July 2026

COMMUNITY *Connections*

News of Cheney Public Schools



For our children, our world, our future



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

IMPORTANT DATES

August 17
Welcome to Kindergarten

August 19
Board Meeting - 5:30 p.m.
Cheney High School, Library

August 24
Open House, Time TBD

August 25
First Day of School for Grades 1–12

August 28
First Day of Kindergarten

September 7
Labor Day - No School

September 8
First Day of Preschool



On the Cover: Cheney Public Schools Director of Technology Ryan Spencer installs a new security camera outside of Betz Elementary.

LETTER FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Parents, Guardians, Staff, and Community Members,

Summertime is a great opportunity to refuel and enjoy time with friends and family. It also provides an important opportunity to tackle larger projects that can be difficult to complete while school is in session. Across our district, teams have been busy preparing our schools for the year ahead. This includes installing new security cameras and interactive Promethean boards in buildings throughout the district. These improvements are funded by the voter-approved February 2024 capital levy and reflect our community's continued investment in the safety, learning, and success of our students and staff.

It is amazing to see these levy funds in action, especially as our district prepares to run two replacement levies this November. Our School Board of Directors unanimously approved Proposition 1: Replacement Education Programs and Operations Levy–better known as an EP&O levy–and Proposition 2: Replacement Capital Levy for Technology, Safety and Infrastructure Improvements. Our district, along with other districts from across Washington state, rely on local, voter-approved levies to bridge the gap between what the state funds and the actual costs of providing our students with the opportunities and resources to be successful. You can visit our website for more information on each proposition and how the funding impacts our entire school district. Remember to cast your ballot and vote in the November 3, 2026 General Election!

The funds generated by the voter-approved November 2024 bond continue to make a meaningful impact across Cheney Public Schools. Our new elementary school in Airway Heights, officially named Skyway Elementary, has gone vertical! The exterior walls and roof supports are beginning to take shape, bringing the vision for this new school closer to reality each day. It is such a privilege to watch it come together. Other bond projects are also underway, including kitchen renovations and switchgear upgrades at Salnave and Windsor elementary schools, along with interior updates at Betz Elementary and Cheney High School. Be sure to follow our social media pages and visit our website for the latest updates!

It is hard to believe we are less than four weeks away from the first day of school for students in grades 1–12! August 25 is quickly approaching, and we are looking forward to welcoming students back into our buildings. We are also excited to welcome some of our newest learners, the kindergarten class of 2039! If your family has a child who will be five years old by August 31, now is the time to register for kindergarten. Registering as soon as possible helps us thoughtfully plan for staffing, budgeting, and class sizes. Visit cheneysd.org to register today. We look forward to another great year together across Cheney Public Schools!

We are Cheney Public Schools!

Onward,

Ben Ferney, Ed.D | Superintendent



Mark Scott
School Board Member
District 1



Elizabeth Winer
School Board Legislative Rep
District 2



Henry Browne
School Board Member
District 3



Bill Hanson
School Board Vice President
District 4



Mitch Swenson
School Board President
District 5

DISTRICT NEWS

Westwood Middle School MESA Team Finishes Second at National Competition

For the second time in three years, a team from Michelle Clayton's Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) program at Westwood Middle School advanced to the MESA National Engineering Design Competition (NEDC), a truly spectacular feat considering the path to get there.

"The only way to move on from every single competition is to get first," Clayton explained. "You have to get first in Regionals; you have to get first in State."

And it is no easy feat as the greater Spokane area is home to the largest regional MESA center in the state of Washington.

"They're going up against 20 other teams of middle schoolers that have been working all year on their project," Clayton continued.

In Clayton's four years at the helm of the Westwood Middle School MESA class and club, advancing to the national competition has become the norm. In 2024, she guided then-eighth graders Isla Funke and Kiera Lanier to a first-place finish at nationals with a wildfire alert system for low-income and rural populations, an idea that was later shared with the Cheney City Council. This year, Westwood students Kensy Bahme, Eldana Zemedkun, and Remi Zickler continued the nationals trend with a second-place finish.

"So, initially when we first joined MESA, our task that we were facing was trying to find an inequity that we would try to solve with our project that we would make," Zemedkun said. "So, it was an inequity that was happening in our community, and we were trying to solve that."

At face value, it seems like an overwhelming task. The possibilities are nearly endless, requiring students to first recognize the challenges facing members of their community before identifying a meaningful problem to address. From there, students must think critically through potential solutions, weigh what is realistic and achievable, and ultimately design and build a working prototype. Year after year, Clayton's students gather their ideas into pointed, powerful projects.



Kensy Bahme (left), Eldana Zemedkun (center), and Remi Zickler (right) represented Westwood Middle School at the NEDC in Baltimore, Md., in June.

"I think it's just mindblowing that they are excelling the way they are," Clayton said. "I remember when I was in the program, it was nothing to the extent of the difficulty level or the creativity, or the skill set that was required to complete what they are doing nowadays. When I was [in MESA], it was a set project that everyone did…For them, it's really, build whatever you want and convince us it's amazing."

"We sat down for a long time, trying to figure out what we wanted to do," Bahme recounted. "It was really hard to find a topic, but we just based it off what our families had gone through, or what we'd seen, and that's where we got a lot of our ideas."

Over the course of the semester with assistance from Clayton, the trio of Bahme, Zemedkun, and Zickler worked together to focus on a single question: how can we create an affordable device to combat Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)?

"Initially, a child in our community passed away during the night from a heart defect, and that really highlighted the anxious feeling new parents face whenever they're putting their child to sleep. So, we kind of targeted that and created B.O.N.D."

"We also found that it affects low-income families at a 2.4 times higher rate than higher income families," Bahme said in an interview with KREM 2 News earlier in June.

They conducted interviews, scoured over current data, and continued to redesign their prototype until it provided nearly identical readings to professional-grade equipment.

From there, the Baby Observation Notification Device, or B.O.N.D. was formed. The prototype offers parents real-time access to their child's health and well-being, leading to greater peace of mind and increased reaction times in the event of an emergency.

"We did lots of research about other companies that have similar products and kind of figured out what theirs were like and how we could improve ours and make ours better," said Zickler.

After each competition, the trio fine-tuned and adjusted their prototype and presentation, and following a first-place finish at both the Regional and State competitions, Bahme, Zemedkun, and Zickler were bound for Baltimore, Maryland, for the MESA NEDC. Overcoming initial nervousness heading into the competition, each student noticed an overwhelming sense of community among the competitors.

"At first, yes, I was scared for the competition, but as I got to talk with the other teams, I really felt like a sense of community that we were all here for the same thing," Zemedkun said. "We all worked so hard, and we just bonded together because of that. It was a really great experience."

"It was also just so crazy seeing the difference in our communities state-to-state, and the difference in the projects people can come up with," Bahme added. "That was just so cool."

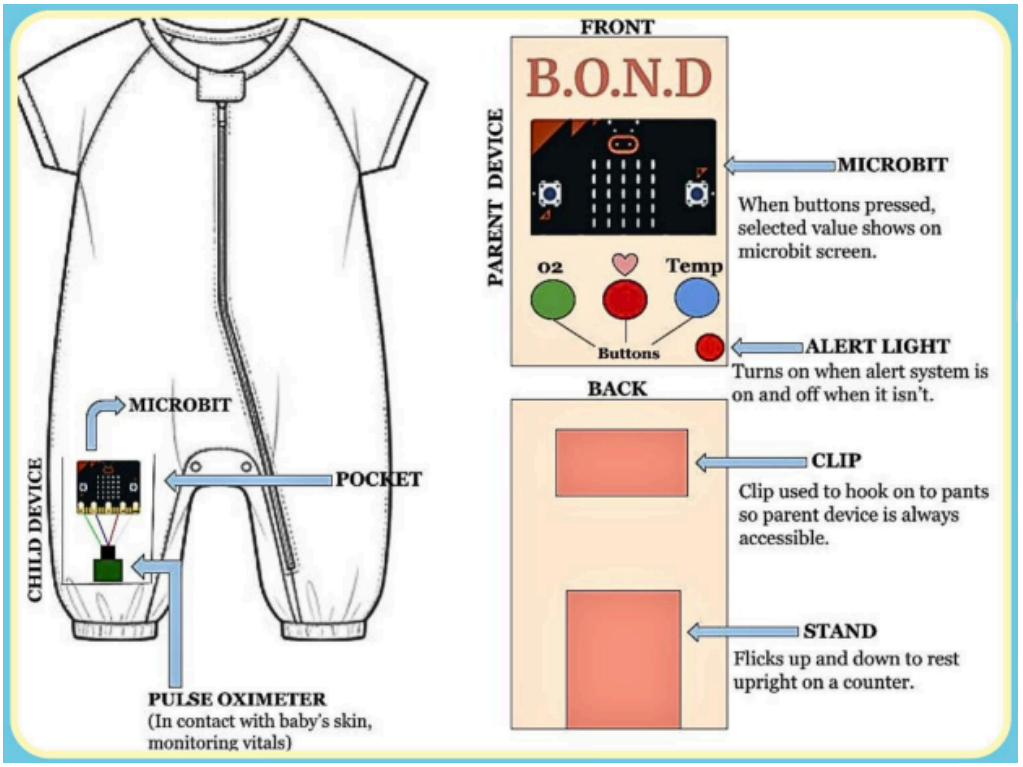
Out of nine middle school teams that advanced to the national competition, Westwood's crew finished third in both the Academic Poster and Symposium and second in the Technical Pitch. With all the elements added up, they secured a second-place finish at the national competition.

"Often what I see in the teams that excel like this is just the time commitment and willingness to put MESA as a priority," she said. "We have so many students doing so many different extracurriculars, and these are the kids who are saying, 'I'm going to prioritize showing up to this class and to this club.'"

That commitment, Clayton says, is the difference for her teams that have advanced to nationals.

"They were there every single day, and they never missed it because they wanted it. They wanted to work for it, so they put the time in."

For a look at the B.O.N.D. prototype and project, check out the NEDC website.



A graphic designed by the Westwood Middle School student team explaining the components of the B.O.N.D. prototype.

Board Approves Replacement Levy Propositions

At the July 15 School Board Meeting, the Cheney Public School Board of Directors unanimously approved Proposition 1: Replacement Education and Operations Levy and Proposition 2: Replacement Capital Levy for Technology, Security and Infrastructure Improvements.

Both replacement levy propositions will be on the ballot in the November 3, 2026 General Election. For more information on each proposition, please visit cheneysd.org.



District Snapshots



District IT Support Specialist Julian Raya services a Chromebook, part of the ongoing process of restoring and reusing technology across the district.



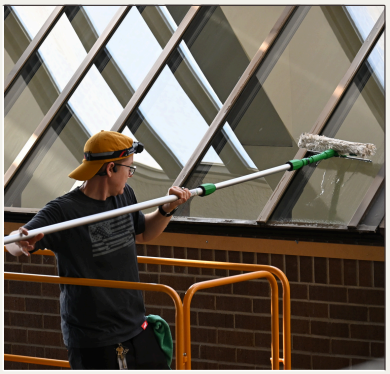
Construction progress on the new Skyway Elementary gymnasium on July 10.



Rising junior Gabe Gomes works on a multidimensional wood cutting board during the Production and Manufacturing Institute program at Cheney High School on July 16.



A glimpse inside Salnave's kitchen updgrades! This worker is measuring and cutting a wall panel for installation. Amazing work being done!



Salnave Elementary's Lead Custodian Amy Bassen works with her team to clean some interior windows on July 29.



Assistant Superintendent Brett Hale (far left), Superintendent Ben Ferney (center), and Airway Heights Police Chief Brad Richmond smile during the Miracle Treat for a Day at the Airway Heights Dairy Queen! Photo Credit: Airway Heights Police Department



The old-to-new updates at Betz are taking shape! Painting is complete and the carpet has been removed, making way for the new carpet installation.



The IT Department works throughout the summer to service, refresh, and refurbish Chromebooks. These Chromebooks are being reset and wiped clean for next year's students.



A construction worker at the Skyway Elementary worksite helps ease this steel frame into place on July 29.

NOTICES

Bus Aides Needed - Apply Today!

Cheney Public Schools is in need of school bus aides for the 2026-2027 school year! This position offers:

- Paid Training
- Great Benefits
- Pension Plan & Retirement
- 4-5 Hour Working Day
- Holidays & Summers Off

Starting pay at $17.86 per hour!

Benefits include: Medical, Dental, Vision, and Life Insurance

Interested individuals can reach out to Athena Dunham at (509) 559-4523 or adunham@cheneysd.org for more information.



Kindergarten Registration is Now Open!

Will your child be five (5) by August 31, 2026? If so, it's time to register for kindergarten! Kindergarten registration, as well as registration for all new students for the 2026-2027 school year, is now open. Click here or visit cheneysd.org for more information and to register.

Families are encouraged to register as early as possible as early enrollment numbers help to provide more accurate student predictions for the upcoming school year. This information plays a critical role in planning district-wide, including budgeting for the next fiscal year, predicting staffing, and managing enrollment numbers.



Cheney Public Schools @cheneyschools

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

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: ⟶

Questions or Feedback?

Do you have questions or feedback?
We're here to help! If you have any questions, concerns, or if there is something you would like to know more about, please reach out to Jenna Larson, Communications Coordinator at jlarson@cheneysd.org.

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