Bellingham Public Schools
a collective commitment

Board Summary: Community Linkage Meeting
Connecting with the LGBTQA Community
January 30, 2014

The Bellingham School Board and Superintendent Greg Baker welcomed audience members, invited guests, and district staff to a linkage meeting focused on strengthening connections with the LGBTQA community.

The purpose of the meeting was for the School Board to engage in a discussion about how The Bellingham Promise resonates with LGBTQA students and families and to listen to their experiences as part of our school system. The Board asked parents, students, alumni, and staff members to explore the following questions:

- *How does The Bellingham Promise currently support LGBTQA students, families, graduates, and community members?*
- *How would you describe your experience with Bellingham Public Schools? How could we better serve you?*

Attendees said the level of tolerance in the community and within the school district is higher here than in many locations. Some said this statement within The Bellingham Promise resonated: *our students are cared for and respected, and they will graduate from our schools prepared for success in the global community*. Several asked for ways to mitigate a sense of invisibility that seems prevalent among LGBTQA students. It was suggested this could be done through enhanced staff professional development, more inclusiveness, and recognition that the need for education – particularly on the power of words – must begin early.

Several attendees thanked the School Board for this opportunity to meet and expressed the hope that the dialogue will continue.

Meeting minutes are attached.

School Board Community Linkage with
the LGBTQA Community
Bellingham High School Library
January 30, 2014

Linkage Attendees:

- Representative parents/guardians, students, alumni, and community members connected to the LGBTQA community
- Directors Kelly Bashaw, Camille Hackler, Steve Smith (Board President), and Scott Stockburger
- Superintendent of Schools Greg Baker
- District Administrators/Staff: Deputy Superintendent Mike Copland; Assistant Superintendent Steve Clarke; Assistant Superintendent Ron Cowan; Executive Director Kurt Gazow; Executive Director Nora Klewiada; Assistant Superintendent Bob Kuehl; Executive Administrator Rob McElroy; Executive Director Tanya Rowe; Executive Secretary and Recorder Ruth Rasmussen

Call to Order:
President Steve Smith called the meeting to order at 6:10 p.m. He explained that Dr. Gass was unable to attend the meeting due to an out-of-town commitment.

Welcome and Introductions:
Dr. Smith introduced Dr. Baker and Ms. Rowe. Following opening comments, the invited guests, audience members, board members, and district staff introduced themselves.

Dr. Stockburger 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. He said the board's role at linkage sessions is to listen and to learn. Dr. Stockburger also provided an overview of The Bellingham Promise, the district's strategic plan.

Board and Attendees Discussion:
Facilitator Tanya Rowe invited the group to consider the following questions:

- *How does The Bellingham Promise currently support LGBTQA students, families, graduates, and community members?*
- *How would you describe your experience with Bellingham Public Schools? How could we better serve you?*

In discussing The Bellingham Promise, some said the following collective commitment resonated: *Our students are cared for and respected, and they will graduate from our schools prepared for success in the global community.*

Following is a summary of other discussion items:

- **District and community resources:**
    - Within the district, some of the middle and high schools have active student-led Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs).
    - Northwest Youth Services in Bellingham offers a support group, the Queer Youth Project, and is developing training for staff that will be available to social service providers in the community.
    - Whatcom Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) serves the local LGBT community.
    - Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. This organization has educational kits for school districts, available at no charge. The Seattle group will send representatives to facilitate workshops for school district staff.
    - Western Washington University Queer Resource Center is open to anyone in the community.
- **Cultural Competency:**
    - Attendees expressed the desire for more sensitivity in terms of inclusiveness when the curriculum is designed. One example cited was in teaching history: perhaps a student project could focus on well-known historical figures who are or were part of the LGBTQA population.
    - Attendees stressed the need for cultural competency in the early grades. Transgender students, for example, are transitioning at younger ages and they need support and understanding from their classmates and district staff. Additionally, a strong focus on unacceptable language is needed at every grade level. Use of the negative phrase "that's so gay," for example, is increasing by very young children.
    - The GSA groups should be promoted in a way that promotes the message that they are for *anyone* who wants to join – gay and straight alike.
- **The problem of "invisibility"**
    - Several attendees addressed this issue. One former student said the harassment she encountered as a youth growing up in Bellingham occurred mostly *outside* of school. During the school day, her biggest challenge was a sense of invisibility. This was a difficult barrier to overcome, she said, since it was not as obvious a problem as bullying. Education for staff and students on how to promote greater visibility in the classroom is critical, she said.
    - Attendees expressed the need for teacher professional development on this topic, preferably at least one workshop a year. One parent observed that while many teachers would like attitudes to change, it seems they don't know where to begin or what words to use, so training is critical. Another noted that teachers and staff must be careful about day-to-day terms they use; for example, the term "your parents" is more inclusive than the term "your mom and dad."
    - It was suggested that the superintendent sponsor an annual breakfast for LGBTQA students and families, as a method to strengthen connections and combat the sense of invisibility that many of them experience.

In his closing statements, Dr. Baker summarized key topics and thanked everyone for their participation. He said the district is committed to family engagement and to making sure all

students and families feel they are a part of this district. He referenced The Bellingham Promise, noting that the School Board holds all district staff accountable for the commitment that every student should be loved, cared for, and respected.

The meeting adjourned at 7:07 p.m.

Steve Smith, School Board President

ATTEST:

Greg Baker, Secretary to the Board