Bellingham Public Schools
a collective commitment

Board Summary: Community Linkage Special Meeting
Alderwood Elementary School
January 31, 2017

The Bellingham School Board of Directors and Superintendent Greg Baker welcomed audience members, invited guests and district staff to a linkage meeting on the topic of poverty in our schools and The Bellingham Promise. The discussion focused on the following questions:

- *Regarding poverty in our schools, how does The Bellingham Promise support families?*
- *How are we doing and how could we do better?*
- *What do you see with our families in poverty that maybe we're not seeing?*
- *How do we ensure that The Bellingham Promise supports all kids?*

During the meeting, attendees shared insights and thoughts on the guiding questions. Highlights of questions/comments:

- When asked which parts of The Bellingham Promise resonated strongly, attendees cited the *collective commitment to Bellingham's children* and the key strategies of *great teaching with strong support* and *early childhood education*.
- As a district, we need to work hard at engaging our families and making them feel welcome, while recognizing how prior negative experiences with educational institutions might present a challenge. Providing adequate space for families to come together is a good tool that will enhance family engagement. Home visits have also proven beneficial.
- For so many, college has proven to be the ticket out of poverty. How can we encourage teachers to talk with elementary-age students on up every day about the importance of college? College saving accounts and children's levies have proven to be successful tools in other districts.
- It is difficult to teach children who represent such a wide spectrum of abilities. How do we work to support students so they are not bored? Additionally, the district must continue to find ways to support teachers, not only through professional development, but in others ways to ensure they will not experience burnout.
- How do we go beyond basic needs in supporting our students and families; i.e, what are we *not* seeing in terms of experiences that some kids and families don't have access to, and how do we provide for and fund that?

Meeting minutes are attached.

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Draft Meeting Minutes: Community Linkage Special Meeting
Alderwood Elementary School
January 31, 2017
6:15 p.m.

Linkage Attendees:

- Community Representative April Adams; Bellingham City Council Member April Barker; Bellingham Food Bank Donor Stewardship Coordinator Kristin Costanza; Volunteer Ray Dellecker; Volunteer Tim Farris; Whatcom County Community Health Manager Astrid Newell; Opportunity Council Director of Early Learning and Family Services David Webster
- Directors Douglas Benjamin, Quenby Peterson, Steven Smith
- Superintendent of Schools Greg Baker
- District Leadership/Staff: Assistant Superintendent Steve Clarke; Deputy Superintendent Mike Copland; Executive Director Capital Projects and School Facilities Ron Cowan; Assistant Superintendent Bob Kuehl; Executive Director Rob McElroy; Special Assistant to the Superintendent for Family Engagement Isabel Meaker; Executive Director of Communications and Community Relations Tanya Rowe; Assistant Superintendent Simone Sangster; Teacher on Special Assignment Tracy Coskie; ELL Family Advocate and Family Liaison Kathryn Koruga; Recorder Ruth Rasmussen
- Alderwood staff: Kindergarten teacher Samuel Carlton; Dean of Students Nicholas Perigo; 4th grade teacher Jayme Rios; Principal Micah Smith; Preschool Teacher Kathleen Sovel

1. **Opening Items**

   Call to Order/Welcome and Introductions: School Board Director Douglas Benjamin called the meeting to order at 6:15 p.m. Mr. Benjamin welcomed the group and introduced Dr. Baker. Following Dr. Baker's welcome and opening comments, the invited guests, board members and district staff introduced themselves and described their connections to the school district.

2. **Meeting Purpose – Explanation of Community/Board Linkage:**

   Mr. Benjamin described the purpose of community linkage meetings, noting the school board views these meetings as an opportunity to listen and connect with the community and to strengthen connections with stakeholders. More specifically, the board is seeking input on the goals set for students through board policies expressed in The Bellingham Promise, the district's strategic plan. The focus of this evening's meeting, he

said, is to examine the district's performance as it relates to poverty and The Bellingham Promise.

3. **<u>Large Group Discussion with School Board</u>:**

Summary of comments in response to the guiding (and other) questions:

- *Regarding poverty in our schools, how does The Bellingham Promise support families?*
    - Promise K is a unique and powerful program. While we will not see its effects for a long time, giving young students this kind of jump start is critical. Volunteers can see within a very short time the huge difference in kids who have had a preschool experience and those who have not.
    - Breakfast in the Classroom is a program that definitely supports families; we see students who really rely on that.
    - Almost every time I leave here {as a volunteer}, I feel optimistic for the future of our kids.

- *How are we doing and how could we do better?*
    - <u>Address teacher burnout</u>:
        - We put so much on teachers. There is a lot of pressure and stress. How are we helping them to make sure they are taking care of themselves? Kids want stability, and this worries me.
        - The Promise talks about great teaching as a key component, and that is bolstered by great professional development. We have to think about what teachers need in terms of other supports.
    - <u>Work to strengthen connections</u>:
        - {*Samuel Carlton*}:
            - At Alderwood, we have a strong focus on the collective partnership with families, yet we still see a continued separation of families and schools. Parents struggle with questions regarding their place, their role in school. I continue to come back to the idea of partnerships with families – how do we bring them in?
            - Do we have an adequate understanding of generational patterns? Some adults have memories of school as a place of joy – a place for playing and learning and excitement. If that was never the experience for some parents, walking through those doors must be like climbing a mountain or tearing through a jungle – it is so foreign to them. How do we get them to see this is an experience that will be beneficial to them?
        - In response to comments on teacher burnout, creating a more unified approach with the community in addressing these challenges {partnering with parents, supporting struggling families, finding more ways to open our doors}is a place to start.
        - There are lots of different types of poverty. Some families are doing well; others are not having their needs met. For some, everything looks fine at face value, but they are struggling with finances – even if their households don't fall within the federal definition of poverty. Others – like refugee families, have no social capital. How do we reach them?

- {*Kathryn Koruga*}: Wouldn't it be great if we had a huge bucket of money for teachers to go on home visits? The message would be we are not doing these visits to *get* something, but to give something.
- When families drop kids off at the door, many do not want to walk in. We look at things to a fault through a middle-class lens. How are people perceiving the welcome or lack of it? Isabel Meaker has been invaluable for non-English speakers. Should we have a similar position for English-speaking families who live in poverty?
- {*Isabel Meaker*:} The Language Exchange is an example of a successful program that strengthens connections. This was a program that we did as a pilot at Shuksan a few years ago. We invited English and Spanish speaking families to come together and teach each other's language. This year April Barker and Kelly Morgan (1st grade teacher at Birchwood) applied for a grant and got $4,000 to support the language exchange. They have done a great job promoting it to the families and they have been getting more than 100 people at every event.
- {*Micah Smith*}: It is important to remember that parents want the same things we want. Most of the time they are looking for answers. They are thirsty for us to connect with them and work with them. We need to think of families as partners in opportunity. They want to be that.

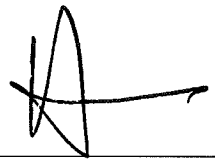
- Leverage the Food Bank:
  - Here at Alderwood, the Thursday night food bank has morphed into a book giveaway too. Families in this neighborhood feel comfortable here; while waiting in line, they are talking. One hundred families show up on a regular basis. Can we morph that even further to get them more engaged in the educational system, for example?
  - It offers an encouraging environment. It is a true community experience.
  - Consider providing meals while they are here to pick up food items.
  - It offers great potential for other activities.
- Look Beyond Basic Needs:
  - The district has done a lot of great things in addressing basic needs. But we also need to reach kids who have never gone to a park, who have never touched dirt, or have never seen Bellingham Bay.
  - Because families are so focused on basic needs, students come in with a real lack of experiences out in the world. How do we extend learning outside of school? How do you make that connection, find those opportunities? How can we all get out together?
  - Consider doing more to develop the whole child beyond reading, writing and math. Many parents work non-traditional hours and often older siblings are expected to fill the parental role – cooking meals, reading bedtime stories, for example. Kids have to grow up at a much more rapid pace.

- *If this were going really well, what would it look like?*
    - {*Isabel Meaker*:} When families know they have a space to come to (for example, the Family Resource Center at Shuksan Middle School), it becomes a magnet.
    - Education is the ticket that gets people out of poverty. I would like to see every teacher every single day talking to kids about the value of college – technical college, community college, whatever. Our teachers should know there is an expectation that they should be talking about it every single day. I don't question for a minute that all kids are capable.
    - {*Kathryn Koruga, acknowledging above statement*:} When we visit homes, we ask what hopes and dreams parents have for kids. Some never mention college.
    - Prioritize the implementation of College Savings Account Plans.
    - I feel sorry for teachers whose students run the educational spectrum from special education to gifted. I don't know the answer. If we had more volunteers who could help individualize instruction and offer guidance, that could help.
    - Direct more resources toward building parenting skills, which has a huge impact on our work in schools. This extends beyond families in poverty, but often times it is parents in poverty who cannot find the help they need. As an example, it is evident that many kids come to school without adequate sleep. What can we do to help parents remedy this?
    - {In response to above comments:} I am skeptical that schools can reach in and try to change behaviors in the home. The school district should make the school experience as strong as possible, so kids love to learn. There is not enough time to reach into all the complexities of home life and change behaviors in adults. The school district has so much on its plate already. To work on behaviors of parents would drain the resources and attention of schools.
    - Keeping schools open 365 days a year and transforming them into community learning centers would reap big rewards. This is being done in other communities (for example, Harlem Children's Zone); how do we do it here?
- *Is poverty in our community hidden? What do you see with our families in poverty that maybe we're not seeing?*
    - {*Isabel Meaker*}:
        - We have many English-speaking families who are so disconnected, who have so many challenges other than language barriers. I feel we don't necessarily notice these families – at least not in the same way we notice people from other countries, for example. Either we don't notice them or we think they are okay – but they are doing okay only on the surface. We need to do a better job engaging them.
        - We have found {during home visits} so many families have no beds. People in the community are so surprised when they hear that.
    - {Jayme Rios}: Are these problems hidden or simply normalized because poverty is so concentrated? Alderwood is 85 percent free and reduced lunch. These are conditions the whole school population lives in; the situations being

described are normal for these kids. Also {regarding comments concerning the value of home visits}: these offer staff unique opportunities to find families' strengths and gifts and they help families to feel valued. I've had teachers, including a 35-year veteran, accompany me and tell me later it was the most valuable thing they had done in their entire career.

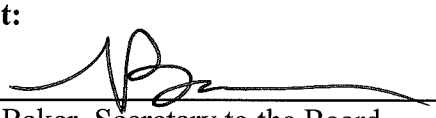
At the close of the meeting, Mr. Benjamin thanked participants and Dr. Baker summarized key discussion points.

The meeting adjourned at 7:17 p.m.

Approved: 

Douglas Benjamin, School Board President

Attest:



Greg Baker, Secretary to the Board

Minutes approved: Mar. 9, 2017