

Learning 21st Century Skills through a Century-Old Program

This summer the district unveiled its new strategic plan, Vision 2030, which ensures students graduate prepared for today's competitive world. During the yearlong engagement process that preceded its adoption, we heard from our stakeholders the importance of 21st Century skills. Whether college or career bound, developing qualities such as grit, work ethic, and perseverance is critical to student long-term success.

As a result, new opportunities and expectations are being implemented over the coming years. And while I am excited about what this initiative will bring to our students, I would be remiss to not point out that one of our most successful 21st Century skill development programs has ironically been honing these assets in our youth for well over a century - our Wa-Hi Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC).

Among the many traditions that continue to enrich our school district's 166-year legacy of excellence is our Wa-Hi JROTC program. The long list of incredible accomplishments from our students who proudly don the cadet uniform is impressive, as is the positive impact this experience has on the lives and futures of thousands of our graduates.

Many may not be aware, the JROTC program is not limited to those wishing to join the military. From Rifle Marksmanship competitions to the study of American Military History, the JROTC experience is as diverse as the 120 cadets who participate annually in the program.

The mission of JROTC is to motivate young people to be better citizens as they prepare themselves to lead successful, productive lives when they graduate from high school. Rigorous curriculum, hands-on leadership training, citizenship, community service and skills that will help students succeed in life are but a few of the qualities lauded.

Last year alone, the Wa-Hi JROTC program participated in 132 community and school events, providing over 1,200 service hours. Three cadets earned the prestigious President's Student Service Award by providing over 100 hours of service individually. It's no surprise that graduating JROTC seniors earned over a half-million in college scholarships last year!

Among the many activities I have the opportunity to participate in every year as our school superintendent, attending the Annual JROTC Review in the spring is one of my favorite district celebrations. I get a front row seat at the outdoor event where six companies of Wa-Hi cadets compete in drill exercises, supervised and formally inspected by a visiting, distinguished serviceperson. During this activity, the departing seniors pass leadership of the battalion to next year's class, a tradition over a century in the making as next year marks our school's 105th Annual Review. If you have not been to one of these events, mark your calendar for May of 2024 and be sure to attend.

How long has the JROTC program existed in our public school system? According to a handwritten battalion history in the archives at Fort Walla Walla Museum, student cadets date back to the late 1800's in our valley. The "old Wa-Hi," built in 1905, included a cadet rifle range, one of the first of its kind. A modern range exists today in the newly-renovated campus and continues to produce some of our country's finest marksmen.

While cadets have been present on our campuses since 1898, not until the National Defense Act of 1916 was JROTC officially designated. Wa-Hi received its certification in 1918, as one of only six inaugural high schools across our entire country. By the 1920s, the Wa-Hi JROTC Rifle Team was nationally competitive and in 1928, won the ROTC National Rifle Championship in Chicago. The first-place trophy they brought home still hangs in the Wa-Hi Rifle Range along with many awards, recognitions, and championship performances amassed over the years.

Unfortunately, females were not allowed to enroll until 1974. Until then, Wa-Hi girls formed the JROTC Auxiliary Sponsors Unit, which competed against sponsors from other high schools in drill and rifle marksmanship. Nowadays, female cadets proudly make up half of Wa-Hi's battalion.

Over the impressive century-long history of Wa-Hi's JROTC program, there have been numerous national rifle champions, junior-Olympic victors, notable cadets who assumed prominent leadership roles in the military, U.S. medal of honor recipients, state legislators, Division I college recruits for shooting sports and graduates of distinction.

Programs like JROTC reinforce our commitment to develop critical 21st Century skills necessary for our students' lifelong success. While some of those essential competencies have morphed over the last 100 years, from mastering a slide rule at one time to now leveraging artificial intelligence, some things have remained the same. Developing leadership, communication, accountability and teamwork skills are as important now as they have ever been.

Our century-old JROTC program is just the place where these skillsets and experiences flourish and thrive as we seek to realize our vision of "Developing Washington's Most Sought-After Graduates."