

John Mungai: In Loving Memory



John Mungai / Via @sww_hsa

By Jessie Moss ('26)
Managing Editor

In August, the Walls community mourned the loss of beloved math teacher John Mungai. Mr. Mungai, who had worked at Walls for eight years, imparted on those he taught and worked with a comfort and security that will surely be missed.

“I think it’s sort of easy to overlook Mr. Mungai, because he was really quiet, he didn’t draw attention to himself,” said math teacher Jesse Koplowitz, longtime colleague of Mr. Mungai. “But he had a really big picture perspective on things that was reassuring to the rest of us.”

“He was just a patient person, and so I feel like he just had this calming presence,” agreed fellow math teacher Kristin Kelly.

“He had a wonderful, good heart,” said Elaine Abbas, who worked with Mungai for

years at Alice Deal Middle School prior to working closely with him as a substitute at Walls. “He always looked at the positive. And he would say, ‘Yeah, we have to work with this [student] a little bit more, he needs a little more help.’ And that was pretty much it, where I might say, ‘Oh, this kid is driving me crazy’, you know, he never exhibited any of that [impatience].”

“You could really tell that he loved what he did,” said former student of Mr. Mungai, Marie-Celeste Pessey ('26). “He focused a lot on teaching us himself instead of assigning us a lot of work, and you could tell he really cared about his students.”

This care was evident in Mr. Mungai’s organization of a student trip to Kenya, his native country, and his tireless efforts to work, despite his declining health.

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Walls Introduces New, Stricter Phone Policy

By Annabel Holt ('28)
Staff Writer

On Aug. 21, SWW administration sent an email to all students and families notifying them of a change to the school’s phone policy, which prohibited use of phones during instructional time. The new policy states that students “may not use cell phones or electronic devices in the classroom unless given permission by their teacher.”

To facilitate adherence to the new policy, at the beginning of each class students are required to place their devices in cell phone holders fitted with a pocket for each student. The goal of the phone pockets is to create a physical barrier between students and the distraction of their phones during class without limiting use outside of instructional time.

The new policy also includes a three-pronged enforcement plan. Upon first violation, students are reminded to place their phones in the holder. Upon a second, the student’s parents are to be notified of the violation, and the violator’s phone is to be turned into administration until dismissal. The policy states that after three or more violations a phone will be “turned into the main office at the start of the school day and returned upon dismissal; parent conference will be scheduled.”

According to 9th grade counselor Kathryn Moore, “The administration provided the phone pockets to all teachers for their classrooms.” She also said that the goal for this policy was to “reduce distractions and help students focus and better engage with course content.”

Until this year, phone policies were at the discretion of individual teachers. Humanities teacher Laura Webster previously required students’ phones be put away during class. Webster noted that reactions to the new policy among faculty have been “highly positive.”

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Walls Club Fair Overhauled for a More Organized Experience

By Mitchell Kasdan ('27)
Staff Writer

The annual tradition of the Walls club fair fills the commons with club representatives raising poster boards advertising the greatness of their clubs. Everyone tries to jump on top of each other to get better sightlines and they project their voices across the terrace or commons. The club fair is traditionally a yell-fest with club leaders shouting at new freshmen and returning students in an effort to convince them to join their club.

This year, administration, teachers, and many students agreed that necessity arose for a change. Volunteers Ms. Schulz and Mr. Matthews helped to compile input from teachers

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Asian Culture Club Leaders pose for a photo at the club fair // via @swwhsofficial

The New Club Policy Provokes Mixed Responses

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and club sponsors. The administration made changes to make the club fair more orderly, along with other rule-changes for the overall structure of the clubs.

The structural changes involve a plan to merge clubs with common or similar purposes. All clubs made a mission statement which established the goals and purpose of the club. The volunteers and administration made suggestions to sponsors of any clubs with similar mission statements to see if a merge could work.

Mr. Matthews, SWW PE and Health teacher, stated that he found many similar clubs with a surprisingly similar purpose or function. He also said that club membership was often more aligned with friend groups than interest groups. Mr. Matthews cited "Growing Together", the school year's theme, as reasoning to merge the clubs. Divided clubs make it difficult to grow together, reasoned Mr. Matthews. They decided on sponsor-approved club mergers as their solution to make the club leader meetings and fair more manageable.

The meeting, packed with over 60 students and sponsors, overflowing into the third floor hallway, lasted only 20 minutes. Clearly, a meeting with fewer club leaders would significantly increase effectiveness at getting the new information out to club members.

The changes meant that this year's club fair had some differences from previous years, though it retained some similarities. The terrace shared many similarities to last year's loud and hectic club fair; filled mostly with fitness/sports, environmental, community service, and advocacy based clubs. Club reps had to scream into nearby students' ears just to convey meeting dates and times. Meanwhile, the other areas, the commons, library, and basement, held a noticeable calm compared to the outdoor terrace.

As part of the new changes, this year's club fair implemented a system of keeping similar clubs in the same areas. All the clubs were grouped into one of 12 groups. They were:

community service and advocacy, fitness and wellness, environment/climate change, gaming, audio/visual, affinity groups, arts crafts and music, cooking, academics, STEM, literature and writing, and world culture. These potentially temporary groupings for the club fair might proceed the official club merges, but on the other hand could just be serving the purpose of organization for the club fair.

Eleanor Brosowsky ('26) said, "I kind of liked it better when it was an absolute free-for-all, but I guess this has its applications," in reference to the calmer commons, basement, and library levels of this year's club fair.

Oliver Strauss ('27) thought the new club fair organization system for club locations made the club fair slightly worse than last year. He wanted to check out clubs in both the library and the basement, but didn't have time to see both sections of the fair.

Reagan Harris ('28) said the club fair was a bit overwhelming. Harris said, "It's good and interesting to see the whole school in one place. I think that it could probably be done a little bit differently. Maybe spread it out through a couple of days and have different clubs on different days." Henry Date ('27) thought that a club fair on two separate days would also effectively make the club fair less hectic, while keeping all current clubs.

Administration also felt supervision of clubs was an issue. The second change discussed at the club leader meeting determined the qualifications to be a Walls club. Clubs must have eight members, meet at least once a month, and have a DCPS background-checked adult at all meetings, likely the club sponsor. Attendance checks at all meetings, or at least once a month, will be required. However, the club leaders meeting talked nothing about how club attendance would actually work in practice.

Having every Walls recognized club on the school website with meeting dates, times, and locations makes finding new clubs easier. Plus, the knowledge of all club meeting's location and time with a background-check adult increases security around club meetings, keeping students safer. SWW's officially recognized club status has restrictions for both of

these reasons.

Clubs which do not meet these standards will be considered "interest groups." Interest groups would share similarities to normal clubs, however, would lack official recognition. They can still meet in the school building if they have a supervisor. In an email to students, Jennifer Tully, SWW's assistant principal, described it as an alternative for clubs which cannot meet the eight person requirement, but still want to meet.

Gwen Morris ('25), club leader for Ornithology Club, Latin Club, and Ultimate Frisbee, thought that "the restrictions are making it more difficult for students to engage in activities they enjoy. They are also ambiguous; administration has not made it clear what they are asking of students. I'm reviving ornithology (birding) club this fall, and not only are we starting with zero members, it is a niche topic and finding enough people just to satisfy the new requirements is a challenge." Ornithology club had a place at this year's club fair, but if they don't get enough new members, they may not qualify to be at next year's club fair, significantly reducing their potential growth.

Morris described Walls clubs as "creative and fun." She added that, "Walls clubs provide innumerable opportunities and I'm worried that the new requirements will cut down on offerings. The beauty of our club system is that a student can form a new club to celebrate any interest of theirs." She is worried that with the additions of restrictions and rules students "might not be able to use clubs as a forum to celebrate our interests with our usual freedom."

How will this affect club life for the average club member? The answer: hopefully not. The changes simply affect club leadership, with every club intending to keep going on as normal, with a new "tiered organization" with an overarching leadership meant to represent multiple clubs as Ms. Schulz said. Clubs have always been a huge part of Walls students' identities because they make an excellent outlet for all students to express their individualism through activities which they enjoy, only time will tell if these elements will continue.

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Walls Remembers Mr. Mungai

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Of his tenacity, Ms. Abbas said, "I think while he was here, he was a much stronger person because he didn't have to think about his illness. He was able to do what he loved, and he loved teaching." "He made learning math fun with his humor," emphasized Jerrey Cuadro ('25). "I always looked forward to his class."

Beyond his life as a teacher, Mr. Mungai was a devoted husband and father of two sons. "He was pretty private about his personal life in a lot of ways, but he was so proud of his sons and talked about them all the time," said Ms. Kelly. "He would joke that coming into work was like his chance to rest more because when he got home, it was just like 'Dad, Dad, Dad', and they wanted to be with him all the time.... He just loved them so much."

"I'll miss seeing him here, he was really special," said another former student, Emil Hanna ('27).

Despite his passing, Mr. Mungai's legacy lives on in the Walls community, through students and teachers alike. As Mr. Koplowitz concluded, "I'll miss him." •

New Phone Policy

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"There are so many moving parts to teaching a class," she said, "if we can take something away, it makes our class so much better." Some teachers disagree with this stance but there have been no reports of policy violations.

By comparison, student reactions have been mixed. Khiya Brown ('28) argued that phones can help with learning, and therefore shouldn't be under a blanket restriction. "When I have my phone, I listen to music, and music helps me focus and get my work done easier," she said.

Declan Chada ('26) agreed that phones don't necessarily need to be entirely removed from classrooms. "It's all about having the willpower not to use it for disruptive things," he said.

Mostly, students raised logistical concerns about the new policy. Chada pointed out that not having your phone during class time can exacerbate existing connectivity issues that arise when school WiFi is too weak and students need their phone for a cellular hotspot.

"We'll have to go up and get our phones for hotspots and then immediately put them back. It's just kind of ridiculous," he said.

For some students, not having access to their phone may raise safety concerns. Caroline Weishaar ('28) pointed out, "I would want it during fire drills and lockdowns so I can contact my parents."

Other students questioned the efficacy of the policy in changing classroom dynamics. Maeve Cunningham ('26) explained, "We're on our computer for 90% of class anyways, and anything I can do on my phone I can do on my computer."

Students may keep their phones for medical reasons, but that is the only exception to this policy.

As the policy takes effect, ongoing dialogue between administration, teachers, and students will be crucial to address these diverse perspectives and refine the approach as needed.

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DC Council Restores Budget, Two Teaching Positions

By Zoe Becker ('26)
Editor-in-Chief

After months of community-led advocacy for additional funds to maintain two teaching positions, the DC Council passed an amendment to restore the School Without Walls budget on June 13, 2024.

The initially proposed budget, which was released in early February, prompted SWW administration to cut two teaching positions, effectively eliminating the Chinese and Theater Arts departments. Though the proposed budget for SY2024-25 was higher than that for SY2023-24, factors such as district wide raises and increases in enrollment made it such that Walls was effectively facing budget cuts and a shortfall of \$235,210.

Upon seeing the proposed budget, members of the Local School Advisory Team (LSAT) which serves as an advising body for school administration, "immediately kicked into gear," according to LSAT Parent Co-Chair Dana Springer. Springer worked alongside HSA president Sandra Muscasco and Christy Leavitt, the HSA liaison to the LSAT, to assemble a document with resources and further information about the issues facing the Walls budget. "We just started putting together a document

with background issues, talking points, trying to get it out there," Springer said. The document included resources such as templates for putting together DC Council testimony as well as advice on contacting council members. Springer, Muscasco, and Leavitt circulated the document among the Walls community and encouraged students and parents to reach out to council members and testify before them for a restoration of the budget.

Meanwhile, students Anna Mayer ('25) and Hugo Rosen ('24) focused their efforts on ensuring the student body was engaged with and responding to the issue.

"Hugo and I coordinated between the HSA and the students," Mayer said. During the spring semester, the pair visited every classroom, encouraging students to attend a testimony they had planned for one of council chairman Phil Mendleson's education hearings.

The testimony, which included appeals by approximately two dozen Walls students "was really the climax of our efforts," Mayer said.

Throughout the spring, Walls students and parents continued to email DC council members, an organized effort that paid off. Ward 3 Councilmember Matt Frumin noted that council members who receive thousands of activist emails in a given week are often quick to ignore them but that wasn't the case with the messages from the Walls community.

"I think council members read them because they weren't system generated. They were personal. And I thought, If there was a thing I could do to try to help here, I would want to try to do it," Frumin said.

Frumin followed through on his word. Alongside nine other council members he vot-

ed yes on Ward 2 Council Member Brooke Pinto's Amendment to restore the School Without Walls budget.

Though the restoration was largely cause for celebration among the Walls community, some saw the last ditch amendment, which passed on the final day of the budget process for the 2024-25 school year, as too little, too late.

Prior to the passage of the amendment, two Walls teachers, Lea Zaslavsky who taught theater arts, and Xing Xing Song, who taught Chinese, had had their positions terminated. "It was very frustrating that after Ms. Z. and Ms. Song had basically been fired when the amendment passed," Mayer said.

Mayer, who was working alongside Rosen to not only restore the Walls budget but that of other DC Public Schools such as Jackson Reed and Duke Ellington was disheartened by the fact that the restoration was a one off.

"We have a huge advantage in that the HSA and student body is willing and able to organize. I am still disappointed that our work didn't translate to the rest of the community which is a long term DCPS and council issue that we have to continue fighting for," she said.

Councilmember Frumin also expressed frustration at the drawn out, tedious process. "For School Without Walls, the road was agony," he said, adding that "all of that uncertainty just creates anxiety for everyone, and we really need to get out of this rut where the the the first budgets that come out are far from adequate, and then the council has to struggle in order to get the budgets to where they need to be, and the schools live with an uncertainty for a three or four month period.

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New Liquid Policy Provokes Community Backlash

By Carlotta Rother ('25)
Senior Editor

When looking around the classroom, Walls students can typically see a variety of drinks ranging from water, to coffee, to energy drinks and slurpees. All that temporarily changed on Sept. 10 when Walls administration introduced a new rule banning all liquids from being brought into the school building. The decision, which was subsequently revoked, sparked widespread backlash among students, staff, and parents.

The new rule, which students weren't made aware of until they arrived at the building on Sept. 10 caught those to whom beverages are near and dear by surprise. It was a major disruption to Kaia Summers' ('25) typical routine. "For the past four years I've brought Starbucks to school almost every morning," Summers said.

Upon arriving at school on Sept. 10 students were immediately instructed to dump out whatever drinks they had with them. Sofia Culberston ('26) noted that, "it wasn't just starbucks or outside drinks, we also had to empty our water bottles from home."

Students did as they were told, however many told their parents who sent emails to the school. An anonymous student said, "I bring water from home because the water filter is blinking red. I told my parents, who then sent an email, because I don't feel comfortable drinking the water."

Later that evening administration sent out an email saying, "The rationale for the policy is to ensure all security machines are functional daily and to prevent water spillage in backpacks or held in students hands do not spill on the machines that may result in damage. The most important reason is to make sure alcohol or other prohibited liquids are not brought into the school."

The new policy prompted mixed reactions from students and staff. Some believed the policy was justified. Avril Graffe ('27) said, "I understand why they implemented the policy, they have our best interest at heart."

Others felt it may be too restrictive, partic-



DCPS students testify on budget cuts via @sww_hsa

ularly with regard to staying hydrated throughout the day. Neve O'Connell ('26) remarked, "[Confiscating an] energy drink I can understand, but water? I don't understand why they had me empty my water bottle."

School officials have acknowledged the concerns about the water filter, and according to Principle Isaac's email, "I met with the lead Custodian this morning and asked him to check all water filters. On the second floor water fountain, there is a red blinking light on the water filter. I have communicated with DCPS to share this information and expect to hear about next steps in addressing this concern. In the meantime, students may use water bottle fillers on the first and third floors in the school." Still,

parents continued to voice their complaints through emails, and the school administration took these concerns seriously. After a day and a half, the decision to revoke the ban had been made, and students were once again allowed to bring beverages into the building.

Many students are relieved that it has been reversed, Culberston continued, "I was happy that I could bring my Starbucks to school again." Many expressed frustration during the brief period that the policy was in place, with some even organizing informal petitions to have the rule revoked, however that was unnecessary since the parent emails and verbal complaints seemed to be enough. ●

Volleyball Team Starts New Season Strong

By Peyton Chada ('28)
Staff Writer

The School Without Walls girls' volleyball team began their season on Sept. 5 at Dunbar High School in a match against Jackson Reed High School. The team, composed of a JV and Varsity squad, is off to a strong start with varsity posting an impressive 14-2-1 record as of 9/30.

The Penguins have been continually led to victory by some impressive individual performances, including those from the two freshmen on the varsity squad. Kate Parker ('28) leads the DCIAA in kills (according to NCAA, a kill is awarded to a player any time an attack is unreturnable by the opposition), with 81 and Ellie Olesh ('28) is fourth in the DCIAA in assists with 18.

Senior captain Natalie Broquard has had an excellent season as well, leading the District of Columbia State Athletic Association (DCSAA) in serving aces with 62. Taylor Brown Jr. ('26) has also put up impressive numbers, placing second in the DCIAA in kills with 50 and third in digs with 47.

As good as the individual players have been, the team really has had success all around this season. For example, a whopping six of the top ten players in the DCSAA this season in serving aces are Walls athletes. On top of that, the top three players in kills, serving aces, total blocks, and digs in the DCIAA this season are all Penguin athletes.

The School Without Walls girls' volleyball team began their season on Sept. 5 at Dunbar High School in a match against Jackson Reed High School. The team, composed of a JV and Varsity squad, is off to a strong start with varsity posting an impressive 14-2-1 record as of 9/30.

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The volleyball team poses for a picture after winning the Model Secondary School for the Deaf Invitational Tournament. (via Sports Information Club)

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Annabel Holt ('28), who plays for the JV squad, attributes the team's success thus far to strong collaboration, mentorship, and communication among the group. "The upperclassmen on the team make the transition easier from middle school to high

school, and they are also very experienced, so I can learn a lot from them," she said.

The more experienced players in question echoed Holt's sentiments. Natalie Broquard stressed the importance of having good relationships between players, which has strengthened team chemistry. "We don't just know each other as players, we know each other as people," Broquard said.

Despite their impressive record, the team is more focused on what they have yet to do this season: beat Jackson-Reed. The varsity team lost to the DCIAA defending champion Tigers 2-0 at the beginning of the season, but hope to get payback in the upcoming DCIAA championship.

Students can access the full volleyball schedule on MaxPreps to watch the team's notable remaining matchups against Sidwell Friends, Maret, McKinley Tech, and others. •

August and September Sports Recap

	Notable Win	Most Valuable Player	Overall Record	DCIAA Record (Place in Standings)
Boys' Soccer	9/30 1-0 vs. Cardozo	Graham Mc-Morris ('25) 11 goals, 4 assists	6-5	3-3 (5th)
Girls' Soccer	9/7 4-1 vs. Latin	Nadia Lytle ('25) 11 goals, 2 assists	6-4	4-1 (2nd)
Volleyball	9/21 Model Secondary School for the Deaf Invitational Tournament Champions	Kate Parker ('28) 85 kills, 14 total blocks	15-2-1	8-1 (2nd)



Scan the QR code for a more in-depth retrospective on SWW sports seasons in August and September!

“Two Grown Adults Arguing Like Children”: Seniors Weigh in on the Presidential Debate

By Gabi Godberg ('25)
Staff Writer

On Sept. 10, former president Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris took the stage at National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, PA in an ABC moderated presidential debate. Trump and Harris spent the 110 minute segment debating issues ranging from reproductive rights to foreign policy and the economy.

“This debate,” Niamh O’Donovan ('25) said, referring to the second official debate of this presidential election cycle, “was incredibly refreshing compared to the one with Biden... this really gave us hope and more confidence in the candidate.”

O’Donovan, like many Americans, was disheartened by the June debate during which President Biden’s presentation faltered as former president Trump offered dozens of false or misleading statements. The chaotic debate spurred calls which eventually prompted Biden to drop out of the race.

Sirin Toal ('25) remarked that, “Trump is making less and less sense by the day.” Charlotte Mendelson ('25) agreed, noting that “there were a large amount of false statements.” However, both Toal and Mendelson appreciated the moderator’s fact checking. CNN reported that Trump made over 30 false claims during the debate.

Others were less enthusiastic of the moderators’ fact checking of Trump’s claims. Cole Hoffman ('25) thought “the debate was heavily biased against Mr. Trump,” adding that “Mr. Trump was debating three people instead of one.”

Others still found the debate underwhelming. According to Josh Black ('25), “Neither of them did a great job addressing the issues; they were just focused on attacking each other.” Eden Dresner ('25) also wished the debate “focused more on their politics and data.”

Dresner was concerned that the lack of concrete policy discussed might make it “hard for people to make informed votes.” This election will be Dresner’s first time voting, so it holds special importance. “Voting is your civic duty,” Dresner said, and pointed out that “local elections are important too.”

Dresner is the minority of seniors who will be able to vote though. Xavier Miller ('25) is frustrated that his “birthday is a month after election day” so he cannot vote, especially because he “feels so strongly about this election.”

Some students only watched the debate because it was an assignment for Kerry Sylvia’s DC History and Government classes. Wesley Freed ('25) said that he tuned in in order to fulfill the assignment but he “was too tired to focus on it.”

Living in the nation’s capitol has given some Walls students a unique perspective on the upcoming election. For O’Donovan, the stakes seemed particularly high when considering the debate and election because “DC is controlled by the federal government.” •

Penguins Take Public Transportation: A Collection

By Avril Graffe ('27), Astrid Leppig ('27), Anna Wood ('27)
Staff Writer

“People climbing the poles in the metro like they’re monkey bars” -Nirvan Welagedara ('27)

“Once a random guy told me his whole life story about how his mom died and now he writes poetry and goes to college for psychology. He told me I looked like a character from The Amazing World of Gumball and that he wanted to write poetry about me.” -Sam Broquard ('27)

“A guy asked for my number so he could be my mentor in life” -Charlie Compagnucci ('27)

“Once saw a guy with a blowtorch lighting something on fire in the back of a metro” Calvin Day ('27)

“[A] man released pet mongoose on Red Line” Omarion Hampton ('26)

“My bus crashed but everyone was OK” -Mia Ferris-Artiga ('27)
“Someone got on the bus and started dancing and played ‘Baby’ by Justin Bieber so loud and then when I left he tripped me and started singing ‘Sorry.’” -Ann G. ('28) •

Class of 2028 First to Go Through New Admissions Process

By Ronan Shah ('28)
Staff Writer

This past year, School Without Walls introduced a revamped admissions process, which included interviews, an in-person writing sample, and teacher recommendation letters. Incoming freshmen have expressed a wide range of opinions on the new process and its effectiveness. While many students agreed that the new process improved upon the old one, they also felt it still had room for improvement. Several freshmen mentioned confusion during the process, with frustration stemming from disorganization and late notices, particularly regarding interview times.

Quynh Matsudaira ('28) noted the lack of clear communication, saying, “I wasn’t really sure what I was doing until the day I came in.” Venya Gulati ('28) echoed this sentiment: “They sent out emails that were like two days before the interview... and I had to miss a debate tournament for that.”

One of the significant changes to the application process was the inclusion of teacher recommendation letters, submitted at the start along with transcripts. Feedback on this addition was overwhelmingly positive. Emma Pfaffenroth ('28) described the recommendation letters as “probably the most important part of the application process” because they reflect “the true thoughts and feelings of the teachers that came before.”

Interviews, a longstanding element of SWW admissions, also received feedback from students. Many suggested improvements, particularly regarding the length and consistency of the questions.

Genevieve Pezalla-Werth ('28) summarized the general sentiment: “The interviews were far too short, and I feel like they couldn’t learn anything about you in the five minutes they were given.” Students also noted that the interview questions varied significantly between individuals, making it difficult to compare candidates.

Additionally, many students questioned the necessity of parent interviews, arguing that they were unhelpful and should be reduced or eliminated. Some felt that parents might exaggerate their child’s achievements. Genevieve Pezalla-Werth ('28) explained, “It’s supposed to be about us and more about our independence and abilities as students.” Chiara Cerletti Giraudy ('28) added, “Parents definitely do play up.”

However, Emma Pfaffenroth ('28) disagreed. She believed that parent interviews offered a broader perspective on students, saying, “Sometimes kids humble themselves... in the interview questions with the kids, they weren’t asked about their sports or extracurriculars, and then for the parents, they were asked more in-depth questions about their lives.”

Another new element of the application process was the introduction of an in-person writing sample, replacing the previously submitted essay. The writing sample featured limited space and opinion-based prompts, which elicited mixed reactions from students.

Some students felt the writing sample effectively tested certain skills but found it somewhat confusing. Many believed the prompts were too random, focusing more on critical thinking than writing abilities. Additionally, students pointed out that calling the assignment an “essay” in the admissions emails was misleading, as the writing space was restricted to about a paragraph. “I thought I was going to have to write five paragraphs,” said Venya Gulati ('28).

Despite the challenges, some students appreciated the constraint on writing length. Ida Laitan ('28) said, “Limiting your space was definitely a key factor... [because it made you] really have to think and process and analyze what you’re thinking in a more concise manner.”

Reviews of this year’s admissions process from teachers was largely positive, mostly due to the one factor that has stayed the same, as it’s still early for teachers to gauge the impact of the new essay component of the process. Spanish teacher Ana Martinez Lopez, who interviewed students this past year said that “I believe the interview is the best way to understand if a student fits well here.”

Corey Matthews, health and PE teacher and another interviewer, agreed, adding that “They do give good information and insight into the students with their interests are...it’s a good process.” Admissions director Noretia Hardge declined Rookery requests for comment on the efficacy of the components of the revamped process. Regardless of student and faculty opinions, the new application process could play a key role in shaping the next generation of SWW students. •

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

From Sunrise to SBOE – Senior Anna Mayer Soars in Local Government

By Sadie Greenhalgh ('27)
Staff Writer

For most SWW students, the DC State Board of Education (SBOE) seldom crosses their mind despite their role in keeping Walls and other DCPS schools running. For Anna Mayer ('25), this is not the case. Mayer, appointed as a student representative for the SBOE, works behind the scenes on an array of education related issues, dedicating her evenings to discussing and voting on policies that affect DCPS schools.

On the first Wednesday of each month, Mayer attends a working session, where all of the representatives review resolutions and the plan for the month. The following Monday, Mayer attends a student advisory committee meeting, where the student representatives meet to discuss issues, vote on upcoming resolutions, and write a statement summarizing their opinion. The Tuesday after that, there are public meetings, where people go to testify about a range of pressing topics and present resolutions and the panel of representatives vote on whether or not to pass their resolutions.

There are also committee meetings, where board members discuss how to improve student life and students' enjoyment in school.

Mayer's involvement in DC politics began over the summer, when she worked as a campaign intern for Ward 2 representative Allister Chang, which showed her "another lens of DC politics." Mayer explained that "seeing that side, experiencing the education side as a DCPS student, and then talking to former State Board Representatives" inspired her to join the SBOE.

Mayer is also a co-founder of Wall's Green New Deal for DCPS club, which is advocating to pass the Green New Deal for Schools, a resolution that will make DCPS more climate friendly. Last year, the club attended several public DC SBOE meetings to testify about passing the resolution, which provided another reason for Mayer joining. "I signed up because of the Green New Deal for



via Anna Mayer

Schools and how positive my experience with the School Board was." Testifying in front of the SBOE made Mayer realize that "one of my favorite things to do is talk to people about what I am passionate about, and I am very, very passionate about public education." She added that joining the SBOE gave her "the opportunity to just talk to people about public education all the time, which is amazing."

In order to apply, Mayer filled out an application about her demographics and why she wanted to join. They reached out three months later to let her know that she was accepted. Out of an unknown number of applicants, she was one of four people to be selected, not including two alternates.

Last year, Walls alumni Ben Yarkin ('24) served as the student representative on the DC SBOE. Mayer remembers testifying in front of him for the Green New Deal for Schools, which "felt good[...] because [it felt like you] are on the same level as the people you're talking to, [which] is something that is difficult to feel when you're talking to just adults." Mayer is excited to carry on Yarkin's legacy, sharing that Brady Woodhouse ('25) "came to testify about the nursing resolution that he wrote." She added that "[it] felt great to have a student testify before me because I felt like I could do my best to propel the interest and the initiatives of fellow Walls students."

During her time at the SBOE, Mayer's goal is to "engage with the student body [at Walls] and across the city... and find what students care the most about." Mayer explained that finding what students want is important because "we as Americans are so used to politicians not actually advocating for what the people want."

In addition to being a student representative for the SBOE, Mayer also works at a preschool and teaches a knitting class. The workload is challenging, but Mayer explained that "it'll be easier for you to do hard, time consuming [extracurriculars] if you really care about them." Mayer also advised to "give yourself a break, you don't have to be doing 100 things to feel fulfilled."

Mayer, reflecting on her time thus far with the SBOE remarked that she has "found a lot of joy and fulfillment from participating in DC government... and genuinely making changes." She added that "the more I work with the state board... the more I think that education and education policy is a career that I want to go into."

The next SBOE meeting is on October 15. "I, from the bottom of my heart, encourage every student at Walls to come to State Board meetings... I know that's a big commitment, so come talk to me about your issues because I promise I will do something about them."

•

Chinese Language Revived at Walls

By Bayla Harper ('28)
Staff Writer

After what seemed like the indefinite suspension of Chinese language classes at the end of last year, many students were pleasantly surprised in late June to learn the program would not cease.

The program, which had faced elimination due to budget cuts, was restored following advocacy from the Walls community to the City Council. However, with the funding restoration coming in late June, Walls administrators faced a tight timeline to find a new Chinese teacher.

Ms. Yidan Xie, the newly hired instructor, is a familiar face, having previously worked at Walls. Her experience inspired her transition from college teaching to K-12 education. After pausing her teaching career during the pandemic, she returned to the classroom at Alice Deal Middle School. Many Walls students who attended Deal are thrilled to have Ms. Xie back this year.

"I took [Chinese] all three years of middle school," said Alice de Vilmorin ('28) who takes Chinese 3. "She's really, really nice, and she makes us sing songs in Chinese, which is really fun." When asked if she's learning a lot in class, Alice responded, "Yeah, definitely."

"I'm very excited to be here," said Ms. Xie, a native Chinese speaker who grew up using the language at home. In addition to being fluent in Chinese, Ms. Xie (pronounced sh-yeah) holds master's

degrees in teaching Chinese as a second language and East Asian literature.

Ms. Xie began teaching Chinese at the university level from 2013 to 2019 before switching to K-12 education. Prior to joining DCPS, she taught beginner to intermediate Chinese at both Minzu University in Beijing and George Washington University. "I really like the process of building a relationship with my students and seeing their growth," she said. "I feel very accomplished when I see my students become fluent."

"Ms. Xie combines learning about history and language, creating an engaging but useful class," said Nicola Lauren ('26) who is taking AP Chinese. "Ms. Xie is open and welcoming to all of her students." She added that, "Ms. Xie prepares us well by assigning work that combines a rubric with proficiency in Chinese and creativity."

"I think that schools are supposed to give students the opportunity to fully express themselves. When options are limited, that limits the students' ability to excel and learn," said Anna Mayer, emphasizing the value of the Chinese program.

Lauren agreed, adding that "Being in the Chinese program is more than studying characters and learning the language. Instead, it is a community where you get to grow together." •

Budget Restored

Budget continued from page 3

We need to get on the same page with DCPS so that the budgets that they come out with at the beginning of the process are, if not completely right, very close to right."

Frumin says that he is in the process of meeting with the mayor, city administrators, DCPS leadership, and the Deputy Mayor for education to discuss how to avoid such budget turmoil in coming years, and instead, stick to the Schools First in Budgeting amendment which passed in 2022 with the intention of preventing school budget shortfalls.

Following June's budget restoration, School Without Walls reintroduced its Chinese and Theater Arts department, led by new hires Yidan Xie and Olivia Tyndall, respectively. •



Closing Night, full cast, Ensemble, and Stage Band (top) and image of Cast A performing (bottom) / Via Avajane Lei

After a Long Fight, the Theater Department is Back at Walls

By Vivian Astmann ('28)
Staff Writer

After a prolonged battle against budget cuts, the theater department at Walls is back in action. Last year, students rallied against a decision to slash the department's budget by \$235,210, which would have led to the elimination of the entire program, including the theater teacher position. Thanks to the testimonies of about 30 students at the DC budget hearing, their efforts were successful, and the department has been restored.

Lea Zaslavsky, who served as the theater teacher at Walls for seven years, made the difficult decision to leave for Duke Ellington after the initial budget cuts. "I've enjoyed my first 4 weeks at Duke meeting students with strong passions for cre-

ating and performing, but I still love my Walls students," she recently shared.

During her time at Walls, Ms. Zaslavsky had many memorable experiences, including the production of Cinderella, the first show after the pandemic. She noted, "It was then that I felt as if we really had a community that supported the work we [...] were doing in the performing arts department."

Ms. Zaslavsky contributed significantly to the school, teaching theater classes and leading the drama club for several years. Maharani Yogi ('25), a former student, recalled, "Theater wasn't really my favorite topic, but I liked the teacher." Yogi described the theater class as "very involved." Ms. Zaslavsky's guidance allowed students to express themselves beyond traditional classroom settings.

Her main goal was to provide an outlet for

students to explore their creativity and build confidence. "I do hope that the theater department I built with my fellow arts colleagues will continue to grow and thrive," she expressed.

The new theater teacher, Liv Tyndall, has different visions for the program. Mx. Tyndall said, "I think it would be really fun to play around with different alternative modes of theater, like devising and site-specific work... So in my creative drama classes, we're going to work on some of those things."

They also aim to teach students that theater encompasses much more than just plays and singing. "Essentially the answer we come down to is, really you just need two people—one to watch and one to perform," Mx. Tyndall explained.

Initially, Liv Tyndall had no interest in theater, being quite shy until their parents enrolled them in a production of High School Musical. They found it psychologically beneficial and discovered a passion for scripted and rehearsed performances.

Before joining Walls, Mx. Tyndall freelanced as a writer, editor, and stage manager. "I was ready to synthesize all of my skills into one avenue, and this, conveniently, was the perfect avenue," they said about their decision to teach.

Many Walls students struggle to find time for theater amidst homework and other commitments. Mx. Tyndall aims to integrate theater into students' academic lives. "So I really want to use the theme of School Without Walls in regards to theater," they shared.

Mx. Tyndall encourages students to join the theater department, emphasizing that participation should be voluntary. They particularly love seeing introverts take the leap to explore new aspects of themselves through performance.

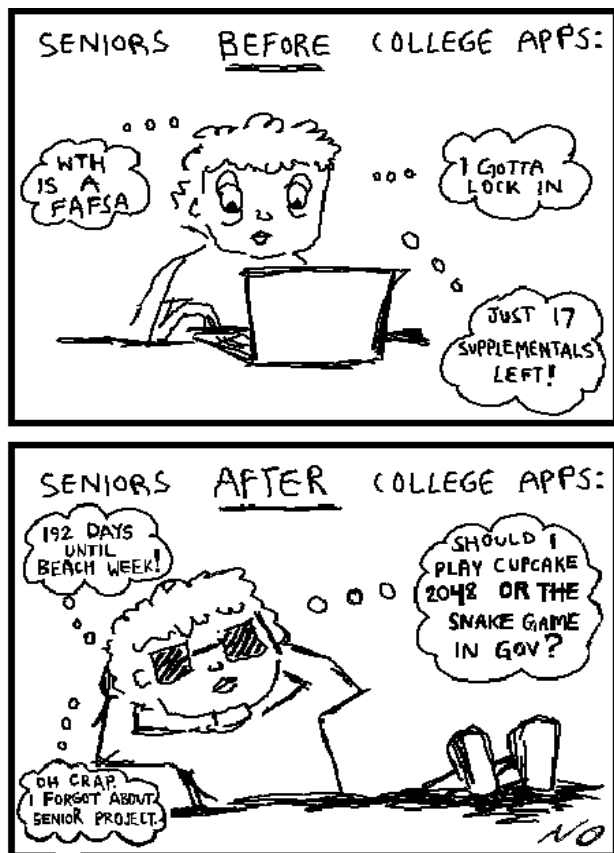


Closing Night, full cast, Ensemble, and Stage Band (top) and image of Cast A performing (bottom) / Via Avajane Lei

COMICS

"Oh No"

By Niamh O'Donovan ('25)
Resident Artist



"Hurricane Helene Comes to DC"

By Lucy Byron ('25)
Resident Artist



CROSSWORD

The Rookery is Back

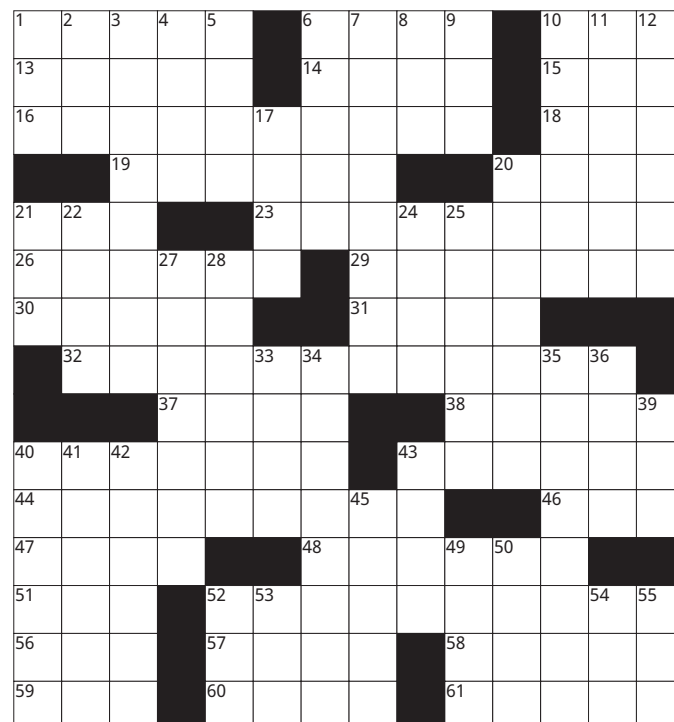
By Leah Levy ('25)
Puzzle Editor

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