

As staff and students return from holiday break with renewed energy for teaching and learning alike, a concurrent vigor of excitement and anticipation accompanies them, stemming from the recent unveiling of Walla Walla Public School's freshly-minted vision statement. Complemented by a thoughtful mission statement born from unprecedented staff and community involvement, in addition to guiding beliefs that drive day-to-day operations and behaviors, the three influential articles have stuck a bold new "stake in the ground" for where the district is headed as a learning institution. More than just words on a page or slogans to be inscribed on the sides of pens, dynamic events Walla Walla schools are currently experiencing can do more than inspire, they can truly influence outcome. One need not look further than Churchill's famous rallying cry to the British when facing almost certain defeat in World War II, "We shall fight on," the inspiring words from Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," or Martin Luther King Jr.'s, "I have a dream" speech. All three, and scores of others like them, shaped the fate of their current reality and continued to have lasting impact for years beyond.

In a process that began last July, the Walla Walla Board of Directors endorsed a thoughtful and inclusive year-long course aimed at developing a comprehensive strategic plan for the district. A three-phased approach, the initial steps this fall/early winter were to engage in a transparent process of determining "where are we now" as a district and "where do we want to go?" It started with a detailed review of eleven internal and external surveys administered over the last three years. From *Healthy Youth Surveys* to numerous community Thought Exchange analyses, to *Staff Strategic Summits*, relevant themes and messages began to surface as to the district's strengths and challenges from staff and stakeholder perspective. A comprehensive quantitative review was also commissioned that examined 35 varying performance indicators. Covering all levels and subjects, from kindergarten readiness to college remediation rates, and from financial accountability to extra and co-curricular student involvement, the Board was provided an encompassing review pertaining to performance-related successes and weaknesses. Finally, ten different formal engagements with staff and community were held to hear directly from stakeholders what they perceived were attributes and concerns with current district operations. Hundreds of accolades, suggestions, criticisms, and dreams were captured. In addition to these parent, staff, and community listening sessions, I had the opportunity to visit with each school's student leadership group in addition to over 250 one-on-one meetings with community members as a part of my Superintendent Entry Plan. The entire data set was then compiled and collated for Board review and consideration.

From the reams of input collected, relevant themes surfaced that directly influenced the shaping of the district's new vision, mission and belief statements. Resounding was the fact that parents and community alike wanted the district to set its sights high for all, ensuring that every student was not just college and/or career ready, but poised for college/career success. They(you) wanted to make sure that no matter what post-high school option a student endeavored, whether they are intending a four-year institution, community college, performing arts bound, athletically motivated, considering the trades /apprenticeship rout, or destined to support our country in the armed forces, that Walla Walla students leave high school well-equipped with the necessary skills, manners, and grit. This collective input directly helped shape the district's new vision, "Developing Washington's most sought-after graduates."

Where a vision paints the picture of where one wants to go, an organization's mission drives the day-to-day purpose and manner by which to achieve the vision. Four critical pillars permeated the listening data collected that helped shape Walla Walla's new mission statement. First, high quality teaching was identified as critical for the district's continued and aspirational success. Second, the district should strive to create better alignment and coordination between schools, programs, and curriculums. Third, Walla Walla Public Schools must continue to better understand and develop supports to ensure that social and mental health needs of students (e.g. ACE's) are being met so that learning can occur. And finally, the district should continue to ensure a safe environment that also supports improved levels of student involvement and connection within the school system. All four themes were captured in the Board's recently-adopted mission statement, "Walla Walla Public Schools ensures all students receive high quality instruction in an aligned and coherent system while addressing their social and emotional needs in a safe and engaging environment."

The Board of Director's then prioritized seven belief statements, serving critical to inform daily actions and decisions. As stated: "We believe; in challenging and supporting all students, quality instruction is critical to student success, in investing in staff to ensure excellence, in maximizing the impact of our resources, in collaborative and transparent operation, in the importance of family and community, and that diversity is a strength."

As the Board continues their strategic planning process working with staff and community to develop action plans associated with the four mission statement pillars, I encourage everyone to follow along and provide input throughout the endeavor. The direction, efforts, and focus will undoubtedly influence Walla Walla Public School students and programs for years to come, impacting thousands of students' experiences and outcomes. It is critical that all of us engage, understand, and partner in our shared responsibility to help ensure Walla Walla Schools achieves its vision of ***Developing Washington's most sought-after graduates.***