LA Philharmonic Makes Debut at Historic Vic Lopez Auditorium

Whittier High School’s historic Vic Lopez Auditorium transformed into a dazzling Hollywood-inspired concert hall when the Los Angeles Philharmonic staged a one night-only, showstopping performance for hundreds of community members in September.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn partnered with Whittier Union and the Whittier Chamber of Commerce to bring the orchestra to Whittier for a free community concert. The Philharmonic was led by Associate Conductor Paolo Bortolanelli; the concert featured works by Beethoven and Leonard Bernstein, plus an LA Phil-commissioned work by Paul Desenne.

The concert also featured a special demonstration of the auditorium’s newly restored 1926 Bill Wood Wurlitzer Organ, which was donated to the school in 2016 by the Whittier High School Alumni Association and dedicated in 2018 during an installation celebration.

“We are honored to partner with Supervisor Hahn to bring this classical performance group to the Whittier community,” Superintendent Martin Plourde said. “To have Whittier High School serve as the hub for such esteemed entertainment as the Philharmonic is an honor for our school district and provides our student musicians the opportunity of a lifetime to listen to and learn from a world-class ensemble.”
We jumped into the 2019-20 school year by welcoming over 11,000 students and 1,200 staff members back to campus, entering the new year committed as ever to supporting our students in their endeavors and doing whatever it takes to ensure their success in our classrooms and beyond these walls.

In August, over 2,700 members of the Class of 2023 became part of the Whittier Union family – one that includes a dedicated team of educators, including our 2019-20 Teacher of the Year, veteran school leaders who have been promoted to new roles and administrators who have been recognized for their visionary leadership.

Just like our teachers, staff and administrators, every student has a story. It is our job to understand who our students are, what motivates them and what obstacles stand in their way. We look forward to continuing this journey of impacting the lives of our 11,000 students and influencing each other in the process.

Superintendent Martin Plourde

Whittier Union will provide additional support classes during the school day to ensure students master the standards and content the first time they take a course, to help students meet college entrance requirements and offer an after-school credit recovery program for the 2019-20 school year.

The student support programs are part of a $171 million 2019-20 budget that supports the District’s Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), a three-year spending plan built with extensive input from parents, students, community, teachers and staff to boost student learning and achievement.

Whittier Union will invest $24 million to develop programs specifically targeting its high-needs groups: economically disadvantaged students, foster youth and English learners.

“Through this plan, we are dedicated to providing programs, services and support in a global manner that will benefit all students across the District and individual schools, ensuring that they receive the gentle push that they need to succeed in school, college and professional careers,” Superintendent Martin Plourde said.

We are now amid the college application season – an exciting time for our students to explore which college or university they want to attend, learn which academic programs will train and prepare them best to reach their career goals and focus their efforts on making their last year of high school count.

I want to thank our parents for attending our College Fair and Back to School Nights and being engaged in the success and education of their children.

It is through the collective efforts of students, parents, teachers, staff and administrators that Whittier Union remains among the top school districts in the state to attain and sustain academic progress and success, winning recent recognition in a Stanford study for excelling at supporting the learning of all students.

It is a true testament to our culture of collaboration and belief that demographics do not determine destiny for our students at Whittier Union.

Just like our teachers, staff and administrators, every student has a story. It is our job to understand who our students are, what motivates them and what obstacles stand in their way. As we learn their stories, our educators are drawing on their personal life experiences and teaching skills to guide students along a path toward success.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees, we look forward to continuing this journey of impacting the lives of our 11,000 students and influencing each other in the process.
Pioneer Math Teacher Recognized as 2019-20 Teacher of the Year

Pioneer High School math teacher and department co-chair Carolina DeHart has spent nearly 30 years instilling high expectations in students while pushing them to attend college and pursue their dream careers.

For constantly demonstrating her love of teaching and helping students achieve their fullest potential, DeHart was selected as Whittier Union’s 2019-20 Teacher of the Year. “I am standing on the shoulders of giants,” DeHart said. “I share this distinction with my math department colleagues, and we could not have achieved what we have without the support of our administration and, of course, our amazing students. It’s all about them.”

DeHart was hired as a calculus teacher at Pioneer in 1989 and has taught every math class offered. She also tutors three afternoons a week as part of Pioneer’s Prep Program.

“Carolina is fabulous. She’s known as the math mom,” Pioneer math teacher Yolanda Johnson said. “She is a guide, a facilitator and a team player and gives so much of her time to helping students and colleagues, always with a smile on her face.”

This summer, DeHart supervised a group of rising Pioneer seniors, dubbed the Calculus Boys, who created a syllabus for an accelerated Advanced Placement (AP) Calculus AB class for 14 students. With her guidance, the students taught the class themselves, condensing a full year’s curriculum into a six-week course.

“We wouldn’t have been able to do this if Ms. DeHart wasn’t willing to stay after school and tutor us,” senior Robert Sanchez said. “Ms. DeHart is more than just a mentor to us. She is an inspiration.” Through the Calculus Boys’ efforts, enough students passed the class to ensure that Pioneer was able to offer the more advanced AP Calculus BC course for the 2019-20 school year.

Whittier Union Welcomes Class of 2023 and Over 11,000 Students for New School Year

California High School’s gymnasium was filled with excited greetings, high-fives and heartfelt hugs as more than 760 freshmen filled the bleachers and spilled onto the floor for its 15th annual orientation event the day before classes officially began on Aug. 14.

Across Whittier Union, 2,727 members of the Class of 2023 participated in Freshman First Day activities that are hosted annually by student Link Crew teams at each school to build connections with freshmen and ease their transition into high school. Overall, the District welcomed over 11,100 students to its campuses.

“I really want our freshmen to feel what Cal High is all about,” Cal High’s Link Crew President Sanya Prasad said. “We’re all-inclusive and we want everyone to be supported and know that we are here for them.”

During the morning assembly, new students participated in a series of chants and games, including a balloon-pop challenge. As part of group activities, students got to know their classmates, playing ice-breaker games to learn names and discover interests.

“This has helped me to know about the school and to get to know other people,” freshman Romina Gonzalez said. Over the course of the day, students learned about academic and extracurricular opportunities, met their teachers and attended abbreviated class sessions where they learned campus rules and expectations.

“We just said goodbye to the class of 2019, and they had a great time learning and growing and now they’re off doing great things in the world,” Principal Bill Schloss said to the students. “That’s going to be you in just four short years, and we are excited to welcome a new class of Condors to our campus.”
Just a few short weeks after the start of school, Whittier Union’s five comprehensive high schools welcomed hundreds of parents and students to their campuses for Back to School Night, showcasing each school’s academic and extra-curricular programs and pathways to student success.

Parents met with administrators, learned about the curriculum for their children’s courses, discovered volunteer and engagement opportunities on campus and learned more about upcoming events that will contribute to their children’s academic progress.

Parents also toured the campuses and ran through their children’s class schedules, met teachers and learned about class expectations.

“I want to thank our students for their hard work in the classroom,” Whittier High Principal Timothy Liggett told parents, pointing to the school’s record graduation, on-target for graduation and attendance rates ranging from 93% to 98%. “We talk about being Cardinals with CLASS, with the ‘A’ standing for achievement, and our students are really putting their money where their mouths are and we really appreciate that.”

Frontier and Sierra Vista high schools also recognized students who earned awards based on summer and/or quarter four performance during a ceremony in August.

Santa Fe High School Business Academy students recently showcased their business knowledge and the innovative career program in which they’re enrolled during the Santa Fe Springs Chamber of Commerce Business Expo, themed “It’s a Game Changer!”

About 30 business exhibitors and nonprofit service representatives participated in the chamber’s annual event, which provided students the opportunity to network and meet business mentors.

Since 1993, Santa Fe High’s Business Academy has provided students a relevant interdisciplinary curriculum that includes courses that meet graduation and college entrance requirements, while emphasizing business experience. Students learn about technology and interact with the local business community through a mentorship program. Students experience business beyond the classroom through City of Santa Fe Springs and chamber events.
Three longtime Whittier Union educators have taken on new administrative roles for the 2019-20 school year, bringing years of veteran leadership and knowledge to essential managerial positions.

Director of Personnel Services Kristin Kooiman, a Santa Fe High graduate, was assistant principal of curriculum and instruction at La Serna High. She was previously a biology and Guided Studies teacher and curriculum coordinator at La Serna.

“Being a former student and substitute teacher in this District, spending 15 years as a teacher and administrator at La Serna, and having my own child graduate from Whittier Union, I know the importance of valuing all employees, who have a tremendous impact on our students,” Kooiman said.

Lillia Vazquez, assistant principal of curriculum and instruction at Santa Fe High School, was previously a computer science teacher at La Serna. She also taught at Whittier and California high schools, serving as a course lead, site data lead and ed tech support lead.

“My journey as a teacher began here at Whittier Union and I am very excited to begin my administrative career here as well,” Vazquez said. “I’ve learned a lot about collaboration and I am excited to be a part of the leadership team.”

Whittier High School’s assistant principal of business and activities Diana Salazar Valles previously serving as director of the New Horizons student support program. She was first hired as Whittier’s college center adviser before becoming a counselor at Frontier High School and guidance counselor at Whittier High.

“I began in the District at 18 years old and never did I imagine that I would still be here 15 years later and have the impact on students in the variety of ways that I have,” Salazar Valles said. “I’m grateful and honored to be at Whittier High all these years.”

Whittier Union Recognized for Beating the Odds

Whittier Union’s earned reputation for attaining and sustaining substantial academic progress among its diverse student population has been over two decades the making, with the support of a dedicated team of high-quality educators serving as the foundation for its rising student achievement.

The District was identified as one of 167 California school districts to excel at supporting the learning of all students, particularly Hispanics, at higher-than-expected levels on the state’s new, more rigorous math and reading assessments in a “Positive Outliers: Districts Beating the Odds” study. Whittier Union ranked at 65 in the study, which was released earlier this year by the Learning Policy Institute out of Stanford University. The Institute is headed by Linda Darling-Hammond, president of the California Board of Education.

“Being recognized for our remarkable achievement levels is a testament to our culture of collaboration and our firm belief that demographics do not determine destiny at Whittier Union, where every student deserves the opportunity to flourish,” Superintendent Martin Plourde said.

Students of color, as well as white students, in positive outlier districts consistently outperform students of similar demographic makeup in other California districts, according to the study. Many of these districts also are closing the gap on a range of other outcomes, including graduation rates.
Students Explore College Options at Annual Fair

In preparation for college application season, Whittier Union seniors and their peers busily explored their post-secondary options, asked questions of dozens of college experts and found resources to ensure a smooth transition to college during the District’s annual College Fair.

Held at La Serna High School in September, the fair provided students and parents a one-stop shop for meeting with more than 70 representatives from community colleges, Cal States, UCs, private/independent colleges and out-of-state universities, including UC Berkeley, Rio Hondo College and Willamette University.

“It’s important to be involved and ask questions, look at the opportunities and learn more about colleges that are here,” Cal High parent Deida Ramirez said.

Students and parents also had the opportunity to attend workshops to learn more about the UC and CSU admissions process, advantages of attending a community college, financial aid and college recruitment for athletes. A Dreamer’s workshop was also held.

“The College Fair gives our students and their families direct access to what may potentially be the college or university of their dreams,” Superintendent Martin Plourde said. “They come prepared with questions, learn what it will take for them to succeed in college and explore the academic programs available. We’ve given our students the foundation to succeed beyond these walls, and now it’s up to them to chase after the opportunities before them.”

Adult School Student Finds New Career as WUHSD Bus Driver

Los Angeles resident and Whittier Union Adult School student Andrea Mitchell loves being behind the wheel of a school bus.

This summer, Mitchell completed the Adult School’s 10-week School Bus Training Program and behind-the-wheel training. After less than three months of schooling, she kicked off her new career as a bus driver for the Whittier Union High School District in August.

“My goal is to be a safe driver,” Mitchell said. “You really have to have the heart and desire to be here, work with kids and love what you do. It’s an important job. It’s a special job.”

Mitchell previously worked in the office of a transportation cooperative, but sought to work directly with students through a career in the transportation field.

“This was a perfect opportunity to demonstrate that I could be a real asset,” said Mitchell, whose child attends a school district served by the WUHSD Transportation Department.

Mitchell joined the first class of the School Bus Training program in spring 2019. She learned laws and regulations regarding school bus driving, took intensive practice tests and studied commercial handbooks, eventually earning a Class C commercial driver’s permit and California Special Driver Certificate from the California Highway Patrol. She also received training in first aid, CPR and serving students with disabilities.

“I received so much experience and knowledge,” Mitchell said. “The instructors are great and interactive with the class. They want you to be successful. It’s a lot of information and hard work, but it’s exciting to learn together.”

As part of the program, Mitchell and other student trainees secured paid internships with Whittier Union to complete behind-the-wheel training. Those who earned full licensure are now WUHSD employees.

Additional career opportunities available within the WUHSD Transportation Department include dispatcher, router scheduler and certified trainer.
La Serna Softball Field to be Named for Longtime Athletic Coach

La Serna High School’s new softball field will be named for physical education teacher and varsity softball coach Ginger Larsin, who retired in June after nearly 40 years in Whittier Union.

Larsin’s legacy includes more than 500 victories, 14 league titles and three CIF championships. She developed into one of the most acclaimed high school athletic coaches in the nation during her tenure at La Serna, where she was a three-time CIF Coach of the Year and nurtured the talents of more than 400 scholar athletes.

“This is an incredible honor, one I was not expecting,” Larsin said. “I was blessed to have such talented athletes who shared the same ideals I did – to work hard, have fun and stay focused on your goals. My greatest memories are those of my players bonding and working together as a team.”

Larsin was a three-sport student athlete at Santa Fe High School, graduating in 1975 and coaching tennis, basketball and softball starting in 1981. Larsin became varsity girls basketball coach and junior varsity softball coach at La Serna in 1983, taking the helm of the varsity softball team in 1986.

“As coach and physical education department chair, Ginger was a tremendous role model, promoting health and fitness to every student,” La Serna Principal Ann Fitzgerald said.

Former players fondly remember Larsin’s efforts to bring them closer together through activities such as Secret Sisters, which strengthened team chemistry during bus rides to and from games.

“Ginger invested countless hours in her players. She made sure we had all the equipment we needed even if she had to pay for it herself,” La Serna Class of 1988 graduate Janet Mosikian said. “She believed you play how you practice and, in the end, it was so true.”

Larsin retired from coaching in 2013. A dedication ceremony is planned for next year.

Summer Math Academy Channels Legendary Calculus Teacher

Hundreds of friends and family members cheered as over 500 students were awarded certificates for completing the 29th annual Pioneer High School Summer Math Academy, an accelerated six-week mathematics program inspired by renowned Garfield High School calculus teacher Jaime Escalante.

Over 80% of students received A’s or B’s, enabling them to advance one course level. High school students earned 10 credits for completing a one-year math course during the summer session.

The program, which targets Whittier-area students in grades five through 12, has grown considerably since the addition of East Los Angeles College’s (ELAC) Jaime Escalante Math Program in 2012.

“Jaime Escalante once told me that to make a difference you have to reach them when they’re young,” Pioneer Math Academy director Javier Gonzalez said. “You plant the seed that students can reach calculus during their high school years and greatly increase their chances of attending college.”

Channeling Escalante’s methods, Gonzalez created the Pioneer Math Academy in 1990, recruiting middle school students to take Algebra 1 and pre-Algebra in the summer and subsequently take Geometry as incoming freshmen.

Nearly 30 years later, Gonzalez guides a faculty and staff of 19 college professors and high school teachers, 18 college tutors and 50 high school mentors who assist in teaching pre-Algebra, Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II and Math Analysis classes.

ELAC added Pioneer to its Escalante Program network in 2012, helping the school to expand its summer classes to a high of 16 this year.

“When I came to Pioneer in 2012, I thought that it was a school like no other,” Escalante Program coordinator Edgar Perez said. “I saw the support he gave to the teachers and the students and I decided that I wanted to be a part of it.”
About 450 incoming freshmen sampled high school life during California High School’s HS 102 course, a three-week summer program during which students participated in a variety of activities that introduced them to the academic and extra-curricular opportunities available on campus.

Launched in 2013, the program, which ran in July, acclimates students as they transition from middle school to high school, familiarizing them with school expectations and providing them with the opportunity to earn 2.5 credits for completing the course.

Students explored the campus, met with counselors to discuss goal planning and setting, and learned how to use a variety of Google applications, including email and Google Classroom.

Other academic sessions included tips on studying note-taking and using the MLA writing format.

Presentations on clubs and career academies gave students a jumpstart on potential career pathways. The program also featured multiple bonding activities, including obstacle course challenges.

Students can sign up for the program during the end of their eighth-grade year and at Future Condor Night, held in March to introduce future freshmen and their parents to programs and classes available on campus.

District programs, activities and practices shall be free from discrimination based on race, color, ancestry, national origin, ethnic group identification, age, religion, marital or parental status, physical or mental disability, sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity or expression, or genetic information; the perception of one or more of such characteristics, or association with a person or group with one or more of these actual or perceived characteristics.

Veteran Educators Named ACSA Region 15 Administrators of the Year

La Serna High School Principal Ann Fitzgerald and Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Dr. Monica Oviedo have been recognized as ACSA Region 15 Administrators of the Year for being visionaries in their respective roles, fostering safe and effective school cultures, and using creativity and innovation to solve problems.

The Association of California School Administrators also recognized former Director of Accountability, Staff Development, Curriculum and Instructional Materials Dr. Carlye Marousek, who retired in June.

“This trio of influential, dedicated and committed educators are true professionals who put the needs of our students, teachers and staff ahead of everything else,” Superintendent Martin Plourde said. “They roll up their sleeves and tackle any task at hand with ease and poise. I am proud of the successes our District has achieved under their leadership.”

Fitzgerald, a 25-year educator in Whittier Union, has been instrumental to the success of La Serna’s bell schedule, which provides intervention support for students during the school day. The structured program has led to a 96% daily attendance rate, 98% graduation rate and nearly 70% of all graduates meeting college entrance requirements.

A former principal of two WUHSD high schools, Oviedo oversees the District’s budget and led the creation of a new transportation department, understanding the nuances of business services and the role it plays in student academic success. She has been with the District 22 years.

Marousek’s wizardry at data analysis and staff development strategies played a significant role in Whittier Union’s success. Her effectiveness in interpreting data for others helped improve program outcomes and optimize instruction, not only in Whittier Union, but surrounding districts as well. She was with the District for 20 years.

Cal High Welcomes New Class of Condors with Summer Program

Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Dr. Monica Oviedo, left, and La Serna High School Principal Ann Fitzgerald were recognized as ACSA Region 15 Administrators of the Year.