

Board Leads Laser Focus on District's Promise to Every Student

From the buildings to the buses to the fields, everyone in the Sumner-Bonney Lake School District is committed to the promise to know, value and support every student.

"Even people who don't have daily interactions with students have the same focus and priorities as teachers," said Erin Markquart, school board president. "Everyone understands the value of education and how it can change the life of a child."

WSSDA named the Sumner-Bonney Lake School Board its 2023 Large District Board of the Year.

"I'm proud of the way everyone across our district has the same laser focus on our promise to students," Markquart said. "As a board, we are intentional about our actions and don't chase the newest, shiny thing."

She said board members evaluate their decisions through three filters:

- How does it match our core values?
- How does it impact students?
- How does it get us where we need to be?

When facing financial challenges a few years ago, the board and the district applied those filters while taking intentional,

proactive and creative problem-solving actions to return to strong financial footing. Grant writing has increased resources, especially for special education programs. And without the community's support in the recently approved levy, services for students would've been significantly hindered, Markquart said.

Another key to the Sumner-Bonney Lake board's success is the collaboration with the superintendent, Dr. Laurie Dent.

"I consider the board as my partner," Dent said. "Yes, I work for them, but even more so I work with them. And that mindset has had a great impact."

Dent appreciates her strong relationship with the board. Spending time together helps build those bonds, so she invites board members to events and programs. Board members also visit classrooms to talk with students, teachers and staff.

"We want board members to see that the programs they helped create are making a difference," Dent said. "We make sure board members feel connected to the students."

CONTINUED on next page

Board members have built strong connections among themselves too. They attend the WSSDA state conference, follow national education industry news, and complete and analyze yearly board self-assessments for continuous improvement and growth.

Strategic Plan

Access to opportunities and resources is a common thread of the district's strategic plan. Aptly named "Future Ready," the plan reinforces the district's goal for every student to experience success and ultimately graduate career and college ready.

Over 200 parents, teachers, students, administrators, community members and other stakeholders participated in the strategic planning process.

Board members and district leaders are intent on progress. So they made sure the goals they set are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART).

For example:

- By 2026, 98% of the senior class will graduate on time.
- By 2026, there will be a 10% increase in the enrollment and completion rates of students taking advanced coursework and specialized programs in all student groups.
- By 2026, 100% of students feel their school is safe and welcoming, as measured by a perception survey.



- By 2026, 80% of 5th grade students will be meeting or exceeding grade-level standards in mathematics.

The "Future Ready" plan also supports leaders' efforts to create a culture and a workforce that reflect the diverse community they serve.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

To promote diversity and a welcoming environment, the board and district developed a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiative.

The resulting policy prohibits racial or ethnic harassment against students. Existing policies also were updated with stronger antiracist language.

This initiative is a first for the district, and it demonstrates leaders' commitment to creating an inclusive, respectful setting at school. When students feel safe from discrimination, they are better able to focus on their studies.

The message to students: we value who you are.

Teaching Academy

Diversity and inclusivity also are part of the district's goal to increase the number of certificated staff who mirror the cultures of its students.

The Teaching Academy program offered at both high schools exposes students to teaching careers and is a pipeline for future educators in the district.

While other districts offer Teaching Academy, Sumner-Bonney Lake stands out for intentionally recruiting diverse students to participate.

They learn the fundamentals of being a teacher and spend time working with young students in district classrooms. Students who complete Teaching Academy and go on to earn teacher certifications are guaranteed an interview for positions they are qualified for in the district.

In the past three years, more students of color have enrolled in Sumner High School's Teaching Academy. Bonney Lake High School has seen more program enrollment from students who are Hispanic and students with disabilities.

Other Opportunities

WSSDA also recognized the Sumner-Bonney Lake school board for addressing opportunity gaps with programs, practices and actions that include:

- Designing educational programs for underserved high school students. Black and brown mentorship programs were established at both high schools with a goal of

CONTINUED from previous page

expanding to middle schools.

There's now a Black Student Union and other first-time clubs.

In addition, the graduation rate gap for Hispanic students is closing.

- Establishing a partnership with the Center for Strong Families through Pierce County United Way. The center offers district families employment coaching, financial coaching and access to public benefits.
- Analyzing qualitative and quantitative data. With all the information they gather, board members identify disparities in academic achievement between different student groups. The data informs their decisions, leading to more equitable learning environments and success for all students.
- Setting aside time at monthly board meetings and study sessions to hear presentations and updates about issues directly connected to the strategic plan. They hear about progress toward specific goals.

Markquart values the learning that happens during the study sessions.

"We dive in and ask questions. We hear about costs, what's going well — and what's not," she said.

'A Tsunami of Support'

Through responsive, intentional leadership, school board members empower staff to do their best work for the students, Dent said.

"This wouldn't be possible without the tsunami of support from our board," Dent said. "We can allocate resources because of their support, and they trust that we're going to deliver."

They also make time to celebrate the positives.

"I love seeing a student's 'lightbulb moment' when they find success," Dent said. "It might be a 1st grader learning to read book pages from left to right, or a middle school student stepping up to join a club. Whatever is important to them in the moment. That's worth celebrating."

Markquart, a board member since 2013, celebrates the district's relentless effort on reaching a 100% graduation rate.

As a kindergarten teacher in a neighboring district, she sees students at the beginning of their academic experience. As a school board member, she's also part of the reward at the end of that journey — shaking seniors' hands as they cross the stage at graduation.

"It's an honor to be part of something so amazing. It's a beautiful thing."

