

New Humanities I and II textbooks / Credits: Bailey McFadden

Reworked Humanities Curriculum Puts Focus on “Cultural Relevance”

By Bailey McFadden (2025)
Staff Writer

Humanities has always been a cornerstone of the Walls curriculum, but this year, teachers reconsidered what a humanities course should be. This semester marked the first few months of heavily revised versions of Humanities I and II, required ninth and 10th grade courses, after a comprehensive overhaul that aimed to improve programmatic relevance to students’ lives.

“At the beginning of last year we came up with a goal for the humanities department, to look at the texts that we had and how cultur-

ally relevant they were,” said Carolyn Schulz, the head of the Walls humanities department and a teacher of Humanities I and II. “We started to review the Humanities I curriculum and it became very clear...that it wasn’t [culturally relevant].” She added that for Humanities II, “similar trends came up for different reasons. It really wasn’t representative.”

Before the changes, ninth graders spent their year reading and analyzing ancient texts, and 10th graders spent the year doing a “survey” of American literature, starting from pre-European contact until the modern day.

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“Do More Research”: Seniors Reflect On First Votes

By Rachel Kolko (2024)
Staff Writer

Seniors at School Without Walls who cast their ballots for the first time this November upon entering adulthood noted that although the voting itself was exciting, the research process proved a bit more complex than many had expected.

With most candidates on the ballot in heavily Democratic D.C. sitting on the left of the political spectrum, seniors said it was difficult to determine the differences between different choices. “Sometimes it’s harder to know who to pick because everyone has similar views,” senior Elanor Hurwood explained.

Regardless, Hurwood, who turned eighteen just in time for the election, was eager to receive her ballot. “Cast your vote anyways,” she advised. “Ever since Trump was elected it’s been on the forefront of my mind.”

Hurwood wasn’t the only senior passionate about casting a ballot. Fabiha Hatem, who was out of town before Election Day, told her mother she needed to be back in D.C. by Nov. 8 so she could vote in person. “I’m first gen American,” Hatem explained, which she said added to her eagerness to get to the polls.

While they were excited to vote, neither Hurwood and Hatem felt they did enough research to distinguish between candidates. “I

think that I didn’t take the time properly to look,” Hurwood said regarding some of the more minor offices on the ballot.

Noah Pershing, another senior, directed most of his attention towards the more well-known contests, such as the at-large Council race. “I definitely regret that I didn’t do really any research for smaller ones,” Pershing said

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A lone campaign sign remains after Walls served as a polling place last month / Credits: Tess Buckley

Teachers Ratify Long-Awaited Union Contract

By David Sipos (2024)
Senior Editor

Members of the Washington Teachers’ Union (WTU) voted overwhelmingly to adopt a new contract on Dec. 13.

After months of negotiations, Mayor Muriel Bowser, DCPS Chancellor Lewis Ferebee and the WTU announced a contract agreement, the first since 2019, last month.

The contract includes a 12 percent salary increase over four years and a 4 percent retention bonus. Additionally, the agreement preserves all benefits offered to teachers.

Teachers have been operating under a 2016 contract that lapsed in 2019. Since then, terms have remained frozen, without adjustments in teacher pay. Because the tentative agreement applies to the 2020-2024 collective bargaining period, pay raises will be applied retroactively to the past two years. The WTU will have to return to the negotiating table next year for a post-2024 contract.

DCPS and WTU leadership hailed the agreement as a strong contract that should be ratified as soon as possible. “Beyond pay and benefits, it was important for this agreement to reflect the respect the District has for teachers and the work they do,” they wrote in a joint statement when the contract was announced. “We believe this tentative agreement is fair for teachers and good for students.”

A DCPS spokesperson directed The Rookery to this statement when asked for further comment.

Many of the WTU’s 5,000 members had expressed growing frustration with the lack of a new contract. On Nov. 17, teachers staged an after-school walkout to protest the stalled

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The Legacy of the Deli

By Jack Meltzer (2024)
Staff Writer

Almost every Walls student has been to the deli at some point. It is a friendly, New York City bodega-style family business with employees that are eager to get to know you. The Deli is notable for its long lines and chaotic lunch scenes. The small space is always packed by lunchtime. Leo’s GW Delicatessen is so iconic that Walls students and teachers alike just refer to it as “the deli.”

Part of its popularity is due to its relatively cheap prices compared to other lunch options in the area. Normal size cold sandwiches at the deli range from the \$3.45 PB&J to the \$8.45 turkey club with bacon. At Western Market’s Capo Deli, by comparison, all small cold sandwiches are \$12.50 and large ones are \$15.50. In fact, almost nothing at the deli is over \$10.

However, the cheap prices are not the only thing impressive about the deli. There is a lot more to this lunch option than meets the eye.

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Walls Trails Banneker in Updated High School Rankings

By Zoe Becker (2026)
Staff Writer

School Without Walls is known to many in the DMV as academically rigorous, often outperforming comparable schools. In the past, Walls has outranked analogous schools, like Benjamin Banneker High School, another DCPS institution that requires applications.

However, this year's regional standings from the Washington Business Journal (WBJ) published in October placed Walls third among local high schools, trailing behind second-place Banneker.

Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Virginia ranks first both regionally and nationally, beating out both Banneker and Walls.

This year, Walls ranks slightly higher than Banneker in nearly every metric used aside for reading proficiency, in which Walls has a score of 93/100 and Banneker 97/100. This comes as a shock to many who regard Walls as an example of excellence in the humanities.

The WBJ releases an article coupled with a slideshow ranking the DMV's top high schools. The WBJ's article uses statistics about K-12 education compiled by the US News and World Report for their assessments.

The Washington Business Journal's editor in chief, Vandana Sinha, now leads the initiative for the publication of these rankings. In an interview, Sinha explained how she and staff at the WBJ write these articles. "We localize and pull our region's schools into our ranking to create our own mini ranking," she said.

The U.S. News and World Report, which the WBJ bases their findings on, evaluates schools on six factors. College readiness, measured through scores on AP or IB exams, is the factor with the most weight in the rankings. U.S. News also ranks schools based on the percentage of students who take AP or IB classes, state testing performance, how schools' test scores compare to demographically similar schools, and, finally, underserved student performance. Given these critical metrics, rankings can influence how many understand the caliber of stu-



Credits: Eleanor Houser

dents at a given school.

Instead of placing an outsized emphasis on these rankings, Principal Sylvia Isaac said, "Our number one goal is to be a school where students thrive... and if they're not thriving or don't have necessary supports, that is our focus.

"We do not spend time thinking about our school ranking," Ms. Isaac added.

Eleventh grade counselor Kathryn Moore noted as well that "both [Walls and Banneker] have high quality academic programs that prepare students well for college and career success."

While they are not the end-all-be-all, ranking changes can be jarring for students, families, and staff.

Ms. Moore highlighted that "colleges do assess high schools based on their programming and rigor, rankings included." She ex-

plained that these rankings allow colleges to think about students' applications in a broader context that can influence their decisions.

Despite this, Ms. Moore cautioned against hyper-fixation on a school's ranking, "remaining engaged and informed about our efforts to promote student emotional health and wellness, equity, and academic success would have a much greater impact on the school experience and community than a simple ranking."

Factors like college, and by extension jobs or income, can be massive motivators for people to attend certain schools. Sinha of the WBJ stressed this, remarking that "so much is based on what the school system is like. Our business decisions and our other life decisions ripple out from that." ●

Should Freshmen Really Take the PSAT?

By Camille Galvani (2026)
Staff Writer

As freshmen filed out of the Commons after taking the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) 8/9, they breathed a collective sigh of relief, knowing it was finally over. But the question remained: Why had they taken the test at all?

The PSAT is meant to provide students with an indication on how they would score on the SAT, which has long been a crucial component of college applications. Additionally, students who reach their state's elusive high score within the Selection Index in their junior year are eligible for the National Merit Scholarship, valued at \$2,000.

Despite the touted benefits of the PSAT 8/9, many students were unsure of its value. Freshman Aminata Sissoko thought it should be optional. She said, "Even though it's not graded, it can bring kids a lot of stress, or their parents saying they have to do [well]," she said. "I think you should only do it if you want to, to see how well you're doing."

Kaelyn Granberry, another freshman, agreed that it should be optional since students are not eligible for the National Merit Scholarship until junior year, and the exam brings "a lot of stress when it doesn't really matter in the long run."

The PSAT 8/9, the version of the test

for freshmen, is a simpler exam than the better-known PSAT 10/11. Sissoko, Granberry, and Hazel Klein, all freshman, concurred they did not feel prepared for the PSAT, as they had not received handbooks other students had, and that it was "more strict" than standardized tests in the past.

"We were just told the date and told to show up early," Klein said. She also noted its similarity to other standardized tests she had taken.

In contrast, ninth grader Hugo Bonelli claimed that it could help freshmen get a feel for this kind of testing and that he felt prepared for it, saying, "I think that conceptually the segments were fitting for freshmen and their grade." Still, he notes, "It was designed to be much better enforced with testing security. It did feel a lot different."

Hafsatu Iro, the ninth grade class counselor, said that "freshmen don't need to prepare, as the skills you need are taught in class and freshmen tend to be prepared; those that [do not feel prepared] are encouraged to practice in Khan Academy or later on take an SAT prep class."

Ms. Iro disputed the notion that students are stressed, saying, "I don't think they're stressed. It's not a real test; it's just practice."

Jordyn Hurry, a current senior, said that the PSAT helps accustom students to multi-hour standardized tests. "I'm not completely sure how [the preparation of the PSAT] would compare to just taking a regular SAT class or just studying a whole bunch."

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New WTU Contract Comes After Three-Year Wait

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negotiations, demanding a contract to keep up with the rising cost of living and to solve staff shortages. DCPS hopes the 4 percent retention bonus will encourage teachers to stay at their jobs.

"[We were] showing our displeasure with the contract negotiation that had dragged on for more than three years," said Arthur Klawender, a Walls chemistry teacher who serves as the union representative from the school to the WTU.

Mr. Klawender voted for the new contract. "It seemed reasonable, nothing surprising or unpleasant," he said. "Teachers approved it; I think it's good."

Mr. Klawender was not on the negotiating committee, but added, "I would guess there were things we asked for that we didn't get...but that's sort of how negotiations work."

The contract will now go to the D.C. Council for final approval. At the time of publication, the Council had not voted on the document. ●

After Voting for the First Time, Seniors Consider Significance of Local Elections



A first-time voter's reward
Credits: Noah Pershing

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regarding the positions on the ballot. “Like ANC — I didn’t even look at it.” The Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners (ANC) are local representatives who advocate for neighborhood necessities like stop signs and street lights, among other things.

He also thought it was difficult to differentiate between most candidates. “They’re all generally going to vote the same way,” he said. “Whatever their biggest issue is, is what they’re going to push for most.”

“A lot of the candidates aligned with my views,” Hurwood added. “I really just wanted to see the candidate had a clear plan and clear goals.”

Although seniors had to navigate most of the voting process on their own, they had some resources from school: Kerry Sylvia, who teaches D.C. History and Government and AP U.S.

Government, held discussions in her classes about Initiative 82, a ballot measure raising the minimum wage for tipped workers. Ms. Sylvia made the complex issue a focus of her discussions with students. “I wanted them to have a solid understanding of what it was saying and to look at both sides,” she said. It was important to her that every student, even those not yet eligible to vote, could have an informed opinion about it.

Hurwood appreciated the opportunity for discussion, saying, “It gave me a better understanding of what was going on, and to hear what other people had to say like the pros and cons.” She also said that she initially felt her opinion about it was set, but once she talked about it with her classmates, she began to reconsider.

Ms. Sylvia also provided articles and online resources to help her students start their research, like the website vote411.org, which she explained was essentially an online database for voting information across the United States. “You put in your address, and then you’re able to show not only information on candidates, but information about registering to vote,” she said.

Seniors agreed even D.C. elections shouldn’t be overlooked. “There should be more awareness,” Pershing said, “and be more push for people to know about the election, know about the candidates, all of those things.”

Are Freshman-Year PSATs Worth It? Students Aren’t Sure.

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She noted that she didn’t remember taking the test in freshman year, which “might say a little bit about how useful it might be.”

According to the College Board, the PSAT is “a low-stakes test, meaning colleges and scholarship programs will never see the score. [The test] is an early barometer to identify areas of study that may need work.”

Ms. Iro explained that the PSAT helps freshmen study in the future. “When you get the scores back, [there is] a partnership between College Board and Khan Academy,” she said. “Students will get personalized feedback on their test, and [Khan Academy] creates a practice test based on the skills you need to improve.” This information can help students prepare for the SAT.

Ms. Iro continued, “Without taking the PSAT, you lose the opportunity for this practice, and the earlier the practice the better. When you come to take the PSAT in 11th grade, you’re boosting your chances of improving your scores in 11th grade, meaning highly selective colleges will be more interested.”

Religious Holiday Absences Pose Hard Questions for Teachers, Admin

By Zoe Becker (2026)
Staff Writer

At the beginning of the school year, SWW students received a cardstock page from teachers: A bright, colorful, newly redesigned DCPS calendar. Despite the modernized design the calendar’s content hasn’t changed much.

The legend of the calendar explains that the many purple markings on the calendar indicate religious observances, from Rosh Hashanah on Sept. 26 to Diwali on Oct. 24 to Ramadan through April 21. Despite all these holidays’ purple markings are accompanied by gray ones, indicating a DCPS closure.

According to DCPS Chancellor Lewis Ferebee, the school system considers “observance of a religious holiday...[grounds for] an excused absence upon submission of a parent/guardian note. In addition, DCPS classifies religious events or celebrations outside of a religious holiday (up to five cumulative days in a school year) as excused absences.”

DCPS official policy further notes that “[w]herever possible, we seek to avoid scheduling critical days for staff or students (i.e. Testing, Parent-Teacher Conferences, PD days, etc.) on major religious holidays because we want students and staff to be able to take leave on these days without significant hardship.” Nevertheless, this plays out in different ways at the classroom level.

SWW principal Sylvia Isaac explained that on the date of a religious observance “the teaching goes on, the instruction continues.” She emphasized, however, that “students are not penalized (for their absence)...we encourage students to meet with the[ir] teacher to find out what they missed.”

This is particularly challenging to face as a teacher. Some find it hard to balance supporting students in school and not leaving behind absent students.

Jeffrey Jordan, a humanities teacher, said that having many students out for a major reli-



A DCPS calendar in the Walls lobby / Credits: Zoe Becker

gious observance is “hard — it’s hard to teach something new when a majority of your class is out, which means that if you taught it you’d have to go back and reteach it when the others are here so the best thing is not to teach that then.”

Students agree that it’s difficult to miss important classes for religious holidays.

Based on her experiences missing school for Jewish holidays like Rosh Hashanah, freshman Naia Albert explained that missing a new assignment can be challenging.

“An assignment was given in my English class on Rosh Hashanah and so I was not there,” she said. “I tried to figure out what the assignment was and my teacher was completely not responsive. I had like, a C in that class for multiple weeks.”

Based on that experience, Albert explained, “If I miss an assignment it’s just really difficult to understand what’s happening.”

Junior Reuben Wolf agrees that when he’s absent for religious holidays it’s preferable to miss lessons rather than assignments. He noted

that, “with how the school system is set up, it’s better to miss actual learning than assignment for a grade.”

He highlighted the difficulty of keeping off because of a religious absence, saying, “Usually on the day of the holiday I have no time to make up any missed work or lessons.”

Albert believes that DCPS should create a policy barring teachers from assigning particularly large assignments or tests, opposed to smaller in class activities or reviews, on major religious dates. “It would be good if they have a very clear policy,” she said.

Wolf agreed, arguing that “it is completely unfair that just because a certain religion is smaller and has fewer people who celebrate their holiday, some students will be left behind.”

He further explained that, “That is ridiculous in D.C., with our highly religious[ly] diverse population, we don’t have breaks on other holidays. All the surrounding school systems do.”

PERSPECTIVE

What Do GW Students Think of Us?

By Zoe Fisher (2025)
Staff Writer

At some point in our high school careers, most Walls students have wondered, “What do GW students think of us?” Walls students have many assumptions about GW’s opinions, but what they actually think of Walls is largely unknown and may be surprising.

Most GW students did not have much information about the high school. A few graduate students had no idea Walls even existed until they were asked what they knew about it. However, most of the university’s limited perspectives derive from lunchtime and occasional classes with Walls students.

A junior in the undergraduate program, Madeleine Lei, stated, “This is actually the first time I have heard about School Without Walls. I knew about schools around here, but I did not know about [it].”

Brynn Sophie Taylor, a junior, said that she sees Walls students, “hoarding around in the food places and in the dome in Kogan... at least someone’s enjoying our campus.”

The other interviewees who knew about



GW’s Kogan Plaza, between G and H Streets NW across the street from Walls / Credits: Zoe Fisher

Walls said it was their tendency to travel in groups and large backpacks that gave Walls kids away.

An anonymous GW student thought Walls was an art school. “Just watching people walk by, I feel like their style is different compared to a normal public high school,” the student said. “It’s a lot more artsy or edgy.”

They also thought the high schoolers pos-

sess a “general vibe of naïveté.”

Some GW students get annoyed by the presence of high schoolers. Emma Westcott, a senior, explained, “You guys do not do anything wrong, but we are bitter, and if we see a group of you guys being happy and loud and exuberant we are like, ‘ugh shut up.’”

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Humanities Teachers Scrap Ancient Civilizations, Chronological Study in Curriculum Overhaul

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After considering the issue, Ms. Schulz and Ginea Briggs, who teaches Humanities II and AP Research, launched an overhaul of the courses. The department adopted a textbook for both Humanities I and II, in a significant departure from the previous classes’ structure. “We’re a humanities course, not English. We’ve always borrowed information from a variety of sources,” Ms. Briggs said. However, “the benefit of the [text]book adoption is there is a wealth of readings and selections for the teacher to choose from,” she added, which made finding effective sources for the new framework easier.

In Humanities I, most of the ancient texts were scrapped in favor of more contemporary works. “The struggle was making the connection to students and the relevance of ancient texts,” Ms. Schulz said. “While you may have had representations from different cultures, it still felt like an antiquated course because you didn’t have a lot of contemporary connection.”

One ancient text from the old curriculum, the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, was kept in the course. “We really believed that the thing that was really solid about the Humanities I curriculum was looking at the origins of storytelling and the purpose of oral tradition, and building a foundation for literature,” Ms. Schulz said. “We wanted to make sure that that was still a part of that course.”

“[Humanities I] felt like an antiquated course because you didn’t have a lot of contemporary connection.”

In the new course, Ms. Schulz explained, early literature at the heart of the former curriculum serves as a starting point for broader study “by theme.” “We now look at the beginnings of story by looking at the origins of storytelling,” she said. “Then out of that we talk about how now all these themes that we see throughout all different types of literature are at the root of the origins of world tradition.”

The structure of Humanities II was flipped. “We used to teach Humanities II in what’s referred to as a survey, meaning you start from date x or point x and move chronologically until an end date,” Ms. Briggs, the course’s primary teacher, said. “The [text]book we adopted takes a very different philosophy looking at American literature and studies, and they believe that we should start now to understand how you got that older literature.”

“9/11, immigration, Native American reservation schools, police brutality... these are topics you all are aware of.”

Ms. Briggs added that the old course “was just literature from the same voices over and over. The overwhelming majority of the authors were white authors, white male authors in particular.” In the new course, “we’ve been talking about 9/11, we’ve been talking about immigration, we are now talking about things like Native American reservation schools,” she added. “Next we’re going to be talking about police brutality. These are topics you all are aware of.”

Some things were held over from the old courses. The sophomore speech, which Ms. Briggs said has become a “rite of passage” for students, and the freshmen research paper will remain, for instance. Those projects in Humanities I and II are “a critical part of the building blocks for getting students ready for Senior Project,” said Ms. Briggs.

Humanities IV was modified “for representation,” in the same way as Humanities II, Ms. Schulz said, adding more female authors and authors of color, but the curriculum was not updated to the extent of Humanities I and II.

Iris Singer, a ninth grader in Ms. Schulz’s Humanities I class, said that she hasn’t found the class relevant to so far, but that she is optimistic for the future. “I know we’re going to read some novels [later in the year] and that’s exciting,” she said.

A 10th grader in Ms. Briggs’s Humanities

II class, who asked to remain anonymous, remained disillusioned with the class. “I just don’t know how necessary [the changed curriculum] is. It doesn’t feel like we’re doing anything,” she said. “I think it’s a good course but there’s other things that could’ve been added.”

Another 10th grader in Ms. Briggs’ Humanities II class, who also asked to remain anonymous, had a very different perspective. “We’ve been learning about oppressive systems, and I think that’s important for us to learn. Because the U.S. still has oppressive systems in place, and so it’s nice we’re learning about them.”

Lilly Shaw, a senior, said she didn’t think her education in her first two years of humanities was relevant to the world around her. “I felt like we were talking about things in very ancient world history, and although I really enjoyed learning about some of these topics it definitely didn’t give me any insight into current world events,” she said. “I think it’s good that they’ve scrapped some of those ancient texts, especially moving towards content that’ll be a little more relevant.”

Savannah Alexander, also a senior, said, “It didn’t feel like [the old curriculum] was relevant. We were learning about these ancient texts in Egypt and Greece and I didn’t really see how they connected to our lives.”

Ms. Schulz also adds that this year is a pilot year for the new curriculum. “When you do a revision of a curriculum you have the pilot year, and then that following year you have a revision of the curriculum again. And then you kind of see how that takes place, and then there’s another year and another revision after that, so that third year generally tends to be about when the curriculum is kind of solidified, where it’s going to be. But it takes about three years, collectively.”

“I think about the essential question — what does it mean to be an American?” Ms. Briggs said. “In the beginning of the year most everyone had a definitive answer, and I hope that during the process of a course like Humanities II that that answer gets more and more nuanced.” ●

Nearly 80 Years Since Opening, Leo's Deli Serves Walls and GW Alike

Deli continued from page 1

In 2004, the GW Hatchet published an obituary of a man named Leo Amborgi. Why would GW, let alone School Without Walls, care about this New Yorker born in 1908? Amborgi was the founder and owner of the GW deli.

In the early 1940s, Amborgi was a GW student who ran a sandwich shop as a side source of income. Eventually, his sandwich business became so popular that Amborgi decided to drop out of the school after only two years to open the full-time GW deli.

After his death in 2004, ownership passed on to his son, John Amborgi, the current owner of the deli. Even today, anytime a student buys a pack of gum or piece of candy, his sons John or Matt are likely behind the counter. The Amborgis owned and ran the deli since Leo first opened in 1945. Perhaps this is what maintains the deli's truly remarkable atmosphere.

Junior Ben Yarkin visits the deli five times a week and has earned his self-proclaimed title as the deli's top one or two customers. "My favorite part [about the deli] is the vibe. I know a few of the employees and they are always relaxed and happy," Yarkin said.

Not only does the deli have a great atmosphere, amazing history, and cheap prices, it boasts excellent food options. The deli's legacy has gone on to help GW and Walls students alike. Even 77 years after it first opened, Walls' students sing its praises.

Juniors August Rundlet and Ben Shelsby greatly recommended the bacon, egg, and cheese and the sausage, egg, and cheese as high quality breakfasts, lunches, or afterschool snacks. Yarkin believes the deli cheesesteak is the best thing on the menu.

The deli cheesesteak itself is part of a long and honored tradition among some Walls students known as Cheesesteak Fridays. Starting last March, groups of Walls students have all



Credits: Jack Meltzer

ordered the deli cheese steak for lunch on Friday. The tradition caught on and on one Friday last June, 11 students all ordered a deli cheesesteak at the same time. Max Ziedler, a loyal participant of Cheesesteak Fridays, said it is "a great way to celebrate the end of the week."

No place, even the iconic deli, is perfect. Despite the line moving fast, students have noted that the deli usually does have a slightly longer wait than other lunch options. With the line often stretching far past the door, on cold days standing outside in a deli line can be particularly uncomfortable. However, whether in search of a sandwich, a bag of chips, or their world famous crumb cake, the deli has become the go-to spot for GW and Walls students alike.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

From Bangkok to D.C.

By Lexi Padre (2025)
Staff Writer

"I had no idea where I was going to be placed," Napat Thongsongkrit said when asked about his exchange program. "I knew I didn't want to stay in the country but it wasn't up to me. It was a risk and I had to take it."

Thongsongkrit is 16 and from Bangkok, Thailand, a city of over 10 million people. He's attending Walls as a junior, until the end of the 2022-23 school year. While homesick, he is excited to be in D.C. Thongsongkrit says, "I enjoy biking around the city, I couldn't bike in Thailand, especially in Bangkok." He likes the weather in D.C., which motivates him to do outdoor activities. However, he finds that "D.C. doesn't have many things to do."

When asked about Walls and school back in Thailand he states, "It's pretty small compared to my school, my school has 4,500 people." Thongsongkrit also laments on the lack of recreational facilities that Walls has access to. At his school in Bangkok, he had access to "six basketball courts, one soccer field, two tennis courts, and two badminton courts," he said.

In order to attend school in the U.S. Thongsongkrit had to take tests and interview with the American Field Service, a non-profit youth international exchange organization, to prove he's able to speak English. He applied after his older sister participated in an exchange program in Germany and liked it. When his sister left, he said, she was shy, but when she returned from Germany she was very talkative. He admires his sister because she's "more proud of herself and more confident" and hopes to become like her.

Before Thongsongkrit leaves he would like to make friends in all grades. In addition, Thongsongkrit is attending NBA games while

Pat Thongsongkrit continued on page 6

CLUB SPOTLIGHT

Penguin Minds Really Do Matter

By Darya Filippova (2024)
Staff Writer

Many Walls students value the school's academic rigor, but struggle with its accompanying stress. Last year, a group of students created Penguin Minds Matter (PMM) to "engage, empower, and educate students on topics surrounding mental health."

PMM is affiliated with Our Minds Matter (OMM), a program that trains student leaders to promote healthy school environments and advocate for youth mental health.

Senior Sydney Horge, PMM's treasurer, explains why she helped start the club. "When I first learned about Our Minds Matter, I was immediately eager to help start the first mental health club at Walls," Horge said.

She acknowledges that many Walls students face similar stressors and personal struggles but do not know what resources are available to them. PMM aims to bridge this gap.

Lori McDowell, the school's psychologist, chose to sponsor the club after she "saw the work the members were putting in ... I wanted to support them as much as possible."

"Students have better ideas in ways to reach each other that adults don't even think about," said Dr. McDowell. "We are at Walls, and with all that embedded stress, students should know they are not alone, they should



A Penguin Minds Matter meeting last month / Credits: Darya Filippova

know that they are supported, and have the resources they need."

PMM offers community service hours, a chance to make new friends and thoughtful discussions on mental health. Member Ayele Gousseva initially joined the club for the service hours, but grew to appreciate its community. "The club offered a safe space to feel my emotions without the judgment of peers or without the competitive energy often circulating around Walls," she said.

Gousseva recommends the club for everyone, especially underclassmen. "A lot of the younger students are getting to know the Walls

environment and the competitiveness can be a lot," she said, "so to have a place where the pretentiousness is dropped, even if it's just one morning of a week, can be a true relief."

During its Wednesday morning meetings, the club holds stress relief activities to help students prepare for the school day. Near Halloween, the club sponsored pumpkin painting, which allowed students to relax and meet members in other grades. The club also plans to host fundraisers to support local mental health charities and organizations.

Penguin Minds Matter meets in room XXX on Wednesdays at 8:30 a.m. ●

Walls's Favorite Winter Activities

By Evie Corr (2025)
Staff Writer

As autumn fades, Walls students look forward to winter activities. Below, The Rookery explores some of D.C.'s favorite winter traditions.

Ice Skating

There are many skating options in the District.

The **Sculpture Garden**, located on the National Mall, is one of the most popular ice rink locations. This rink has a festive atmosphere and vibrant winter spirit. Holiday music is playing, food is available, museums are nearby, and visitors are surrounded by beautiful sculptures and works of art. The entry fee to the rink is \$12, but there is a student discount for only a \$9 entry. To receive this discount students must show their student ID. Renting is available, but only for skaters 18 or older. There is a \$6 skate rental and \$1 locker rental. One of the best things about the Sculpture Garden is its Metro accessibility. It's Metro-accessible: the Smithsonian (Blue, Orange, and Silver Lines) and Archives (Yellow and Green Lines) stations are nearby.

Southeast of the Sculpture Garden is **Canal Park**, in the Navy Yard neighborhood, located a block from Nationals Stadium and near the Anacostia River. Dining options abound: Pizza, sushi, ice cream, and garlic knots are available at the rink. Many Navy Yard shops and restaurants are also nearby. Skate rental is only \$5, with an additional \$12 entry fee. Just like the Sculpture Garden, Canal Park has Metro accessibility: the Green Line's Navy Yard station is only a two-minute walk from the rink.

Finally, the **Washington Harbor** rink, located at Georgetown Harbor, offers beautiful views of the Potomac. It isn't too far from school, about a 25-minute walk down Virginia Ave. The rink entry fee is \$10 and skate rental is \$7. Unlike the Sculpture Garden and Canal Park, Washington Harbor rink isn't near a Metro stop, but it is bus-accessible via the 31 or 33.



Credits: Myra Shalaty

U.S. Botanic Garden

Located just down the hill from the U.S. Capitol, the **U.S. Botanic Garden** features a stunning holiday display of model trains and scale models of D.C.'s most iconic buildings and monuments, all made from plant materials.

This year, the Botanic Garden has set up the trains outside, a holdover from last year's COVID-friendly exhibit, but there will be holiday-themed exhibits inside the conservatory as well. The seasonal exhibit will run from Nov. 24, 2022 until Jan. 2, 2023. Tickets are not required to visit the Botanic Garden.

Lighting Ceremonies

Another unique D.C. winter tradition is the **National Menorah Lighting**, which has taken place on the first night of Hanukkah every year since 1979. The lighting is held on the Ellipse in front of the White House. A large crowd attends the lighting every year, seated in front of the approximately 30-foot-tall meno-

rah. Music is played by various military bands and food is available. Rabbis representing the American Friends of the Lubavitch, the organization that hosts this event, are hoisted in a cherry picker to light the large menorah.

This year the lighting occurs on Sunday, Dec. 18, the first day of Hanukkah. Tickets are free and available on the National Menorah website. The White House is only a 10-15 minute walk from school. Prominent guests attending include the President, Vice President, members of the Cabinet and Congress and the diplomatic corps.

Another notable celebration is the **Capitol Christmas Tree lighting ceremony**. For over fifty years, D.C. has kicked off the Christmas season by lighting a 50-foot evergreen tree. A different state provides the tree each year, which is decorated from top to bottom by the Capitol Grounds Team. This year the tree came from the forests of North Carolina. The Capitol Tree remains lit from sundown to 11 p.m. every night through Christmas. ●

Pat Thongsongkrit, Exchange Student From Thailand, Discusses Life at Walls

Pat Thongsongkrit continued from page 5

he is here as he cannot in Bangkok. He encourages others to become exchange students but notes that cultural differences can be tough. While Walls only has one exchange student this year, in previous years Walls has had upwards of 15 students in a single year.

If studying abroad during high school sounds interesting, Maribel Jimeno, a Walls Spanish teacher, coordinates with the Council

on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), a non-profit organization that promotes international exchange and education. She said more information on exchange programs for Walls students will be available near the end of the school year. ●

Image at right: Pat Thongsongkrit
Credits: Lexi Padre



GW Students' Thoughts on Walls

GW Students continued from page 4

Taylor added, "It's not a reflection of how I feel about you guys, it's just a reflection of how I feel about life and youth. It's hard to tell if they're a really young freshman or a Walls kid. And if they're annoying, I'll respond the same way."

On the social media platform Jeti, there is an online community of GW students who complain about Walls. "I have to pass you guys to go to class a lot, and sometimes you're like singing, and walking in your groups," Westcott said, "and I put that on Jeti one time. [It got]

tons of 'up votes.'"

Taylor added, "Enough people have the critical thinking skills to not go like 'all the Walls kids suck.' I'm sure we've all said it and tweeted about it, but we don't actually think that."

Joey, a GW first-year, explained, "We've got plenty of annoying people here anyway, so like, it can't be worse than our fellow GW students."

Many GW students have only met their high school counterparts on rare occasions through the GW Early College Program. The program allows Walls juniors and seniors to enroll full-time in college and work towards an associate's degree.

Some GW students said they enjoyed the company of their younger classmates. In fact, senior Abi Ingoglia said, "I was friends with a

Walls kid when I was a freshman."

GW junior Eliana Pirotti said, "I had a friend who had a class with a Walls kid. They just thought that [the Walls student] was cool and smart, and they felt very insecure having a high schooler in their class who was doing better than them."

Her friend, Leona Freedman, another junior, agreed. "I would not be as confident [as Walls students are] walking around a college campus when I was in high school," she said.

Pirotti, acknowledging the singularity of Walls students' position, said, "I think it's great that high schoolers are being given opportunities to have really cool experiences and show that they are really smart. Because I think that you guys are really smart, and people don't give you enough credit. So to give you the opportunity to take college classes is really dope." ●

Athletic Programs Struggle to Keep Up in “School Without Gym”

By Theo Weller (2025)
Sports Writer

It's a warm April Friday afternoon. The clock hits 3:30 p.m. and Walls students are let out for the weekend. But a somewhat tense mood hangs over the baseball team, just one day away from their biggest game of the year: the Jackson-Reed showdown.

The team is eager to tune up their skills at practice in preparation. Fitted with two backpacks each — one for baseball, one for school — the group makes their way to the Foggy Bottom Metro where they catch the 3:45 train. After multiple Metro transfers and 10 minutes of walking, they arrive at Banneker Recreation Center at 4:20 — at the earliest. Finally it's time to practice. This is the trek the team must make every day just to practice.

In contrast, Jackson-Reed baseball player Freeman Hunt ('25) reported a devastating two-minute commute to practice at Fort Reno.

School Without Walls has plenty of successful athletic programs. Several sports routinely dominate in-conference games, even taking down some private schools. In their most recent seasons, the baseball, soccer, volleyball, tennis, swimming and golf teams reached the DCIAA championships. Tennis, girls swimming and golf teams all won first.

Despite the school's athletic prowess, our facilities can't compete. The school has no fields or courts on-site or even closely accessible. As a result, student athletes, like those on the baseball team, are regularly forced to travel across the city.

As DCPS renovations fitted schools with sparkling new athletic facilities, Walls's lack of space means it lags behind its counterparts. Senior Eliav Brooks-Rubin, head of the Sports Information Club, contends that Walls has the worst athletic facilities out of all DCPS schools.

Brooks-Rubin isn't alone in these views. Soccer player and track athlete Jack Meltzer ('24) also reported team commute times of up to 45 minutes. The soccer teams practice at The Fields at RFK, 11 Metro stops and a reasonable walk away from school.

No other D.C. public high school lacks a gym, as Brooks-Rubin points out. A member of the basketball and baseball teams, he notes “the basketball practice situation is absolutely ridiculous every year. This year we're practicing on a court that we're sharing with the girls team, from 6-8 p.m. Last year, we started at 5:30 on a court as skinny as two swimming lanes before shifting to an extremely slippery and still small court once the girls were done...We don't get to practice everyday because the schools we play at have events or need their gyms from time to time.”

Brooks-Rubin told The Rookery that “despite the stereotype of Walls as a purely academic school, I think we have among the most passionate fans in the DCIAA.” But Walls' athletic predicament prevents them from supporting us as well as they can. He added, “Not having facilities limits the fan turnout because of accessibility.” Fostering school spirit and overall community is difficult when sporting events are inconvenient.

In contrast, the Jackson-Reed features a quality batting cage complete with a fully intact net. Even after Walls' players journey to practice, they are greeted by a cage so riddled with holes that it is nearly unusable.

Hunt said he is able to “lift in the weight room, hit, throw, do some fielding drill[s] and sprinting.” The School Without Walls “weight room” is a claustrophobically small janitor's closet fitted with one bench and a handful of miscellaneous weights. Walls is already at a disadvantage by virtue of its facilities (or lack thereof) against DCPS opponents, namely rival



The Walls baseball team uses aging batting cages at the old Banneker High School building.
Credits: Theo Weller

Jackson-Reed. But adding facilities is no easy task for an already undersized campus.

Many Walls students see a basketball gym as the biggest need. Not only would this benefit the volleyball and basketball teams (along with other sports looking for a place to run modified practices on rainy days), Brooks-Rubin pointed out that it “would also be beneficial to the broader school community in our PE classes and just to have access to.” Though a field could serve many sports as well, the school's geography in tightly-packed downtown DC makes this nearly impossible.

Considering that Walls is built on its partnership with George Washington University, one might expect that SWW student-athletes would have access to its facilities. In the past, this was the case. Basketball and swimming at times practiced at GW's athletic center. But with the exception of those in the GW program, Walls students are currently barred from using any GW facilities. According to GW's associate athletic director Brian Sereno, this is because “high school students are recruitable age prospects. [Walls] would need to pay the going rental rate for us to avoid any NCAA recruiting violations.”

Walls students do still have something to look forward to. SWW athletic director Kip Smith said that “when renovations for Francis-Stevens are done, we will have access to a full-size gym. The current gym size is being expanded.”

He added that “we also have access to the MacArthur Boulevard School, formerly owned by GDS, that will be opening in the fall of 2023. Also, we are in the process of exploring partnerships with private schools and facilities within D.C.”

Though the renovation at Francis-Stevens has caused inconvenience by complicating volleyball and basketball's practices, it seems it may be well worth it in the end. Francis-Stevens is less than a mile from SWW's Foggy Bottom campus. Additionally, its association with School Without Walls High School ensures reliable access. Though the MacArthur Boulevard School is further — two and a half miles away — and not Metro-accessible, it has the upside of not housing any other students, giving Walls athletes a court that is fully theirs.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel. But for now, School Without Walls athletes have to manage long commute times, little

in-person support, and sub-par facilities — all while trying to compete for city championships. ●

SWW SPORTS REPORT

Hot Start to the Basketball Season

By Eliav Brooks-Rubin (2023)
Sports Writer • Sports Information Club

Winning: Unfortunately, it's not a word that has been associated with School Without Walls boys' basketball in recent years. But this season, it's all the boys' team has been doing.

Kicking off the season with a home game against Burke, the Penguins hit their stride early with a 7-0 run and led at the end of the first quarter, 23-3. A light-scoring third quarter was the only blemish in a 60-21 steamrolling of Burke in front of the home fans. While the next two games were on the road, Penguin fans traveled. In front of a raucous crowd at E.L. Haynes, a key third quarter 7-0 run, capped off with a 3-pointer by Harry Megeath ('24), halted the Haynes momentum. The boys never looked back, closing out Haynes 64-56. The Latin atmosphere was no different, and the boys responded, outlasting the Lions 65-52 in a gritty fashion.

Much of the team's recent success can be credited to its sophomore stars, Chdiire Nwokwu and Paul Joire. Nwokwu has been the team's defensive cornerstone, picking opponents' pockets a remarkable five times per game; he turns defense into offense, averaging 14.7 points per game. Meanwhile, it feels like Joire hasn't missed a shot all year, shooting 68 percent from the floor (team: 42 percent) and 67 percent from the three-point line (team: 29 percent). Between the two of them, they've scored half of the team's 63 points per game.

Captain Julius Cohen ('23) highlighted their impact, noting, “They're so dynamic defending and scoring the ball — without them, we might be looking at a losing record right now.”

As the boys' varsity team moves into the tougher part of their season, momentum is on their side. With the backing of a newly passionate fanbase, the boys' varsity team seems poised to make noise in the DCIAA this year. ●

The Importance of Student Journalism, in the Words of AI

By ChatGPT
Guest Contributor

ChatGPT, a preliminary chat-based artificial intelligence program developed by OpenAI, has attracted significant attention since its release last month for its impressive reasoning, versatility and fluency. To demonstrate the capability of AI and its potential to transform the news industry, we asked ChatGPT to "write a brief article for a high school student newspaper about the importance of school journalism."

— Gabriel Kraemer, editor-in-chief

School journalism plays a vital role in fostering a sense of community and promoting transparency within a school. As student journalists, we have the opportunity to not only inform our peers about important events and issues, but also to give a voice to those who may not otherwise be heard.

Through our reporting, we can shine a light on important issues and spark discussions and debates among our school community. This not only keeps students informed, but also encourages critical thinking and engagement with the world around us.

In addition, school journalism provides a platform for student perspectives and experiences. As young journalists, we have a unique perspective on the events and issues affecting our school, and our reporting allows us to share that perspective with our peers and the broader community.

Furthermore, school journalism serves as a valuable learning experience for students. It teaches us important skills such as research, writing, and critical thinking, and allows us to develop our voice and express ourselves creatively.

In short, school journalism is crucial for fostering a sense of community and promoting transparency within our school. As student journalists, we have the opportunity to inform, engage, and empower our peers. Let's continue to support and uplift school journalism, and strive to make our student newspaper a valuable source of information and perspective. ●

Crossword

By Emmett Brosowsky (2023)
Puzzle Editor

ACROSS

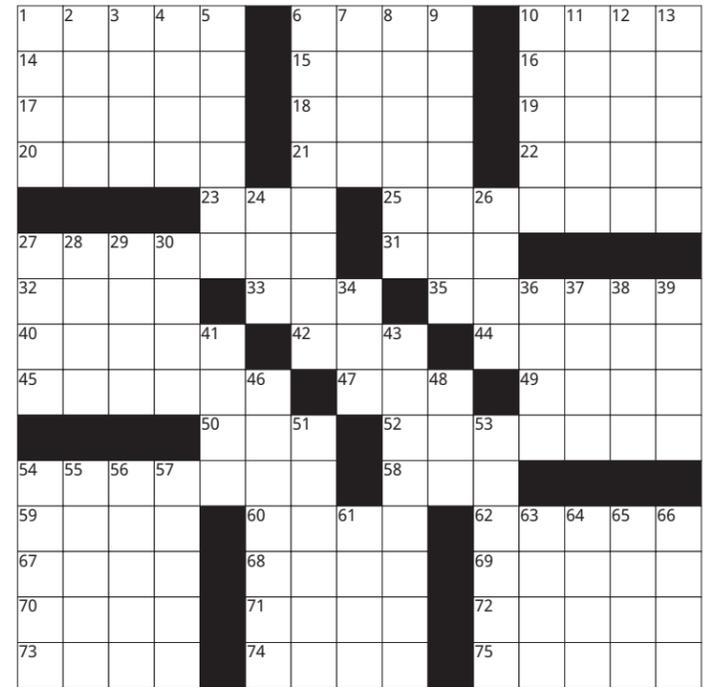
- 1 Fragrant wood
6 Credit or debit
10 Wharf
14 Congo, formerly
15 Away from the wind
16 "Yeah... I don't think so"
17 Equally angry
18 Opposite of future
19 Texas ___ M
20 Short Instagram videos
21 Stench
22 Reaction more extreme than LOL
23 Biannual Muslim holiday
25 With 54A, popular poultry place for 75A
27 You'll lose it when you solve this clue
31 Spasm
32 1993 Texan standoff site
33 Every
35 Countertop cash collector
40 Turing, Rickman, and Alda, for some
42 Organizers of Paris 2024, for short
44 40-40
45 D or C, in D.C.
47 Definite article in rap, sometimes
49 Secrecy contracts: abbr.
50 Slang for the A in LGBTQIA, sometimes
52 Frugal one's answer to "Where did you get 75A?"
54 See 25A
58 Criticize harshly

59 Do not enter?

- 60 Prefix with skeleton
62 Mosque leaders
67 Column in chess
68 Nair rival
69 Mob
70 It's sometimes represented by a lightbulb
71 Russian mountain range that's one letter off from 4D
72 "You're being ___"
73 Quarter or semester
74 Spare in a Brit's boot
75 Midday break... and a hint to 25A, 52A, 54A, 6D, and 43D

DOWN

- 1 Bygone Russian leader
2 Simplicity
3 Accurate throw, maybe
4 Shrinking sea that's one letter off from 71A
5 Site of a famous split
6 Superb sandwich spot for 75A
7 "When I was ___"
8 Club Med, for one
9 Home of Lions and Tigers?
10 Worry
11 Savory taste
12 Kofi formerly of the U.N.
13 "Hello, sir," extremely slangily
24 "___ Believer" (Monkees hit)
26 It's anything but basic



- 27 It comes before the night before Christmas
28 Stop
29 Tesla, for one
30 Not here
34 Real estate listing
36 Stay in a state of limbo
37 Title guy in a Beatles song
38 Purple berry often used in smoothie bowls
39 Partner of relaxation
41 Follower of aisle or window
43 Lovely Latin-American locale for 75A
46 Common generic allergen

- 48 Redditor's "all question's allowed," for short
51 Cantankerous
53 Muppet drummer
54 Equip again
55 Rust, for one
56 Edmonton NHL player
57 Water vapor
61 Letter opener?
63 Ronaldo's now-former squad, for short
64 Picasso's "Lady with ___"
65 Catchall abbr.
66 Pageant Accessory

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Find us on Monday mornings at 8:30 a.m.

in room 127 to contribute to the paper!