

We Are.....

Willie Ross!

Annual Report 2022 • Willie Ross School for the Deaf

Reflecting on Our Founders

As time marches on and Willie Ross School for the Deaf continues to evolve to meet the needs of our student population, we remind ourselves that it was a small group of loving parents who had the courage to send their children to a fledgling first-of-its-kind school for the deaf.

The story of perseverance demonstrated by the very first parents to entrust the school with the education of their children never gets old.

There are only a few of the original cohort of Willie Ross parents still with us and at our most recent WRSD Gala our community gratefully celebrated Grammatiki “Kiki” Anderson, who was there at the start of the school.

Our 2022 Gala audience was moved hearing Kiki share her heart about those early days of the school. A native of Greece, Kiki moved to the United States in 1956, eventually settling in Longmeadow. Her son John was born deaf and Kiki joined with other parents of a deaf child in advocating for and starting our school in 1967. These parents were motivated by a very simple idea—they wanted a day school where their children would learn with other deaf children, come home at the end of the school day, have dinner with their families and sleep in their own beds.

Kiki’s love for Willie Ross and what it represented to her and so many other parents was so evident as she humbly addressed attendees at our 2022 Gala. We would not be here without Kiki and the group of inspired parents, who to this day remain an important part of the school’s DNA.

Those parents, many of them no longer with us, would be proud to see Willie Ross School in its present state. In 2022, we fully occupied our new administrative center that includes an audiology clinic. We also cut the ribbon on a new playground offering a new outdoor space to our students. Both initiatives were made possible from capital fund drives, crowd funding and the generosity of many within our community and outside as well.

Our Board of Trustees composition continues to evolve with the inclusion of a parent and a deaf person and we are proud of the broad diversity of our student population.

In addition to our flourishing main campus in Longmeadow and our partnership campus embedded in East Longmeadow Schools providing mainstreaming services, Willie Ross Outreach division continues to experience unprecedented growth in serving individual school districts.

None of this could have been possible without the original vision and dedication of the founders of our school. We always say we have the best staff and we do! We appreciate those who continue to share our vision for a vibrant, evolving and loving school community.



Bert Carter, President & CEO



George Balsley II, Chair, Board of Trustees

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Historic Board Appointment



George Balsley, a longtime member of the school's Board of Trustees, became Chair of the WRSD Board in 2022. This marks the first time a deaf individual has served as the chair of the Board of Trustees in the school's 55-year history.

George is a native of Washington, DC and as a child moved to Western Massachusetts where he attended the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton. He spent his career as a registered architect and became involved in architecture for the deaf.

Balsley recalls his own experience growing up deaf. "When I was born, while Harry Truman was President, hospitals didn't have hearing tests. At the time, we were living in Hawaii where my dad, a Naval officer, was working at Pearl Harbor when my mother suspected that I was deaf at 15 months. She took me to John Hopkins Hospital where it was confirmed that I was deaf. My parents were resolved to find a school that would teach me speech and lipreading and hopefully learn how to hear.

"It's a full circle experience for me now to serve on the Board and I am honored to be named Chair of this amazing learning community," Balsley said.

Ribbon Cutting for *Our New Playground*



Our new Longmeadow campus playground was dedicated in 2022 to Peter and Kate Pappas, longtime supporters of the school. Representative Brian Ashe and Senator Eric Lesser were in attendance, along with board members, staff and students.

The new playground was part of the school's larger campus expansion and renovation of its Sidney Cooley administration building. The new playground has a number of climbing features and slides.

Peter Pappas has served on the Willie Ross School for the Deaf board for more than 10 years and he and his wife have been longtime supporters of Willie Ross.



In 2021, the school initiated an online crowdfunding campaign on GiveCampus.com for the new playground, and reached 100% of its \$75,000 goal within several months due to contributions from board members, faculty and staff, students, parents of students, alumni, and members of the larger community. In total, more than 160 donors contributed to the campaign.





L-R: State Senator Eric Lesser, Willie Ross President and CEO Bert Carter, Peter Pappas, and State Representative Brian Ashe.

Parent Spotlight

Paying it Forward *The Lawsons - Parents Making a Valuable Gift*

The Lawson family first heard about Willie Ross School for the Deaf when they learned their two-and-a-half-year-old was severely language delayed. That was in 1978 and their son, Patrick, was enrolled in the integrated preschool program at the school.

For Susan and Kevin Lawson, finding Willie Ross was life altering for Patrick and for their family.

Susan says, "I do not know how I would have been able to move on in life without the genuine, caring support of the WRSD staff and parents. While I was working with clinical specialists to resolve our son's medical issues, Patrick was becoming a happier, calmer three-year-old. He was learning some basic signing which opened the door to better communication skills. Family life began to settle down as well...we were on a good path.

"As his mother, my experience with WRSD was life altering in the most positive ways. I was connected to and supported by other parents dealing with the same, scary issues. We were put on a path with a plan to give our son the tools he needed to be happy and thrive," she says.

In a classic "pay it forward" moment, the Lawsons provided the signature donation to allow the building of a new playground at the Longmeadow campus. The program benefited from a crowdsource fundraising campaign, with the Lawson donation being the centerpiece for the project.

"The thoughts of children having a safe place to play and interact...just have fun...made our decision to contribute a no brainer. It was the perfect way for us to give back to the school that has played such a vital role in our son growing into a happy, productive adult," Susan says.

"It warms the hearts of all our family members. It was indeed, well worth our gift. We were grateful to be in a position to help with the playground project."

Battle of the Books

WRSD Places Third 2 Years in a Row

Each year Willie Ross students participate in the Battle of the Books national academic competition. For the second year in a row, the school placed third. Congratulations to our outstanding students and our own All Star in the competition, Helen Dempsey.

The purpose of the Battle of the Books is to promote literacy among deaf and hard of hearing middle school students; promote a spirit of academic competition and good sportsmanship; and to encourage critical thinking skills among middle school students.

The annual competition for middle school students consists of three different divisions based on reading levels, and tasks each team (of at least three students) with reading three assigned books independently without help from teachers, parents or other adults, followed by rounds of competition.



Outreach Services

Continued Growth

Laurie Brown was named Director of Outreach Services in July of 2022. She succeeded longtime Willie Ross administrator Greg DeLisle, who served in many administrative positions, the last of which was overseeing Outreach Services.

Starting under Greg and now with Laurie's leadership, WRSD's Outreach Services continue to grow and expand. Outreach programs bring WRSD expertise to help deaf and hard of hearing students into the school districts where those students are. A full-time director, where once there was a part-time director, a full-time American Sign Language specialist and, going forward, the addition of a teacher, all point to the dramatic growth of services.

The goal is to meet the individual needs of each child, delivered by Willie Ross professionals in collaboration with a school district. The Outreach team supports individual students' language and communications needs as determined by their Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Some quick stats:

WRSD Outreach serves **24 school districts/communities** in Massachusetts and Connecticut

Teacher of the Deaf (TOD) consultation was provided to over **170 students over the two states** in the past year

Early Intervention, which typically serves four newborns is up to a **census of 13 newborns**

Four districts were added in Massachusetts and **one** in Connecticut over the past year

In the 2021-22 school year there were four districts using WRSD ASL supports; in **2022-23 that number grew to eight districts**

TOD consultation was rendered in three districts two years ago; in this **past year nine districts utilized this service**

Annual Gala

The 2022 WRSD Annual Gala, held on October 13, 2022 at Twin Hills Country Club, Longmeadow, celebrated longtime supporter, Grammatiki “Kiki” Anderson, and longtime partner, Paul Robbins Associates.

Kiki Anderson is part of the cohort of parents who helped to establish the school in 1967. Kiki’s son John was born deaf and after struggling to find the right program for her son she discovered Willie Ross. John became part of the original class at WRSD.

In the school’s early years, parents contributed whatever skills they had to support the success of Willie Ross. Kiki coordinated bake sales and tapped her contacts in the Greek community to help get the school off the ground. She shared with Gala attendees that the kindness and caring she experienced in the beginning continues at Willie Ross today.

The evening’s other honoree was Paul Robbins Associates, a strategic communications firm that has partnered with Willie Ross on all things related to communications including media outreach, creation of videos and marketing/branding initiatives all designed to tell the Willie Ross story.

The strategic communications agency became involved after longtime board member, Erica Broman, reached out for help with the school’s communications. Paul Robbins, principal of Paul Robbins Associates, says, “Erica understood that Willie Ross was at a point that it needed assistance with communications. I immediately fell in love with the school—the teachers and children are so joyful and are the heartbeat of the school.

“It has been a joy to raise the profile of the school in so many ways and to play a very small part in seeing the school flourish and grow.

“Our success in telling this amazing story is helped immeasurably by my colleague at PRA Talene Jermakian. Her skill, dedication and professionalism is a big reason the school’s profile has been raised.”



Kiki Anderson with President and CEO Bert Carter and her son, John.



Paul Robbins and Talene Jermakian, of Paul Robbins Associates.

The annual Gala Auction was well received with the following organizations providing gifts: Hartford Yard Goats; Boston Red Sox; Total Wine & More; The BroBasket; Mystic Aquarium; Elite Island Resorts: Caribbean (8 packages up for auction); Mohegan Sun; Exit 7 Theater; Sonny’s Place; Oriental Trading; Connecticut Sun (WNBA team); TreeTop Adventures; Celebrity Series of Boston; Buzzards Bay Brewing; Institute of Contemporary Art/ Boston; Mass Audubon; and New England Revolution.

Sharing Our Message



Facebook

- 2,323 likes
- 2,506 follows

Instagram

- 832 followers



Website (2022 numbers)

- 13,954 visits
- 30,039 views



WRSD is featured in Monson Savings Bank TV commercials! We're grateful for our partnerships with the local business community.



Our new overview video, WRSD is L-O-V-E, tells the story about our school and all that we offer to our students and families. Watch the video on our website, WRSDeaf.org, or scan the QR code!



Student Spotlight

A Graduation Message

Darlin Betemi offered the student speech for our graduation in June. His inspiring words are shared.

Excerpts from Darlin Betemi's Graduation Address

“ Hello, precious people. I just wanted to say thank you to my family for your help, support, and making me who I am. My mom, who found Willie Ross, thank you mom, because you were there for me when I needed it the most. And thank you to my new Willie Ross family for giving me the support that I needed to be here, standing before you today. Thank you to the teachers and the staff for never giving up on me, and for your support in keeping me focused and keeping me determined. Thank you for your help in getting me to my diploma and for all the good memories with you all... The teachers here are the best in the world... thank you to Julie for teaching me math, and when I had a really hard time, she stuck with me until I really got it. It was a challenge to work with me, and I know that that journey on math with me was a tough one. But I really do understand it now. And thank you also to [Julie Grenast] for your help in finding my curiosities and talking about my future. Your help and support so that I could really understand different career opportunities, and how that can be the step to my career. Thank you so much for being the school-to-career counselor. I'm so excited about the future. I'm planning on going to NTID for RIT in Rochester, and I'm planning on working hard and persevering, and never giving up on myself. Thank you for being here, everyone, here at Willie Ross. ”

Our Grads

Our 2022 graduates were Solomon Shtrom, Natavia Cobb, Darlin Betemi and Ashley Marrero, all of Springfield; Corbin Marcil from Easthampton; and Cameron Veprauskas from Southwick.

Corbin Marcil, of Easthampton, was a student at Willie Ross since 2006. His favorite class in school was Life Skills and his hobbies include watching fantasy movies and playing games. Marcil planned to attend tech school in the fall.

Ashley Marrero, of Springfield, was a WRSD student since 2006. Her favorite class in school was English, and her hobbies include drawing and gaming. Marrero's plans for the next year included working and supporting her family.

Darlin Betemi, of Springfield, was a WRSD student since October 2021. His favorite classes in school were history, science, and art. His hobbies include hanging out with friends, going to the pool and beach with friends, and taking trips. Betemi planned to attend National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology in the fall, as well as working and traveling.

Natavia Cobb, of Springfield, was a WRSD student since November 2003. Her favorite classes in school were English, P.E., and American Sign Language (ASL), and her hobbies include swimming, walking, listening to music, hanging out with friends and family, and shopping. Cobb planned to begin working after graduation.



Students who graduated from Willie Ross this year (L-R): Ashley Marrero, Cameron Veprauskas, Corbin Marcil, Natavia Cobb, and Darlin Betemi (not photographed: Solomon Shtrom)

Solomon Shtrom, of Springfield, was a student at WRSD since 2008. Shtrom's post-graduation plans included continuing his volunteer work at Baystate and looking for full-time employment.

Cameron Veprauskas, of Southwick, was a WRSD student since February 2007. His favorite classes in school were all science classes, and his hobbies include gaming.

Sign Language Classes

WRSD offers sign language classes each semester for members of the community, and free classes for parents and guardians of deaf and hard of hearing students.

Enrollment has remained steady at 60-70 students each semester. Of those students, 75% are from the larger community and not directly affiliated with WRSD.

This past year a Spanish translator was also added to the parent and guardian course for Spanish-speaking families.

The courses include: Level 1A beginner course for students who have no previous experience in sign language or fingerspelling. Students learn the manual alphabet and will learn to combine words to form simple sentences. The Level 1B course focuses on expanding basic vocabulary and conversation skills.

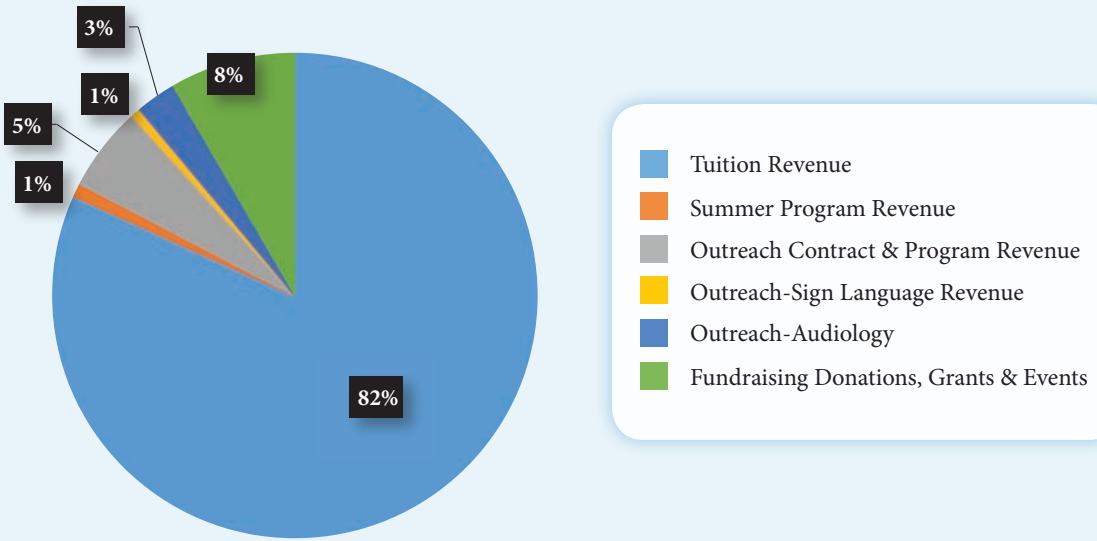
The Level 2A intermediate courses focus on further expanding vocabulary and conversation skills; and the 2B course is designed for students who possess a strong basic sign language vocabulary and fluency in expressive and receptive communication.

The Level 3 course is the most advanced course designed to further build on expressive and receptive communication.

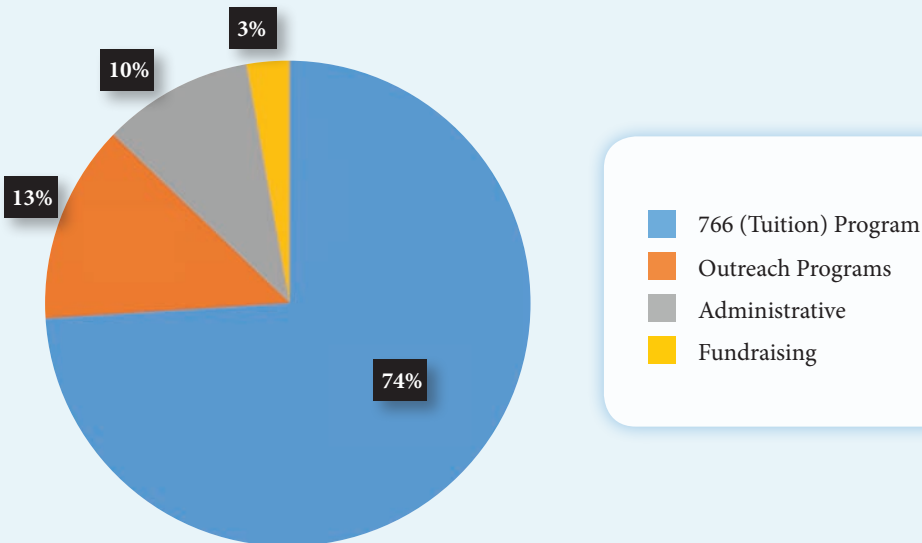
Sign language classes have been popular and serve as a resource to the larger community. Staff provide the training and administrators including Bert Carter and Joel Skelton have also served as instructors.



2022 Revenue by Source



2022 Expenses by Program



Massachusetts has a new charitable contributions deduction. It's available to all taxpayers, whether or not you itemize deductions on your federal return. Just keep track of your contributions and report them on the state tax return you file in the first part of 2024. They'll be deducted from your taxable income. This deduction is universal, and permanent, so you can utilize it every year going forward.

Our Annual Donors

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 T-Mobile Accessibility

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