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 Opinion

Commentary: The "shine" is back at Walla Walla public schools

Wade Smith Special to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

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SMITH



Walla Walla School District Superintendent Wade Smith, right, introduces John Schumacher at a meet and greet session at Walla Walla High School, Feb. 22, 2022. Schumacher was named Wa-Hi's new principal on Feb. 25.

Jeremy Burnham, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Joel Aune, executive director for the Washington Association of School Administrators (who, coincidentally, was a principal at Berney Elementary many years ago), shared the following statement with me recently: The “shine” appears to be back at our schools. And while our custodians and maintenance staff have been working feverishly deep cleaning our facilities over the summer in preparation for student and staff return, the “shine” he was referring to was not the freshly waxed floors, but rather the excitement, enthusiasm and “glow” that had historically surrounded the start of every school year.

The pandemic's impact on our students, families and faculty over the last two years, the ensuing controversies over masks and vaccines and the ideological divisiveness that seems to pervade every corner of our country have been unlike we have ever experienced. No doubt these compounding issues have dimmed the annual start-of-year "shine" over our nation's schools in recent years — a critical element that always helped to energize and launch school campuses every fall.

While COVID still lingers, and some conflicts have yet to be constructively resolved, I believe Joel is right; the shine is back at our schools! Having spent considerable time across our campuses engaging with our dedicated staff, meeting new families as they enthusiastically register their children, watching eager coaches and athletes prepare for the fall season and participating in numerous pre-service faculty trainings this summer, the energy and excitement that has been sidelined the last few years has seemed to return in full force.

We have much to celebrate as a school district and community. I am so proud to report that all of our bond projects remain on time and on budget, thanks to over 50 local contractors and vendors who have partnered with us, as well as the stewardship from our citizen-led Bond Oversight Committee. I can't wait to show off our newly-renovated facilities and historic level of improvements at our community open house celebrations to be held this fall.

Thanks to our dedicated and talented staff, we have secured millions in state and federal grants that will help improve access to state-of-the-art technology, provide better learning opportunities for our students with disabilities, offer outstanding after-school enrichment experiences and procure bus fleet and other facility improvements that will reduce emissions and long term utility costs.

Additionally, we are launching a free teletherapy mental health service that will be available to students and their parents come September. We have also filled a critical community need by providing early learning opportunities to dozens of students at our Center for Children and Families to help ensure all valley's children enter school kindergarten-ready. And we have hired incredibly talented staff (some of them former WWPS graduates who are returning to our community) and invested in critical safety improvements across our school sites.

While we know that much work remains as we help ensure all students rise to the academic, behavioral and technical skills necessary to achieve our vision, there is a level of excitement, energy and optimism that I haven't felt in many years. It's hard to put my finger on exactly what it is, but the "shine" is indeed back at our Walla Walla Public Schools.

Dr. Wade Smith is superintendent of Walla Walla Public Schools.