

FEATURING DAN STEELE

WASA Employee Spotlight



In this issue, we're proud to spotlight Assistant Executive Director, Governmental Relations, Dan Steele. Dan joined WASA in July 2010.

"When the Legislature proposes new policy for our schools, Dan is often my first call in understanding the impact for students. He's particularly skilled at thinking through any benefit or consequence for schools. The K-12 advocacy community looks to Dan for leadership."

Melissa Gombosky, Gombosky Public Affairs

What does your job entail at WASA?

I represent WASA and bring its members' perspectives to the State Legislature, advocating for school district interests.

What do you like most about your job?

Sine Die is my favorite holiday! Actually, the best is the worst. The context within which I do my job changes on a frequent and regular basis. Every day is different, and there really isn't a regular, specific, or even predictable routine.

How has WASA changed since you were hired?

We do more professional development beyond the standard and predictable conferences and events. We have more direct member contact with relevant, useful, and timely information. We are very deliberate and intentional in how we approach our work, and I believe there is depth and strong substance to the support we provide members.

What were you doing before you were hired at WASA?

I worked in a very similar capacity at WSSDA.

What is your favorite memory at WASA?

I would say when Mack Armstrong got pulled over outside of Wenatchee with a number of WASA staff in the car. When Mack said we were coming from an educators' conference, the officers remarked that he wasn't being a good

role model. That, and the day I called Sheila Chard and asked her to come to WASA and join our team.

What do you like to do when you aren't working?

Sleep and golf—I don't play as much as I would like to. I like a good book or a good movie, and pizza. And of course, 17+ weeks out of the year when the Pittsburgh Steelers are playing football.

Best vacation ever?

Six Flags Magic Mountain, where we rode every single ride multiple times for 12 hours straight. It wasn't a busy time of year and there were no lines.

Where's your favorite place in the world?

Disneyland. Isn't that the happiest place on Earth?

What are your favorite movies or music?

Movies: Gangster (*Godfather*, *Casino*) and Sci-Fi (*Blade Runner*, *Dune*). Music: Heavy Metal and Progressive Rock.

Do you have story about a former staff member that WASA members might enjoy?

Barbara Mertens—I worked with her for many years while I was at WSSDA and she with WASA. She was the consummate professional. I learned a lot from her. She really was the Queen of legislative relations.

TOM VENABLE REFLECTS...

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

In a letter written by Isaac Newton in 1675, he stated, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

Thought to be an original thinker by many, myself included, I later learned that Newton's statement wasn't entirely his own. The idea that we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us was not new. In fact, it can be traced back to a twelfth century author, John of Salisbury, who wrote that philosopher Bernard of Chartres compared people to dwarves perched on the shoulders of giants, stating, "we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature."

Acknowledging there are "giants" in every

profession, the field of education is no different. As a first-year superintendent, this could not have been more evident than in the spring of 2014, while attending my first WASA Superintendents' Conference. It was shortly following my arrival that I found myself sitting at a dinner table listening to an insightful conversation about timely and relevant educational topics that could not have been replicated or taught in a course. Rather, it was a dialogue that could only take place within a gathering of educational leaders—where the collective wisdom of those who I would soon refer to as mentors was on full display.

Recognizing I was clearly surrounded by greatness—wide-eyed, and awestruck—a close friend, colleague, and mentor leaned over and

stated, "This is what it means to be a WASA member. We are sitting amongst some of the giants in our profession tonight. They have learned from those who have preceded them. They are true legends of the profession who have made it their own. We are all standing on the shoulders of giants."

Later that evening, attempting to absorb all that I had just experienced, I found myself flooded with a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation, not only for my colleagues, but for what I had come to know of WASA—a transformative, equity-driven organization, working tirelessly to bring educational leaders together, lifting each of us to see more and farther.

Happy 50th Anniversary WASA!

Tom Venable was WASA Region 171 president in 2018-19, and has served as Superintendent in Methow Valley since 2013.

JOHN DEKKER REFLECTS...

A Legacy of Support

Upon joining the WASA team in 2001 as Assistant Executive Director, and over my 16-year tenure, I had the unique opportunity to work in support of four WASA Executive Directors, each of whom were visionary leaders. My role at WASA included three areas of responsibility: direct service to members, liaison to the WASA Small Schools Committee, and emergency support to school district administrators. I feel particularly blessed to have had the privilege to serve school district leaders!

In 2010, WASA leaders met to reflect on our mission and to re-brand, refresh, and clearly articulate the organization's purpose. The tag line **Leadership | Trust | Advocacy** was born defining the history and the hallmark of the organization to this day. Few decades have tested the resolve of school district leaders and WASA more than the second decade of the 21st century.

Criticism of public education and calls for public funding of private education deflected attention from the central issue: that public education was significantly underfunded. Calls for improved funding and fair teacher pay were often met with increased regulation, greater expectations measured by standardized testing, and teacher and administrator evaluation reform . . . but without additional funding.

WASA took the lead advocating for equitable, sustainable, and ample state funding with the Stable Funding Committee, the Local Funding Workgroup, and joining partner organizations, including the School Funding Coalition. Those efforts provided a rubric by which to judge various legislative funding initiatives. WASA advocated for funding solutions that served districts east-to-west and small-to-large.

District leaders faced tremendous challenges to match fiscal resources with the needs of employees whose compensation had lagged behind the private sector. Following the *McCleary* lawsuit and subsequent changes to basic education funding, Legislators reported to the public that the school funding dilemma had been addressed and even implied that districts were "flush with cash." Districts faced the reality that new basic education funding had been largely offset by reductions in categorical revenues and new restrictions to raising funds locally. Many districts were simply unable to meet employee expectations at the bargaining table. As WASA's "point person" to assist districts facing potential employee strikes, the requests for assistance increased from three or four per year to dozens by 2015.

WASA increased its capacity to support districts by partnering with AWSP, WSSDA, and ERNN to deliver bargaining crisis resources through regional workshops. Andy Wolf joined

the WASA team in 2016 to partner with me in support of districts facing imminent strikes. To meet the communication challenges districts face in crisis, WASA partnered with WSPRA to develop SCAN (School Communication Assistance Network), a network of communications experts who stand ready to quickly assist districts facing emergencies of all types.

Andy came on board and "hit the ground running," to continue WASA's legacy of support to school district leaders across the state. Whether it is Management Reviews; employment contract reviews; Board/superintendent relations support, or crisis intervention, WASA stands ready to serve.

Each decade has its unique challenges but WASA's resolve to serve through leadership, to promote support of public education through advocacy, and to earn the trust of its members, and the public at large will continue to be its hallmark.

John Dekker was on staff 16 years as Assistant Executive Director at WASA. Prior to joining the WASA team in 2001, John served seven years as Superintendent in the Rainier School District.

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