



Summary Notes for Safety and Security Planning Committee

Meeting 3: 4 – 5 p.m., Thursday, April 17, 2025

Location: District Office, 1985 Barkley Boulevard, Bellingham

Present: Russ Robinson, Director, Safety and Security, co-chair; Jessica Sankey, Chief Operations Officer, co-chair; Jay Jordan, Assistant Superintendent; Kurt Gazow, Chief Technology Officer; Dana Smith, Assistant Director, Communications; Sonia Cole, Principal, Sehome High; Allison Chryst, Principal, Shuksan Middle; Micah Smith, Birchwood Elementary; Curtis Lawyer, Director, Capital Projects; Heather Jones-Jennings, Custodial Supervisor; Laura Cardinal, Director, Mental Health Services; Derik Scott, Bellingham Fire Department; Kelly Balzer, Paraeducator, Northern Heights Elementary; Roxanne Borders, Preschool Teacher, Silver Beach Elementary; Lauri McBeath, Systems Analyst; Analisa Ficklin, Director, Special Education; Dawnette Chadwick, Parent/Guardian, Bellingham High, Birchwood Elementary; Shay Colson, Parent/Guardian, Alderwood Elementary; Cooper Stafford, Student; Angie Ritchey, Operations Specialist; Katie King, Administrative Assistant, Facilities.

Chief Operations Officer Jessica Sankey welcomed the group, reviewed the agenda and outlined the two main topics: a short discussion on the mission statement and a panel discussion on how sense of security and belonging is related to school safety.

Review vision and mission statement

With the help and work done by Dana Smith, assistant director of communications, we now have a working vision and mission statement.

Jessica then displayed the vision and mission statement on the screen and read it to the committee. She then asked how it landed with the committee, to which everyone gave a round of applause. Russ Robinson, director of safety and security, said that we took a lot of the language that you highlighted as important and incorporated that into the mission statement.

Panel discussion

Jessica welcomed the panel to the front of the room and asked the panel to introduce themselves and talk about the relationship of the sense of security and belonging in their schools.

Sonia Cole - principal, Sehome High School

- Through the Healthy Student Survey and word cloud analysis, restrooms consistently emerged as perceived unsafe areas. Worked with students discussing what makes it hard to stay in class and what you are looking for when leaving class.
- Developed The COVE, a quiet, dark room where students can meet with a teacher for up to 15 minutes. It serves as a space for emotional regulation, academic focus, and behavioral support.
 - Students can access anytime throughout the day with a pass.
 - Patterns of student usage are monitored to identify needs and provide support.
 - Due to success, we were able to use paraeducator hours towards staffing.
 - Students returning from extended absences often start in The COVE to ease their transition back to school.
 - Allows for the counseling office to be used for students with higher needs.
- After experiencing lockdowns, helped form a student safety committee to review protocols and discuss post-incident support. Emphasizes adapting approaches to meet diverse student needs.
- Encourages students to advocate for themselves, fostering independence and ownership of their well-being and safety.

Alli Chryst – principal, Shuksan Middle School

- Uses RULER method to help students understand and monitor their emotions, using a two-axis model: energy and pleasantness. The goal is to normalize all emotions and help students recognize when their mood or energy may not be appropriate for the situation. This helps students feel seen, heard, and supported.
- Previously implemented a space similar to The COVE, but found middle school students struggled with time regulation. A new portable space was created, requiring students to be accompanied by a counselor, vice principal, or principal to ensure accountability and inclusion in problem-solving.
- Promotes the district’s reporting form and QR code system to encourage “see something, say something.” Students can report concerns anonymously or openly, and both parties are brought together to discuss incidents and consequences empathetically.
- Advocated for more accessible single-use and all-gender restrooms, including converting staff restrooms in each grade-level area to better serve students.

Rodolfo Riviere – dean of students, Birchwood Elementary School

- Emphasized that many students feel safest at home because they can be themselves. His goal is to replicate that sense of unconditional acceptance at school, ensuring students feel loved and supported regardless of external challenges.
- Shared a personal experience of being a trusted adult for students during emotional crises, including ongoing communication with families. Even when students express anger or frustration, he remains a consistent and safe presence.
- Highlighted the collective effort of teachers, office assistants, and staff to create a welcoming environment where students know they are cared for.
- Uses surveys and ongoing conversations with students, teachers, and parents to assess and improve the school’s approach to safety and emotional support.

Russ Robinson - director of safety and security – Districtwide

- Serves as the Threat Assessment Coordinator, helping evaluate and respond to incidents. With 11 years of high school experience, he works closely with students, families, and school teams to ensure everyone feels safe and supported.
 - Builds lasting relationships with students—some continue to stay in touch years later.
- Regularly analyzes and shares data to guide safety procedures.
 - Restrooms consistently emerge as a top concern, prompting targeted policy and procedural changes.
- Oversees the district’s **safety tipline**, receiving 4–5 tips weekly.
 - Tips are forwarded to the appropriate principal or department.
 - The tool is widely used and considered successful, with strong messaging and follow-through.

Jessica Sankey – chief operations officer

- Talked about the new medical facility and classroom space at Options designed for similar uses as The COVE. These spaces provide students with a calm environment to regulate emotions or complete work, described as a “game changer” for student support.
- Recognized that students often come to all the panelists due to their roles and connections. One of the committee’s goals is to educate students on who to contact—starting with their teacher or principal.
 - Acknowledged that some students feel uncomfortable reaching out directly to staff.

- Highlighted Dr. Baker as a responsive contact who reads all emails and ensures follow-up.
- Emphasized the importance of making resources like the safety tipline and general inquiry form highly visible:
 - Tipline is featured on every district webpage, student ID cards, and staff badges.
 - Encouraged students to use these tools, noting they don't have to be anonymous.
 - Stressed the importance of bridging the gap between school and district support systems.

Jessica highlighted how the sense of belonging expressed by staff seems to be a core value within the school community and asked whether it can be taught and how staff are trained to foster it. Russ responded by emphasizing that while physical safety is important, over-securing schools can hinder connection and learning. Instead, he advocates for proactive relationship-building with students and families, noting that most students simply want to attend school and feel normal. He stressed the importance of campus monitors who are visible, approachable, and not tied to classrooms, explaining that their presence and trust-building efforts are far more effective than surveillance tools. Discipline, he added, should focus on changing behavior rather than punishment, helping students return to school safely. Rodolfo reinforced that love and belonging are central to the district's values and called on staff to reflect, confront biases, and set aside pride to better serve students and families, committing personally to change for the good of the community.

Parents don't always feel confident in school administration, so staff emphasized the importance of guiding families on how to advocate for their students. The recommended approach is to start by contacting the teacher, then the principal, as they know the student best. Parents can also use the safety tipline, which routes concerns to Russ and the appropriate school team, or reach out directly to Dr. Baker, who reviews all emails and ensures follow-up. Alli noted that concerns raised later in the year are often harder to address and encouraged parents to speak up early, reassuring them that they're never a bother. Sonia added that responsiveness builds trust and helps share positive stories. Rodolfo reinforced that staff are always open to listen and support, emphasizing the school's team-based, family-oriented culture. The panel also shared that immediate concerns can be texted to a principal or vice principal, and a form is filled out to ensure proper documentation and response.

Next steps

Jessica concluded the meeting by notifying panelists and committee members that time had run out. She expressed sincere appreciation for their time, thoughtful contributions, and the engaging questions shared throughout the discussion.

Russ outlined the next steps, emphasizing the goal of moving forward with actionable items with our vision and mission statement, proactive safety practices, physical safety measures and culture of care and belonging. He noted that survey data will be sent out to help guide future decisions and thanked everyone for their engagement, encouraging them to enjoy the rest of their evening.

The next meeting is scheduled for: 4 – 5 p.m., Thursday, May 15 at the District Office.