

COMMUNITY *Connections*

News of Cheney Public Schools



For our children, our world, our future

LETTER FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Parents, Guardians, Staff, and Community Members,

There is so much to be thankful for here at Cheney Public Schools! As we roll into the second semester, I am excited for what the remainder of the school year has in store for our students, staff, and community members.

With the passage of our \$72 million bond in November, multiple district-wide projects will soon begin. As bond projects progress, we will strive to keep you informed through a clear and consistent communication process, including bi-weekly updates on our webpage, social media, and other channels. We are forming a Bond Advisory Team to provide input on implementing projects funded by the November bond. This team will help promote clear communication, responsible use of funds, and alignment with the District's capital improvement goals.

Applications for the team were open until January 15th, and we are excited to move forward with this group of community members. If you are interested in learning more about the Bond Advisory Team, please scan the QR code to the right or visit CheneySD.org and navigate to the Community Tab, then select Bond & Levy Information. The Bond Advisory Team tab will be visible on that page.



We continue to implement our Strategic Plan across the district. Recently, we have focused on developing a public-facing dashboard to report the level of understanding among our students district-wide. This tool, called Schoolytics, is a data analytics platform designed to provide clear, data-driven insights into student progress and achievement. Schoolytics will also help us track progress toward the goals outlined in our Strategic Plan, allowing the community to see how we are advancing these priorities. This valuable resource will be available very soon!

Classrooms are the heart of our work, and across our district, our staff has been implementing new curriculum such as foundational reading at the K-2 level and 6-12 math. Our staff meets every Friday in professional learning communities to collaborate, find solutions, and work together to improve our students' learning. Together, we look forward to building on this progress and creating new opportunities for success in 2025.

We are Cheney Public Schools!

Take care,



Ben Ferney, Ed.D.
Superintendent | Cheney Public Schools



Ben Ferney, Ed.D.
Superintendent
bferney@cheneysd.org

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Mark Scott
School Board President
District 1



Liz Winer
School Board Member
District 2



Henry Browne
School Board Vice President
District 3



Bill Hanson
School Board Member
District 4



Mitch Swenson
School Board Member
District 5

MISSION STATEMENT:

Cheney Public Schools exists to guarantee a safe and caring environment where ALL students learn at high levels and graduate with options for post-secondary education, careers, and civic engagement.



Empowering Student Voices at Windsor Elementary

The learning and growth that happens within the Functional Communication and Functional Academic special education classrooms at Windsor Elementary is transformative. Special education teachers Olivia Moore and Jennifer Gonzalez have nearly 13 years of combined special education experience, and the programs they lead at Windsor are impacting students every single day.

Gonzalez's Functional Academic (FA) classroom is one of several in elementary schools across the district. These classrooms are designed to support students with significant disabilities that make it difficult for them to access general education classrooms and curriculums, yet they are able to learn and thrive in this restrictive environment.

"[Disabilities that] are often associated with difficulty with adaptive skills, navigating their environment, toileting, safety, and also those personal-social skills like being



Various low-tech communication tools used in the Functional Academic and Functional Communication classes at Windsor Elementary

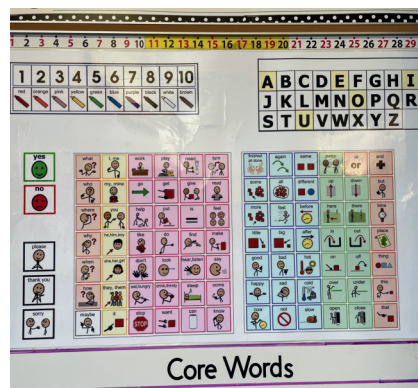
able to self-regulate and interact with adults and peers," Gonzalez said. "There are a lot of students in my classroom who are also having difficulty communicating, and so they are pre-verbal, or they only have one or two words or phrases verbally."

Moore's Functional Communication (FC) classroom—the only FC classroom in the district—provides direct and intensive intervention to increase the students' functional communication, always with the goal of returning to their original Functional Academic classroom.

"It's part of their continuum of services that we support," Moore said. "If they need the

support of Functional Communication, where we have a higher adult-to-student ratio, then we support them in gaining access to communication. While [working on] decreasing communication based behaviors so they can move into a less restrictive environment, which would be the Functional Academic classroom."

"And the concern with the behaviors is that the behaviors are impeding their learning," Gonzalez added. "That's why the consideration of, 'We need to get these behaviors managed;' often, it's related to not being able to communicate. Their behavior is their only communication tool. I think that is where a lot of the communication tools—the low-tech, high-tech, and the buttons—have come about because we are just trying to find the communication tool that resonates with



[the student] that they can access all the time." Low-tech tools, like picture binders, and high-tech tools, like iPads, are intuitive teaching tools that both Moore and Gonzalez have introduced to their pre-verbal and non-speaking students as a device to help them communicate with each other and others. Each tool is customized to meet a student's unique abilities, considering their visual needs, dexterity, and consistency. For instance, if a student does not have access to an iPad at home, Moore and Gonzalez might opt for a binder instead, allowing them to use the same tool both at school and at home. So, how does the whole process work?

"It's a lot of modeling," Moore said. "As soon as they are asking for something we are giving it to them. If a student is requesting Goldfish or markers or art, then we start with saying, 'Yes, we can. Let's do it.' They are learning that, if I say this, I can get this. Then we start to build up their language from there."

Moore and Gonzalez model the behavior with the tool, pointing to or selecting specific words to form sentences in response to the student. Repetition, modeling, and consistency in the placement of buttons help facilitate learning for each student. It is especially helpful if families are able to introduce either a low-tech or high-tech learning tool before kindergarten to aid in early learning.

"We do work with our SLPs (Speech Language Pathologists)," Gonzalez added.



"They often have ideas about which words they want to start with or which activities. We always want those highly preferred

activities, which 90 percent of the time is going to involve food, and Goldfish. Bubbles are really popular, or popular characters they are interested in. So, we're incorporating their interests to get them engaged."

Students may begin with one or two 'words' with yes or no answers, then expand the number of buttons as they learn. In time and with guidance, they may expand their communication to offer comments, opinions, and participate in conversations on a variety of topics. Each communication tool will support individual students with where they are at in their communication, taking into account visual needs, dexterity, et cetera.

Story continued on Page 5

Westwood Middle School MESA: The Path to a National Championship

Seven months have passed since the National Engineering Design Competition concluded in San Diego, Calif., and MESA students Isla Funke and Kiera Lanier are still coming to terms with the reality of being National Champions.

“It was just surreal; like no way,” Funke said.

“It was crazy,” Lanier added. “Just so cool.”

Rewind over a year back to Fall 2023 when then-eighth graders Funke and Lanier elected to take Michelle Clayton’s Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) science class at Westwood Middle School. It proved to be a decision that kickstarted their path to a national championship at the National Engineering Design Competition (NEDC) in late June 2024.

“Everyone begins with the class,” said Clayton, a MESA alum herself. “We spend about half the time learning coding skills and different elements, and kind of focusing on the equity part of it. Then, [students] take those skills and develop a project based around that.”

According to its website, MESA USA is a consortium of statewide MESA programs representing 10 states across the country. The program operates collaboratively to broaden participation and improve academic outcomes for underrepresented students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education.

At Westwood specifically, there are two parts to MESA: the class and the club. In order to be eligible for competitions, students must be part of the club and sign up through their club advisor. As Clayton explains, Westwood offers the MESA elective class with the club option for students who want to compete. In the elective class, about half of the time is dedicated to learning STEM skills like coding and other elements, and the other half is spent on projects, competitions, and the role that equity plays in STEM.

“We always start with the toolkit because once they know what they have to work with, they can build [the project] from there,” Clayton said. “We do spend a lot of time on what

equity means, and what that looks like for different communities and different types of people because that is what the project is based around. We spend a lot of time identifying areas that experience inequity, and then within that, I encourage them to figure out what they feel connected to.”

Several of Clayton’s students created projects based on their own experiences. For example, a group of bilingual students created a translation app specific for the Marshallese language, a limit they had experienced within their own non-English speaking families, while another group created a pack to help with menstrual cycle issues, something each one of them had experienced in their own lives. For Funke and Lanier, the idea took a little bit of time to come to them.

“We had been talking about what we wanted to do for a really long time,” Funke said. “Nothing really jumped out at us or was something we were really invested in. We actually were looking through some of the older MESA projects that had got into state, and we saw that there was a lot of stuff really focused on air quality. We were just talking about that, how funny it was that there were so many. Then we were like, we could really use something like that for Spokane because there are so many fires here. Then we were like, wait, that’s actually an issue that actually matters to us, and that we could maybe do something about.”

Wildfires are a common and consistent threat for the Inland Northwest, and both Funke and Lanier live in an area that has been directly impacted by wildfire. They noticed there were severe lapses in communication about those fires.

“We knew the main issue was that some people don’t have phones, some people don’t have internet, and also, we have phones and internet and we still had trouble getting alerts.”

And so, their idea to create an equitable and dependable wildfire alert system for low-income and rural populations was born. The device and system needed to be small, have the ability to plug into a wall, and be created using the tools and elements available in the class.

“I was really there as a kind of mentor and organizer for them to make sure everything



Kiera Lanier (L) and Isla Funke (R) pose following their presentation to the Cheney City Council on Nov. 12, 2024.

was done in a timely manner, revising and constantly giving feedback,” Clayton said. “They were such a successful group because they were internally motivated to get all of it done and get it done well.”

The pair completed their project in time to present at the Spokane Regional MESA competition where they competed against other schools from the greater Spokane area. As part of the competition, Funke and Lanier had to submit a written proposal, create a poster to present, deliver a pitch of their project to judges, followed by a question and answer segment. Westwood’s MESA program excelled at regionals, with Funke and Lanier placing first while the other two competing teams finished second and fifth, respectively. With their top finish, Funke and Lanier were headed to state.

“With regionals, whoever places first gets to move onto State,” Clayton explained. “So, we traveled to Seattle, and they competed against the best teams from each of the regions. They competed, did all the same things with some improvement from one competition to the next, and placed first. They were then invited to go to Nationals.”

The National Engineering Design Competition was held June 24-27, 2024, at San Diego State University in San Diego,

Calif. A 15-page packet outlined the requirements for the competition, along with the scoring criteria, with detailed explanations of each of the competition requirements: design proposal, academic requirements, technical pitch, and symposium. Funke and Lanier went head-to-head with the top competition across the country and won.

“The competition is truly a college-level rubric of competition,” Clayton said. “That’s why that presentation is so over-your-head, because the level they have to be at is so stinking high.”

“At Nationals, there are four individual categories, and we had been finishing second in several categories with one first-place finish in the last category,” Funke said. “Then we realized that we probably had more points than everyone else. We were like, ‘Did we actually win this?’ That was insane.”

After claiming the national title in June, the pair presented their project to the Cheney City Council in early November 2024, and they were invited to be part of the ribbon cutting ceremony for the grand opening of Eastern Washington University’s MESA center. As they reflected on their experience, both credit

the MESA program and experience for developing life skills.

“The MESA experience, competing and stuff, definitely helped me get more comfortable talking to new people and presenting in front of people,” Lanier said. “That’s really cool, and I definitely did learn a lot about coding and computer science and things like that.”

“I think for me, it definitely has helped with my presentation skills,” Funke added. “I never really applied a lot of the stuff I knew, like I knew how to solder, but I had never made my own project and had to solder it myself, which was really cool.”



Isla Funke (3rd from left) and Kiera Lanier (4th from left) pose with other EWU Girls+STEM Camp participants and Eastern Washington University staff at the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new EWU MESA center on Dec. 13, 2024.

Empowering Students, cont'd.

“We see a decrease in those maladaptive behaviors,” Gonzalez said. “Instead of hitting or throwing themselves on the floor screaming, they are able to ask more appropriately.”

“Huge amounts of growth can occur when we give our students the ability to access their language,” said Moore.

The impact language and communication has on students in the FC and FA classrooms is transformative. It provides a lifelong skillset to students that can open doors and expand opportunities later in life.

“It gives them autonomy,” Gonzalez said. “Oftentimes we infantilize and do not hold our non-verbal individuals to high standards. We just assume—they’re not speaking, they

don’t know anything. I think this really starts to disprove that.”

“To be able to express themselves to everyone around them, whether that’s really telling people how they feel, or being able to live what I would say is a quality life,” Moore said. “I think that’s where it becomes powerful is that we’re not just looking at functional communication, but it’s a lifetime we’re looking at.”

It’s empowering to empower kids,” Gonzalez continued. “Even when the progress is slow, you see it.”

If you are interested in learning more about how non-verbal or non-speaking individuals can use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools, scan the QR

code (below) for an in-depth story about a 19-year-old who utilized an iPad to author an entire symphony. In addition, the following children’s books include the use of AAC and can be a great learning tool:

- *A Day with No Words* by Tiffany Hammond
- *Sabita Finds Her Voice* by Dr. Stephanie Vavilala
- *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper

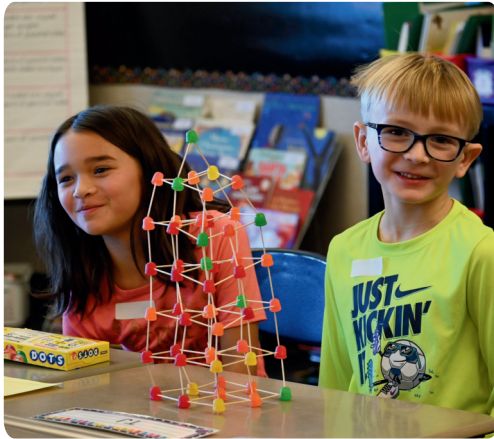




Stop for

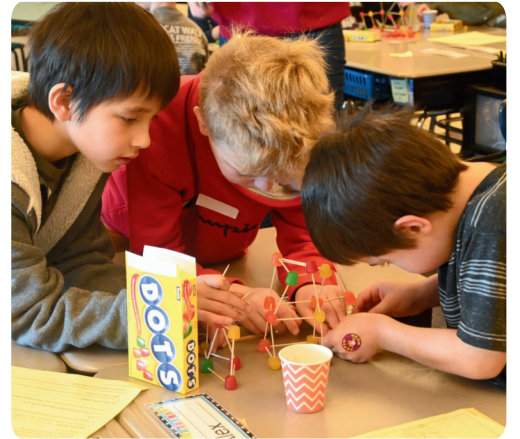


A few days before the 2024-25 winter break, Windsor Elementary students participated in the school's first-ever Stop for STEM event. Students from all grades and programs worked together in multi-grade pairs on an engineering project that aligns with the Next Generation of Science Standards.



The goal of the activity was to build the tallest standalone tower out of toothpicks and DOTs candy. In addition, students were also completing the entire design process, including identifying a problem, brainstorming solutions, testing prototypes, and making improvements based on results.

Students applied multiple scientific concepts related to force, stability, and structural integrity during the Stop for STEM activity. Well done!



Schoolytics Dashboard Coming Soon to Cheney Public Schools

The Schoolytics dashboard is coming soon to Cheney Public Schools. As of publication in mid-January, the dashboard was being finalized; it will not be made available for the public until all of the necessary data is correctly configured.

What is Schoolytics, and why is Cheney Public Schools introducing such a dashboard to the community? Schoolytics is a data analytics platform designed to provide clear insights into student progress and achievement. The dashboard aligns with the goals of the District's Strategic Plan and was specifically referenced as part of the Exemplary School District goal. It states:

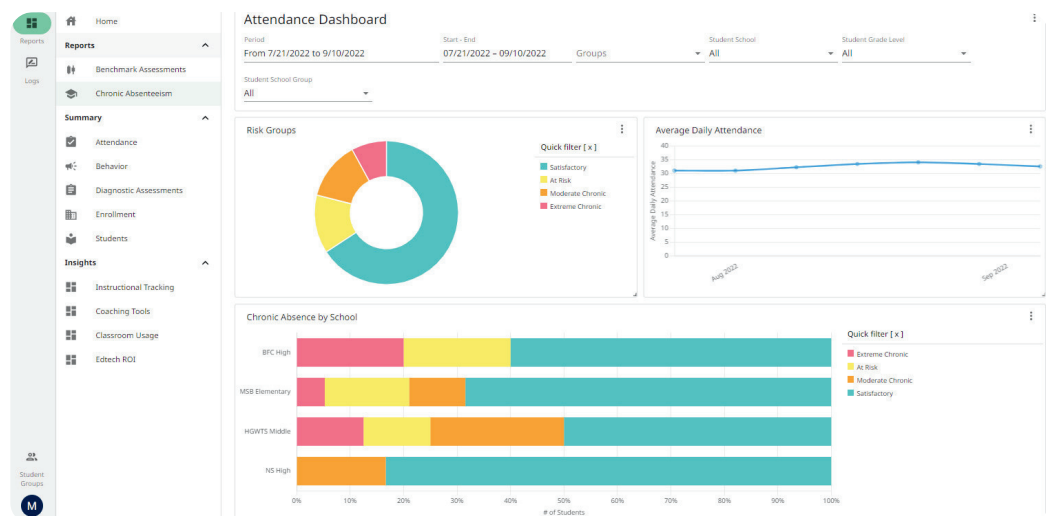
"Cheney Public Schools will incorporate a comprehensive evidence 'dashboard' on the district website to provide a live and regularly updated snapshot of student learning growth and strategic priority progress. This dashboard will share multiple measures of student learning that will detail

growth over time."

The dashboard will provide a comprehensive view of district data including attendance trends in addition to academic performance metrics like iReady

and Smarter Balanced Assessment data.

Schoolytics pulls data from a wide range of sources, including our student information systems, assessment platforms, and spreadsheets.



Above: An example of how the dashboard and data could be visually represented in Schoolytics.

Pay Rate Increase for All Substitute Positions

Cheney Public Schools is seeking qualified substitutes for all positions. Effective January 1, 2025, for substitute teachers holding a fully-certified certificate, the rate will increase to \$175 per day. Emergency-certified substitute teacher pay will increase to \$150 per day.

Additionally, beginning January 1, 2025, classified substitutes holding a degree will be eligible for an hourly pay enhancement as outlined below:

- Associate Degree = \$0.50 per hour
- Bachelors Degree = \$1.00 per hour
- Masters Degree = \$1.50 per hour
- Doctorate Degree = \$2.00 per hour

*Note: Enhancements cannot be stacked; pay will be for the highest degree earned.

In order for your degree to be considered for the hourly pay enhancement, HR must have

official transcripts on file. We are not able to access copies of transcripts or a copy of a college diploma. Transcripts may be sent directly from the college/university to Leigh Lubbers at llubbers@cheneysd.org, or you can request they be mailed to the following address:

Cheney Public Schools
Attn: Human Resources/Leigh Lubbers,
12414 S. Andrus Rd., Cheney, WA 99004.



Join Our Team!

Interested in joining our team? Scan the QR code below or visit cheneysd.org to view all available job openings.



We're Hiring



Free 2024-25 GSL Passes for Seniors 65+

Did you know that seniors age 65 and over are eligible for a free Greater Spokane League pass? To snag yours, head to the Cheney High School business office with a valid ID. You will need to complete some paperwork to acquire your pass.

For any other community members interested in getting a Greater Spokane League annual sports pass, please visit shopgsl.com for available packages. Remember, annual sports passes include admission to ALL GSL home and away contests. This includes all regular-season events at all sixteen GSL schools.



School Bus Registration Transitioning Online

The Cheney Public Schools school bus registration will be transitioning from a paper-based process to a fully online system beginning in January. All bus registration will be completed through Transact, the same system district parents and guardians currently use to view bus schedules and routing information.

This registration transition will only impact families who:

- Need to register a new student(s); or
- Have a change of address; or
- Change schools (e.g. moving from elementary to middle school or middle school to high school).

Families with currently registered students who are not experiencing any of the above do not need to take any action.

CHOICE Enrollment Window Opens Feb. 3

Choice is an option for families to request attendance at a school other than their address-assigned school.

The Choice Enrollment window will be Feb. 3 through March 31. **As a reminder, all choice families--including new and renewals--need to complete the choice process.** Paperwork is available at CheneySD.org > Services & Support > Student Access & Opportunity > Choice.





509-559-4599

www.cheneyisd.org

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Important Dates

January 20

Martin Luther King Jr. Day - No School

January 21

Semester Break Day - No School

January 22

Emergency Make-Up Day

February 7

Professional Learning Day - No Students

February 12

School Board Meeting - 6:00 p.m.
Cheney High School

February 17

Presidents' Day - No School

February 26

School Board Meeting - 6 p.m.
Cheney High School



TOGETHER, WE ARE CHENEY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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 Arlt, Assistant Superintendent
Cheney Public Schools
12414 S. Andrus Rd. Cheney, WA 99004
Phone: (509) 559-4550
Email: tarlt@cheneyisd.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: fdlay@cheneyisd.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@cheneyisd.org



Cheney Public Schools



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Are you a member of a military family?
Please visit <https://www.cheneyisd.org/community/military>
for more information.