

https://www.union-bulletin.com/news/local/education/wa-hi-students-discuss-issues-facing-teens-at-town-hall/article_b314b3fd-bf7b-4d37-9b2e-ef84ef1156f7.html

Wa-Hi students discuss issues facing teens at town hall

Loryn Kykendall Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
Feb 25, 2026



Student panelists answer questions during the Real Talk town hall at Walla Walla Police Department on Monday, Feb. 23. From left to right: Sean Nunes, Lyric Bortz, Lily Oakley, Sienna Wylie, Aubrie Nielson, Ainsly Ridler, Yulissa Ambriz and Kyan McAlister.

Loryn Kykendall Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

A wide range of resources is available to students in Walla Walla who might be facing issues such as food insecurity, homelessness or substance use — but many of them don't know it.

At a youth-led town hall on Monday, Feb. 23, a panel of Wa-Hi students said they'd never heard of many organizations that offer services to kids and families, including The Health Center, Akin, The Spark and Communities in Schools.

"I think schools sometimes don't realize a lot of kids have different situations and they might not all have a parent they can talk to," panelist Lily Oakley said. "So making it known that there are resources for kids to reach out and get help (is important)."

Oakley was one of eight students on the panel at the town hall, called Real Talk, which took place at the Walla Walla Police Department. The town hall, organized and led by students, was open to the public in an effort to share local teens' perspectives and experiences.

Several panelists pointed out that even with all the resources available to students, many of them only learn what's available to them after they've been struggling with something for a prolonged period.

Panelists agreed that one of the most prevalent issues teens currently struggle with is vaping.

"The only way I found out the long-term effects of (vaping) was through my own research," panelist Kyan McAlister said. "We used to have another drug counselor at Wa-Hi, and I only found out who he was once I got in trouble."

Oakley added that while health classes do teach about the dangers of vaping as well as the effects of other kinds of substance use, it's usually not effective.

"I know that students — even myself — don't pay attention in that class," Oakley said.

Many of the panelists said that having outside professionals or experts come into classes to educate them about these things would be helpful.

Students also said that they wished they'd been taught about the dangers of substance use much earlier than high school.

"This might sound bad, but I think as early as fifth grade," McAlister said. "I grew up in Portland and it's a lot different than it is here for a lot of families, and it might seem crazy that kids would be doing that that young, but I know kids that have told me, 'I started doing these things when I was in fourth grade.' That's not normal and it shouldn't be normal."



Student panelists chat after the town hall.

Loryn Kykendall Walla Walla Union-Bulletin



Organizations, including Communities in Schools, Comprehensive Healthcare and The Health Center, set up resource tables for attendees at the town hall.

Loryn Kykendall Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Where mental health is concerned, panelists said a lot lies under the surface that teachers and parents often don't recognize.

"I'm going into my senior year and college is being brought up. Where do you want to go? What do you want to do?" panelist Sienna Wiley said. "There is a lot of stuff to think about your future, but half of these kids have things they need to worry about right now. Will food be on the table? Am I going to be able to wash my clothes?"

Oakley said the pressure that teachers put on students can be too much at times.

"They don't realize that some kids are in tough situations and can't always do their homework," Wylie said.

Students also realized during the town hall that there were no school administrators or school board members in attendance, although they were all invited.

More involvement from those groups when it comes to making sure students know what's available to them would be a big help, the panel said.

"Showing up for stuff like this to show they're actually concerned about the student body and what's going on within their school (would help)," panelist Lyric Bortz said. "Announcing that there's counselors and resources around would help."

One of the organizations that provides both mental and physical health services in every middle and high school in Walla Walla is The Health Center. Executive Director Norma Hernandez, who attended the town hall, asked students what her organization and others could do to let kids know what's available to them.

Some students mentioned that talking about resources in the morning announcements would be an effective way to reach all students. Another student said organizations can advertise through the



Associated Student Body's weekly "What's Up Wa-Hi" announcements, which then go onto social media pages that students follow.

Panelist Sean Nunes said the free counseling offered at school had made a big difference for him and that it could be beneficial for so many other students if they just knew it was there.

"Something that really helped me is the free school counseling," Nunes said. "That's genuinely helped me a lot and I really hope to see that more announced or widespread because I know if it can help me, it can help another student."

Loryn Kykendall reports on health care and education. She can be reached at lkykendall@wwub.com.

Loryn Kykendall

Health and Education Reporter

