Listening and Learning:

Dr. Greg Baker's Entry Plan Report to the Community



Superintendent of Schools *Greg Baker*

Dear Families, Community and Staff,

The purpose of my Entry Plan as the new superintendent of Bellingham Public Schools has been to listen and learn about our strengths, improvement opportunities and challenges through a process of building relationships, public trust and engagement in our schools.

During my first six months on the job, I have spent time in every classroom in our 22 schools to experience our system as a learner. In addition, I have had monthly meetings with my Student Advisory Council, Parent Advisory Council, school and labor leaders. I have also met with all district staff and numerous groups of other students, parents, business and community leaders, and educational partners. I have enjoyed becoming involved in our community by attending a variety of events from music concerts to football games, speaking to groups and even hosting some events. Our "Fitness Fridays" runs in the fall were a success that we want to continue in the future. I have also conducted an extensive data analysis and document review, trying to learn as much as possible about our school system's history, past practices and current status.

This report does not mark the end of my listening and learning. I plan to continue meetings with stakeholders regularly with the belief that new learning, strong communication and adaptation to change are central to our future progress.

This juncture in the school year creates an opportunity for me to share with you a vision for Bellingham Public Schools based upon my listening and learning. For the long-term, this provides a foundation to further involve our community in building our next strategic plan during the 2011-12 school year. For the short-term, it outlines next steps that we either intend to implement in preparation for next fall or that are still being considered with opportunities for additional feedback.

Thank you for the opportunity to share what I have heard and learned!

Dr. Greg Baker



"I just wanted to pass along to you some of the thoughts from my Jazz Band... My students were impressed with you being there and taking part in the music with them. I believe the event shows your interest in music and, what's more, gives a feeling of your personal interest in them. It also gives them a sense of camaraderie with you." — **Music Teacher**

"My daughter is in the Leadership class at Bellingham High. Her class enjoyed their time with you and truly felt heard and valued." — **Parent**

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1306 Dupont Street
Bellingham, WA 98225

360-676-6520 *phone*

www.bellinghamschools.org





One Schoolhouse

Commendations: As the new superintendent, I have observed many notable examples of our students, staff and community operating with a "one schoolhouse" mindset. The Carl Cozier Elementary School parents who led a campaign to raise funds for all third graders to have a pioneer conservation site experience are mentioned in a recent edition of Time Magazine for their work to create equity in these hard economic times. The community's response to the Whatcom Middle School fire and our staff and students at Shuksan, Fairhaven, Geneva and Bellingham have nurtured a one schoolhouse culture. And, another example is the Collaborative Orchestra Concert that my family and I attended this fall in which all three high school student groups performed together and shared the proceeds. Our School Board provides an example of a one schoolhouse philosophy by implementing policy governance and adopting Ends/Outcomes for all students.

> *"In my 34 years, we've met as a K-12 staff only two times."*
> *– Elementary specialist*

Observations: Many opportunities exist to expand our thinking and work as one schoolhouse. Data shows the numbers of students attending our schools who are living in poverty, are homeless or have a home language other than English continues to grow. These numbers are much higher at our northside schools and students' needs vary accordingly. State budget reductions have caused the district to cut back in many areas and parents are asked to pay for more such as field trips, increased school supplies, athletics/activities and other fees. This can amplify the hardship for families struggling to make ends meet.

Another data point indicates an achievement gap among ethnic groups and special populations in our district. We have less diversity in our upper-level high school courses such as Advanced Placement (AP).

> *"There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals."*
> *– Thomas Jefferson*

We also have numerous examples of staff working in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to improve student achievement throughout our system, but data indicates our staff have not spent much time in schools or work sites other than their own. Our staff need more opportunities for sharing best practices and collaboration.

Work Priorities:

- Use data, research and best practices as staff to work as one schoolhouse to address the achievement gap and make progress toward the School Board-adopted Ends/Outcomes for all students.
- Create a One Schoolhouse Award and a Closing the Achievement Gap Award as part of the district's annual awards process to recognize outstanding achievements of students, staff or volunteers in these areas.
- Increase opportunities for staff collaboration and teamwork throughout the system and consider a "Walk In Your Shoes Day," where staff could spend time in another school or part of the district with which they are unfamiliar.
- Form a work group of staff and members from the Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council to reduce school supply costs and possibly other fees by working as one schoolhouse. School supply fees, for example, currently vary from $23 to $116 for 4th grade and fees for the same science course at the three high schools range from $0 to $25.
- Read as a leadership staff the book, "Detracking for Excellence and Equity" by Burris and Garrity and pursue rigor for all.
- Form a group to explore ways to connect funding with students' greatest needs, differentiated accordingly by using data and Response to Intervention (RtI) as a model.

"I am particularly grateful for your interest and inclusion of our Hispanic community and your willingness to visit Sterling Meadows and speak with the MECha and ALTO student groups." — **Community Member**



Secondary Innovation and Increased Flexibility

Commendations: School and district leaders and staff in grades K-12, but especially in middle and high school, have been studying data related to our on-time and extended graduation rates and are implementing a number of strategies. Some of the current middle and high school schedules provide time for blocks of interventions and enriched learning, and staff are working together to create schedules at all schools that allow for this. Some online learning for summer school credit retrieval has been offered the last two years for high school students who are behind in credits.

Observations: Options High School is a pocket of innovation in our system with staff using creative instructional strategies such as project-based learning. Some barriers exist among Options and the three high schools, which all need to work together to offer an expanded menu of alternative learning options for students. We have 10,600 students and approximately 12,400 school-age children in our attendance area. Not all students in the city will find the right fit with us, but we don't want large numbers of students to enroll in other online learning programs, private schools, homeschool, transfer or drop out because we don't offer enough options.



Work Priorities:

- Expand online learning for high school students for year-round credit retrieval starting by fall 2011 and grow online learning to eventually allow secondary students to take at least one course online. Online learning does not replace classroom instruction, but is most successful in conjunction with strong teacher-to-student support.
- Increase flexibility for students for earning high school course credit through demonstration of mastering standards and by expanding the high school schedule in the future from early morning to evening, allowing students to attend school to best meet their learning needs.
- Increase technical/vocational opportunities for students to support their career paths without taking away their eligibility opportunities for college.
- Explore a K-12 homeschool partnership program where families could take one or more courses as part of specialized homeschool program.

On-time Graduation and Dropout Rates

Academic Year 2008-09*	Annual Dropout Rate	On-time Graduation Rate	Extended Graduation Rate
District	5%	67%	71%
State	6%	72%	77%

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

"It is frustrating to see students who are smart and capable drop out of school because they are bored or overwhelmed by their academic classes. Please consider adding vocational opportunities back into the high schools and let's keep kids from becoming drop-out statistics." **— Teacher**

"Keep on fighting the good fight to unite and connect us because that is what will help us provide a cohesive and unified system that will serve all students. We can't maximize and leverage our own strengths until we understand how they fit into the whole." — **Staff Member**

Early Childhood



Commendations: Several years ago, a Full-Day Kindergarten Task Force recommended the district implement full-time kindergarten. Elementary schools have taken steps in this direction by offering some sections of full-day kindergarten on a space-available basis with sliding-scale tuition.

Observations: Currently, 203 of approximately 800 kindergarten students are in full-time kindergarten. The rest attend kindergarten every other day. This creates inconsistent learning experiences and inequities for students in the part-time program. Even when the district had a part-time, everyday program – which cost more for transportation – kindergarteners still did not have enough instructional time to prepare for first grade. Our first indicator of an achievement gap is the initial kindergarten screen when students come to our schools. Data shows this is only widening because children currently in our full-time program are getting further ahead and some of the children who need the most academic, social and emotional skill-building are in the part-time program. Tuition, even on a sliding-scale, can be a barrier. National research shows that early childhood is one of the best investments a community can make. Providing full-time kindergarten can be viewed as a revenue source because it helps students achieve at or above standard early in their education. This lessens the need for expensive intervention and support programs later in their schooling and improves graduation rates, subsequently increasing employment and reducing poverty and crime.

Work Priorities:

- Provide full-time kindergarten as soon as possible second semester at no cost to as many families as possible using federal AARA funds at Title I schools: Alderwood, Birchwood, Roosevelt and Sunnyland.
- Provide full-time kindergarten at no cost for all or as many district families as possible starting in fall 2011.
- Begin expanding pre-school opportunities once full-time kindergarten is implemented.

Full-Time Kindergarten: Why Now? Aren't Our Kids Too Young for Full Days of Instruction? To watch a brief video **CLICK HERE** See some of our kindergarten teachers sharing their thoughts and share yours.





"No matter how good your plan is, you will not be able to please everyone in the district. Keep in mind what is best for the students." — **Staff Member**

System Support for Teaching and Learning

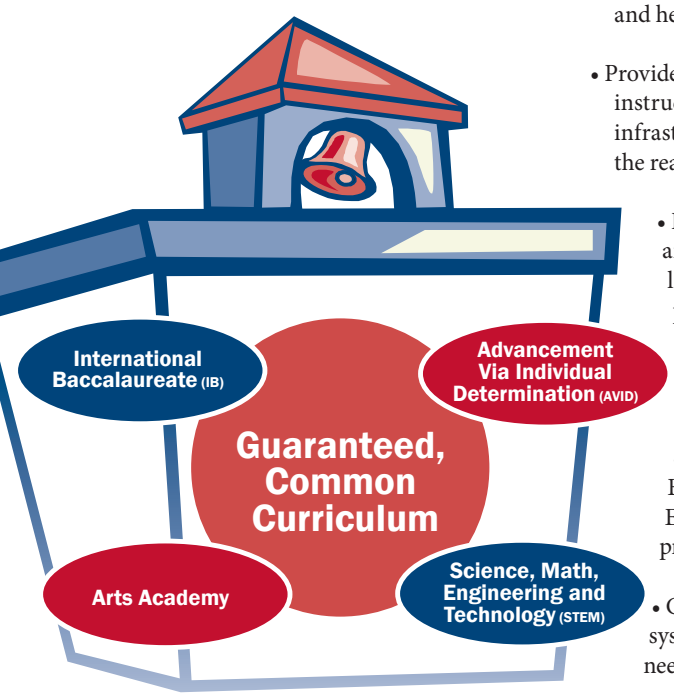
"Even with budget challenges, we can do better." — **Administrator**

Commendations: Bellingham Public Schools have a strong reputation for having a majority of students learning at or above state standards, especially in literacy. Staff are working in Professional Learning Communities on steps toward a common curriculum. Community members say talented, caring staff are the "best thing" they consistently hear about our schools.

Observations: The system does not have a common core curriculum in many content areas or grade levels so student learning experiences vary widely across, and sometimes even within, schools. This contributes to inequity and achievement gap issues, and makes it challenging for families or staff who change schools. Many pockets of innovation and exemplary instructional practices exist throughout our schools and staff could benefit from time to share and collaborate. The community strongly values visual and performing arts and health and fitness for students, and much work is needed in these and other areas to develop a continuum of K-12 curriculum. Our technology infrastructure and transportation system need refinement. More than 25 percent of district office leadership, especially in the areas of teaching and learning, has been eliminated in the last two years with budget cuts and our community still expresses "too much administration" as a concern. Leadership and central coordination is essential to meet students' needs and deliver on community expectations and values for our schools, and currently, we are struggling to provide adequate levels of support to schools.

"Middle school science has been on the back burner. We need to work on aligned, common assessments. We need leadership from the district office. We don't have enough administrative [support]." – ***Middle school science teacher***

"Part of the problem is a lack of district curriculum. Teachers having to create their own curriculum does not allow time for collaboration." – ***Labor leader***



Work Priorities:

• Provide support to school staff to collaboratively develop a common, guaranteed curriculum for all students. Regardless of zip code or classroom placement, students will have a high-quality, high-rigor learning experience that is aligned with national and state standards. This does not mean that curriculum is scripted and teaching innovation is diminished or that all schools should be the same. School programs should enhance a core curriculum.

• Nurture opportunities for grade level, school and systemwide staff collaboration.

• Provide central support to coordinate staff in developing a K-12 visual and performing arts and health and fitness curriculum.

• Provide central support in the area of instructional technology and improve our infrastructure so that it is reliable and meets the real-time needs of students and staff.

• Provide central support to develop an elementary program that includes library/technology, visual and performing arts and health and fitness, and work in future years to expand counseling and world language to every elementary school.

• Conduct program reviews of our English Language Learners, Special Education and Highly Capable Learners programs to better meet students' needs.

• Continue to refine our transportation system to meet program and students' needs, and reduce costs.



Budget Update

Legislators are proposing major cuts to K-12 funding, which will have a significant impact on increasing class sizes statewide for next school year. For our district, we are anticipating a loss of more than $2 million in state funds that we currently use to reduce class size. This is too big of a hit to soften entirely, but our supplemental levy will certainly help. We are extremely grateful to voters for approving a supplemental levy of $2.5 million per year for the next two years to help offset some of the state budget cuts. Without the supplemental levy and using some our savings, we would be looking at even more significant class size increases. We are considering using some, but not all, of the supplemental levy funds to help mitigate the impact of the state budget cuts on our class sizes for 2011-12, especially in grades K-4. We will also need this funding for our instructional program and to help us meet the learning needs of students in other ways, such as investing in kindergarten, improving our graduation rate and providing essential teaching and learning support to schools. Following the two previous years of significant reductions to our budget, it will continue to be a balancing act of juggling numerous needs with not enough funding.

Share your feedback on Dr. Baker's Entry Plan Report, full-time kindergarten, school start and end times, and more by taking an online survey.

CLICK HERE



School Start and End Times

High school staff are currently working together to create a common schedule for Bellingham, Sehome and Squalicum, possibly for fall 2011. This would potentially allow more options for high school students or staff to travel among the schools to take or teach courses in the future and provide more time for learning interventions and enrichment. Staff at our middle schools are also working to create similar middle school schedules to provide students more time within the school day for extra support or enriched learning.

Systemwide, the district is working on moving the 9:30 a.m. elementary school start time earlier for fall 2011 based upon feedback from families and staff. This could also change the start and end times for middle and high schools. Transportation is a major factor. We currently do not have the funding required to purchase more buses to create the ideal school start and end times that are desired, so a minimum of 45 minutes is needed between bus runs with our current fleet and transportation routes. Elementary students currently attend school 6 hours per day. Students in intermediate grades attended school 6.5 hours per day until this school year, when the start and end times for grades K-5 were aligned to save transportation costs. Currently, many elementary students are waiting outside until 3:45 p.m. for buses to arrive. Benefits of a 6.5 hour school day for all K-5 students include less time spent waiting outside for buses to arrive in the afternoon and more time in school. In order to provide a 6.5 hour instructional day for all K-5 elementary students, given our budget constraints, we may need a weekly early release for elementary students. This would allow us to meet requirements to provide individual planning time as well as collaborative time weekly for teachers. It also would allow staff to have important "one schoolhouse" time for sharing best practices and improving student learning.



Baker's Challenge: Share a better no-cost or low-cost solution or your feedback on our school schedule scenarios.

CLICK HERE