Bellingham Public Schools
a collective commitment

Board Summary: Community Linkage Special Meeting
Columbia Elementary School
May 17, 2017
5:30 – 7 p.m.

The Bellingham School Board of Directors and Superintendent Greg Baker welcomed audience members, invited guests and district staff to a linkage meeting focusing on the LGTQA+ community and The Bellingham Promise. The discussion focused on the following questions:

- *How have we been doing regarding supporting our LGTQA+ community?*
- *What could we do better?*
- *How do we ensure that The Bellingham Promise supports all students?*

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

- The district has made progress since January 2014, when the board last held a community linkage meeting focused on the LGTQA+ community. However, more work is needed to ensure that all students and families feel included and respected. Specifically, attendees asked that the district focus on the following:
    - Devote more resources to educate all staff and students on LGTQA+ concerns.
    - Help raise awareness districtwide on topics such as pronoun use, misgendering, and name changes. Make sure conversations on these issues begin at an early age.
    - Work to ensure that a student's decision to change their name is handled respectfully, and when a name change does occur, find ways to update school records quickly and efficiently.
    - When a new task force is formed, pay close attention to the composition of its membership to make sure it is inclusive.
    - How do we ensure that the school curriculum supports inclusivity?
    - What resources can be channeled to school libraries to support this effort?
    - Consider hiring an administrator who will oversee this effort districtwide.

Meeting minutes are attached.

Official Meeting Minutes: Community Linkage Special Meeting
Columbia Elementary School
May 17, 2017
5:30 – 7 p.m.

Linkage Attendees:

- Representative parents/guardians, students, staff, alumni, and community members connected to the LGTQA+ community
- Directors Kelly Bashaw, Douglas Benjamin, Camille Diaz Hackler, Quenby Peterson
- Superintendent of Schools Greg Baker
- District Staff/Leadership: Bethany Barrett, Director of Teaching and Learning; Julie Batten, Principal, Columbia Elementary School; Steve Clarke, Assistant Superintendent, Teaching and Learning; Ron Cowan, Executive Director, Capital Projects and School Facilities; Kurt Gazow, Executive Director of Technology; Fontaine Phillips, teacher and QSA Advisor, Bellingham High School; Tanya Rowe, Executive Director, Communications and Community Relations; Simone Sangster, Assistant Superintendent, Finance and Operations; Ashley Welch, Teacher, Columbia Elementary School

1. **Opening Items**

   Call to Order/Welcome and Introductions: The meeting began at 5:30 p.m. with a meet and greet. At 6 p.m., School Board President Douglas Benjamin thanked those in attendance, noting that feedback obtained at linkage meetings is invaluable to both the school board and the administrative team and staff. Mr. Benjamin then introduced Dr. Baker. Following Dr. Baker's welcome and opening comments, 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:**

   Ms. Bashaw said board linkage meetings are held three or four times each year. Tonight's meeting is a follow up to one held with the LGTQA+ community on Jan. 30, 2014. She said linkages allow board members to gather feedback from community members and to strengthen connections with stakeholders. Additionally, through linkage meetings, the board seeks input on the goals set for students in The Bellingham Promise, the district's strategic plan, to help guide decisions related to school district policies.

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

Guiding Questions:

- *How have we been doing regarding supporting our LGTQA+ community?*
- *What could we do better?*
- *How do we ensure that The Bellingham Promise supports all students?*

Summary of Comments:

- Transgender Students/Challenges:
    - The district should consider expanding the acronym to LGBTQIA. (*Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer/Questioning/Intersex/Asexual*)
    - Please offer more comprehensive staff and student training on transgender issues. Transgender students confront challenges that are very different than those faced by gay or lesbian students. More training directed at all district staff and the entire student body would result in greater empathy and a better environment for all students.
    - The district is making some strides; for example, the term "preferred pronoun" now appears on the Kindergarten registration form.
    - It is a concern that no parents of transgender students are represented on the district's LGTQA+ Task Force.
    - Staff training is needed in three specific areas: handling students' requests for a change of name; understanding appropriate use of pronouns; and when a misstep occurs, learning how to apologize to students in an appropriate and sensitive manner.
    - When a student changes their name, the process in updating records (for example, Skyward, ASB cards, yearbooks) can be inconsistent and/or cumbersome. Some students do not have the resources/opportunities to have their name legally changed. The policy needs to be reviewed so it is inclusive for everyone.
        - In response, Kurt Gazow, Executive Director of Technology, said registrars have been directed to change records in Skyward when asked to do so. The state, however, continues to hold the district accountable in ensuring a student's legal name is reflected on their transcript.
- Concerns/Recommendations:
    - For teachers and other staff, ongoing messaging/training is extremely important in many areas, including:
        - interactions/communications with gay parents
        - how to better support parents or families when they first learn their child is gay or transgender
        - building awareness on the importance of using inclusive language
        - district expectations relating to name and gender markers, use of preferred names, and gender-inclusive facilities.
    - Education of students regarding empathy and respect towards LGBTQ+ individuals needs to start in the very early grades.
    - Consider adding a section to enrollment packets that address some of these topics.

- In school libraries, work to ensure LGTQA+ materials are integrated throughout the stacks; avoid having a "gay section" in which books and resources are confined to just a few shelves. Whatcom County's youth services librarians are well trained in this effort and would be a good resource.
- Consider establishing a position titled Director of Equity Inclusion, or hire a social worker who is identified as the person leading the charge districtwide.
- Consider replicating the work of other districts where a curriculum that includes family and gender diversity is mandated, so it becomes a normal subject of conversation. There are many of these types of models out there, and it would help children, staff, and families.

At the close of the meeting, Ms. Bashaw thanked participants and expressed appreciation to Tanya Rowe and Bethany Barrett for their help in planning the meeting. Dr. Baker summarized key discussion points, noting that these types of discussions help to influence policy. As an example, he said gender neutral restrooms were created throughout the district due in part to feedback received at the January 2014 linkage meeting with LGTQA+ families and community. He added that a key takeaway from tonight's meeting is that the district has made progress, but more work and education is needed to ensure that all of our kids feel included, respected and loved.

The meeting adjourned at 7 p.m.

Approved:

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Douglas Benjamin, School Board President

Attest:

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Greg Baker, Secretary to the Board *Minutes approved*: *June 8, 2017*