

## It's Time to Shine the "Walla Walla Way" Bat Signal

It didn't take long for my family to fall in love with Walla Walla; a town steeped in history and rich traditions, and with the ability and willingness to come together to address challenges when they arise. Over my short few years in our community, I have laid witness to this unique "Walla Walla Way" asset successfully overcome many community-wide obstacles. Now is the time to shine our Walla Walla Way "bat signal" again and rally around a dilemma that directly impacts the social and economic future of the incredible place we call home – access to early learning.

Every day I reflect on the remarkable job I have been blessed with, serving as the superintendent of Walla Walla Schools. And every day I am humbled not only by the exceptional colleagues I have the pleasure to work with, but also the amazing and talented students who adorn our halls. Over the last four years as your superintendent, as I share our continued successes across our valley, I have also taken the opportunity to address what is a burgeoning challenge facing our schools and greater community. That challenge is the significant demographic shift we have experienced in recent decades.

In the early 1960's, when the late Jeannette Hayner had the foresight to champion the relocation of Walla Walla High School to its current site, the student demographic (and greater community) looked far different than it does today. At that time when the "new" high school opened, about one in ten students were living in poverty. Fast forward to today, as we renovate the near-54-year-old facility, that number has ballooned to six in ten students. The impact of this economic shift, being felt across our community, has also greatly affected students in our school system. One need not look any further than the correlation between this dramatic shift and its impact on our students entering kindergarten.

While poverty has affected schools and communities across our state, the stark reality is that Walla Walla appears to be impacted to a far greater degree. Although sobering, statewide data reveals that only about half of the students who entered kindergarten last year were kindergarten ready according the state-wide WaKIDS assessment that measures social and academic preparedness among other attributes. One promising sign, however, is that the state-wide readiness number has increased by over 20% in recent years and continues to trend up. Unfortunately, the news is far different in Walla Walla. In our community, less than one in four students is entering kindergarten ready and our trend has gradually receded over recent years. This is an alarming statistic that not only impacts our school system, but the future success of our youth and greater community.

While we maintain excellent private, non-profit, and public early learning options for families, years of study, community engagement, and outreach by such organizations as the Walla Walla Early Learning Coalition and Community Council reveal a staggering population that still remains underserved or unserved altogether. Access, affordability, limited providers, state licensing requirements, and many other obstacles continue to hamper valley access to early learning opportunities for many families, even those not impacted by economic hardship.

With less than 25% of incoming kindergarten students prepared in Walla Walla, nearly half as few as the state-wide average, tremendous resources and attention continue to be focused to remediate and shore up lacking skillsets. Despite these great challenges, as a district we are beating the odds as graduation rates continue to exceed state results.

However, one need just imagine the possibility if we could reverse our readiness trend and begin to improve our early learning preparedness. Think how much further we could take all students if even half came prepared for kindergarten? Instead of remediating skill sets we could be enriching them!

We are at an opportune time as early learning momentum has peaked across our community. The City of Walla Walla was one of just eight cities across our nation to receive support from the National League of Cities' Early Learning Nation efforts as part of a technical assistance cohort. The Walla Walla School Board is considering repurposing Blue Ridge Elementary into a wall-to-wall community early learning center to expand access. Similarly, incredible efforts from the valley's early learning leaders such as the Early Learning Coalition, United Way, and Children's Home Society, are fully committed to addressing our early learning challenges.

Only one in four students ready for kindergarten affects all of us. Our future leaders, entrepreneurs, business women/men, and families are counting on us to reverse this bleak statistic. I encourage our entire community to rally around the Walla Walla Way "beacon" that illuminates our glorious valley sky and commit to being part of this important solution.