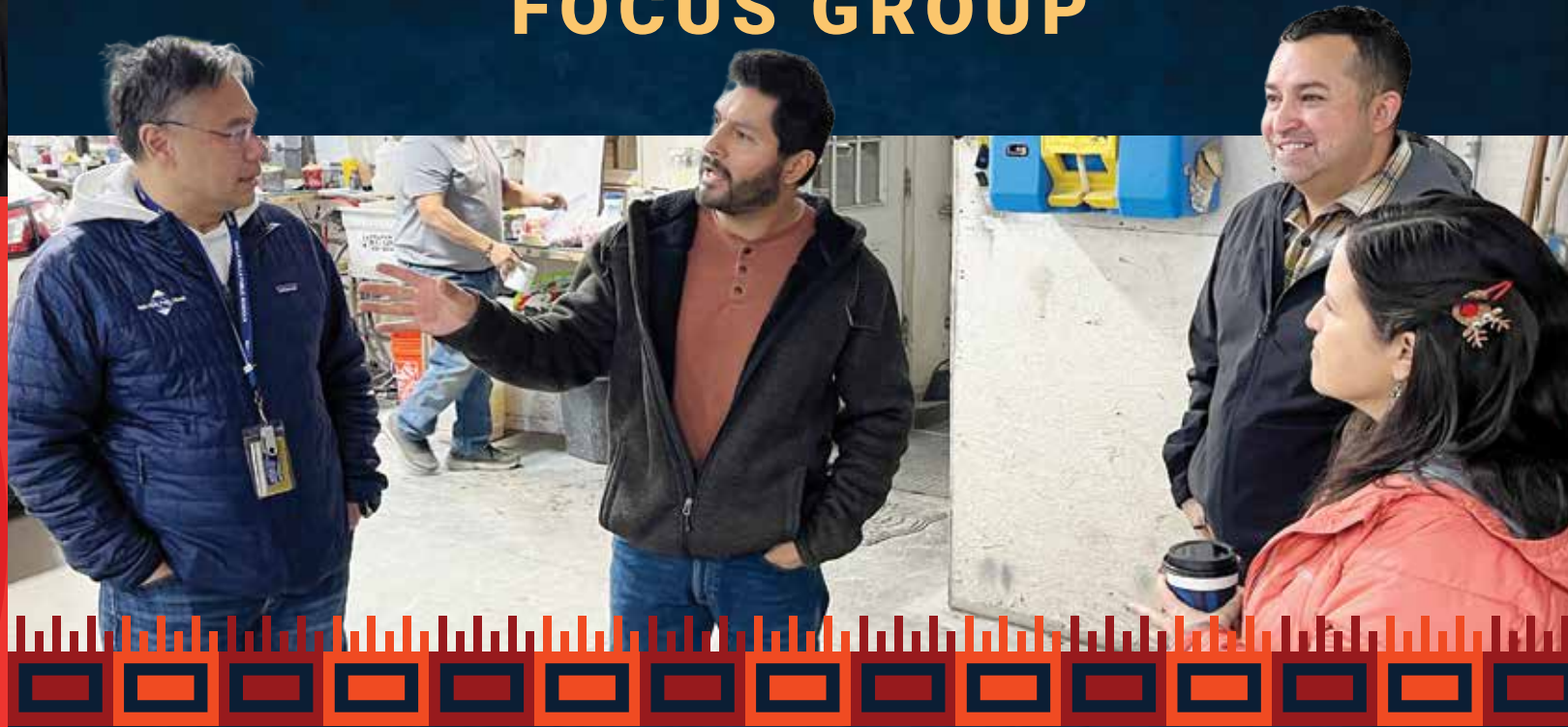


WALLA WALLA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

HISPANIC LEADERS

FOCUS GROUP



Superintendent Establishes Focus Group For HISPANIC COMMUNITY LEADERS

Walla Walla Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Ben Gauyan has established a Hispanic Community Leaders Focus Group to strengthen relationships and improve communication between the district and the Hispanic community. The group is designed to provide meaningful insight and feedback to help ensure district programs, services and initiatives reflect the voices, needs and experiences of Hispanic students and families.

Longtime community leader and educator Sergio Hernandez serves as the group's ambassador to Dr. Gauyan. Hernandez helps guide conversations and support open, ongoing collaboration between the district and community leaders. The focus group meets every other month to discuss key topics related to student success, family engagement and community partnerships.

Beyond structured meetings, Dr. Gauyan and focus group members also participate in site visits to local businesses and

agencies represented by focus group members. They also visit schools. These visits offer opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of the work being done to support families in our schools and community. Last fall, the group visited Checker's Auto Body for a tour led by owner William Garcia, with additional winter and spring visits planned.

"Building authentic connections with our Hispanic community is essential to ensuring that every student feels seen, supported and valued," said Dr. Gauyan. "This focus group will help us listen more intentionally, learn from one another and move forward together."

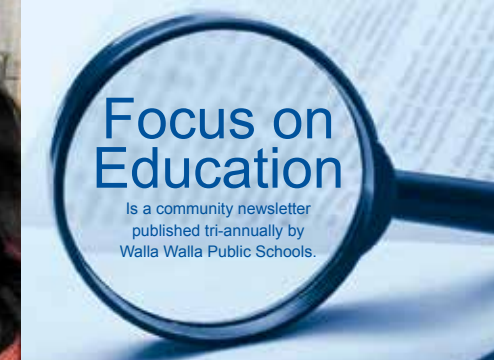
Through this initiative, Walla Walla Public Schools continues its commitment to meaningful engagement, shared leadership and creating welcoming schools where all students and families can thrive.

Photo: Checker's Auto Body owner William Garcia takes Dr. Gauyan and members of the focus group on a tour of his business.

Board of Directors:

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- Ruth Ladderud
- Kathy Mulkerin
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- Ari Kim-Leavitt, Student Rep.
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Walla Walla Public Schools

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COMPREHENSIVE NONDISCRIMINATION STATEMENT

Walla Walla 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, disability, or the use of a trained dog guide 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 Coordinator & Civil Rights Compliance Coordinator
DR. MINDY MEYER, Dir of Human Resources
364 S. Park Street
Walla Walla, WA 99362
(509) 527-3000
mmeyer@wwps.org
- Section 504/ADA Coordinator
BARB CASEY, Director of Special Education
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Walla Walla Public Schools is an Equal Opportunity Employer and complies with all requirements of the ADA.

Where Are They Now?

Washington's Most Sought-After Graduates

Walla Walla High School graduate Cailin Price, Class of 2013, has taken a unique journey since her days as a Blue Devil, one filled with learning, resilience and new passions.

Cailin began her education in Walla Walla at Prospect Point Elementary for kindergarten, moved on to Blue Ridge Elementary for grades 1-5, and later attended Garrison Middle School before arriving at Wa-Hi. During her high school years, she was an active member of the school community, participating in track and field, National Honor Society, Key Club and Latino Club.

After graduation, Cailin pursued her love of health and science at the University of Idaho, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Nutrition in 2017.

Looking back on her Wa-Hi experience, Cailin says she is grateful for the staff who supported her during some of her most difficult times. She fondly remembers Ms. Bickelhaupt, whose fun and engaging lessons made class a joy, and counselor Carolyn Franklin, who, along with Ms. Bickelhaupt, was an anchor of support following the passing of her father right before her senior year.

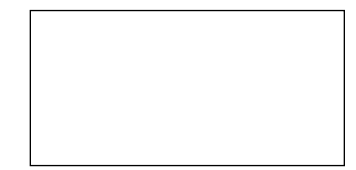
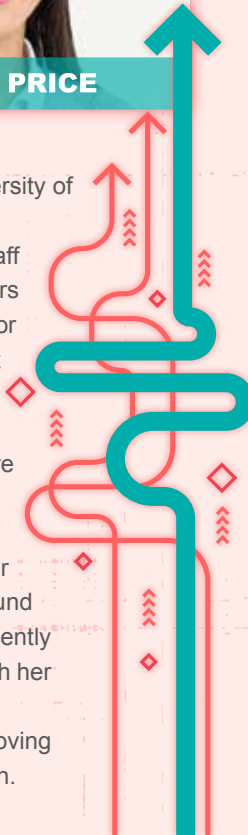
Today, Cailin has found her professional home in real estate, working as a Realtor for Berkshire Hathaway Home Services Walla Walla Realty. Before entering the field, she worked as a server and barista in both Walla Walla and during stints living in Kalispell, Montana, and Las Vegas, Nevada.

Outside of work, Cailin keeps busy with hobbies and interests that show her fun and adventurous side. She enjoys walking her sister's chocolate lab around Bennington Lake, creating short-form content for social media, and most recently building intricate LEGO sets. To date, she has completed around 15 builds, with her sights set on the ultimate challenge: the 10,000-piece Eiffel Tower.

Cailin's story is one of resilience, creativity and community connection, proving the lessons and relationships built at Wa-Hi carry forward long after graduation.



CAILIN PRICE



Walla Walla Public Schools Focus on Education

Your School District Newsletter | Winter 2026 | Volume 28 | Issue 2



Out & About with Dr. G.

New Video Series Showcases Learning in Action

Walla Walla Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Ben Gauyan is taking learning beyond the office and into the heart of our schools with a new video series, Out & About with Dr. G. The series offers an inside look at the incredible programs across the district as Dr. Gauyan steps into classrooms, shops and training spaces to learn alongside students and staff.

Already this school year, Dr. Gauyan has joined Walla Walla High School JROTC cadets on the Raider Course for a demanding outdoor workout that tested strength, teamwork and perseverance. He also spent time with the Transportation Department, learning firsthand how to chain up a school bus in preparation for winter road conditions. This essential skill helps keep students safe during snowy weather.

He also visited the SEATech Construction Technology program,

where climbed onto the roof learning station to experience what it takes to qualify for fall protection and work safely in the construction field.

Coming up this winter, Dr. Gauyan visits Garrison Middle School to take part in a Battle Bot competition.

The goal of Out & About with Dr. G. is simple but powerful: to take viewers behind the scenes and showcase the wide range of hands-on learning opportunities available to students across Walla Walla Public Schools. By rolling up his sleeves and trying each activity himself, Dr. Gauyan hopes to spotlight the dedication of staff, the talents of students and the real-world skills being built every day.

New episodes are planned to be released monthly, offering the community a fresh look at learning in action throughout the district.



ELEVATE PROGRAM PUTS WWPS AT THE TOP FOR FINANCIAL AID COMPLETION

Walla Walla Public Schools seniors are taking big steps toward life after graduation and leading the region in the process. According to United Way of the Blue Mountains College and Career Readiness Lead Advisor Jenny Foster, WWPS currently ranks number one in the Southeast Region for completed financial aid applications. More than 50 percent of WWPS seniors have already submitted their FAFSA®, far surpassing any other district in the region. Their goal is 70 percent.

This momentum is fueled by the Elevate initiative, supported by the Horizons Grant from the Gates Foundation. Elevate brings together K-12 schools, colleges, and community partners to remove barriers and help students move confidently from high school into college, apprenticeships, or career-training programs.

Why does this matter? While most Washington students aspire to continue their education after high school, many never take that next step. This is especially true for first-generation and low-income students. Elevate is changing that story by turning aspirations into action and ensuring more WWPS students have access to the opportunities that open doors to long-term success.



First Phase of Entry Plan Wraps Up

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT UP NEXT

When I began my journey as the 17th Superintendent of Walla Walla Public Schools, I set out to do three simple but important things: listen, learn and connect.

PHASE 1 RECAP:

The first phase of my entry plan wrapped up in December. The first phase focused on building relationships with students, staff, families and community members. I gained a deeper understanding of the traditions, challenges and opportunities that make Walla Walla such a special place.

Over the past several months, I have had the opportunity to:

- Visit all schools and meet with teachers, principals & support staff.
- Listen to students in classrooms, during activities and in informal settings.
- Engage with families and community members through meetings, school events and community gatherings.
- Connect with local leaders in business, government and higher education.

- Meet with staff associations and employee leaders to better understand their priorities and perspectives. These conversations have been invaluable. They have provided a clear picture of Walla Walla Public Schools from many different angles and will help guide our work moving forward.

PHASE 2 FOCUS:

As we look ahead to 2026, I am entering the second phase of my entry plan with a strong sense of purpose and optimism.

In the coming year, my focus will be on:

- Strengthening trust and communication with families, staff and community partners.
- Supporting the goals of Vision 2030 to ensure we are developing Washington's Most Sought-After Graduates.
- Prioritizing student well-being and safety while maintaining high expectations for all learners.
- Ensuring fiscal stability so the district can continue investing in what matters most, our students.

It is an honor to serve Walla Walla Public Schools. Together, we will build on the district's vision of Developing Washington's Most Sought-After Graduates



SCHOOL BOARD RECOGNITION MONTH

January was School Board Recognition Month, a time to pause and say a genuine thank you to the people who step up and serve our schools with heart and purpose. Thank you for your leadership, time and unwavering commitment to Walla Walla Public Schools!

Thank you

PHOTO: (LEFT TO RIGHT) - ARI KIM-LEAVITT, ABRIL SALAZAR, ELIZABETH ALONSO-BARRIENTOS, KATHY MULKERIN, ALAYNA BRINTON, DEREK SARLEY & RUTH LADDERUD



-Preserving a Century of History- Ann Ray Rebuilds the Legacy of Wa-Hi's JROTC Program

Walla Walla High School Class of 1959 graduate Ann Ray has spent the past two years carefully preserving a remarkable piece of school history. Ann archived the Walla Walla Junior Recruit Training Officer program, which dates back to 1919.

The project began after the 2018 bond to modernize Walla Walla High School prompted the need to relocate items stored in the school's attic. With new HVAC systems planned for those spaces, the long-forgotten boxes of historical materials, including photographs, newspaper clippings, awards and officer academy selections, needed a new home.

"I've always loved giving back to my school, it makes me proud to know this important part of our history has been saved and will be available for the years to come."

Walla Walla High School cadets rolled up their sleeves, carefully carrying numerous boxes of fragile documents down the attic stairs and delivering them to Ann's home. Over the next two years, she meticulously sorted and organized the collection by year, creating a set of historic scrapbook binders that beautifully capture more than a century of the program's legacy.

The district warehouse provided binders, acid-free pages and preservation materials to support the effort. This winter, the collection will be digitally scanned and made available on the Walla Walla High School website so that students, alumni, community members and veterans can explore this rich history for generations to come.



Helen Freer... GIVING BACK TO THE SCHOOLS AND THE COMMUNITY THAT SHAPED HER

Helen Freer's story is a powerful reminder of what can happen when determination meets opportunity, and when someone chooses to give back to the place that helped raise them.

A proud member of the Walla Walla High School Class of 2007, Helen was born and raised in Walla Walla and attended Edison Elementary and Pioneer Middle School. Today, she's back at Pioneer in a full-circle role as a Communities in Schools Community and Student Advocate. Helen is now in her third year supporting students and families.

Helen's path to this work wasn't easy or traditional. As a single mom of two young children, she enrolled in Walla Walla Community College's Early Childhood Education program while, in her words, "in survival mode" for her family. She earned her Associate of Arts degree, a milestone she credits with opening doors for her future.

That momentum carried her forward. While working as a Family Advocate at the Walla Walla Center for Children and Families, Helen earned her bachelor's degree from Washington State University through an online program, balancing work, parenting and school with grit and purpose.

Now at Pioneer Middle School, Helen's impact is felt daily. This year, she is teaching a Middle School 201 class, serving about 10 students who have struggled with attendance and truancy. The class focuses on building positive attendance habits, providing academic support, and connecting students with critical social and emotional resources through community agencies. The success of the program has led to the addition of a second class this winter, expanding support to even more students.

Beyond the classroom, Helen plays a key role in strengthening school-community connections. She helps organize career fairs, school open house events, and family engagement activities, creating spaces where students and families feel welcomed, supported and seen.

Helen describes herself as a "late bloomer" who found education as a career, and she says she's now living her best life. Her journey, marked by perseverance and purpose, continues to inspire the students she serves and the community she calls home.

Walla Walla Public Schools is proud to celebrate Helen Freer and the difference she makes every day at Pioneer Middle School.



Garcia Receives Coin of Excellence

Walla Walla Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Ben Gauyan recognized District Music Coordinator and Garrison Middle School Music Teacher Roger Garcia with the district's prestigious Coin of Excellence during the Garrison Middle School Holiday Concert in December. Garcia received the honor in celebration of his 21 years of exemplary service to Walla Walla Public Schools students, staff and the districtwide music community. Garcia joined Walla Walla Public Schools in 2004 following more than two decades of experience as both a performer and music educator.

"Roger embodies everything this recognition stands for. His leadership, his passion for music education, and his commitment to students have elevated our programs for more than two decades."

"We are grateful for his service and proud to honor him with the Coin of Excellence," said Dr. Gauyan.