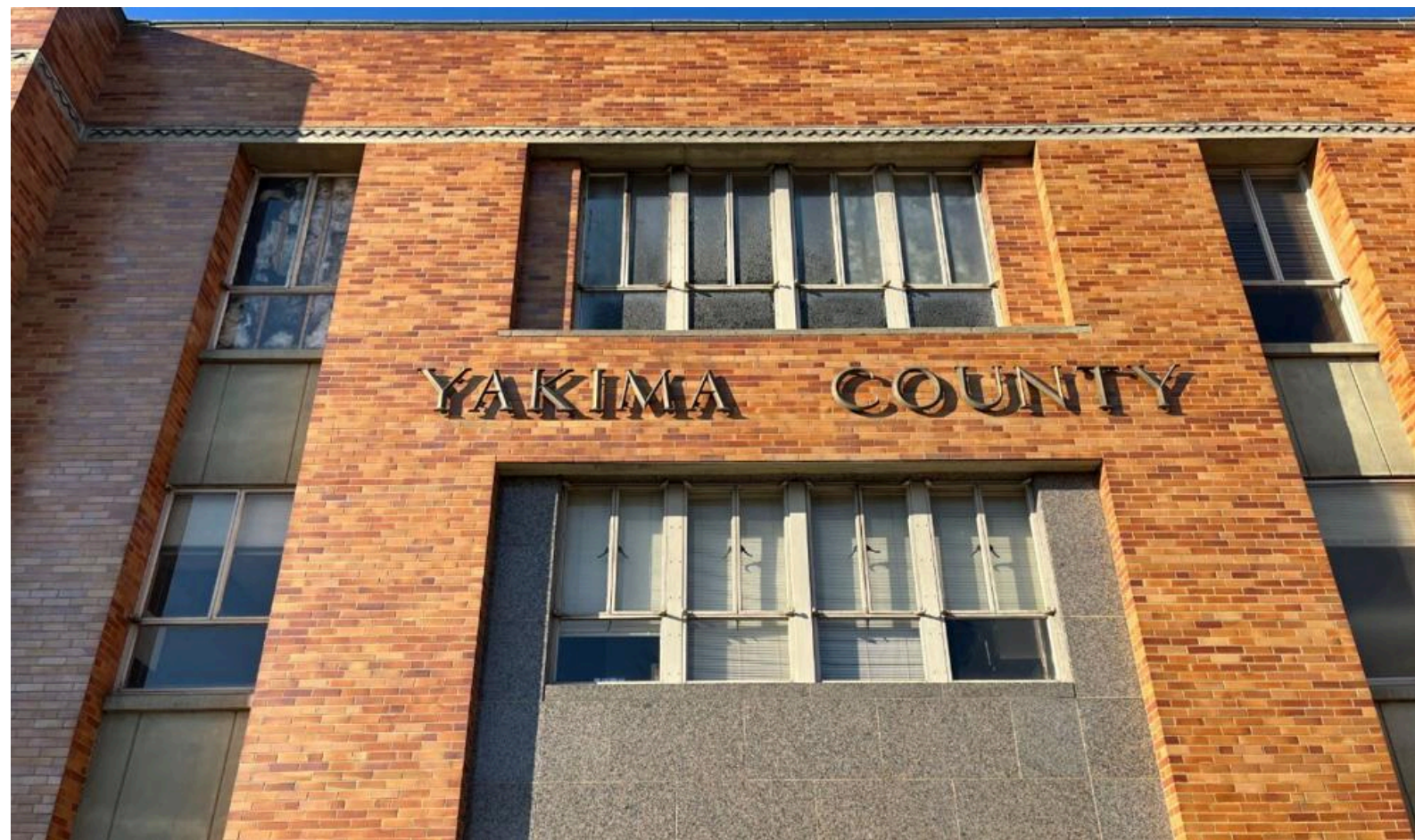
The educational experience will be similar to that of Tri-Tech Skills Center or Delta High School.

The technical school will be the first high school to operate in east Pasco, and will be at the corner of Salt Lake Street and Utah Avenue, near Ochoa Middle School. The school district hopes to go out to bid on the project this spring.

https://www.applevalleynewsnow.com/news/lawsuit-claims-west-valley-school-district-fired-employee-in-retaliation-for-unionizing/article_212f2ac2-e006-11ee-8993-7bf84bd7f887.html

Lawsuit claims West Valley School District fired employee in retaliation for unionizing

By Emily Goodell
Mar 11, 2024



Default

MORE INFORMATION



Richland man, child hurt in crash with semi near Sunnyside

WEST VALLEY, Wash. —The West Valley School District is facing a lawsuit by a former HR employee, Amy Joffs, who claims she was wrongfully terminated from her position in retaliation for unionizing.

"Trying to subvert employees' rights to organize: that is wrong," said Bill Pickett, the attorney who filed the lawsuit on behalf of Joffs.

According to Pickett, the district was also served with a new claim Monday afternoon from a current employee, lead mechanic Kurt Sweezea, alleging the district denied him union representation in violation of the collective bargaining agreement.

In the lawsuit filed last week against the district and Assistant Superintendent of Business Operations Joe Connolly, Joffs claims Connolly began limiting communication with eight employees at the district office — including herself — after they decided to unionize in April 2022.

In July 2023, Joffs reportedly received a termination letter, saying her position — which had existed in the district for more than 40 years — was being eliminated due to a decrease in federal and state funding.

However, according to the lawsuit, Joffs was repeatedly warned by the HR manager during that year-long period to be careful and document everything because she was being targeted for termination over her union involvement.

ADVERTISING

A large purple rectangle with a white number '8' in the center, representing a 1Password password strength indicator.

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"The law protects employees," Pickett said. "You can't undermine their ability to make that decision [to unionize]."

According to the lawsuit, that letter also mentioned part of the decision was because Joffs was the last hire.

Joffs started with the district in 2014 but briefly took another position with ESD 105 before she was hired back with better pay and a guarantee that she would maintain her seniority and her original hiring date.

Pickett said that means, according to that agreement, Joffs would not have been the last hire.

I reached out to West Valley School District Superintendent Peter Finch about this case and he said, "The District is aware of the claim. Due to pending litigation the District has no comment at this time."

In order to file a lawsuit, the plaintiff must first attempt to resolve their issues by filing a claim with the defendant. If it's not answered within 60 days, they are able to file a lawsuit.

Pickett said they filed the lawsuit on behalf of Joffs after the district failed to respond to their earlier claim.

In a separate claim by a different employee, which the district was reportedly served with Monday afternoon, lead mechanic Kurt Sweezea claims the district failed to adhere to the terms of the union's collective bargaining agreement.

Pickett said Sweezea was blindsided on Feb. 28, when the district brought him in to discuss allegations against him as an employee.

According to Pickett, the CBA requires that the district provide those accusations in writing to the employee ahead of time and allow them to bring with them an attorney or a union representative. He said the district did neither in Sweezea's case.

"When you shortcut or you break those promises and those safeguards, and you get it wrong, you've actually done exactly what the whole agreement is intended to prevent," Pickett said.

According to the claim, Sweezea was "threatened with having law enforcement called on him for alleged criminal activity and threatened that if he did not sign a resignation notice that his 'career would be over.'"

The district has 60 days to respond to Sweezea's claim. Pickett said if they do not receive a response, they will be filing another lawsuit against the district.

Richland considers policy on honoring seniors who have died



NOELLE HARO-GOMEZ

Hanford High School students and staff take a moment of silence to honor their classmate Dmetri Kennedy-Woody during the commencement ceremony at the Toyota Center.

BY ERIC ROSANE

EROSANE@TRICITYHERALD.COM

Richland, WA

Maria Vasquez Reyes was one of a kind.

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And in 2018, classmates decorated the empty graduation chair of a Hanford student [who drowned just days before he was due to walk](#) with classmates. His name also was called out at the ceremony.

The [Richland School Board](#) is considering adopting a graduation ceremony policy that guides schools through the process of responsibly and safely acknowledge the lives of students who’ve died.

The issue is [up for discussion at its meeting Tuesday, March 12](#). It would be the first of its kind in the Tri-Cities.

Most school districts in Washington state do not have a set policy on the books because of the nuanced nature of death and grief. Many also fear traumatizing or harming classmates during an event normally seen as a celebratory.

Some school districts have long-held, often unwritten policies on not acknowledging the deaths of students during graduation ceremonies. Others have opted in recent years to make graduation remembrances with the support of the community.

At a minimum, the board agrees Reyes’ name will be read at the Class of 2024 Richland High commencement and she will be included in the program.

“There is not a right answer to this,” said board Vice President Jill Oldson.

Last month, the board agreed it needed some uniform guidance on remembrances that provides schools a little flexibility to commemorate how they see fit. Family requests have ranged from a chair with the student’s photo at the ceremony to the reading of the student’s name or to the awarding of a diploma posthumously.

While graduation remembrances can be used to help families grieve, they also have the potential to harm students, some professionals believe.

“I think that we’ve heard a lot of people say that there isn’t a right answer, but I think that doing nothing is definitely the wrong answer. Not doing any recognition of students who have passed is definitely a wrong answer,” said board member Bonnie Mitchell.

REMEMBRANCE FEEDBACK

Richland School District staff asked for feedback from five organizations that offer social services on [how they should approach graduation remembrances](#).

The organizations — which included Tri-Cities Chaplaincy, Lutheran Community Services Northwest, the Youth Suicide Prevention Coalition, Forefront Suicide Prevention, and Underwood and Associates Lifelines — agreed that the district should promote safety and not linger on the topic of death.

- “The district should follow a path that offers the least aversive approach to grief and loss possible. Community care is available for family grief and loss recovery, and does not necessarily need to happen in a large group event such as graduation,” one unidentified organization was quoted in materials supplied to the board.

- “A student attending graduation, who lost a parent during their high school career, might experience the empty chair as a reminder of their parent who is not there to celebrate with them. A student who is close to the deceased or a witness to their death might experience the chair as a reminder of that tragedy and might be in crisis thinking the entire ceremony, unable to regulate their emotions,” said another source.
- They “really like having a graduation program that includes the names of students that would have been members of the high school’s graduating class, with family approval. This allows acknowledgment of the loss but makes it clear that providing more details can have negative affects,” another source said.

Since the COVID pandemic, student mental health has become an acute concern of administrators, teachers and students in Richland schools.

Deaths by suicide are of particular concern and pose challenges for districts to strike the proper balance for honoring a student.

About 1-in-5 seniors across Washington state have seriously considered suicide within the past 12 months, [the state Healthy Youth Survey finds](#). Statistics are similar for Richland and other Tri-Cities school districts.

Suicide remains the second-leading cause of death in the U.S. for people age 10-14 and 25-34, according to the [most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death for all people ages 1-44.

Here are some places to turn for help and advice on suicide and grief:

- Lourdes Counseling Center at 509-943-9104.
- Comprehensive Healthcare crisis line 509-792-1747.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK or 800-273-8255 for English and 888-628-9454 for Spanish.
- Crisis Text Line: text “START” to 741-741.
- Trevor Project for LGBTQ youth: 866-488-7386, or text “START” to 678-678.

School counselors plead with Kennewick to keep 9 mental health therapists for students

BY ERIC ROSANE
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Counselors from more than a dozen Kennewick schools have signed a letter urging the district's top brass to keep a contract that has provided critical mental health and therapy services for students.

The Kennewick School District plans to end its contract with Yakima-based Comprehensive Healthcare starting next school year in a cost-cutting move the counselors say will have serious detrimental effects on students in crisis.

That means there will be nine fewer school-based therapists working full-time in Kennewick schools.

"The absence of mental health therapists in our middle and high schools means that many students will not have access to the crucial support and intervention they may desperately need during this critical period of development, that could pose long-term effects," said the letter sent this week to Superintendent Traci Pierce.

Under Kennewick's \$1.1 million contract with Comprehensive Healthcare, the nine master's level therapists provide student screenings for various mental health conditions, conducting assessments and implementing treatment plans.

The therapists also offer help for deaths and crisis events. And they refer students to Comprehensive Health's crisis clinic in Kennewick when specialized treatment is needed and serve as consultants to district employees.

In two separate incidents in the last couple months, Kennewick counselors and therapists were assigned to help middle school students traumatized by neighborhood gun violence.

"The mental health impact of shootings presents a wide range of struggles and trauma for students who reside in a neighborhood where catastrophe happens," said the letter to Pierce.

In a response sent to counselors, the superintendent said the contract was part of a short-term strategy to support student social-emotional well being during the pandemic.

It was funded with one-time COVID relief money the district received from the federal government, which expires this September.

"We are looking at opportunities to continue to partner with Comprehensive Healthcare in terms of providing a process for student and family referrals," she wrote in the letter obtained by the Tri-City Herald. "We know that our students face a variety of challenges and needs, and we are making it a priority to use the funding we receive to provide our KSD students with the best support possible and maintain our valuable KSD staff."

In a statement to the Herald, Board President Gabe Galbraith reiterated the short-term aspect of the funds. But he also took aim at the "bad policies" coming from Olympia and Washington, D.C., noting the past couple years that have resulted in rising costs that strain school districts like Kennewick.

"As a result, we prioritize using the resources we receive to maintain our excellent KSD team and give our kids the greatest support possible, taking into account the diverse needs and challenges they experience," he wrote.

1,200 STUDENTS USE HAZEL HEALTH

Kennewick's decision underscores wider financial stresses local school districts are under as they begin forming budgets for the 2024-25 school year.

With the last of ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds due to expire in fall 2024, school districts across the U.S. will be making some tough choices about which pandemic-era mental health programs to continue funding and which to abandon.

It's unclear how many Kennewick students used Comprehensive Healthcare's services, but telemedicine services have proved popular in Pasco and Richland.

Hazel Health provides virtual mental health services and six therapy sessions to all 19,000 Pasco students for free. The students can use the services at school or at home with their family.

Pasco pays \$300,000 annually for the service, at cost of about \$15 per student, which is paid for with ESSER funds.

The program has mostly served as a form of triage, with families being referred out to Comprehensive Healthcare for longer term needs. So far, more than 600 Pasco students have completed 3,000 visits with Hazel Health tele-therapists.

Richland School District has also used Hazel Health for its 14,000 students since September 2022.

From October 2022 to January this year, about 600 Richland students completed more than 1,400 visits.

Half of those visits occurred just this last fall. Richland administrators expect the number of visits and students receiving referrals to rise considerably.

Unlike Pasco, Richland is not using its one-time funds to pay for its Hazel Health contract.

MENTAL HEALTH CONTRACT

Pierce says they continue to invest in strategies and programs that support student well being in Kennewick schools and are working to implement a comprehensive school counseling program.

The district recently hired more school counselors at each of its comprehensive high schools — Kennewick, Kamiakin and Southridge.

Each school now has five counselors doing guidance and counseling work that helps students with their academic, career, personal and social needs.

But nearly all Kennewick counselors are catering to about 300-400 students.

And they argue the services provided by Comprehensive Healthcare's mental health professionals are a crucial tool for addressing the more intricate and holistic needs of students.

Removing the services, counselors say, "sends a troubling message to students and families about the importance placed on mental health within our educational community."

"While we strive to address the diverse needs of our students to the best of our abilities, the expertise of specialized services offered by mental health therapists are invaluable in addressing complex mental health issues. School counselors, school-based mental health therapists and Communities in Schools (of Benton-Franklin) work together to create safe and welcoming school environments," Kennewick counselors wrote in their letter.

Having those services in schools removes barriers to access caused by transportation and the financial ability of parents to pay costs out of their pocket. The amount of youth mental health care services in the Tri-Cities also hasn't kept up with rising demands, which has led to longer wait times for local families.

Roughly one-in-five Washington youths age 12-17 have reported a “major depressive episode” in the last 12 months, which is higher than the national average.

“Students spend most of their waking hours in schools, and we know that our youth have suffered serious declines in access to mental and behavioral health care services in our area,” the counselors wrote. “The wait time to receive outside therapy is anywhere from 3 to 6 months. Research shows that schools are the most common place young people seek and receive mental health services.”

KENNEWICK BUDGET DEFICIT

In addition to the end of ESSER money, Kennewick School District is also undergoing severe budgetary woes, which started with enrollment decreases during the COVID pandemic and were exacerbated greatly after voters rejected two levy initiatives in 2022. As a result, the district expects to operate on an annual budget deficit [of about \\$5 million to \\$10 million the next few years](#).

The school district collected nothing in local funding in 2023 due to its double levy failure.

And while voters agreed in February 2023 to a smaller three-year \$71.5 million levy to support basic education beginning that following year, [skyrocketing property values reduced the total state match](#) the district expected to collect.

That accounts for \$2.5 million less the district expects to see in the 2024-25 school year, and possibly more in the years after.

It's expected that Kennewick will have spent about one-third of its ESSER funds — about \$20 million of its total \$58.7 million allocation — covering programs, teacher salaries and other expenses that should have been covered by levy dollars it lost in 2023.

School sends in
counselors after
Kamiakin student
killed crossing I-182



COURTESY BELINDA VARGAS

Investigators are still trying to determine why Ethan Vargas was crossing the street.

**BY CAMERON PROBERT
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Kamiakin High School students are being offered time with counselors this week after a fellow student died early Tuesday after he was hit by a car.

Ethan Vargas, 16, was a student at the Kennewick school and was killed when he was struck trying to cross Interstate 182 in Pasco.

Robyn Chastain, the district's executive director of communications and public relations, confirmed that extra counseling support is being provided for any students and staff.

Family members described Vargas as a "sweet, strong man who found laughter and joy in every occasion," in a [GoFundMe organized](#) by Candie Gonzalez. This is the family's only authorized GoFundMe.

"We can only rejoice in knowing he is in paradise walking alongside our Heavenly Father," Gonzalez said in the fundraiser. "If you have anything to help the Vargas family reach their goal financially or a simple prayer for strength through this unimaginable loss, it would be more than appreciated."



COURTESY BELINDA VARGAS

Investigators are still trying to determine why Ethan Vargas was crossing the street.

A second GoFundMe titled “Loving Memory of Ethan Vargas Forever 16” appears to be fraudulent. The Vargas family told the Herald it is not associated with them and will not receive any donations to it.

Vargas was hit by a Cadillac XTS as he crossed I-182 shortly before 4 a.m. The section of road was within a mile of the Road 100 exit, according to a Washington State Patrol traffic memo.

The hour and location of the accident have raised questions about what brought the 16-year-old to that stretch of the highway, especially at that time of day.

Trooper Chris Thorson told the Tri-City Herald that detectives are still piecing together what sent Vargas across the divided highway.

Vargas was running south across the three westbound lanes when he was hit, Thorson said.



IMAGE COURTESY WASHINGTON STATE PATROL

A Kamiakin High student was killed early Tuesday while trying to cross the dark highway in Pasco.

On the south side of the freeway in that area is Tri-Cities Prep Catholic high school, the Broadmoor RV store and the Pasco/Tri-Cities KOA Journey Campgrounds. On the north side are car lots and other residential neighborhoods.

Thorson said it's clear at this point that the driver, George J. Dvorak, had no chance of avoiding the teen.

The 58-year-old Hanford employee told investigators that Vargas just appeared in front of him out of the dark without time for him to react.