

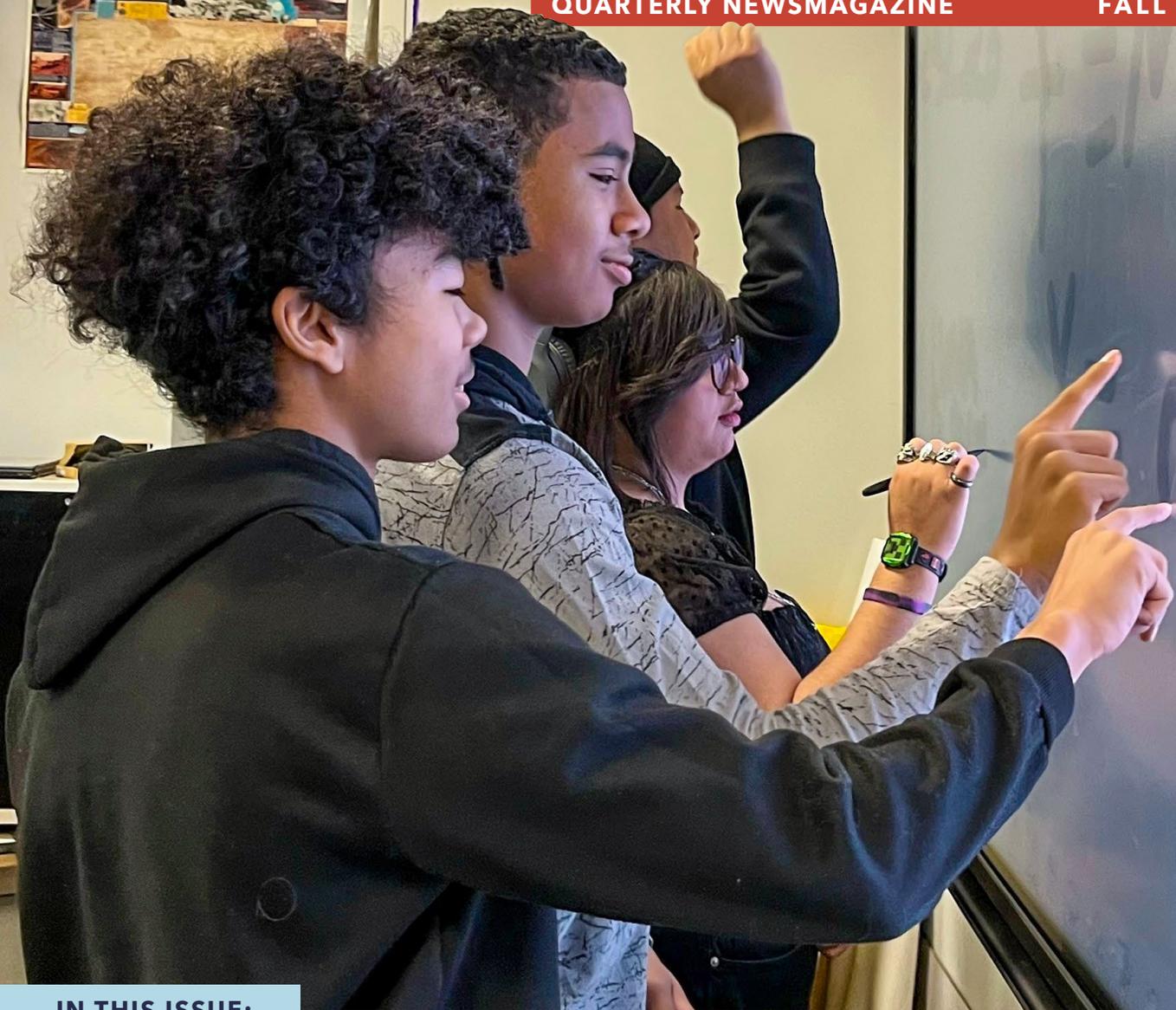


WSSDA

direct

QUARTERLY NEWSMAGAZINE

FALL 2023



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Executive Director Tim Garchow reviews General Assembly programming



From the Executive Director

Focusing on what matters

As I write this, most of my thoughts are on our first-ever hybrid General Assembly. Going hybrid is like delivering two events at once, but we're really excited to give our members a second option for participating in this crucial WSSDA event. We hope it lowers barriers and raises participation.

Following the assembly is Annual Conference, our biggest event of the year. Preparations take place all year long. That's why I'm super excited to see it finally happen. The Annual Conference Committee and our staff have put a lot of effort into bringing you a wide variety of high-quality breakout sessions, workshops, and keynote speakers. They've done an amazing job of providing an array of options for every sort of school director and even student board representatives. It's an awesome event for learning and connecting with other board members. Like President Mabry said, "Come curious and don't be shy."

Over the last three years, so many things have pulled our focus in different directions. So this year's conference theme of "Focus" means now is our chance to turn our attention back to what we believe in, what we stand for, and what's best for kids.

Finally, one of the goals of this newsmagazine is to show examples of school districts doing what's best for kids in their community. That's why on **page 14**, you'll find an article about balanced calendars aimed at helping districts innovate to serve their students better. And on **page 11**, we have a story showing how the North Thurston board-superintendent team adopts complementary roles to help them each achieve greater success.

In closing, I hope you'll enjoy our latest issue of *Direct*, and I look forward to seeing you at Annual Conference in November.



Tim Garchow, WSSDA Executive Director



WSSDA direct

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ON THE COVER:

Students at North Thurston High School use interactive whiteboards, an integrated classroom technology, to complete equations.

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Your association, your voice

Over the summer, one would think that WSSDA would have slowed down and relaxed for a spell, but no. Our staff kept watch on federal and state education-related activity, sharing that at regular intervals. They prepared a new system to facilitate statewide elections for the State Board, Educational Services Districts, plus our own elected positions. (Make sure you vote!) They prepared a new, hybrid format for General Assembly, which you should all participate in.

And then there's the always-formidable project of preparing for the WSSDA Annual Conference, another WSSDA event I highly recommend for all school directors. There's lots to learn and lots of people to build new connections with. It's truly a unique opportunity to get to know your own board members plus others from every corner of the state. Come curious, and don't be shy!

And finally, if that wasn't enough, some WSSDA staff also lent support to our districts affected by wildfires!

For our part, the WSSDA Board didn't sit still either. We reached a major milestone in operationalizing our new action and accountability plan, which we tied in with a revised process for evaluating the WSSDA executive director. School directors can review the plan on the WSSDA website. The action and accountability plan is entirely based on member-adopted goals. I encourage you to take a look if you want to see how the board is overseeing the work of staff while fulfilling its governance role.

It all starts with *you*, school directors. Everything I've described above is being done to meet *your* needs and expectations. You decide what those are when you vote on things at General Assembly, like WSSDA's goals and legislative positions. And even if something you or your board wants isn't adopted at an assembly, we still hear you. The WSSDA Board, the staff, and your peers across the state all hear you and want to find ways to serve or partner with you. But that's only true if you participate. Help us break last year's attendance record!

I'm excited to experience all of this with you. Please join me.

Sincerely,

Coming up...

Here are some of WSSDA's fall events.

For more information and to add events to your personal calendar, go to wssda.org/events.

September 22 & 23	General Assembly Doubletree Spokane (hybrid event)
October 1-16	Voting open to elect WSSDA officers, committee members, and board members for ESDs and the State Board of Education
October 9 5:00 pm	Leg Rep Network Monthly Meeting
November 6 5:00 pm	Leg Rep Network Monthly Meeting
November 16-18	Annual Conference Hyatt Regency Bellevue Pre-con workshops: • Board Boot Camp • Law Conference • Strategic Advocacy Academy
December 4 5:00 pm	Leg Rep Network Monthly Meeting

Leadership Development *–Tricia Lubach*

I've been thinking about curiosity lately. *Psychology Today* dubs curiosity “our superpower for just about everything,” contending that “simply understanding how our brains get curious can help us harness that power to supercharge learning, break bad habits, and even live happier, more engaged lives.” Dangers to felines aside, curiosity is vital to our continual intellectual growth, expanded knowledge, social skills, and zest for life. Think about the eager and excited kindergarteners in your district. Children are brimming over with curiosity and the desire to learn more about life and all that it holds. In fact, Arnold Edinborough contends that “curiosity is the very basis of education.”

The next time you encounter something or someone you disagree with, try getting curious about it. When we listen with curiosity, we get smarter by expanding our thinking and exposing ourselves to new information. And as Edinborough notes, “if you tell me that curiosity killed the cat, I say only the cat died nobly.”

Strategic Advocacy *–Marissa Rathbone*

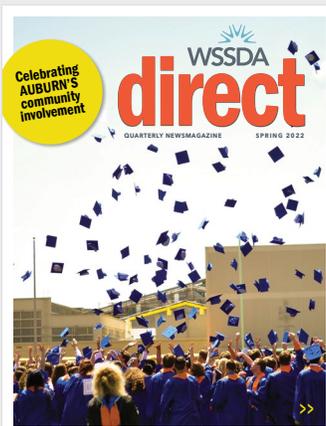
I was tending to my modest garden recently, admiring the last dahlias of the season and noting the return of a slight chill in the air. It's that time of annual transition when we see friends share photos of their kids on the first day of school, and some daring stores tease the holidays with Halloween or even Christmas decorations. At the same time, WSSDA staff are testing various technologies to offer an easy-to-attend General Assembly and finalizing resources to help school directors prepare. And with the changing season comes anticipation. Soon, students will walk in the front doors of their schools. We all hope for their growth, excitement, and continued success and that they have all that while being kind to one another and leaning into their educational experiences. I hope we adults do the same. I hope we can take that same approach as we head into the General Assembly and then the 2024 legislative session. School directors, I look forward to resuming this important work with you.

Policy and Legal *–Abigail Westbrook*

Many school boards have expressed an interest in WSSDA's Policy Manual Review services and want to learn more about our unique approach. In addition to our webpage (wssda.org/PMR), we're now offering an informational walk-through of our services by joining you remotely during one of your board meetings. We do this so the whole board can better understand the process. Meanwhile, the 2023 Law Conference is shaping up to be our best ever. Come learn about why some school boards are mounting a legal challenge against social media companies and whether your district should join. Hear the latest on litigation seeking funding for school construction and special education. And know what to do if your school board is named in a lawsuit.



Want to catch up on back issues?



Visit wssda.org/direct



WSSDA travels to Salt Lake City for NSBA business

Above: WSSDA staff and members of the board of directors join school board members from across the Pacific region for the NSBA Summer Leadership Seminar in Salt Lake City, Utah. The seminar focuses on state association leadership topics and leadership core competencies.

Right: WSSDA board member and NSBA representative Marnie Maraldo grabs a photo with opening keynote speaker Steven Sharp Nelson of the Piano Guys.



District workshops build effective teams



WSSDA can provide district workshops and retreats to meet a board's specific development needs. Districts can also team up together to take advantage of this opportunity. In-district workshops and retreats can help you build effective, cohesive board-superintendent teams with agreed upon goals and operating principles. These workshops are especially helpful for new members joining the board.



School directors gain another option for meeting legislated training requirements. Foundations of Cultural Proficiency is the newest learning experience* added to WSSDA's growing training catalog.

Here's the description: Culture is to people what water is to fish. We tend not to think about culture because it surrounds us all the time. In this learning experience, participants will explore culture within the context of a school district and its impact on students, staff, and families. By considering the opportunities and benefits of cultivating cultural proficiency throughout a school district, school

directors will be equipped to promote cultural proficiency within the unique context of their own districts.

The Foundations of Cultural Proficiency will be offered for the first time this fall. Although seats have already been filled at the WSSDA Annual Conference, it is offered virtually throughout fall and in early 2024. See all scheduled trainings at wssda.org/training.

To see descriptions for all of WSSDA's OnBoard learning experiences, visit wssda.org/catalog.

**Why call it a "learning experience"? In OnBoard trainings, the participants talk more than the instructor/facilitator. Participants might stand, walk, and definitely converse with multiple people during a single training. More than a mere training, they are interactive experiences where learning occurs naturally.*

Directors attend "Women Who Lead" conference

The inaugural "Women Who Lead" conference was an amazing professional learning experience where strong leadership in K-12 was elevated and celebrated. Superintendents, school board members, educators and instructional leaders gathered from all over the country to celebrate public education by highlighting success, collaboration, strategic planning, and communication. Here are some comments from directors and staff who attended.

Sandy Hayes
Northshore School District
WSSDA President-elect

The conference was well attended by female superintendents as well as those in deputy and administrative roles. I think WSSDA could add value [to the conference] by bringing the voice of school board members to the conversation. More female board members attending would help to strengthen district leadership teams. The format of the conference allowed for those deeper and honest conversations that are so needed to build trust. I hope to attend next year and plan on encouraging females, particularly females of color in leadership in my district, to attend.

Sara Betnel
Shoreline School District
WSSDA Legislative Committee Member

In a field dominated by women in the classroom but not in administration or boards, it was powerful and affirming to be in a space dedicated to connecting and uplifting women's leadership at the highest levels of public education. I valued being in conversation with the leaders in attendance - it provided insight into unique challenges women superintendents and administrators face in their work.

I was inspired by the transformational practices attendees shared, which they are carrying out in their own districts or throughout their careers. The conference format allowed us to



Board members Sandy Hayes (left, Northshore School District), Sandra Zavala-Ortega (Vancouver Public Schools), and Sara Betnel (Shoreline School District) present on effective school board governance at the Women Who Lead conference.

talk about the opportunities and challenges that exist in the board/superintendent relationship in a supportive space apart from the work of our own districts.

It would be valuable to return to continue these conversations as well as bring them back to our own [WSSDA] conferences and convenings - looking at our own practices with an eye toward increasing women in leadership in our districts. Additionally, extending the conversation to how we elevate and support leadership in our districts by female students is an important part of ensuring we are building pathways for future women leaders.

Marissa Rathbone
WSSDA Director of Strategic Advocacy

As a presenter at the conference, I felt honored to be supporting several Washington state school directors as they shared best practices for supporting and serving their superintendents in diverse communities across Washington. I hope more school directors and their superintendents are able to join in the future.



Former WSSDA Member Support Specialist Antonio Gonzalez, joined by his wife, Gloria, regales staff with stories of his career and harrowing accounts of WSSDA events disrupted by inclement weather.

Longest-serving staffer retires from WSSDA

After giving WSSDA more than a quarter century of service, Antonio “Tony” Gonzales retired in July. Antonio was a quiet yet steady force, encouraging staff to continuously improve and provide good customer service. Through thick and thin, he was someone his colleagues could always count on. Before he left, we asked Antonio to reflect on his years at WSSDA.

What did you do before working for WSSDA?

I was in the military for 17 years. Then, I worked a couple of months at the gas station down the road. After that, I worked temporarily for the Department of Health. It was about six months between retiring from the military and joining WSSDA.

How did you hear about the job at WSSDA?

From a lady at church. Actually, it was someone at church who told me about the Department of Health job, too. When you’re looking for work, you should go ahead and mingle because you never know. Somebody might be needing something, you know each other, and then one thing leads to the other. It’s not a guarantee, but you apply and see what happens.

What is something you enjoyed about your time at WSSDA?

Just learning something new. Every time I thought I had learned everything, something else would pop up. So, I would say it’s been fun.

Why do so many school board members know you?

From answering the phone and being available at our annual conference. I worked the registration table. Lots of times, I had to say things like, ‘OK, you’re tense because it’s not working for you at the moment.’ So I try to make a joke, lighten things up until the member is like, ‘You’re right, ok, let’s just fix it. Let’s get it done so I can go back to what I want to do, which is participate in the conference.’

So, we’re here to serve them. That’s always been my philosophy. So, when people ask me ‘Who do you work for?’ I say, ‘1477 people.’

During your time here, how has WSSDA changed for the better?

We’ve become more digitized. We have done a lot to try and reach more school board members. I would say we’ve become more accessible to the board members and other people in the education field. Let’s be clear: we also give some support to superintendents and administrators, like through our lunchtime networking calls or phone inquiries. When someone makes the effort to grab a phone and dial those 10 digits, what they have to say is important to them. So even if it’s not a board member, we’ll

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do whatever we can to get them the information they need.

What's something you've seen change for board members over the years?

Well, I've seen things work for the good and bad. The bad is when people get upset with board members, and that seems more common now. People don't always understand that the board is not one person; it's five. So you can't try and elect one new person who agrees with you and expect everything to change. So either you can work together, or you won't accomplish anything.

Do you have any advice for school board members?

I don't think they need any advice. I think they have the right state

of mind. They're here for the kids, and that's all that matters. They know that whatever they do, it'll influence them, positive or negative. I think they're all trying to do their best, so let's just give them a chance.

If the WSSDA Board made you the executive director tomorrow, what would you do?

Honestly, I wouldn't take the job! [laughter] I don't want the job. To be honest, I admire the folks who sit in that chair. It's never easy, trust me. Like any leadership position, it's easy to criticize from the outside, but once you sit in that chair, you suddenly realize, 'Whoa, it's not that simple.'



Above: Antonio (assisted by CFO Josh Collette, at left) greets attendees at the registration table at WSSDA annual conferences over the years.



Above: WSSDA staff offer their love, appreciation, and best wishes to Antonio for his retirement during his farewell luncheon on July 12.



Above, left: Board members participate in an activity during Board Boot Camp at WSSDA's Annual Conference in 2022. Middle: A speaker educates the crowd during the 2022 Law Conference pre-con session. Right: Director of Strategic Advocacy Marissa Rathbone, pictured at a legislative event, will lead a new pre-conference in 2023 titled Strategic Advocacy Academy, where school board members can learn to advocate more effectively.

Annual Conference is on the horizon; have you registered for a pre-con?

Pre-conference workshops offer an opportunity to deeply explore issues important to your role as a school leader. These sessions often include expert speakers, panelists and active engagement. While these sessions are optional, pre-conference workshops provide exceptional value for new and seasoned board members alike in crucial areas of board work. If you're new to your board member role or to WSSDA's offerings, read on for an overview of the offerings at our upcoming annual conference in November.

Board Boot Camp

Boot camp is designed to allow new board members to hit the ground running and effectively serve from day one. This five-hour pre-conference session provides details and best practices around the school board's critical roles and responsibilities. In addition, we spend time providing pertinent background knowledge on topics such as using student-focused data, educational equity, and the Open Public Meetings Act. All this knowledge is woven into a format that encourages board members to forge connections with their peers from across the state.

Law Conference

Given significant court challenges and rulings, the 2023 Law Conference is not to be missed. Learn about why some school boards are mounting a legal challenge against social media companies and whether your district should join. Hear the latest updates on litigation seeking funding for school construction and special education. Understand the legal underpinnings of gender-inclusive schools and the status of the state and federal law. Know what to do if your school board is named in a lawsuit. Law Conference is designed to be what seasoned school directors need to know now.

Strategic Advocacy Academy

Advocacy is more than just raising your voice; it's about developing relationships and creating a well-thought-out strategy to effectively influence change. The "STRAD" Academy is designed to equip you with the tools, insights, and techniques needed to elevate your advocacy efforts and achieve real, tangible results. You'll learn from experts, perform hands-on activities, network with others, and receive resource materials. You will walk away feeling more competent, confident, and committed to advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels.



Adding a pre-conference to your existing registration? Visit wssda.org/ac and follow the "Quick Link" to the change form. Note: If someone else registered your board group, please contact them to have your registration modified.



COMMITTEE CORNER

Why did you join the Annual Conference Committee?

What would you tell first-time attendees?



**RUTH LADDERUD, DA 11,
WALLA WALLA SCHOOL BOARD**

Like I have found on each of the WSSDA committees I've had the privilege to serve on, it is a delight to meet many devoted and insightful board members. I really appreciate the different perspectives that come to the table. And a special treat about the committee is getting a sneak preview of the different workshops that will be available.

To Annual Conference first-timers: Plan to take in all the workshops - not take an afternoon off or leave early. Some of the best I've been to have been in the final time slot. Review the entire list and go to what interests you, which is likely what will be relevant to your district. And I nearly always have a plan "B" workshop. If the one I select is either full or, after a few minutes, turns out to not be what I thought, I quietly tuck out and go to my plan B.



**LORI OVIATT, DA 2,
RIVERVIEW SCHOOL BOARD**

I love, love, love brainstorming the themes and seeing how the WSSDA staff takes that brainstorming session and turns it into an amazing theme for the conference. I'd tell first-time attendees to soak it all in, meet new people, ask lots of questions, find a mentor, and talk to the student representatives who are attending! As chair of the committee, and representing Director Area 2, which is one of WSSDA's largest regions, I attend as many regional meetings as possible and have conducted surveys in the past to inquire about board members' interests.



**RON MABRY, WSSDA PRESIDENT
(LIAISON TO AC COMMITTEE); DA 11,
KENNEWICK SCHOOL BOARD**

I've been on the committee for a year as the WSSDA Board liaison. I enjoy hearing the ideas of others and having my ideas heard. I'd tell first-timers to study what is being offered and make a game plan to attend as many sessions as possible. Also, take note of what you would like to see next year and submit those ideas when the conference evaluation is sent out.



**MARY LU DICKINSON, DA 3,
UNIVERSITY PLACE SCHOOL BOARD**

I've been on the Annual Conference Advisory Committee for well over 10 years. I first joined because I wanted to make a positive difference for school directors. I wanted to give the school board members across the state an enriching and inspiring experience to come and learn together. We learn so much from each other.

I would tell people going to the WSSDA Annual Conference for the first time that your conference experience is what you make it. If you focus on the needs of your district, attend the sessions that would be most beneficial for your district, and just allow yourself to be inspired and directed by what you hear and experience, the conference will be wonderful for you and your colleagues. Networking with others will help you to know you are not alone in your efforts to make your schools the best they can be for your students.



**CINDY KELLY, PRESIDENT,
WASHINGTON SCHOOL BOARDS'
EDUCATION FOUNDATION**

I represent the Washington School Boards' Educational Foundation as the foundation's president. As a foundation board member, past school board director, and former WSSDA Board member, I have been involved with the committee for many years. I enjoy interacting with the committee members and making sure that we are trying to provide something for each of our 1,477 school board directors to assist them with their work on their local school board.

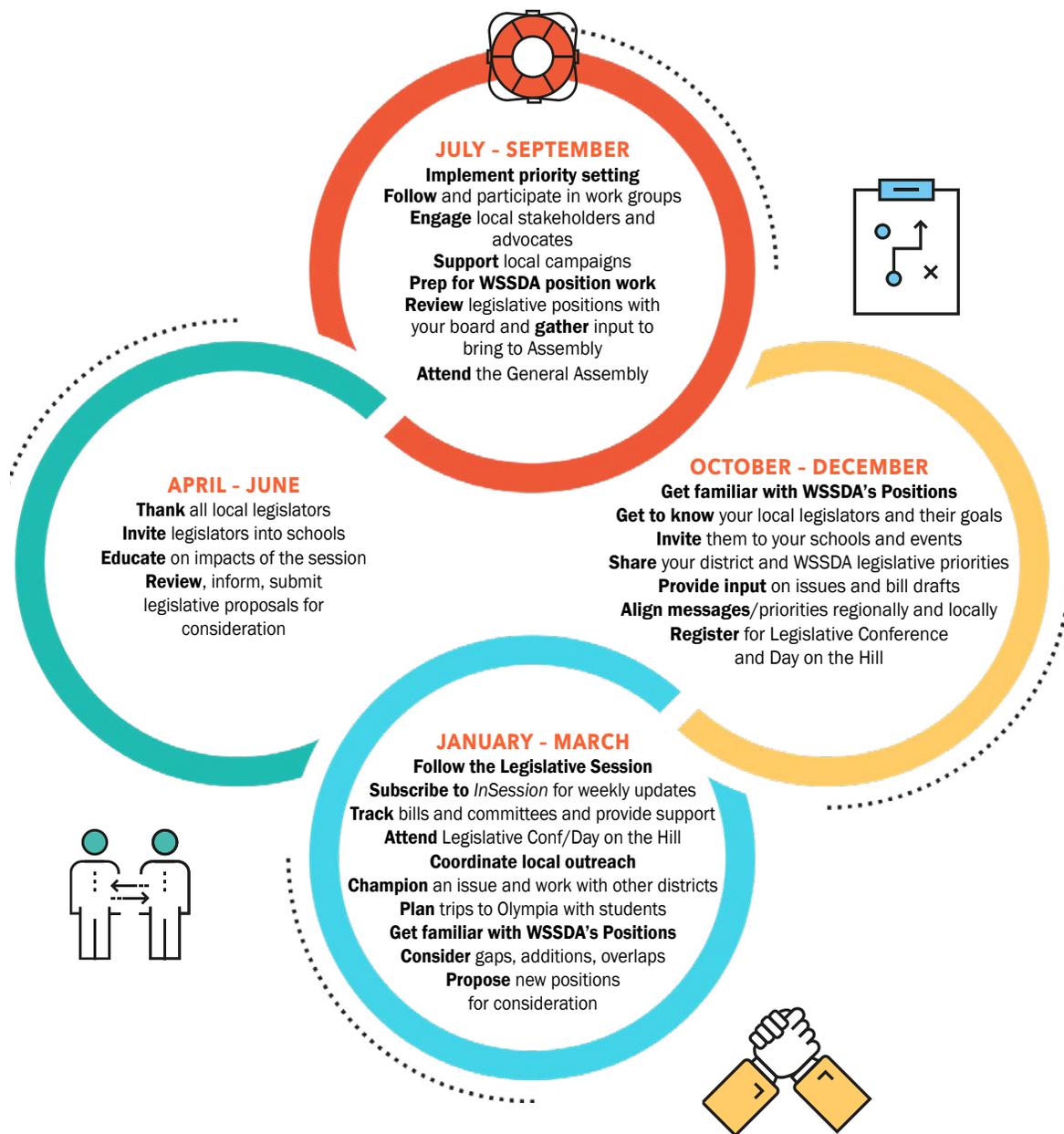
The seasons of advocacy

The arrival of autumn brings the excitement of a new school year, pumpkin-spiced goodies, colorful leaves, and a couple of other things just for school boards: the WSSDA General Assembly on September 22-23, followed by the prioritization of WSSDA's adopted positions September 26 through October 16. While not as tasty as pumpkin pie, these fixtures of WSSDA's annual calendar are valuable for supporting boards in their legislative advocacy.

As school directors prepare to advocate for their district's greatest needs, it may be helpful to remember where we are in the year-long advocacy cycle. From October through December, the most effective advocacy is accomplished in conversations

with your legislators and hosting them at your schools. It's an excellent time to express gratitude for your legislator's work and the outcomes we enjoyed in the previous legislative session. It's also an opportunity to point out where and how future actions by the legislature can most benefit your district's students and families.

While there are ebbs and flows to our collective advocacy work, this time of year provides the natural upswing to proactively elevate the needs of your students, staff, and schools. And, through their engagement in WSSDA's member-driven democratic process for building its platform, school directors can help WSSDA support the needs of all districts.





Policy governance delivers accountability and support at North Thurston Public Schools

When school boards are clear on goals and roles, students benefit.

The North Thurston Public Schools (NTPS) Board of Directors adopted a policy governance model in 2017 that provides a high level of accountability for the superintendent, accompanied by a high level of support from the board. One of many possible governance models, this governing strategy strengthens relationships between the board, superintendent, and the community. It streamlines decision-making and creates an

environment where leaders and staff are empowered to innovate.

“The NTPS school board is laser-focused on their commitment to a policy governance model that enables them to be crystal clear about their role and the role of the superintendent,” said Tricia Lubach, WSSDA’s director of leadership development. “That clarity allows the superintendent to support her staff in a way that makes them feel confident about their work and how it aligns to board goals.”

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NTPS board members' commitment to effective governance helped the district realize achievements that earned them recognition as the 2022 WSSDA Board of the Year for large districts. The WA School Board Standard they focused on was "Respecting and advocating mutual understanding of the roles and responsibilities of board members and the superintendent."

Board focuses on goals, not methods

Policy governance establishes a new board mindset, explained Rick Maloney, a WSSDA trainer who recently led a NTPS board workshop. "It says, yes, we (board members) are responsible for everything, but we don't do everything and, therefore, we don't intervene in everything."

NTPS board member Dave Newkirk said, "This approach sets the base level for what we want to accomplish. Then, the board is able to focus on policies that support students with high-quality educational experiences throughout their NTPS experience and beyond."

The NTPS board created policies that:

- Defined the board/superintendent relationship.
- Established end results or ENDS Policies, such as closing the achievement gap in English language arts.
- Set Executive Limitation Policies to outline what the superintendent cannot do, such as exceed the approved budget.

Together, these policies provide greater flexibility and accountability for district leadership. Staff report progress toward ENDS Policies regularly to the board. The board then accepts the reports as compliant or partially compliant, requests further information, or commends staff for progress toward the goal.

"The ENDS policy makes it very clear what the target is. Then, working with our staff, we figure out how to get there," said Dr. Debra Clemens, district superintendent. "For example, because the board established the need to close the gap in student achievement in English language arts, we chose to participate in a national study around foundational literacy. I don't have to go back to the board and ask if it's OK if we participate in the study because they've already established the goal that holds me responsible for closing the gap."

Through policy governance, board members establish the vision for the district and engage frequently with the community to better understand how to serve local needs.

"It's our job to look at the data and talk about goals," said Gretchen Maliska, NTPS board president. "It is our job as board



Students at River Ridge High School present to the class during a Lushootseed language class. The class is part of the Native Student Program, a supplemental program designed to assist American Indian and Alaska Native students with culturally unique academic needs to meet Washington state academic achievement standards.

members to listen to each other, listen to the people who come to us, and then do the hard work."

Programs help close opportunity gaps

Several district programs are helping achieve the ENDS policy to close opportunity gaps for students.

The district's POWER-UP program addresses academic and social-emotional learning gaps widened by pandemic disruptions. Through the program, students receive services ranging from mental health support to science labs, math tutoring, and foundational reading skill assistance. Literacy is a core focus of POWER-UP, and the district's Lexia reading labs showed that students in the program gained skills significantly faster than those not participating.

"We're actually not only closing the achievement gap for specific groups of students, we're focused on getting back to 2019 student achievement levels for all students," Clemens explained.

The district is also participating in the national Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) for Reading study. All 13 elementary schools are involved, and three approaches are being studied: two new researched-based approaches to instruction and one group of schools continuing business as usual.

"All three models are scientifically good, solid ways for students to learn to read. We're going to identify the best model for us by participating in this study," Clemens said.

First-year results show greater gains for first graders in the schools using the two new approaches. Second graders, however, showed greater gains in the business-as-usual approach. The study continues, and, as pandemic impacts recede, results may change.

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NTPS is also phasing in universal screening of first graders to help close opportunity gaps in its Highly Capable program. By screening all students, the district eliminates the need for students to be referred for testing, and it allows them to test in a familiar environment. Early results are encouraging, with more underrepresented students being identified as highly capable.

Connecting with the community is an important board role

The NTPS board’s ENDS policies derive from their understanding of community needs. A large part of each board member’s role is to connect with the community, both informally and at organized community conversation gatherings.

“We connect with the community in different ways. Board members are scheduled to visit schools quarterly to meet with leaders and visit classrooms. We hold board meetings at a different school each month,” board member Newkirk said. “Our district also hosts community cafes to hear directly from families. For example, we’ve met with Hispanic and Black families in our district to learn how to better meet their children’s needs. Their voices are very important. We learn from them. When we sit at the same table to find solutions, we benefit all groups of students.”

The board also hosts a community conversation twice each school year. In a recent community conversation, board members met

with industry experts and the public to learn about skilled trades education in North Thurston Public Schools. As a result, the board issued a determination. The board determination established an expectation for the superintendent to make sure equitable access to programs is available at all three comprehensive high schools.

“Our board members realize that the board meeting is not the most important work that they do. The most important work that they do is connecting with the community,” said Sarah Rich, NTPS assistant superintendent.

Keeping the focus

Board members practice policy governance at every board meeting. As new members join, the board holds periodic workshops to ensure everyone understands the policy governance model. Every two years, the board conducts a self-assessment to answer questions about community engagement, executive limitations, and their past goals. Based on the assessment’s results, they establish new goals for the board and continue their commitment to implementing policy governance in NTPS.

Newkirk credits the board’s success with being committed to the governance model. In the end, “It’s all about transparency, transparency, transparency!” he emphasized. “Policy Governance requires the board to be clear about its goals, outcomes for student success, and accountability for the superintendent.”



From left: School Board members Dave Newkirk, Gretchen Maliska (president), Graeme Sackrison, Dr. Jennifer S. Thomas (vice president), and Tiffany Sevruck display a sign featuring their 2021-2022 Compassionate Community Project. The yearlong project, titled “The Spirit of Giving Back,” brought awareness to the many ways that classes, clubs, teams, schools, businesses, organizations, and groups can give back to the community.

Districts explore balanced school calendars to improve outcomes for students



Above: Students from White Swan High School in the Mount Adams School District hold up a first place Future Farmers of America award. Mount Adams School District is one of several school districts exploring a balanced calendar.

Across Washington, more than 45 school districts have studies or implementations underway for new balanced calendars that spread school breaks more evenly across the school year.

The primary aims of a balanced calendar are to reduce the number of consecutive days or weeks in a row that students are out of school, reduce the well-documented summer learning loss, and increase student learning overall. For these reasons, a redesigned school year is part of State Superintendent Chris Reykdal's long-term vision for Washington's K-12 public schools.

Educational leaders have long studied the potential benefits of modified school calendars. For example, a shorter summer break means less review time at the beginning of the school year and more time to teach new material. Balanced calendars also build in time for intensive learning opportunities called intersessions, which are held during school breaks. With intersessions occurring throughout the year, students who need

additional support receive the help they need in a timely manner, which prevents them from falling even further behind. It also can reduce the need for summer school, which can have a stigma associated with it.

Several other benefits are also possible, and they will vary with the uniqueness of each district. Secondary benefits may include reducing transportation needs, creating the ability to accommodate celebrations or cultural events, and adjusting to local harvest schedules.

Research regarding the effectiveness of balanced calendars spans back to the 1980s, but the most seminal study on this subject was completed in 1996 with the work of Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsey, and Greenhouse.¹ Their meta-analysis found gains in student performance, and corroborating studies continue today.

CONTINUED on next page

The Pandemic Creates Both Need and Opportunity

Interest in balanced school calendars gained momentum after the pandemic disrupted learning and widened opportunity gaps. In 2021, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) made the decision to leverage federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds to create a grant program to help districts explore, and potentially implement, balanced school calendars. The balanced calendar initiative is led by OSPI, with partners from multiple state and local education agencies along with consultants Drs. David Hornak and James Pedersen to bring support and advice to participating districts.

Forty-five Washington school districts received grants in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years. Grantees also received hands-on support and technical assistance from the Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD).

“Balanced calendar is one approach to reduce learning loss,” explained Dr. Jon Mishra, OSPI Assistant Superintendent. “It must fit the needs of the district.” He added grantees can study the modified calendar without implementing it under the grant.

Finding the Right Calendar for Each Community

A variety of balanced calendar models offer districts flexibility to meet local needs. All models incorporate a shorter summer break and retain a 180-day school year.

- 45-15 Calendar. Schools are open for 45 days, followed by a 15-day break.
- 60-20 Calendar. Schools are open for 60 days, followed by a 20-day break.
- 90-30 Calendar. Schools are open for 90 days, followed by a 30-day break.
- Extended School Year. This calendar resembles the traditional calendar with additional instructional days added for remediation, acceleration, or both.
- Four-Day School Week.² A new calendar model that uses the fifth day of the week for remote instruction or three-day weekends.

Districts Move to Implementation

Some of the earliest adopters of the balanced calendar come from Central Washington and are served by ESD 105, led by Superintendent Kevin Chase, a supporter of the approach. Three districts shared stories that reflect the many reasons schools seek a balanced calendar and some of the challenges they face.

The Mount Adams School District adopted a balanced calendar to decrease learning loss. District leaders reported one challenge was to find teachers willing to work during intersessions. They suggested getting community input and creating a calendar based on students’ needs.

The Toppenish School District saw a need for academic intervention to be held during the regular school year rather than waiting for the summer. Toppenish indicated some of the obstacles they faced included working around the state testing schedule, end-of-year reporting dates, and releasing of grants. Some of the solutions to these obstacles included creatively working with federal and state funding.

The Union Gap School District adopted a balanced calendar to address staff and student burnout. They indicated one significant obstacle to implementation was educating the community to understand that a balanced calendar did not include any virtual instruction. This district chose to start small by only having breaks of five days rather than two or three weeks and to include at least six weeks of summer break.

Communication with the Community is Key

Mishra said understanding and addressing community concerns is key to successful implementation. A balanced calendar can impact everything from childcare providers to interscholastic activities. “The main strategy... is to listen and hear folks out,” he added.

Freeman School District in Spokane County is doing just that. Superintendent Randy Russell shared a bit about their process. “Our journey exploring the balanced calendar continues to be a learning experience. We have met with several districts to learn about their success and challenges. We are thankful for this opportunity to consider what is best for our students, staff, and families.”

This article was authored in coordination with:

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^{1,2} For cited research and other related source material, see the web version of this article at wssda.org/balancedcalendar.



Indiana Hilmes

SELAH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Year started as a student board representative: 2022

Why do you like being a board rep?

I feel like I have the opportunity to share my own voice as a student while also bringing the perspectives of other students to the board.

What surprised you about becoming a board rep?

Student voice really does matter! People really want to hear from kids these days, and I think that's really, really cool. The best way to change our schools for the better is to actually listen to the people *IN* them.

What is the day-to-day life of a student school board rep like?

I have such a unique lens on my school life now. Now I can see the policy and impact in everything about school. I'm always listening and looking for how students feel about things, too.

What was the most interesting policy you worked on?

I had the opportunity to do a research project through my board last year, where I traveled to every school in my district and interviewed students about how they felt about school. I ended up interviewing over 150 kids, and I loved hearing the perspectives of both kindergarteners and graduating seniors. It made a huge impact on our board members, too, and really shows how important student voice can be.

Is there anything you know now that you wish you knew before you became a board rep?

I wish I knew how much goes on behind the scenes. I've learned so much about the logistics of school, and that's made me feel so much more thankful towards everyone who works in schools.

How has being a board rep changed you for the better?

I think my voice has grown so much. I have a much more developed perspective, and I'm not afraid to share it. Having this perspective has also allowed me to start encouraging others to use their own voices.

What is advocacy like?

To me, advocacy means empowering the voices around me. My district has spent a lot of time focusing on the voices of ALL students, and we're beginning to see positive results in our student body.



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WSSDA *Direct* is evolving. Our hope is that it will grow into a platform that helps school directors share their knowledge, experience and perspectives with each other. In this way, it will become a resource informing and reflecting the work of Washington's school boards. *Direct* will be published quarterly. The views expressed by individual authors do not necessarily represent WSSDA policies or positions. If you have a disability and need this publication in an alternative format, please contact our Communications department.

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