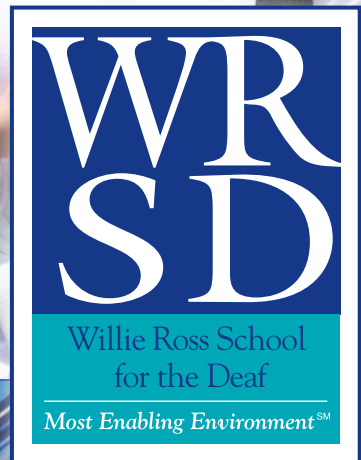




Celebrating Our Successes...

Preparing for the Future



To the Willie Ross Community and Our Friends,

The year 2025 was a transformative one for the Willie Ross School. So many initiatives to improve our school seemed to converge this past year. It allows us to look back and celebrate and, at the same time, prepare for what we all believe is a bright future.

Over this past year we have seen the growth of our school in so many areas—notable increases in our early education and Pre-K classes, establishment of new early education space on the campus of Bay Path University, the exponential growth in our Outreach program designed to assist public school districts with hard of hearing students, and the continued diversification of our Board of Trustees.

It was during 2025 that our President and CEO Bert Carter shared that he will retire at the end of the coming 2026-27 academic year. So, we will have plenty of time to reflect on his incredible service to our community over this next year while we, as always, look forward.

As we look back in this Annual Report, we celebrate Bert Carter's stewardship, we hear from the East Longmeadow School Superintendent about the value of the relationship with Willie Ross to the East Longmeadow community and we share our many successes in 2025—our 2025 graduating class, the hosting of our "Purse Bingo" fundraiser, the build-out of new space at Bay Path and we acknowledge our generous donors.

As always, none of these successes would be possible without the teachers, staff, Board of Trustees, friends and donors and, of course, the students who make our community truly unique.

Sincerely,

Claire Sanders
Chair, Board of Trustees

Embarking on the Next Phase of Classroom Expansion at Bay Path





In 2025 WRSD embarked on a new capital campaign for Phase 2 of its expansion of classroom space at Bay Path University (BPU). With a goal of \$800,000, the campaign seeks to further develop space on the ground floor of Bay Path's Theinert Hall, which will become the future home of WRSD high school classrooms.

Back in 2024, WRSD opened early education classroom space in Theinert Hall on the Bay Path campus — 7,500 square feet with four classrooms and several support rooms for students and staff, allowing WRSD to serve up to 20 additional students.

In addition to new classroom space, the campaign will fund essential BPU campus improvements in the spaces used by WRSD, including making entrances and bathrooms Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant. Funds will also be put toward much-needed improvements for WRSD's Longmeadow campus, particularly the student bathrooms which have been in need of renovations for some time.

The partnership and collaboration between BPU and the Willie Ross School is mutually beneficial, as it addresses the need for more early education and high school spaces for WRSD, and provides opportunities for hands-on experiences for Bay Path University students.

Willie Ross Hosts 2025 Gala at Bay Path

On April 10, WRSD held its annual Gala at Bay Path's Blake Student Commons. The event at Bay Path, which was a fitting way to celebrate the continued partnership between WRSD and the University, honored the late George H. Balseley, II, WRSD's first deaf Chair of the Board of Trustees and longtime supporter of the school, who had passed away just a month prior. WWLP-22 News was also recognized as a strong community partner of the school.





"The Best Job I've Ever Had"



Bert Carter to Wrap Up 13 Years as President & CEO in June 2027

For Bert Carter the road to a career in deaf education started with an internship at the Boston School for the Deaf while in graduate school at Lesley College in Cambridge. The aspiring art therapy professional admits to knowing nothing about the deaf community at the time.

"Once I met the students, I was hooked. This was the environment I knew I wanted to be in. I had no sign language skills and, through that experience, I became intrigued and really drawn to the deaf community and its culture. I enjoyed it so much I ended up doing my second-year internship there too, which required special permission from the College. The rest is history," Bert says.

His experience at the Boston School for the Deaf was life changing more than just on a professional level. Bert served that initial internship with three other Lesley College grad students—one of whom Bert eventually married.

From Lesley College, Bert went on to pursue a Ph.D. in Deafness Rehabilitation from New York University. While working on his degree, Bert accepted a position as program director at the Connecticut-based Family Services Woodfield, now known as Lifebridge. It was there that Bert learned administrative and leadership skills as Director of Deaf Services, growing the program from one full-time employee to 90 employees during his tenure.

Bert eventually was hired and became President and CEO of the Austine School for the Deaf in Vermont where there were multiple programs and deaf education sites across the state. It was at Austine that Bert became familiar with Lou Abbate, President and CEO of Willie Ross, and Lou's reputation for "having saved the Willie Ross School" when it had experienced critical funding gaps, Bert recounts.

"Lou and I would meet halfway between my office in Vermont and his at the Longmeadow campus. We would compare notes about the challenges and successes at our schools. So, when I got the job to succeed Lou, I knew I was walking into a school with good bones and there was a lot to work with."

"My first impressions when I was hired were that the staff was great and the partnership with the East Longmeadow Public Schools was excellent. Coming in, one of my goals was to strengthen the school's relationship with the deaf community," Bert says, "I wanted to bring both the community and the faculty into that process."

Upon his hiring in 2013, Bert started the process of increasing awareness of the Willie Ross School in the deaf community. Bert's outreach included alums of the school, the Deaf Club of Holyoke and the Western Mass Association for the Deaf, where Bert first met future Board of Trustee member and Board Chair George Balsley, who was deaf.

Bert also embarked on improving sign language proficiency for Willie Ross staff by engaging an American Sign Language specialist. This led to sign language classes for staff, in addition to those available to the community at large.

The school's Outreach program, where services are provided directly to students attending public school systems, received heightened attention under Bert's leadership to expand the school's reach. Today, the Outreach program has grown to serving more than 400 students, from just a few years ago serving less than 200 students, demonstrating exponential growth during his tenure.

Bert also launched a five-year strategic planning process early in his tenure—with the school now working on a third revision of its five-year plan. That original plan identified capital improvements needed on the Longmeadow campus. As a result, the school launched a successful \$1.6 million campaign leading to a \$2.2 million renovation, adding a second floor to the school's administrative center.



The transformed Sidney M. Cooley Administration Building included expanded space for the school's audiology clinic, new conference space and work-study space for students engaged in internships. The successful campaign also allowed for the renovation of outdoor play and recreational space for students.

As the student population at Willie Ross has become more diverse over Bert's time at the school (now a plurality of students are Latine), he moved to diversify the Board of Trustees. Now, there are persons of color, more women and, for the first time in the school's history, a deaf person served as Chair (the late George Balsley).

As Bert begins to wrap up his tenure at the school, Willie Ross has entered into a collaboration with Bay Path University to address the growth of early childhood education at Willie Ross. With the preschool-age census of deaf children growing at the school, Bert launched a search for local partners who could house and support the program. This culminated in a collaboration with Bay Path University in 2024 that led to the university housing WRSD's early education programming in renovated former student dorm space. Willie Ross has launched a new capital campaign in 2025 with a target of \$800,000 to grow the current space at Bay Path, making it the future home of the Willie Ross School's high school program.

"I would like to get this last capital drive for the Bay Path space completed before my tenure is up in 2027 so that the new leader has a clean slate," Bert says.

And maybe the most indelible legacy Bert will leave behind is his daily use of American Sign Language in communicating with students, teachers, staff and even the world outside of Willie Ross. Bert had planned to take a gradual approach in his use of sign language until a teacher pulled him aside and asked him why he wasn't using it more often. That led to Bert quickly incorporating use of sign language, including offering remarks and playing Master of Ceremony at the school's Annual Gala entirely using American Sign Language with use of an interpreter.

"This is their world, and you are a guest in the world of deaf people. So, I wanted to acknowledge that and be part of their world and use the form of communication our school and teachers use," Bert says.

As Bert begins to see the 2027 finish line to his long and meaningful service to the deaf community, he says, "We have had a strong period of growth and the school is in a good place, and I am proud of that. This has been the best job I've ever had. What I will miss most is the kids and staff. After 40 years in this field, I can say that I am eternally grateful for the deaf community allowing me to be in their world."

The feeling is mutual, Bert.

"Once I met the students, I was hooked."





Retiring East Longmeadow Superintendent Reflects on the Nearly 40-Year Relationship with WRSD

“We Are Educating the Whole Child”

As the retiring East Longmeadow School Superintendent Gordon Smith looks out his office window at the construction of the town’s impressive new high school being erected outside of his office, he notes that two classrooms for students from the Willie Ross School for the deaf will be part of the new edifice.

“We are coming up on the 40-year anniversary of the relationship with the Willie Ross School for the Deaf and it really is a testament to former Willie Ross School President Lou Abbate who had the vision to start the mainstreaming program for their students with the East Longmeadow Public Schools.”

The idea pursued by Lou Abbate was that some students from the Willie Ross main campus in Longmeadow could and should be “mainstreamed” in a partner public school system, where they could pursue their studies alongside hearing students, with both populations benefiting from the relationship.

In the mainstreaming program, Willie Ross students have dedicated classrooms in the elementary schools and share student assemblies, special classes and lunchtime with their peers. As they matriculate to Birchland Park Middle School and East Longmeadow High School, deaf students join academic and specials classes with their hearing peers, assisted by an in-class interpreter. In the high school, as with the earlier grades, the East Longmeadow schools have dedicated classroom space for deaf students, teachers for the deaf and in-classroom technology that enhances learning.

Having had prior experience as an Assistant Principal in East Longmeadow High School and then at Ludlow High School before returning to East Longmeadow as Superintendent in 2010, Gordon says, “The mainstreaming program was already well established when I became Superintendent, so I knew it was working and was a well-oiled machine.”

He says the benefit to the East Longmeadow school community has not been lost on him. “Not only do Willie Ross students benefit by the association but our East Longmeadow students benefit too. It builds community at the youngest ages. It helps our students learn about challenges and difficulties others may have that they might not be exposed to or see. These deaf and hard of hearing students enrich the experience of our students.”

Gordon says current, and also soon to retire, President Bert Carter has “done an exceptional job growing Willie Ross and he is responsible for introducing an American Sign Language course for our students.” He indicated that East Longmeadow is considering whether to include ASL as one of the languages included in the two-year requirement for a foreign language. Willie Ross also provides audiology testing services to East Longmeadow students as part of the collaboration.

The relationship, he says, has been a two-way street.

“We are educating the whole child and this exposure to the deaf community prepares our students for what life outside of school is going to look like.

“I remember when we celebrated the 25th anniversary we had a student assembly and when the audience applauded, many of our students used the hand symbol that deaf people use for applause . . . that was wonderful to see.

“It said to me that we are all part of the same community,” Gordon says.



2025 Graduation

Five students graduated from WRSD in 2025: **Jordan Jones, Amonty Gonzalez, LJ Ortiz, Monay Blue, and Yanleiris Andino**. The ceremony was held on June 10.



Sign Language Classes See Increased Participation from the Community



Willie Ross offers two semesters of American Sign Language classes each year, open to any community members interested in learning the language and taking place on Tuesday evenings on the Longmeadow campus. **In 2025, 60 community members participated in ASL classes** – 34 attending in the spring and 26 attending in the fall.

Bert Carter, President and CEO of WRSD, explained that the classes help bridge the gap between WRSD students and the surrounding Western Massachusetts community. “We want to broaden the community that is accessible to our students,” Carter said. “So when they are out in Western Mass, they have access to whatever services... or activities are involved. The more people who know sign language, the better they can navigate the community.”



Celebrating an Advocate

State Representative
Brian Ashe



State Representative Brian Ashe has been a longtime friend to the Willie Ross School for the Deaf. Whether it be advocating for the deaf community, supporting legislation for deaf education bills, such as an Act establishing the deaf children's bill of rights (accompanying bill, House, No. 200 in 2025), to securing state funding for the school, Rep. Ashe's support has been steadfast. In 2020, the Commonwealth provided \$100,000 in funding to the school due to Rep. Ashe's advocacy. The funds supported the renovation and expansion of the now-open administration building on the Longmeadow campus. We thank him for his continued commitment to a bright future for WRSD.



First-Ever Purse Bingo Fundraiser a Fun Success

WRSD held its first-ever Purse Bingo fundraiser on October 24 at Twin Hills Country Club, complete with fun, laughter, friendly competition and of course, designer bags! Over 100 people were in attendance for the inaugural event that featured 11 rounds of bingo with bags by Kate Spade, Michael Kors, Coach and more for prizes. Proceeds from the event supported WRSD's educational mission.





Spotlighted at ERC5 Breakfast

Willie Ross was recognized at the East of the River Five Town Chamber of Commerce (ERC5) Legislative Breakfast on February 10, 2026 at Ludlow Country Club. The organization, along with event sponsor Monson Savings, celebrated two nonprofits, WRSD and Rick's Place, and the great work they do in the community. WRSD joined ERC5 as a member in 2024.

2025 Legislative Breakfast



Our 9th Annual Legislative Breakfast event was held on May 23, providing a valuable opportunity for state legislators, Longmeadow elected officials and Massachusetts Association of Approved Private Schools (MAAPS) representatives to engage with students and staff and learn more about the school. Students also had a chance to ask the legislators in attendance a variety of questions in a "town hall" format, a welcomed addition to the program.



IN THE NEWS



Purse bingo event supports Willie Ross School for the Deaf



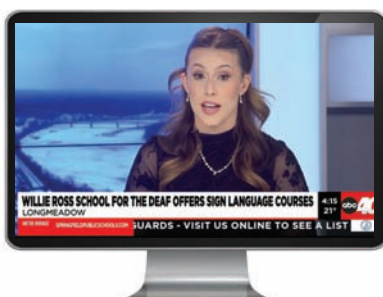
People in Business:
Claire Sanders, New Chair of WRSD Board



22News honored with award during Willie Ross School for the Deaf gala



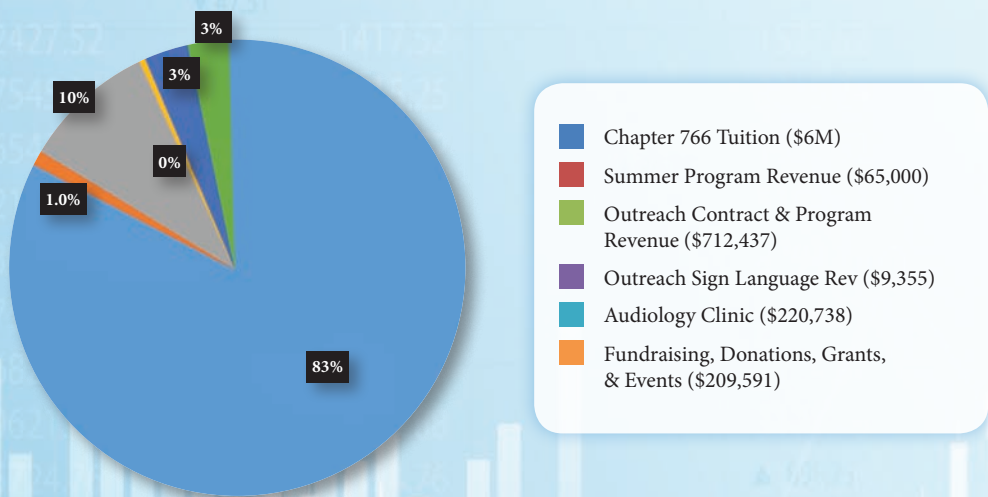
Young student raises funds for Springfield Open Pantry with 3D-printed art



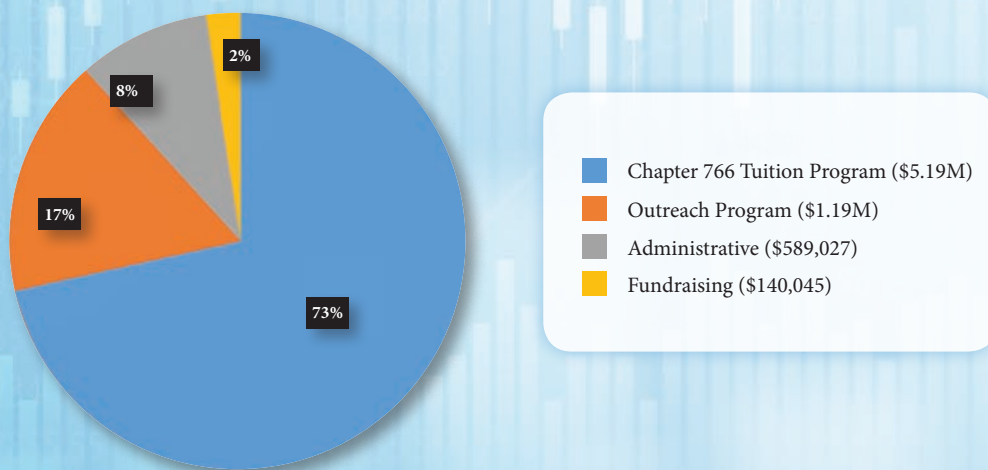
Willie Ross School for the Deaf offering community sign language classes



2025 Revenue by Source



2025 Expenses by Program



Total 2025 Revenue: \$7,241,125

Based on 2025 Audit

Our Board

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Lucie K. Lewis, Ed.D., *Vice Chairperson*
Technical and Creative Freelance Cultures, LLC

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David Martel, *Secretary*
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Meredith Y. Wood, *Trustee Emeritus*
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Mark Ross, Ph.D., *Honorary Member*
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Thomas F. Laurin, *Honorary Member*
Laurin Publishing Company

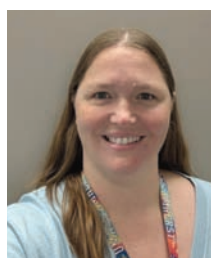


Welcoming New Board Members and Claire Sanders as Chair



Claire Sanders was elected Chair of the Board, the second deaf chair in the school's history, following the late George Balsley II who served as Chair until his passing in early 2025. Sanders, who has been teaching in the field of American Sign Language and Deaf Studies for more than 25 years, serves as a Deaf Studies department chair and a professor of language and culture at Holyoke Community College (HCC). She holds a Master's-level national certification from the American Sign Language Teachers Association.

Carla Alves
VP of Business Banking
at Country Bank



Emily Bambacus, Au.D.
Lecturer/Clinical Supervisor and
Placement Coordinator, University of
Massachusetts Amherst

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\$1 - \$99

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 Colapietro, Mary Cate
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 Fletcher, Valerie
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 Guerri, Katie
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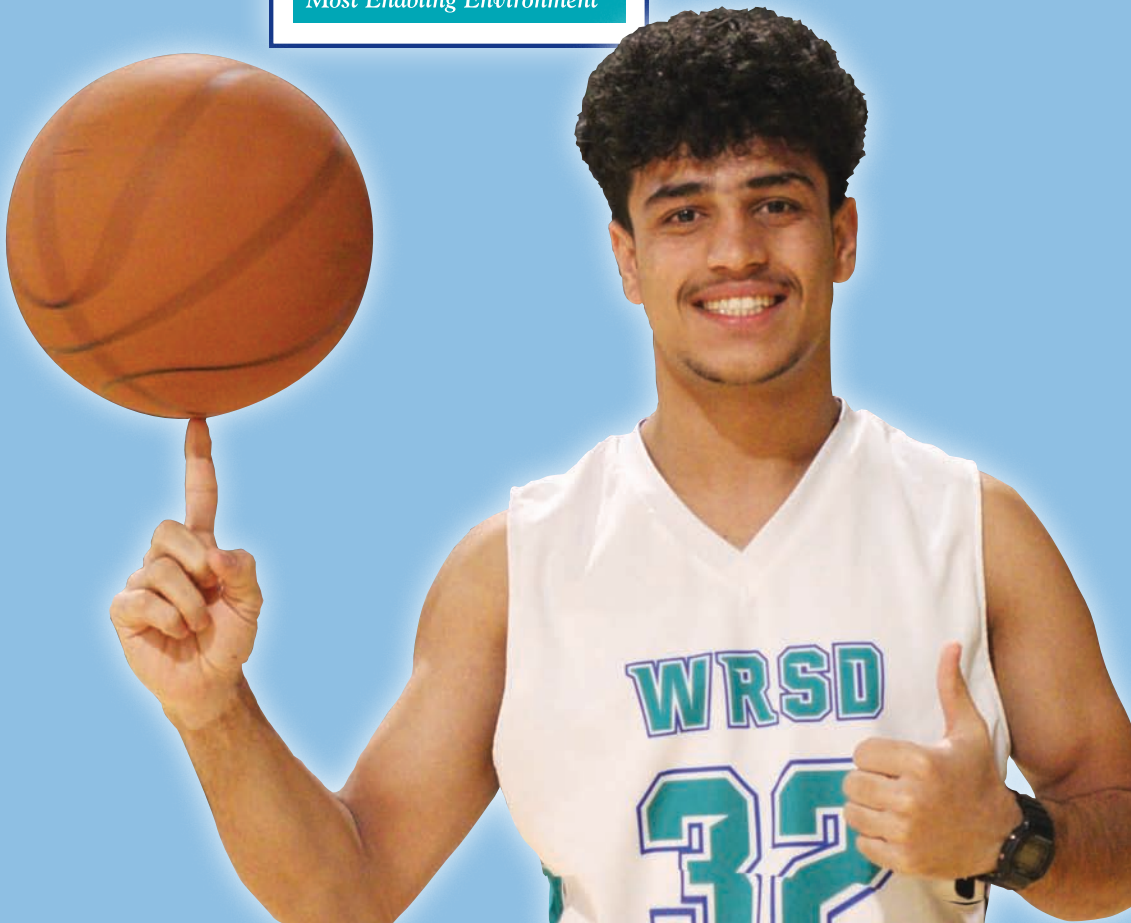
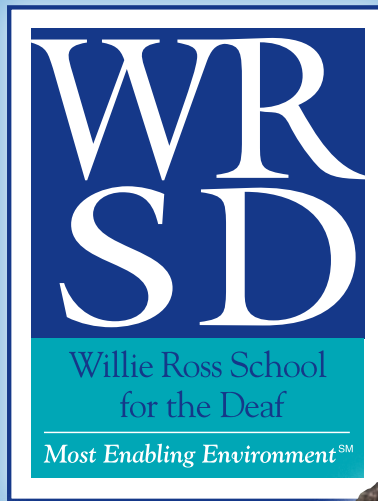
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 Balsley, Laura
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Willie Ross School for the Deaf
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