

The State of our Schools: A Rotary Club Report from 1926

I recently came across an article that appeared in the Walla Walla Daily Bulletin that dated back to July 25, 1926 (yes, it was called the Daily Bulletin back then). In that day's paper was a lengthy story titled, "Public School History Here Dates to Civil War Times." I was immediately mesmerized as I began to read the chronicle that highlighted Walla Walla High School Principal W. A. Lacey's presentation he provided the Rotary Club; a club that was chartered just seven years prior in 1919. This story was of particular interest as I had recently presented to the same club of which I am also privileged to be a member. As I read Principal Lacey's written report to the Rotarians, reprinted in the paper, it served as a remarkable annals of our district's history; both in its celebration of successes as well as a call for improvement.

Lacey began his club report with a brief glimpse into the district's origins. While informal schooling in the valley dates back to Fort Walla Walla, the first official city program was thought to have begun in 1861. At that time, Sarah G. Minor, superintendent and sole teacher, opened a makeshift school house serving 57 pupils. Between then and Lacey's presentation in 1926, the school system had blossomed to nearly 5000 students. As noted in his report to Rotary, bond issues were, "willingly voted by goodly majorities," constructing many new schoolhouses to serve the city's burgeoning student population over the preceding sixty years. In his address he highlights dozens of dedicated school board members who helped steward the district's growth, some of their surnames still prominent throughout our valley today. He lauds this volunteer leadership stating, "Without this willingness and interest on the part of qualified people, the forces of selfish interest and penuriousness would swamp our schools." Board member service and responsibilities are just as important and challenging today as they were 100 years ago. In full transparency I did need to pull up Webster Dictionary to look up "penuriousness." Think "financially strapped."

W. A. Lacey went on to extol the remarkable institution that Walla Walla High School had become. He highlighted that WaHi was considered one of the state's finest, where about one in four graduates went on to college. In addition, a great source of pride in 1926 was the state's only high school JROTC program at the time. Consisting of nearly 300 boys across the school's companies, the high school had recently been rated as an Honor School by the US War Department.

However, Lacey did share a few areas needing improvement back in the mid-twenties. While only one in three eligible students in the Walla Walla community actually attended high school at the time, programs like music, home economics, art, and "manual arts," still remained particularly lacking according to his report. "Our offerings should not become wholly academic," he points out, as a well-rounded education should be provided to those both college and non-college bound alike. Additionally, with a remarkable level of candor, he also shared some of the significant challenges they were facing trying to motivate students and bolster their individual effort and attention towards their own schooling.

As I reflect on many of the promising remarks from Principal Lacey from a century ago, it is a privilege to share that I am able relay many of the same accomplishments in recent addresses I have made to the same Rotary Club. Our high school JROTC program for example, which now includes scores of female cadets, continues its incredible legacy of success. Not 1 in 4, but now 6 in 10 students attend college after high school. While an area of concern in 1926, we now boast award-winning career and technical education programs, performing arts, culinary education and fine arts opportunities. Our faculty

remains top notch and our community continues to step up and invest in our schools when facility and program needs are identified.

Despite the myriad of opportunities maintained or improved upon over the last 100 years, the educational system still wrestles with motivating and imparting grit amongst all of their students. While expelling disengaged pupils has long since been outlawed, a strategy Principal Lacey noted was being implemented at the time, we continue to confront similar challenges today. To that end, our school board has implemented many proactive strategies to remove barriers and help bolster student determination and perseverance. Fostering such work ethic remains just as essential today as it was a century ago. We can and must do better to ensure every student, whether college, career or military bound, leaves with these critical skills.

While efforts continue to make our schools the very best they can be, we continue to prepare and graduate the most incredible young men and women. As Principal Lacey shared during his Rotary address when reflecting on recent WaHi graduates, “the names of many of those prominent today in the business life of this city...found scattered in every activity of the community and in other communities, [are] doing their part in keeping the wheels of the world spinning.” Our vision today is as true as it was a century ago – we are indeed Developing Washington’s Most Sought-After Graduates.