LETTER FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Community Members,

For me, spring brings feelings of freshness, renewed energy, and excitement for all the activities to come in the next few weeks. Time spent outdoors is always a plus, as is the changing landscape of the Pacific Northwest and our home in Eastern Washington.

For our District, the spring brings multiple celebrations, lots of extracurricular activities, and the promise of graduation. I have been fortunate enough to be part of several springtime celebrations, including the 32nd annual Spokane Scholars Banquet. Six Cheney High School students were honored at the event for their accomplishments in six respective disciplines: English, Fine Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and World Languages. It is incredible the things our students have accomplished, and it was inspiring to witness these students honored for their work.

Our District was also honored with the Purple Star Award, recognizing Cheney Public Schools as a Washington State Military Friendly School District. It is such an honor to serve our military families and students, and earning this recognition is the direct result of massive amounts of work to create an inclusive and support environment for those families and students. We are fortunate to have military affiliated families as part of our district!

This spring has already been filled with several extracurriculars, including the annual Van Kuren Invitational track meet, hosted by Cheney High School on April 13. Nearly 40 schools participated in the massive annual track meet, and it was so encouraging to see the volunteer efforts of so many of our staff. Events like this could not be possible without the hard work and dedication of our volunteers and endless energy from the track coach, Derek Slaughter! I also had the privilege of viewing Westwood Middle School’s drama production, Pirates 2: Hidden Treasure. It was great to see the hard work our middle school drama students put into the production and see it come to life. Thank you to Drama Director Robin Miller for your guidance and support of all Westwood’s drama students!

I am excited to provide an update on the District’s Strategic Plan, as this has been an ongoing project this year. With the invaluable input of our District staff, students, families, and community members through focus groups conducted over the last six weeks, we have been able to draft a strategic plan. Then, with additional feedback from district staff, students, and families, we will generate a final draft that we will present to the Board of Directors on May 22. Thank you so much to those of you who have participated in focus groups and feedback; we could not have created the District’s Strategic Plan without your input.

As we look forward to the final weeks of the school year, I am grateful for all the amazing work being done throughout our district. I look forward to celebrating the next round of graduates in June, and then the summer months to plan and prepare for a spectacular 2024-25 school year.

We are Cheney Public Schools!

Take care,

Ben Ferney, Ed.D.
Superintendent | Cheney Public Schools
Cheney Public Schools Earns Purple Star Award, Recognized as a Washington State Military Friendly School District

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) announced Cheney Public Schools as one of 12 school districts across the state to receive the 2024 Purple Star Award. This is Cheney Public Schools’ first Purple Star designation.

“We are thrilled as a district to be awarded the Purple Star Award from OSPI,” Superintendent Ben Ferney said. “It is an honor to serve our military-connected students and families, and I am proud that our district has been designated a welcoming and supportive community for them.”

To receive the award, school districts must successfully address the educational, social, and emotional barriers that students may experience when their parents/guardians are deployed or when relocating or transferring to different schools. School districts must also demonstrate a commitment to military-connected families and students by providing students with the tools and supports needed for success in their education and in their futures—whether they pursue postsecondary education, military involvement, or other careers.

The Washington state Purple Star Award was established through House Bill 1346, which became law in July 2023. To be eligible for this distinction, Cheney Public Schools needed to meet several requirements, which can be viewed on OSPI’s website. All 12 school districts that applied for and earned the Purple Star Award in 2024 will retain the designation for two years.

CHS Students Honored at Annual Spokane Scholars Award Banquet

Six Cheney High School students were honored at the 32nd annual Spokane Scholars Award Banquet, hosted by the Spokane Scholars Foundation at the Spokane Convention Center on Monday, April 15. Each student was selected for the honor in one of six disciplines: English, Fine Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and World Languages. They are part of an elite group of 168 Spokane-area high school seniors recognized at this year’s award banquet. Congratulations!


CHS Senior, Community Member Honored at Annual NEWASA Awards

Zachary Cox, a senior at Cheney High School, along with Zachary Zorrozua, spokesperson for the Committee for Support of Good Schools, were both honored at the annual Northeast Washington Association of School Administrators (NEWASA) Awards Luncheon on Friday, April 19. Cox was selected as one of nine regional students for the Student Leadership Award, while Zorrozua was honored with the Community Leadership Award.

A natural leader, Cox has utilized his abilities to make a lasting impact at Cheney High School and the greater district. He has been involved in nearly every student activity available at CHS and has made a massive effort to represent his student population as ASB President. He is committed to providing an inclusive environment for all students, serving as Freshman Orientation leader and a Link Crew representative to ease the transition from middle to high school. From cross country to FFA, to coordinating the Mother’s Day Plant Sale and placing first at the DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America) State Championships, Cox has done it all. He has also served as a School Board Student Representative since 2022.

Zorrozua was instrumental in leading the Committee for Support of Good Schools for Cheney Public Schools during the 2024 election cycle. He was responsible for all aspects of the committee, including organizing bi-weekly meetings, coordinating outreach efforts throughout the district’s three distinct communities—Airway Heights, Cheney, and the West Plains—recruiting individuals to write letters to the editor, among many other tasks. Zorrozua single-handedly organized volunteers to distribute information through door knocking, texting, sign waving, and word-of-mouth, while utilizing social media to engage with a wider audience. Without his commitment, Cheney Public Schools would not have seen the positive support for the approval of both levies, or one of the best supported bonds in the region.
Nutrition Services Features Locally Sourced Food & Scratch Cooking

When you peruse through Cheney Public Schools’ monthly lunch menu, you may find your stomach beginning to rumble. Honey Mustard Chicken Breast Sandwich, Washington State Bison Chili with Black Beans, Chicken and Waffles, or maybe a Cheese Zombie with Classic Tomato Basil Soup is more your style. Whatever you prefer, the school lunch options for district students are expansive, and Director of Nutrition Services LJ Klinkenberg has utilized grants and other funding to provide an experience more aligned with farm-to-table: fresh, local produce and locally raised meats to expose students to a wider variety of foods that can best fuel their bodies, mostly made from scratch.

It’s a tall order, especially given the state and federal requirements that Klinkenberg and his team are required to follow for school nutrition. Just a short glance at the USDA Food and Nutrition Services Nutrition Standards for School Meals shows the extensive rules and policies public school districts must follow in order to receive federal funding. The regulations are expansive and exhaustive, down to the number of calories, sodium, trans fats, and carbohydrates meals can include over the course of a week.

“I’ve been working in school food since 2011, and since that time, regulations and rules have continued to increase while still giving us options,” Klinkenberg said. “My cooks will tell you, it’s kind of like nutritional Jenga. You’ve got to figure out what fits on which day, and every menu has to match that five-day cycle menu.”

And a difficult nutritional Jenga at that. Klinkenberg and his team utilize locally grown produce and vendors as often as possible while also making the majority of meals from scratch. Each district school may serve between 300-500 students per meal every day, and that takes a lot of planning and forethought not only by Klinkenberg, but by each of his kitchen leads as well.

“It really depends on the items we are serving,” says Dani Meredith-Bercot, Windsor Elementary’s kitchen lead. “Scratch cooking requires a lot more forethought and prep time...We are ordering about three weeks in advance, and my mind is about a month ahead all the time.

It’s really hard because we have so many laws that we have to follow,” Meredith-Bercot continued. “When Chef Klinken sets a menu, it’s based on the week. So, every week, kids can have a certain amount of sodium, a certain number of calories, a certain number of grams of protein. All of that is accounted for and set for us, so we don’t have to think about it when we go to order.”

To give you an idea, Windsor Elementary—which any given day serves about 500 students for lunch—has been ordering an average of 2,389.9 pounds of fresh produce and dairy per week over the last month. Meredith-Bercot places orders with multiple distributors about three weeks in advance, just to keep everything on schedule.

“If one thing slips through the cracks, our kids don’t get fed as efficiently as they should,” echoed Rita Whittaker, Sunset Elementary’s Kitchen Lead.

Scratch cooking is not something every district offers, nor is the commitment to sourcing food locally. Many school districts have to purchase food from macro, national sources; those sources in turn ship foods from much farther distances, requiring those foods to be frozen. Though frozen food is still high quality and meets state and federal regulations for school food service, it loses some of its nutritional value. Macro food sources also have no positive financial impact on the local community, and the families who live here.

“The fresher we can get [food], the more we can keep it local, we keep our communities healthy with supporting local farmers, the families that work for those farms, and so on and so on,” Klinkenberg said. “And we get to work with some amazing products.

If I can keep it in Washington state for quality, for supporting our state and what we do in our communities, and get the best nutritious food I can for the children, that’s what I get up every day and come in for.”

There is an abundance of Washington state produce that has been sourced for Cheney Public Schools district meals. Chef Klinkenberg and his team introduced locally raised bison—purchased with a grant from the Washington State Agriculture Department—to serve as Bison Chili with Black Beans. They also secured a grant for wild-caught Coho salmon, which led to a Roasted Salmon Pesto Flatbread. Chef Klinkenberg has also utilized tomatoes and Italian plums from Spokane Valley, as well as grass-fed beef from Dayton. Though the opportunity to serve fresh, local food takes a lot of effort, it is worth the reward of exposing students to new food options that can expand their palate and appreciation for food, all while supporting the local economy and citizens.

With the district’s food service, high-quality, nutritious meals and exposure to new, never-before-tried foods go hand-in-hand. At Sunset Elementary, Whittaker has explored a variety of different fruits on her salad bar, like kumquats, pomelos, pink pineapple, Oro Blanco grapefruit, papaya, and persimmon as well as more common Pacific Northwest fruits like strawberries and grapes.

“They are excited to see those things because they may not get them at home, or they may not get them as often at home,” Whittaker said. “For most families right now, [fresh fruit] is not something they can afford on a regular basis. Getting that nutrition to our kids is good for them because they need strawberries, they need grapes, they need vegetables, because it all gives them a balanced diet. It gives them all the things they need to learn. All the nutrients, all the minerals.”

“I know that [students] are learning that fresh food tastes different, and when you see a salad
bar that is a rainbow of color, you’re more willing to try the new, exciting things, and it’s less scary and daunting,” Meredith-Bercot added. “You have to be taught how to try new things and be excited about it and not nervous about it. So, we try to put the full rainbow out there on the salad bar as much as we can.”

Cooking scratch meals from locally sourced ingredients has become the norm at Cheney Public Schools, thanks to the hard work and effort from Klinkenberg and his entire district team. The opportunity to cook with such fresh ingredients and interact daily with children has drawn some highly talented, highly educated culinary staff; both Whittaker and Meredith-Bercot hold culinary degrees. Whittaker has over 15 years of professional experience including several years at The Davenport Hotel, while Meredith-Bercot was educated and trained at Le Cordon Bleu in Seattle. Local, superb talent combined with fresh, local ingredients, added to the strength of the nutrition teams across the district has created a recipe for success.

“Through passive culinary education, [students] get to try a quality product that Washington state produces,” said Klinkenberg. “That’s part of our job, providing good, quality meals, but also that education of where it comes from, why we have it, and why it’s important they try it. For their health, and for the quality of our state, and the process of the food that we do in this state.”

To watch the video showcasing Nutrition Services’ locally sourced food and scratch cooking, click the QR code to the right!

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**Kindergarten Registration**

Kindergarten registration for the 2024-25 school year is now open! It is important to note that children must be five years old by August 31, 2024, to be eligible for kindergarten for the 2024-25 school year.

If you are unsure of which Cheney Public Schools attendance boundary you reside in, please visit the district website for more information. Navigate to the Parent & Student Resources menu and select Student Registration from the drop-down menu. This webpage also has an abundance of additional registration information, such as required forms, school contact information, and useful links.

To register, it is required to provide proof of birthdate, immunization records, and proof of residence (such as a utility bill). The parent/guardian registering the child must also provide a valid ID.

In addition to kindergarten registration, new student registration for new and existing families is also open for all grades. Please visit the aforementioned district webpage to access links for new student registration for both new and existing families.

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**Cheney Public Schools Strategic Plan Update**

Thank you to all of our district members who have participated in the district’s strategic planning process. We have received invaluable feedback from our focus group participants over the last month, and along with the previously gathered information from both ThoughtExchange and SurveyMonkey surveys, we have been able to draft a strategic plan for the district.

Interested individuals can view a draft of the strategic plan at the following URL: http://bit.ly/4aTKwWa.

As the next step in the strategic planning process, the district requested further input from students (3-12), families, and staff members regarding the draft of the strategic plan. A link to the survey was emailed to each group on April 16th and was available for 10 days.

The final version of the District’s Strategic Plan will be formalized utilizing feedback from the survey, along with additional feedback from Level II Focus Groups including Students, CTE, and district leadership teams. This final version will be presented to the district’s Board of Directors on Wednesday, May 22.

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**Cheney Public Schools Strategic Plan Timeline**

[Image of timeline diagram]

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Community Connections | Spring 2024 5
Cheney High School Joins the Initiative for Student Wellness

This past fall, Cheney High School joined a group of county schools selected to participate in the Initiative for Student Wellness—or ISW—an innovative mental health program created to address the youth behavioral health crisis impacting the region.

The time since the global pandemic has highlighted the desperate need for youth behavioral health services. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, nationwide in 2021, more than 4 in 10 students felt persistently sad or hopeless and nearly one-third experienced poor mental health. That same year, more than 1 in 5 students seriously considered attempting suicide, while 1 in 10 attempted suicide. Locally in Spokane County, five people aged 10-19 died by suicide in 2022.

Designed and funded by Spokane County, in collaboration with ESD101, the ISW is working to combat this decline in mental health. The program screens students through a voluntary survey before sorting each student into tiers of risk based on their responses. Then, appropriate resources are deployed to provide students with the help they need, either immediately or over time.

“We have the resources, and this helps us get kids connected to the right resources,” said Nicole Starkey, one of CHS’s school counselors.

Starkey, along with Mental Health Therapist Jen Painter, Interventionist Maria Weber, and Student Assistance Professional Courtney Larcom, initiate a touch point in all ninth-grade health classes at Cheney High School with the Check Yourself Screening Tool. Currently, the program is only funded for students in ninth grade, with the hope to expand the program to other grade levels in the future.

Based on their responses, students will be filtered into one of three tiers with varying levels of intervention. The resource group, along with Assistant Principal Ryan Goodwin, immediately review the screening tool results and triages students based on risks and needs. All Tier 3 students are met with by the end of the day, and Tier 2 students within one to two weeks. Tier 1 students indicated no risks during screening but will receive personalized feedback as part of the Check Yourself Screening Tool.

Regardless of what they indicated on the Check Yourself Screening Tool, any student can request intervention. Painter, CHS’s licensed mental health therapist, meets with Tier 3 students for at least 10 sessions or more, depending on their situation or specific needs. A similar process is utilized for students who require less intervention in Tier 2, setting up meetings with either Larcom, the Student Assistance Professional, Weber, the Interventionist, Starkey, the Counselor, or Goodwin, the Assistant Principal.

“The biggest reaction that I typically get is, ‘Oh, I didn’t want to bring it up because I didn’t think it was a big deal,’ or ‘I didn’t want to talk about my problems,’” Goodwin said. “Then once they are here, they’re more willing to open up and express their concerns or issues.”

“I’m getting to know kids that I typically may not have because they are not the ones who talk [about their struggles] openly,” Starkey added. “That’s really nice.”

Given the confidential nature of the screening tool, along with the accessibility, Goodwin estimates that about 85 percent of students consistently fill out the survey. Parents who prefer their child does not participate in the screening process have three different opportunities to opt out of the program, and students also have the opportunity to opt out if they so choose.

“It’s allowing kids to see who to go get help from,” Starkey said. “Sometimes I’ve had kids who haven’t taken the survey yet, but they know they’re struggling. Their friend will bring them in and say, ‘Oh, you need to talk to Ms. Starkey.’ That’s helpful. It’s helping us build relationships so that kids feel more comfortable to take those connections.”

In addition to creating connections, the ISW program is also providing greater accessibility to mental health services. According to the 2022-23 ISW Year-End Report, the program is funded through Spokane County Mental Health Sales Tax, which allows for “any youth needing a behavioral health service to have access, removing limitations based on healthcare insurance or medical necessity, and preventing youth and families from enduring the arduous process of financial means testing.” The Initiative for Student Wellness program is free for all students, including referrals to outside mental health organizations.

“[Jen] does a lot more intense therapy, and then depending on what [the student’s] needs are, she refer[s] out to other therapists,” Starkey said. “There is such a gap between finding out that somebody is suicidal and then getting them into therapy. So, [Jen] is connecting with them to get them the services they need now, so that they can get more services later.”

The ISW program is enabling CHS staff to educate students on available resources while simultaneously combating the declining mental health of area youth. It is about creating customized treatment plans based on the student’s needs and situation, while maintaining a high level of confidentiality. It is about educating students on available resources and ways to take care of their mental health. It is about helping students get the help they need in a safe space with a trusted adult. It is about connection.

“I think it’s really good for the school,” Goodwin said. “It’s good to see what’s happening out there and the root issues kids have. I think it helps us become a better school, learning that we need a resource for this or a resource for that. The prevention aspect of things helps as well. Our goal is that every student has an adult here that they trust, and I think [ISW] has really helped with that as well.”

“Now [students] know they have multiple adults they can connect to,” Starkey added.

If your child is struggling in any way, please encourage them to reach out to their school counselor for support. Each school in the Cheney Public Schools district is equipped with a dedicated school counselor who is ready to provide support and connect students with available resources.
Westwood Middle School Announces New Principal

Following an extensive interview process, Cheney Public Schools is pleased to announce that Alison Tobler has been selected as the next principal of Westwood Middle School. The Board of Directors approved Tobler’s hiring on March 27.

Tobler has spent her entire career within the district, beginning as a math teacher at Cheney High School in 2002. She moved into a Principal Assistant role with Betz Elementary in 2016. In 2017, Tobler was elevated to Assistant Principal at Betz, a role she held until 2019. She then transitioned to middle school, serving as Principal Assistant at Westwood from 2018-22; then in 2022, Tobler was hired as Westwood’s Assistant Principal. She will officially begin her tenure as principal in July.

“It is with sincere excitement and joy that I accept the role of principal at Westwood,” Tobler said. “The staff are an amazing team of professionals. I look forward to leading them as we work to provide positive and challenging experiences for all students.”

New Principal Selected for Sunset Elementary

Cheney Public Schools is pleased to announce that Sara McKennon has been selected as the next principal of Sunset Elementary, pending Board approval. The decision follows an extensive interview process.

McKennon began her career as a teacher and acting administrator at Dr. Howard D. Elementary School in San Bernardino, Calif. from 2001-08. Her time with Cheney Public Schools began at Sunset in 2008; in addition to her duties as a 4th/5th grade teacher, McKennon was also the administrative designee in charge of the building when administrators were absent. That led to her tenure as assistant principal at Salnave Elementary, beginning in 2015.

“I am beyond honored and excited to accept the position as principal at Sunset Elementary and return to a community I hold so dear,” McKennon said. “I look forward to working collaboratively with staff, students, families, and the community to foster a positive, inclusive, and supportive environment for all.”

Cheney Public Schools Set to Launch New Website in June

This upcoming June, Cheney Public Schools is preparing for an exciting change: a new website is set to launch on or around June 13, 2024. This transition is a significant step forward in providing an enhanced online experience for our students, parents, staff, and community at large.

While we are excited about the capabilities and features of this new platform, we’d like to be transparent about the change process. We anticipate there will be a bit of a learning curve as everyone adjusts to the new website. Change can be challenging, yet we believe that the benefits of this transition will outweigh any initial difficulties.

As we move forward together, we are excited about the possibilities that this new website will offer. Thank you for your understanding and patience during this transition period.

SCREENAGERS: Growing Up in the Digital Age

Cheney Public Schools will screen the award-winning documentary SCREENAGERS: Growing Up in the Digital Age on Wednesday, May 22, from 6-7:45 p.m. at the Cheney High School Auditorium. Following the screening, a panel of professionals will lead a question-and-answer engagement session. The event is free and open to the public.

SCREENAGERS is a documentary film that probes into the vulnerable corners of family life. It depicts the messy struggles of social media, video games, and academics and offers solutions for helping kids navigate the digital world. For more information on the film, please visit http://www.screenagersmovie.com/.

Cheney Public Schools 2024 High School Graduations

This June will feature four separate graduation ceremonies for Cheney Public Schools. Between the District’s three high schools—Cheney High School, Three Springs, and WIN Academy—the district has just over 300 graduating seniors in the class of 2024!

The festivities begin with a graduation celebration for the Cheney Community Transition Program. It is set for Tuesday, June 4 at 3 p.m. in the Little Theater at Cheney High School.

The festivities continue with Cheney High School’s graduation on June 6 at 7:30 p.m. at the McCarthy Athletic Center on the campus of Gonzaga University. No tickets are necessary to attend graduation. Doors will open for the event at 6:30 p.m., and seating is available on a first-come, first-serve basis. Clear bags are enforced, and all persons and their belongings are subject to search upon entry into McCarthy. Additional information is available at chs.cheneysd.org.

Both WIN Academy and Three Springs High School will graduate the following day, June 7, at Hargreaves Hall on the campus of Eastern Washington University. The WIN Academy graduation will begin at 5 p.m., followed by Three Springs High School at 6:30 p.m. Congratulations to the graduating class of 2024!
Important Dates

May 8
School Board Meeting - 6 p.m.
Cheney High School, Library

May 22
School Board Meeting - 6 p.m.
Cheney High School, Library

May 22
SCREENAGERS Documentary Film Screening
Cheney High School Auditorium

May 24
Emergency Make-up Day

May 27
Memorial Day Holiday - No School

Cheney Public Schools does not discriminate in any programs or activities on the basis of sex, race, creed, religion, color, national origin, age, veteran or military status, sexual orientation, gender expression or identity, economic status, pregnancy, familial status, marital status, disability, or the use of a trained guide dog or service animal, and provides equal access to the Boy Scouts and other designated youth groups.

The following employees have been designated to handle questions and complaints of alleged discrimination:

Title IX/Chapter 28A.640 Officer:
Civil Rights Compliance Coordinator/ADA Coordinator/Gender Inclusive Schools Coordinator
Tom Art, Assistant Superintendent
Cheney Public Schools
12414 S, Andrus Rd, Cheney, WA 99004
Phone: (509) 559-4550
Email: tarl@cheneysd.org

Section 504 Coordinator
Franklin Day, Director, Student Support Services
Cheney Public Schools
12414 S, Andrus Rd, Cheney, WA 99004
Phone: (509) 559-4507
Email: fday@cheneysd.org

Requests for Disclosure of Public Records
Helen Page, Public Records Officer
Cheney Public Schools
12414 S, Andrus Rd, Cheney, WA 99004
Phone: (509) 559-4502
Email: hpage@cheneysd.org

Are you a member of a military family? Please visit bit.ly/cheneymilitary for more information.