



Washington state Lieutenant Governor Cyrus Habib gives the keynote address at the Lake Washington School District's "Bridge the Gap" benefit luncheon on Tuesday. Nicole Jennings/staff photo

Lake Washington Schools Foundation luncheon focuses on 'bridging gaps'

Foundation aims to bring equal opportunities to students from all income levels.

By Nicole Jennings

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Poverty. Hunger. Homelessness.

These are not words that one normally associates with Eastside schools, but the Lake Washington Schools Foundation's annual benefit luncheon on March 27, attended by 400 people, drew attention to the population of Lake Washington School District students who come from families struggling to make ends meet.

Speakers pointed out that while schools in Redmond, Kirkland and Sammamish are known for their exceptionally high achievement and large population of wealthy families, it is vital to remember that not all students come from such fortunate backgrounds.

The theme of this year's luncheon, "Bridge the Gap," is intended to help close the gaps between students of different socio-economic levels, so that everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve success.

"As a high performing district, it's important that we recognize there are gaps," LWSD Superintendent Dr. Traci Pierce said at the luncheon. "There are achievement and opportunity gaps. Our goal is that every single student is future-ready."

Pierce pointed out that the district is nearing 30,000 students, one of the state's largest school districts. The foundation's work is crucial to help with the district's growing pains.

"The Lake Washington Schools Foundation helps to provide resources and fund programs that help our district bridge the gap and close the gap," Pierce said.



About 400 people attended the luncheon, which at press time had brought in \$205,000. Nicole Jennings/staff photo

Washington state Lt. Gov. Cyrus Habib gave the keynote address, speaking about his own upbringing and experiences in the state's public school system, specifically in the Bellevue School District.

"I'm a public school kid ... were it not for that experience having gone through public school, I really would not be in my position standing in front of you right now," Habib said.

In the third grade, Habib lost his eyesight to cancer. He explained how he had been stopped by school staff from joining the other children at recess so that he would not hurt himself. Habib's mother stepped in and told the principal that she would rather her son risk "a broken arm ... than a broken spirit."

Habib used his story of exclusion due to a disability as a metaphor for other children who are not able to take part in activities because of financial barriers.

“It was the beginning for me of a journey of understanding my own right to be included,” he said. “Bellevue is not always equal ... we need to understand that we’re not a success story as a region unless every single person enjoys the bounty of our school district,” he said.

In Olympia, Habib is working to increase equity for students across the state. In partnership with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and many donors, the Lieutenant Governor’s office created the AP Access Fund so that all students receiving free and reduced lunch can take the AP and IB exams for free.

Habib also noted that students from low-income backgrounds do not tend to study abroad as much as students from more privileged backgrounds. To help even the score, Habib’s office and the Association of Washington Generals founded the Washington World Fellows Program, which allows high school students to study abroad in Spain for free and earn 10 college credits from Central Washington University.

Habib stressed the importance of organizations like the LWSF in helping to give public school students a quality education.

“[My] path from Braille to Yale was not an easy one, but it was made entirely possible because of access to quality public schools,” Habib said. “That’s the heart of what [LWSF Executive Director] Larry Wright means when he talks about bridging gaps.”

At press time, Wright said that initial counts showed the luncheon had brought in \$205,000, but noted that this number was likely to go up in the next 24 hours as donations came in from people who had not been able to attend the luncheon.

“I was really pleased to see so many people there, and I hope that everyone left feeling inspired to make a difference in their communities,” Wright said. “Everyone can make a difference.”

To learn more about the LWSF, visit www.lwsf.org.

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