


Seahawks' Russell Wilson and performer Ciara surprise West Seattle students with savings accounts

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Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson and performance artist Ciara Wilson make a surprise online visit with students of Denny Way International Middle School on Tuesday. The power couple... (Amanda Snyder / The Seattle Times) [More](#) 

Nearly 900 Denny International Middle School students received some sound financial advice on Tuesday from a Seattle power couple, along with a memorable lesson in investing and saving that they can now take to the bank.

Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson and performance artist Ciara made a surprise virtual visit and a donation of more than \$35,000 so that each student of the West Seattle public school will receive a savings account with \$40 in seed money. The arrangement is part of a Financial Literacy Month partnership with the NFL Players Association, the couple's Why Not You Foundation, and the New York-based financial technology company [Goalsetter](#).

Goalsetter CEO [Tanya Van Court](#) began with a lesson called "Building Wealth – A Blueprint to Financial Freedom Inspired by Hip Hop," which provides a brief case study of how rapper Jay-Z became a billionaire not just through his music, but by taking his earnings and investing them wisely. Partway through the lesson, the Wilsons arrived to "drop jewels" of financial trivia as well as the savings account announcement.

Some students watched the broadcast from their classrooms, while others watched from home.

"Financial literacy and building wealth is so important," said Wilson. "Ciara and I really wanted to talk to you all because we didn't come from much and we had big visions, we had big goals, big dreams." Wilson said the couple learned about personal finance along the way as their successes accrued.

He encouraged students to contribute to causes they believe in, but to "make sure you know what you're doing" first by doing some research. He quizzed students by dropping another household name – Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos – and talked about the risks Bezos took to get investors and to hold on to his 53 million shares of company stock, now worth more than \$3,000 each.

Ciara encouraged the middle schoolers to invest time into themselves, their craft and their communities, and into learning about the things they might want to financially invest in.

“All these things can pay back tremendously if you invest in them in the right way. ... Investing is very powerful and it will also allow you to create an opportunity to build legacy for your family,” Ciara said.

When eighth-grade student leader Elizabeth Palma Alvarado asked the couple for their stock recommendations for young investors, Wilson encouraged the students to learn more about technology to prepare to invest in the world’s next big innovations.

“It’s about finding the next up-and-coming thing. I wish I had invested in Facebook when I was young,” the 32-year-old said.

Wilson’s still got time, and so do the Denny Middle students. To encourage saving to invest, their new savings accounts come with a caveat: They can’t be touched until the students turn 18.

Giving cash or gift cards away doesn’t incentivize saving or investing for kids, Van Court, the Goalsetter CEO, explained.

“Gift cards teach them about consumerism. To spend on things you don’t really need,” she said.

Instead, the Goalsetter program will provide up to five years of family literacy tools through its app. Eventually, students will receive a debit card designed for teens and tweens that have game-based financial literacy quizzes attached to its use via the Goalsetter app. The students’ funds will freeze on Sunday mornings unless the students take their financial literacy quiz for the week. The unique accounts also allow friends and family members to contribute to a youth’s account.

Over the past year, Van Court, who has experience managing youth educational programming for brands like Discovery, Nick Jr. and Noggin, and launching ESPN3, has used that knowledge and her relationships with NBA and NFL figures to lead a movement in teaching youth and their families about building generational wealth.

“After these kids see or hear Russell Wilson in their classroom, I want them to see that they don’t need to aspire to be in the NFL to be as cool and as financially successful as him,” Van Court said. “But every kid in Seattle can be him on the financial field.”

Wilson’s teammates, linebacker K.J. Wright recently also gifted seed accounts to classes at Aki Kurose Middle School. Goalsetter’s partnerships include 40 individuals and organizations. The highest contributor to date has been Nike, sponsoring savings accounts for 10,000 kids worth \$1 million dollars.

“It really should be a crime that kids are coming out of high school and can describe the periodic table but can’t describe the stock market,” Van Court said. “We have a capitalistic society that depends upon the understanding of the infrastructure of capitalism in order to build wealth, yet all we teach them is to go out and get a job.”

She said she was startled to learn about the growing national racial wealth gaps in the United States. [The data](#) puts Black and Latino people on a trajectory to have zero net worth in the next 30 and 50 years, respectively.

As a Black woman and parent, Van Court said she doesn’t want that to happen on her watch.

While she would love to meet her company’s goal to draft a million children and families into the Goalsetter program, she said she also wants to see every state have a mandated K-12 financial education curriculum, “just like we mandate English.”

“I will also say I would like for us to mandate that financial education in a way that is culturally relevant and applicable to all kids,” Van Court said.

Denny Principal Jeff Clark said that Tuesday’s program was a “super exciting enhancement” to the school’s existing financial literacy education program and math classes that integrate finance skills. The announcement and instructions to participate in Goalsetter will be translated into the various languages spoken by the families the school serves. Twenty-nine percent of Denny Middle’s students are Latino, with 23% identifying as white, 22% as Black, 13% Asian, 2% Pacific Islander, 1% Native American and the remaining 10 percent identifying as being more than one race.

Clark said that eighth graders start putting their financial literacy skills to work in a “real-world project” that has students identify two career paths, with one requiring a college degree, and another analyzing earnings to loan debt “so they can think through the things they’re passionate about and understand their financial trajectory.”