**Board Summary: Community Linkage Meeting**
**Connecting with Families of English Language Learners**
**October 24, 2013**

The Bellingham School Board and Superintendent Greg Baker welcomed English Language Learner (ELL) families, students, a recent graduate, and district staff to a linkage meeting on October 24, 2013.

The purpose of the meeting was for the School Board to engage in a discussion about how The Bellingham Promise connects with the English Language Learners program and the services provided for students and families. Attendees were divided into small groups with at least one Board member and one Executive Team member with each group. The Board asked parents and staff members to explore the following questions:

- *What in The Bellingham Promise rings true?*
- *What in The Bellingham Promise could be improved?*
- *How does The Bellingham Promise connect to English Language Learners?*
- *How would you describe your experience with Bellingham Public Schools? How could we better serve you?*

Many in the group shared their support for The Bellingham Promise and some asked for more detail regarding its purpose and its components. Parents and guardians suggested ways that the district could better serve ELL students and families, including more interpretation and translation services; a desire for equitable pre-school opportunities for all; and additional resources to help parents assist their children with homework. Attendees expressed appreciation for programs that enhance family engagement with the schools, and they asked that resources continue to be directed to such programs. They also emphasized the need for more flexible after-school transportation services for children who participate in sports or other extracurricular activities.

Meeting minutes are attached.

**Official Minutes**
**School Board Community Linkage with**
**Families of English Language Learners**
**Shuksan Middle School Library**
**October 24, 2013**

**Linkage Attendees:**

- Representative parents/guardians of English Language Learners (ELL), students, and a recent graduate
- Board President Ken Gass and Directors Kelly Bashaw, Camille Hackler, Steve Smith, and Scott Stockburger
- Superintendent of Schools Greg Baker
- District Administrators/Staff: Mike Copland, Assistant Superintendent, Department of Teaching and Learning; Nora Klewiada, Executive Director, Human Resources; Bob Kuehl, Assistant Superintendent, Human Resources; Justin May, Doctoral Resident; Tanya Rowe, Executive Director, Communications and Community Relations; Amy Carder, Director, Department of Teaching and Learning; Isabel Meaker, Special Assistant to the Superintendent for Family Engagement; Tanya Castellon, Family Liaison; and Ruth Rasmussen, Superintendent's Secretary

**Call to Order**:
President Ken Gass called the meeting to order at 6:10 p.m. and welcomed attendees.

**Welcome and Introductions:**
Director Camille Hackler thanked those in attendance and explained the purpose of community linkage sessions: to provide the School Board with the opportunity to strengthen connections with families and community members. She explained that the board's role at linkage sessions is to listen and learn. Ms. Hackler provided an overview of The Bellingham Promise, the district's strategic plan.

Dr. Gass introduced Dr. Greg Baker, Superintendent of Schools, and Tanya Rowe, Executive Director of Communications and Community Relations. Following opening comments, the invited guests, interpreters (Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, and Punjabi), Directors, and district staff introduced themselves.

**Board and Attendees Discussion**:
Facilitator Tanya Rowe invited board members, district staff, and families to break into small groups to address guiding questions related to The Bellingham Promise. Following the discussions, staff highlighted key points from each group. A summary of comments follows:

- *What in The Bellingham Promise rings true?*
    - Staff members are very engaged and encourage our students.

  - Kids are safe.
  - There is vigilance about ensuring kids go down the right path.
  - Teachers are extremely supportive.
  - There is an opportunity for students to interact with kids from other cultures.
  - I like how it talks about the whole child. We all want to be loved.
  - Diversity is valued. There is no discrimination; no sense that one culture is better than another.
  - Respectful human beings -- that is important.
  - Respectful and compassionate; honest and ethical citizens; well-rounded community members engaged with the broader world; multi-lingual readers and speakers.
  - Diversity, compassion, and service build community.
  - The Bellingham Promise makes sense to me. My kids are really happy with the schools.

- *What in The Bellingham Promise could be improved?*
  - I see there is a commitment to a strong culture and creating character, but I really don't understand The Promise.
  - Why don't we have pre-school in all the schools? Only people with really low incomes qualify for pre-school, so those of us who work, we are "punished." If you work, it's bad [said in jest].
  - I would like teachers to address more about respect: respect for self and community, to increase self-confidence.

- *How does The Bellingham Promise connect to English Language Learners?*
  - I am able to communicate with the teachers on ELL nights and during conferences when the interpreter is there.
  - There are always interpreters. Only once I was without an interpreter, because she was not available.
  - When the staff are more open to us, it makes us more willing to open up to them, and it gives us more security.

- *How would you describe your experience with Bellingham Public Schools? How could we better serve you?*
  - I came from California, and I noticed my children are learning more here. They [staff] pay more attention to my children here. Their studies have advanced. My son liked school okay there, but here he can't wait to go to school. I've noticed the difference.
  - My son is making huge strides in his growth, making decisions about his future. He is more centered, more mature. He is becoming a young adult.
  - My daughter is ready and eager to go to school every day.
  - These are very effective schools. They love Alderwood.
  - To know we have the school's support is very much appreciated.
  - The principal greets our kids…and kids are safe.

- I trust the school to leave our children there.
- At Cordata the staff and everyone is nice to my children.
- I learned a lot, and my kids learned a lot in the Strengthening Families program. I would like to see more of those types of programs.
- Thank you for the school supplies.
- I want to make sure there are people to help [students] in the schools. Keep the services for interpreters, because it's frustrating not to be able to talk to the teachers.
- We don't have the tools to help them do their homework. We want to; we just don't know how.
- Textbooks are hard to understand.
- I would like my son to be able to participate in after-school activities; but he has to ride the bus. There is no other way for him to get home. I think it is important to participate in sports, but my son is unable to do that because of transportation issues.
- [Parent from the Russian community]: I would like my children to have a greater exposure to the Punjabi and Hindi community. They have been exposed to other cultures, but not these, and I would like to see them get better exposure and representation.
- [Parent from the Punjabi community]: There are different dialects, and the Punjabi the district uses for written documents is different than my dialect, so it is difficult to understand.
- The cultural difference between school and home is a challenge. Food and clothes are an example.
- Usually all I get is a message on the phone from the principal, or announcements about school. Other than that, I don't get a lot of communication.
- Parents' English is limited and they need extra help. Does the school have extra help? I could use help with a translator or interpreter.
- Is there a possibility of a volunteer spending time in our home to help translate, and to help with homework? Our students bring homework home, but since I don't know English, I don't know what to do.
- It would help to have a report every week asking what the parent needs or asking if the students needs special help.
- [Vietnamese parent]: Our school sends something home every week, but it is in English. If it came home in Vietnamese, it would help. Then we could read it and understand it. A letter needs to be translated; if not, it is useless.
- [Vietnamese interpreter]: There was a good program at Whatcom Community College last weekend, but no Vietnamese families were there. No families knew about it. If you send a letter home that is translated, then the parent and students will know about these events.
- How come not all schools have tutoring after school?
- I heard that there could be high school students who could come to elementary schools to help. Ferndale School District has this program.
- There is an information breakdown between families and schools.

- For my child, having time and structure to do homework in the school environment is really helpful. The home environment is challenging for him to focus.
- We are learning a new language and adjusting to a new society. We need more parenting resources. We don't always know about future planning, like college.

- I've noticed many of our schools don't have theater or drama programs. Our kids go to private activities for singing and acting, but I wonder what other families do if they can't afford this.
- It is great to have a planner. It's a way to show parents what the work is and what students are supposed to do in each subject. It helps to have a journal for each subject, not just separate papers.
- Clear communication on the district's bullying policy would be helpful.

In his closing statements, Dr. Baker thanked families for taking the time to participate in tonight's meeting. He said the district is committed to family engagement and to making sure every student and family feel they are a part of this district. He expressed appreciation to all attendees for their input and for helping the district to get better at serving our children.

The meeting adjourned at 7:04 p.m.



Ken Gass, School Board President

ATTEST:



Greg Baker, Secretary to the Board