



Bits & Pieces

www.wssra-units.org/thurstoncounty/

January 2026

Unit 28 of the Washington State School Retirees' Association
Serving retired and active school employees and our community.

President's Message

\$15,000! That is the amount of the award given to TCSRA recently to support our mini-grant program.

The Nisqually Indian Tribe annually invests a portion of the gaming revenue generated from the Red Wind Casino to local organizations. They report that \$1.9 million were donated community-wide last year to help support selected organizations, including 22 education organizations, 8 children organizations, 34 family organizations, 7 homeless organizations, 5 church organizations, 6 habitat organizations, and others. TCSRA has been added to their support list in 2025 because we are providing grants to schools in a novel way that is not duplicated by any other organization. We are so thankful.

In making these awards, the Nisqually Indian Tribe's goal is to help build strong community support for future generations of their families and neighbors. TCSRA heartily thanks our members, **Dorn Barr** and **Ron Crawford**, who connected with the Tribe and spent the time needed to complete an accepted application.

The \$15,000 will fund 37 mini-grants to teachers and 4 to school libraries. The mini-grants that were received by schools within Thurston County will be awarded this month. The list of recipients is found on page 3.

Best wishes for 2026.

Patty Gee, TCSRA President

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Hooray! TCSRA members donated enough small gift items to assemble 56 "mom bags" for the Salvation Army Adopt-a-Family program. For the first time a half dozen bags were delivered to member shut-ins. The Bible study group from the Olympic Christian Reformed Church led by **Terry Lowe** contributed 26 bags bringing the total donation to 82 bags. Many thanks to our faithful and talented seamstresses, member **Jo Edwards** and Kathleen Newcomer from Gull Harbor Lutheran Church.

TCSRA continued the tradition of donating to the food
(Continued on page 3. See Community Service.)

WELCOME MEMBER AND HISTORIAN

SANDY CROWELL

Historian Sandy Crowell, author of *The Ravaged Forest* and *The Land Called Lewis* will be the guest speaker at our January 16 TCSRA luncheon.

Sandy is from Lake George, Colorado. She went to Woodland Park High School, University of Northern Colorado, and City University Seattle.

The Ravaged Forest is a biography about Helen Sanders (Mitchell), a Chehalis Tribal member who saw the damage that had been done to forests on Indian land. She and Quinault Tribal Chairman, Joe Jackson, formed the Quinault Allottees Association to pursue a lawsuit against the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) which led to the U.S. Supreme Court case, *United States vs. Mitchell*, 1983.

As well as author of several books, Sandy is active in many different areas, including: President of Unity Center Board of Directors, consultant and writer for the Chehalis Tribe, co-founder of Southwest Washington Writers Workshop, Commissioner on the Thurston County Historical Commission, and Chair of the Thurston County Book Project. She was also the Training Manager at the Nisqually Red Wind Casino and has taught at Centralia College.

We are looking forward to having Sandy tell us about Helen Sanders and her advocacy for Native American rights and land protections.

Vicki Carter, Hospitality Committee Chair

[Bring a friend, and be sure to make reservations for your entire party. See page 2 for reservation info.]

Friday, January 16, 2026 —12 noon
Indian Summer Golf and Country Club

Menu: Chicken Parmigiana with pasta
OR

Ratatouille (GF, DF, V):

Dessert: Chef's Choice

(\$20 includes tax and gratuity)



LUNCHEON RESERVATIONS



I will be sending out emails to remind you of our upcoming luncheon. Please respond to that email if you plan to attend. We need our reservation count by **noon on**

Friday, January 9.

If you **do not receive an email**, or if you **need to cancel or add** to your reservation, email me at dazicar88@gmail.com, or call me **no later than noon on Friday, January 9, at 253-381-2592**. To be added to the email list for notification, please send me your email address.

ZiNita Carrell, Email Committee Chair



LEGISLATIVE REPORT



On January 12, the Washington State Legislature begins a 60-day legislative session. Unfortunately, its primary task will be to close another budget deficit. This deficit, which is expected to be \$1.5 billion over two years and \$4.3 billion over four years, is not nearly as large as the shortfall the state had to address in 2025. However, having already picked much of the low hanging fruit, a second round of budget cuts could hit harder than the first. Passing any bills that cost money will be extremely challenging. Our goals are to provide a cost-of-living adjustment for TRS 1 and PERS 1 retirees, protect PEBB health insurance benefits, and make sure that pensions are fully funded.

We will continue to talk to legislators about SB 5085, our bill from last year that would restore an ongoing COLA for TRS 1 and PERS 1 retirees. However, it seems that legislators are more likely to consider a one-time COLA in 2026. Even this will be a hard lift due to the budget deficit.

We will be on guard against potential cuts to health insurance benefits for retirees who purchase Medicare supplemental insurance through the Public Employees Benefits Board (PEBB). The state currently subsidizes these plans to keep retiree premiums low. However, if the legislature wanted to, it could reduce or eliminate this benefit, causing health insurance premiums to skyrocket.

And we will make sure the legislature does not try to balance the budget by reducing pension contributions. Underfunding pensions could potentially jeopardize benefits for retirees who dedicated their lives to public service.

By supporting WSSRA, you are supporting these goals. If you haven't already done so, please join our email list to make sure that you receive news of urgent developments throughout this session. Please visit www.wssra.org and scroll to the bottom of the page to sign up.

Emmett Mills, WSSRA Legislative Coordinator

Ed News for the New Year



1. State Superintendent Chris Reykdal has been elected President of the National Council of State School Officers by other state directors.

2. Washington students still perform on par with or better than their peers of eleven other states using the same test vendor. Our students have the 2nd-highest performance in English language arts and the fourth-highest performance in math.

3. The White House continues to dismantle the Department of Education, laying off 1,766 employees so far, including nearly all of the staff in the Office of Special Education. Since 1979, the DOE has been responsible for distributing federal funding, reporting education data, enforcing nondiscrimination in education, and ensuring equal access for every learner. The firings inhibit educational programs serving students who are Native, migratory, and homeless.

In our state, almost 200,000 students are served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and school districts rely on federal IDEA funding annually to uphold student rights and deliver specially designed instruction.

The White House is moving the management of several education programs to other federal agencies that have minimal connection to K-12 education, e.g., elementary and secondary education is now under the Department of Labor. This is being done on the premise that it "returns education to the states" and "eliminates bureaucracy." Such actions require an act of Congress, which hasn't happened, but such diffusion of K-12 education only creates confusion for educators and families,

Remember, our state constitution says, "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of **all** children in its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex." Thank you to our state's schools, educators, and OSPI for unwavering commitment to supporting each and every student who enters our classrooms during this unsettling time in our profession.

4. New Year's Resolution? Write to Chris Reykdal or to Congress.

Gery Gerst, Education Committee Chair

In Memoriam

We note the passing of **James Doherty, Jill Gerwig, Carol Lewis, Dale Lien, and Bruce McQueen**, and we offer sincere condolences to their families and friends.

MINI-GRANT RECIPIENTS NAMED

With the amazing and generous grant of \$15,000 from the Nisqually Tribe, we didn't have to say "no" to any applicant. Most of the applications this year were from SPED teachers and librarians. I guess that tells us something! We had no applications from the Tenino or Rainier school districts. With a small amount of money remaining after funding all our applicants, the mini-grant team voted to split the remainder into fourths. That was awarded to long-time member principals for exclusive use in their school libraries, benefiting all students. The schools selected had no applicants this year: Littlerock Elementary, Salish Middle School, Parkside Elementary, and Olympia High School.

Thank you to the wonderful team of readers who selected this year's recipients: **Kevan Hagen, Jeanne Harmon, Erin Mann, Dennis Crisp, Toni Demme, and ZiNita Carrell.**

Karen Keller, Mini-Grant Team Leader

Tumwater School District:

Cassidy Gudgeon	Bush Middle School
Carisa Shaw	Black Lake Elementary
Scott Rang	Tumwater Hill Elementary
Renee Cruickshank	Tumwater Middle School
Lisa Summers	Black Hills High School
Rachel Roberts	Tumwater LINC's

Yelm Community Schools:

Jeanette Burnham	Yelm Prairie Elementary
Donna McCarty	Ridgeline Middle School
Natasha Dunnam	Yelm Prairie Elementary
Dawn Lantz	Yelm High School
Mylisha Lanegan	McKenna Elementary
Emily Walsh	Fort Stevens Elementary

Rochester School District:

Danielle Cearns	Rochester Primary
SPED 9-12 team	Rochester High School
Jennifer Billings	Rochester Primary
Carrie Black	Grand Mound Elementary/ Rochester Primary
Nicole Kernutt	Rochester Primary
Tammy Caskey	Rochester Primary
Carrie Black	Rochester Middle School
Velynda R Hubbard	Rochester Middle School

Griffin School District:

James Alviar	Griffin Elementary
Heidi Toepke	Griffin Elementary
Wendy Potkonjak	Griffin Elementary
Johanna Dowler	Griffin Elementary

Olympia School District:

Justin McKaughan	Jefferson Middle School
Marti Buck	Transition Academy
Kyrian MacMichael	ORLA
Rachel McKaughan	ORLA
Jacqueline Collett	Jefferson Middle School
Rebecca Rutzick	Hansen Elementary

North Thurston Public Schools:

Midge Livingston	Woodland Elementary
Courtney Owens	Chambers Prairie Elementary
Kari Toms	North Thurston High School
Matthew Landers	Pleasant Glade Elementary
Carly Stigall	South Bay Elementary
Carol Roth	Seven Oaks Elementary



COMMUNITY SERVICE *(Continued from page 1.)*

bank in November and collecting for Salvation Army in December. Members donated \$1,930 to the Food Bank. We will report on Salvation Army next month.

January represents a kind of new beginning, an opportunity to make positive changes in our behavior by way of New Year's resolutions. However, January can become a big letdown from the frenzy of Christmas planning and celebrating and the conviviality of the New Year. How many people (including yourself) do you know who made a New Year's resolution and actually kept it for any respectable length of time?

The post-holiday letdown can spiral into feelings of loneliness for folks of any age, but especially for shut-ins and older people living in institutional home situations. COVID made it clear that loneliness can affect anyone of any age. Loneliness and social isolation were recognized as an epidemic by the WHO and the CDC, pre-Robert Kennedy. The Japanese government established an Office for Policy on Loneliness and Social Isolation in 2021.

Though it is perhaps a bit of a stretch to call it "community service," my suggestion to combat loneliness is simple, free, and easy to do. Just choose one person from all your acquaintances, including family and friends, and "adopt" him/her through simple and frequent communication. Every week or two, call that person, send a text, mail a card, or schedule a visit or an activity if they are able.

Make it a priority and you will both benefit from the frequent personal connection. If this clearly smacks of being a New Year's resolution, so be it. Dare to prove me wrong about resolutions.

Sally Jones, Community Service Chair

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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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Each month we will randomly draw the name of one of our "active" (not-yet-retired) members, who will receive a Starbucks gift card in the mail.



This month's winner is:



Erin Hagen
Griffin School District

Check this box each month to see if YOU are the lucky member.

Welcome, New Members:

Active, not-yet-retired, members are underlined.

Kristi Wheeldon
Susan Wilson
Deana Baird
Leslie Bowen
Marissa Dozier
Emily Fagan
Andrew Kernutt

Rachel Ledbetter
Justin McKaughan
James Nealer
Carisa Shaw
Kevin Theonnes
Vicki Vice
Tiffany Villanueva
Jessica Young

Please report any address or telephone changes to the **WSSRA Office** at: **360-413-5496** or **michele@wssra.org**

BITS & PIECES, the newsletter of the Thurston County School Retirees' Association, is published nine times a year, September through May, as a membership service. It is a means of communication between officers, committees, and both retired and active (not-yet-retired) members.

Letters to the editor from members are welcome and will be published when space is available. The editor will determine when letters will be published and when in doubt, shall consult with the president. The following guidelines are specified for letters to the editor:

- Letters must not exceed 150-200 words.
- Only one letter per year from the same writer will be accepted.
- Information must be accurate.
- Language must be appropriate.
- Content should be of general interest to the membership.
- Opinions expressed by the writer do not necessarily reflect policies or positions of WSSRA or TCSRA.
- Name, address, phone number must be included.

Editor: Pat Slosson, 360-561-3232.

Information for the February 2026 issue is due by January 14.

Please email copy to pslosson1@comcast.net.