

Honoring the Present - Lesson from our Past: Celebrating American Education Week

November 15-19, 2021 marks American Education Week - a time set aside annually where our nation celebrates our public school systems and its faculty whose noble calling continues to fulfill the remarkable responsibility of educating our future citizenry. It is as true today as it was 100 years ago; our nation's democracy and success is best guaranteed through a prosperous public education system.

With World War I in our rearview mirror, a devastating conflict that claimed more than 16 million soldier and civilian lives worldwide, our country found herself at a crossroads in the early 1920's. At the time, graduation rates hovered around 17%, college attainment was less than 5%, students with disabilities were excluded entirely from school systems, and illiteracy rates among many student populations remained high.

Established in 1921, American Education Week was born to help draw attention to a nation whose future success was sure to be impaired by a lack of educational attainment and proficiency of its people. We understood that to maintain the democracy and freedoms necessary to ensure our continued prosperity and sovereignty, our country had to out-engineer, out-invent, and out-develop others. In order to do so, we rightly recognized that the only logical way forward so was to out-educate our adversaries through a robust, free, public school system.

Over the last 100 years, remarkable advancements have been made in our nation's educational program. Locally, graduation rates in Walla Walla Schools now exceed 91%, well above state and national levels, five times higher than historic figures. Two-thirds of our high school students now attend college, trade schools or military service upon graduation, we continue to make great strides supporting our students with disabilities, and dozens of high school seniors are graduating fluent in two languages, not just one.

I took the opportunity to peruse the Royal Blue (WaHi's yearbook) from 1921, where the birth of the Walla Walla school system's legacy of success and rich academia can be revered from the photos, stories and accomplishments contained within. (Every WaHi yearbook back to 1915 has been carefully digitized and preserved, and is accessible online at <https://www.wwps.org/district/information/yearbooks>). And while student performance results from today far outpace those from a century ago, I posit that there may be some school experiences worthy of reflection.

I found it compelling as I read about an educational opportunity our high school students shared in their school annual from 100 years ago. While politics across our country remain viscerally divisive nowadays, it was refreshing to read about the start of the 1920-21 school year at WaHi. As shared in the yearbook, "The first two months of the school year were perhaps the most lively and interesting of the year." As soon as school was started, civics classes were organized into the two political parties. As the article explained, assemblies were held every Friday from the beginning of school through the month of November where students advocated for their class-assigned party platform. As noted, discussions were lively but respectful, and served a means for students to hone their public speaking skills and expand their understanding of both sides of the political aisle. As reflected in the yearbook, while the campaign activity will fade from student memories over time, they recognized that the experience informed critical lessons on citizenry, voting and respectful discourse.

Even though multi-month student political debates have long since taken place in our schools, it reminds me of the important role our systems play in developing our future leaders. While classrooms are not the place for adults to influence political ideology, our schools continue to serve an essential medium for students to learn and explore our nation's democracy, as was the case a century ago. I advance, if not in public schools, where else will students seek to deepen and understand differing political viewpoints, learn and model what respectful discourse looks like, and hone skills necessary to disagree tactfully with those whose views differ? It has become increasingly clear that Facebook, Twitter and TikTok are less than promising venues to proffer healthy civic engagement.

While fall student debates remain an activity archived in century-old yearbooks, the incredible work and rich educational experiences continue to take place throughout our halls, stages and classrooms. I am both humbled and honored to be surrounded by 850 dedicated teachers, support staff and campus leaders who continue to uphold our district's glorious legacy of educating some of our state's finest pupils. Please take time to thank our valley's teachers, administrators and support staff for their commitment and dedication during this important week.