

# 30

Jim Thacker Honored for Three Decades of Excellence!



## Special Olympics Unified Sports® Partnership Opens Doors for Basketball & Soccer

This winter Walla Walla High School partnered with Special Olympics to start a unified inclusive basketball program for students. Unified Sports joins people with and without disabilities on the same team. It was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. A \$3500 grant from Special Olympics helped

get the basketball program launched. The program includes a four-game regular season schedule and opportunities to compete in districts, regionals and state depending on how the team fares. The basketball team practiced once a week under the leadership of coaches Jennifer Butenhoff and Krystal Ceron. Look for Unified Soccer coming to Wa-Hi this spring.

Photo L-R: Big Blue Boosters President Casey Waddell, Richland HS Coach Earl Streufert (former Wa-Hi player and coach), Jim Thacker and Former Wa-Hi Coach John Golden reunite during the Coach Thacker Recognition Ceremony.

Former players, fans and staff packed the Wa-Hi main gym Jan. 17 to honor legendary basketball coach Jim Thacker in a special recognition ceremony before the boys basketball game against Richland. Big Blue Boosters of Walla Walla planned the event to pay tribute to Thacker, who amassed a 534-332 record during his 36-year career coaching boys basketball. Thacker retired from Wa-Hi following the 2005 season. During his 30 years at Wa-Hi, Thacker's team made 11 trips to state and won the title in 1999. In 2008, Thacker was inducted in the Washington Interscholastic Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

## LOCAL SCHOOL TAX RATES SEE DOUBLE-DIGIT DROP IN 2023



Local school tax rates dropped 12 percent from this time last year, according to the Walla Walla County Assessor's office. Local bond tax rates fell to an historic low of 91 cents per thousand assessed, 12 cents less than last year and 32 cents lower than what was advertised when the bond passed in 2018.

The remaining educational tax rates, consisting of the district's Education Programs and Operations Levy and the two state taxes collected for Olympia that fund schools statewide, have also decreased double-digits, shaving off 88 cents per thousand from last year. Overall local and state school taxes dropped from \$6.36 per \$1000 in 2022 to \$5.61 per thousand in 2023.

"Walla Walla Public Schools maintains one of the lowest overall school tax rates in the region," said Superintendent Dr. Wade Smith. "Our district's strong underlying credit rating, conservative fiscal approach and refunding of excess bond dollars are permitting us to keep rates as low as possible for our taxpayers."

## TEACHER ACADEMY

Now in its second year, the Teacher Academy program at Walla Walla High School offers students a year-long class to explore the field of education. There are 12 students enrolled in the program this year.

"One of the program's primary goals is to grow future educators directly from our local classrooms," said Teacher Academy Instructor Amy Reed. "We are also hoping to recruit a diverse group of future teachers who more closely reflect the population of today's children and youth."

"We hope this classroom experience ignites the spark that will begin the journey to a career in education," said Reed. "There is a national teaching shortage and programs like ours help plant the seed for students considering the field of education. The relationships developed during their practicums help encourage their return to teach in Walla Walla."

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### Walla Walla Public Schools

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website: [www.wwps.org](http://www.wwps.org)

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- Title IX Coordinator & Civil Rights Compliance Coordinator  
DR. MINDY MEYER, Dir of Human Resources  
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[mmeyer@wwps.org](mailto:mmeyer@wwps.org)
- Section 504/ADA Coordinator  
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[bcasey@wwps.org](mailto:bcasey@wwps.org)

Walla Walla Public Schools is an Equal Opportunity Employer and complies with all requirements of the ADA.

## Where are they Now?

### Washington's Most Sought-After Graduates

As a child, Class of 1997 Wa-Hi graduate Joey Vargas regularly visited his dad at his accounting office. In those days he didn't think much of it, but as time passed he developed the same passion his dad did for the world of accounting.

For the past 15 years, Joey has spent a lot more time in the office with his dad, Dave Vargas, as an Accountant/Shareholder at Tompkins Vargas & Associates PS.

Following his high school years, where Joey played basketball and was active in all aspects of high school life, he attended Portland State University to earn a degree in Business Administration - Accounting. Joey also attended Prospect Point Elementary and Garrison Middle School. Joey says Science Teacher Sue Parrish was one of his favorite teachers. He loved her high energy teaching style and ability to get her students to think critically. Music teacher Ilene Tyler was also a favorite by making learning fun.

Joey loves his community and wants to give back any time he can. He currently volunteers as the treasurer of Walla2Hoops AAU basketball club. You'll often see Joey in local school gyms volunteering to supervise local youth basketball games.

He and his wife Lindsey have two young children -- Bode and Poppy. Bode is a 2nd grader and plays on a W2Hoops basketball team.

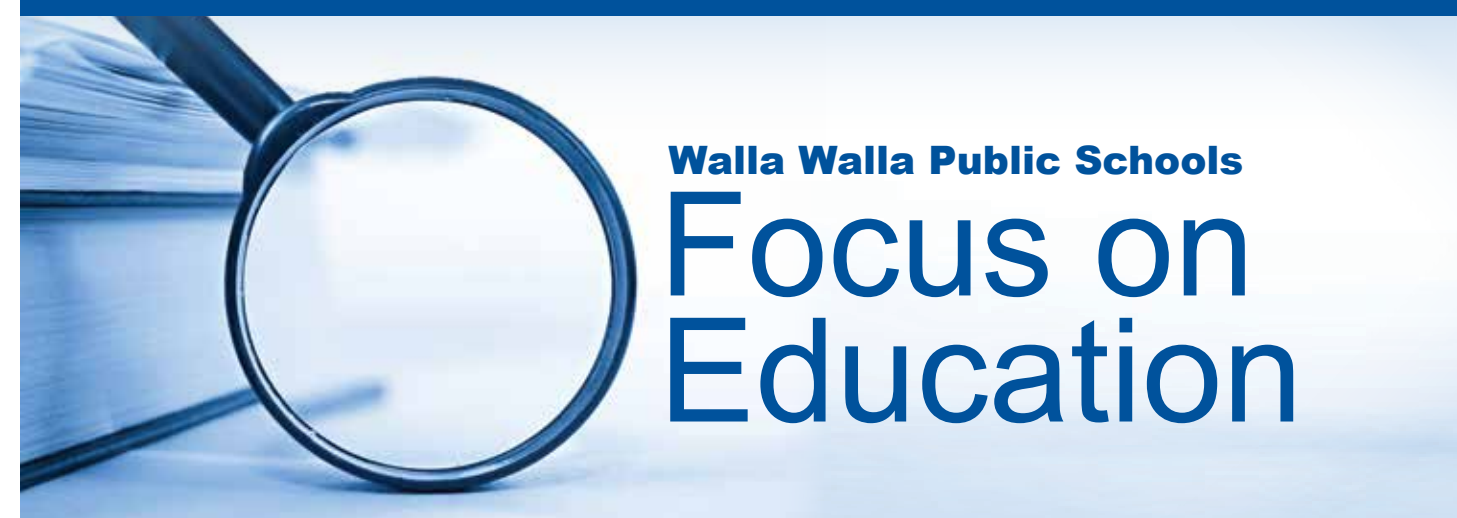
Joey is a family man at his core. He also enjoys playing with his dogs, traveling, golfing and spending time outdoors. He is very inquisitive and pushes himself to continue learning.



JOEY VARGAS

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Your School District Newsletter | Winter 2023 | Volume 25 | Issue 2



## Promises Kept!

### \$320,000 back to taxpayers

### District returns excess bond funds as promised to voters

As the district's historic 2018 bond program comes to a close following more than three years of campus renovation improvements, approximately \$320,000 of unallocated bond dollars will be refunded to taxpayers, further reducing local tax rates. This critical and final step of the bond program completes the last of the "promises made promises kept" list of assurances, where all remaining local and state match money left over would be returned and not reallocated towards other non-voter

*Promises Kept! continued inside* ■ ■ ■

“When we signed on we had big ideas and big dreams. It's a wonderful feeling to help the district do what it promised to the taxpayers and our students. We promised to give any excess funds back to taxpayers and that is what we did.”

Scott Morasch,  
Bond Oversight Committee Chair

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#### Our Vision

"Developing Washington's Most Sought-After Graduates"

#### Our Mission

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.

[www.wwps.org](http://www.wwps.org)



# “ Superintendent’s Message ”

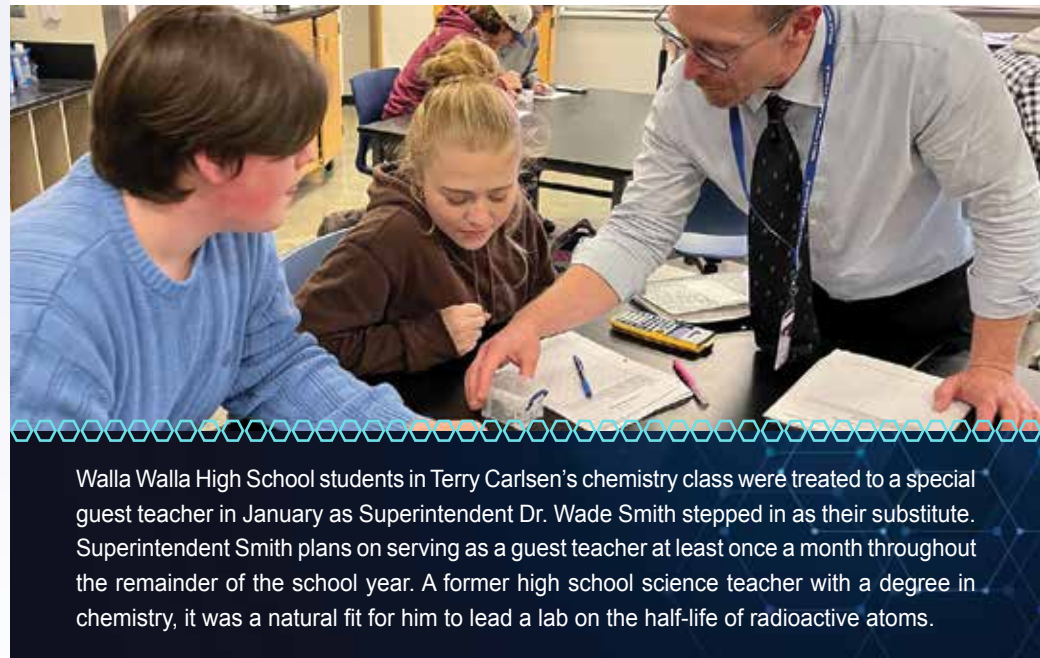
## Winter Focus | 2023

### Not only do our new buildings shine – so do our students

While much hype and deserved fanfare has surrounded our successful construction bond campaign as of late, I want to take this opportunity to thank our community for their decades-long support for our Educational Programs and Operations levy. Often referred to as the “learning levy,” for the last 50 years our community has continued to provide the additional opportunities, experiences and programs the state does not fund in their basic education model. Whether a student graduates with plans to enroll in college, enlist in service or land gainful employment after high school, ALL students benefit from this invaluable resource.

They could be one of hundreds who enroll in one or more of the 20 high school Advanced Placement courses available to them. Maybe they land a leading role in an upcoming play, take part in helping build a residential home for a family in need or suit up on the field for a game. They could be a student learning the violin in elementary school, have the opportunity to visit a local farm on a field trip, or one of many who learn how to swim in the 2nd grade. Perhaps they learn to weld, gain sound financial management skills or acquire automobile safety in our new driver’s education program. All of these remarkable experiences that continue to make our schools some of the best in the state are thanks to generations of Walla Wallans who continue to emphasize the importance of a quality education.

I encourage everyone to come and celebrate the incredible talent our community has helped to develop as a result of the continued learning levy. Attend a play, concert, event or activity. Remember, attendance at these events is free and our students would love to show off their talents and hard work. Whether on the stage, the field, the court or the classroom, our students continue to shine thanks to your support.



Walla Walla High School students in Terry Carlsen’s chemistry class were treated to a special guest teacher in January as Superintendent Dr. Wade Smith stepped in as their substitute. Superintendent Smith plans on serving as a guest teacher at least once a month throughout the remainder of the school year. A former high school science teacher with a degree in chemistry, it was a natural fit for him to lead a lab on the half-life of radioactive atoms.

*We appreciate your involvement and support. The Board of Directors and I value your input and welcome your ideas as we strive to “Develop Washington’s Most Sought-After Graduates.”*

Dr. Wade Smith  
Superintendent  
(509) 526-6715  
wsmith@wwps.org  
Twitter: @WallaWallaSup

### Our Next Strategic Plan Journey is Underway

*New plan focuses on student learning, rigor, culture of belonging and family partnerships*

Last spring Walla Walla Public Schools launched an inclusive strategic planning development process that concludes this spring with the development of a new five-year plan. This six-phase plan process relies heavily on a comprehensive outreach element to ensure engagement and input from all stakeholders.

“Our school board understands how critical it is to deeply involve the entire community, from student to staff to parent to stakeholder, in this important process,” said School Board President Derek Sarley. “Our schools are a direct reflection of the community and we value everyone’s voice as we make important decisions about the direction of the school district.”

WWPS has utilized a number of different modes to ensure feedback from stakeholders was gathered, including ThoughtExchange electronic discussions, four surveys, 50 face-to-face listening sessions and 21 focus group meetings in English and Spanish.

This fall district leaders began to synthesize this feedback and have developed a draft plan ready for public review and feedback. The district’s work will conclude this spring with the school board and leadership team operationalizing the plan in preparation for a 2023-24 school year implementation. Below are highlights of the draft 2023-2028 Strategic Plan.

Goal 1 Ambitious Learning for All	Goal 2 Relevant and Rigorous Experience	Goal 3 Culture of Equity and Belonging	Goal 4 Partnership with Family & Community
<b>OUTCOME STATEMENT:</b> WWPS prioritizes a districtwide culture where all instructional staff collaborate with their peers to ensure high quality instruction, analyze and respond to student learning needs and maintain a collective sense of urgency around high achievement for all.	<b>OUTCOME STATEMENT:</b> WWPS commits to ensuring all students will receive a relevant and rigorous educational experience where every senior graduates with 21st century-skills and a post-secondary plan to enroll, enlist or attain gainful employment after high school.	<b>OUTCOME STATEMENT:</b> WWPS ensures an equitable educational experience where all students feel a sense of belonging as they develop connections with peers and adults in a safe, supportive, inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment.	<b>OUTCOME STATEMENT:</b> WWPS leverages family, community and industry partnerships in order to support student learning, improve the educational experience and ensure post-secondary success.
<b>ACHIEVED THROUGH:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Collective Teacher Efficacy</li><li>A Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum</li><li>A Shared Sense of Urgency</li></ul>	<b>ACHIEVED THROUGH:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Post-Secondary Plans</li><li>Access to Rigorous Curriculum and Courses</li><li>Developing 21st Century Skills</li></ul>	<b>ACHIEVED THROUGH:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A Culture of Belonging and Equity</li><li>Elevating Student and Stakeholder Voice</li><li>Implementing Inclusionary Practices</li><li>Ensuring a Culture of Support and Collective Accountability</li></ul>	<b>ACHIEVED THROUGH:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Maximizing Family Engagement</li><li>Assuring Community Involvement and Volunteerism</li></ul>

### Strategic Summit

Public invited to share ideas & input

The district is hosting a public Strategic Summit to get additional input from the community on the direction of the district’s 2023-2028 draft Strategic Plan. All community members are invited to attend and be part of this important planning process.

- Thursday, February 23
- 5:00 to 7:00 p.m.
- Wa-Hi Commons Building
- Childcare & Dinner provided

### Walla Walla Online Perfect Fit for National High School Rodeo Star!

Walla Walla Online Junior Paige Gartner is not your typical high school student. Paige has been competing in rodeo since she was a little girl. You might say she was born into the rodeo lifestyle since her mom is a professional barrel racer and her dad is a professional bulldogger.

Paige is currently living in Arizona for the winter to train and support her national high school rodeo schedule. In 2022, Paige and her family traveled to eight different states with their horses to compete in rodeos. This demanding travel schedule makes attending traditional school difficult. Thankfully Walla Walla Online was the perfect fit.

“Walla Walla Online has been a lifesaver for me,” said Paige. “Walla Walla Online allows me to take school with me and not get behind. The staff have been amazing and are always willing to support me.”

Paige’s hard work is paying off as she is getting noticed in the rodeo world. She is planning to attend college to compete on the college rodeo circuit.

#### PAIGE’S RODEO CAREER HIGHLIGHTS:

- ★ Jr. World Finals - Las Vegas (2022) - 4th time qualifying
- ★ 1st place in barrel racing at the Silver State Intl. Rodeo
- ★ 1st place in barrel racing at the Jr. World Finals (2017)
- ★ 8th in the world - Jr. World Finals (2017)
- ★ 8th place WA state high school barrel racing & cutting
- ★ 1st place Fall Frenzy race in Idaho (2022)
- ★ VGBRA fastest time for 3 years in a row & Jr. Champion
- ★ Cayuse Jr. Rodeo Barrel Racing Champion (2020)

### Traffic Safety Program Returns!

The Traffic Safety Program at Wa-Hi returns this spring, two decades after the program’s funding came to an abrupt stop from the State of Washington. There is no cost to enroll in the program for active students of the district or private/homeschool students residing in the Walla Walla Public Schools boundaries. Students will receive classroom and in-car driving instruction. The program is in high demand and is already full for this spring. The district will offer classes this summer and more seats will be available next fall.



### A Talent for Helping Children

You will rarely see Walla Walla High School senior Molly Knight without a big smile on her face. She loves school and has thrived in the district’ Special Education program. This year Molly signed up for the district’s new Teacher Academy program to utilize her natural teaching skills. Molly is patient and persistent as she helps students complete their work. Molly would like to work with young children at the Walla Walla Center for Children & Families. WWCCF is the location for many activities hosted by the Walla Walla Valley Disability Network that Molly has attended.

### Promises Kept! » Cont. from page 1.

approved projects.

The excess bond dollars will be transferred to the district’s Debt Service Fund, reducing the overall amount the Walla Walla County Assessor’s Office needs to collect in future years. The 2018 bond measure, overwhelmingly approved by voters with an historic 73% yes vote, funded facility renovations at Walla Walla High School, Pioneer Middle School, Lincoln High School, and specific district-wide safety and infrastructure projects.

“We made a promise to voters that if there were any unspent dollars remaining after all the voter-approved improvements were complete, they would be returned to taxpayers”

-Superintendent Dr. Wade Smith.

“We delivered on every project advertised, and our citizen-led Bond Oversight Committee carefully stewarded community resources throughout the entire construction program. Local bond tax rates are set to fall to an historic low of 91 cents per thousand assessed, 32 cents cheaper than what was advertised when the bond passed.”

Superintendent Smith praised the Bond Oversight Committee for carefully monitoring the delivery of the bond program. They reviewed financial statements, project scope, construction documents and bid solicitations to ensure that bond dollars were only being spent on projects approved by voters. The committee also supervised the advertisement and selection of the projects’ general contractors, architects, vendors and consultants. Their oversight helped to secure over 50 local contractors and suppliers for bond project work, resulting in tens of millions of dollars’ worth of improvements awarded to local Walla Walla companies.