Board Summary: Community Linkage Meeting
Connecting with Senior Citizens
March 27, 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 community's senior citizens.

The purpose of the meeting was for the School Board to engage in a discussion about how The Bellingham Promise resonates with senior citizens and how Bellingham Public Schools can strengthen its relationship with this segment of the community. The Board asked attendees to explore the following questions:

- *What in The Bellingham Promise resonates?*
- *What in The Bellingham Promise could be improved?*
- *How can Bellingham Public Schools strengthen its relationship with our senior citizens/retirement community?*
- *What is one thing you want our School Board to take away from this meeting?*

During discussion, attendees said they appreciated that The Bellingham Promise focuses on development of the whole child. Many agreed that stronger connections between senior citizens and students would be mutually beneficial, particularly since senior citizens and retirees represent a tremendous pool of talent, skills, and knowledge. One example cited was recruitment of senior citizens to help students become more election-savvy. Ideas for ways in which students could reach out to senior citizens were also discussed; for example, students could help with household chores, provide technical/computer assistance, or fulfill classroom assignments involving interviews with seniors to get their perspectives on history.

Accessibility of schools was also a concern. Many agreed that schools are a community asset and need to be open outside of regular classroom hours. Shuksan Middle School's twice-a-week dinner program for low-income families was cited as one example of an effective use of the building after hours.

Several attendees suggested that the district maintain face-to-face connections with senior citizens on a continuous, year-round basis, not just during election season.

It was noted that Bellingham's demographics are rapidly changing, and the district must continue to reach out to diverse populations. The appointment of a Special Assistant for Family Engagement was cited as an example of a positive approach in this direction.

Meeting minutes are attached.

School Board Community Linkage with
Senior Citizens
Central Services Board Room
March 27, 2014

Linkage Attendees:

- Representatives of Bellingham's Senior Citizen Community: Jeanne Chadwick, Carol Comeau, Joan Dow, Nellie Durham, Marilyn Flint, Julie Guy, Bob Hendricks, Beverly Jacobs, Giovanna Wong, and Lawrence Wong.
- Directors Kelly Bashaw, Ken Gass, and Steve Smith (Board President)
- 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; 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 12 noon. He explained that Ms. Hackler was not in attendance due to an out-of-town commitment.

Welcome and Introductions:
Dr. Smith thanked those in attendance and explained the purpose of community linkage sessions: to provide the school board with opportunities to strengthen connections with families and community members, and to engage intentionally with members of the community who are not typically heard from. The board's role at these sessions, he said, is to listen and to learn. He added that the district's strategic plan, The Bellingham Promise, serves as a framework for discussion during linkage meetings.

Dr. Smith introduced Dr. Baker. Following Dr. Baker's welcome and opening comments, the invited guests, audience members, board members, and district staff introduced themselves.

Discussion:
Dr. Smith then introduced the meeting's facilitator, Tanya Rowe, who invited the group to consider and respond to questions relating to The Bellingham Promise. Following is a summary of questions and responses:

- *How does The Bellingham Promise resonate, and what in The Bellingham Promise could be improved?*

- I think The Bellingham Promise is fantastic. I wonder where you get your funding to do all these fine things. I know how our legislative body has impacted schools, and what a struggle it is to provide equity. Recently, Janae Hodge [Shuksan Middle School Assistant Principal] gave a presentation on steps Shuksan is taking to keep students in school. One way is by reducing the amount of suspensions and expulsions. Kudos for all you are doing.
- The focus on the whole child is very important. The testing mania has taken over in many parts of the country, and teaching is not joyful anymore. Your focus and vision are profound. I appreciate that one of Dr. Baker's priorities is to reduce school-related expenses for all families. I applaud the focus for all kids.
- I would love to see development of a resource group that could help students in need. You need to inventory all of the resources of the senior community here, to recruit volunteers. Also, you could publicize in local newspapers what the schools need [in terms of supplies or volunteers.] Many seniors in this community would volunteer if they knew what is needed and what the approval process is. For example, people could help coach math teams in such a way that [Bellingham students] could be number one in the state.
- It is important to remember, one is never too old to volunteer or help out.
- I came from a community on the East Coast where high school seniors were required to do a community project involving senior citizens. They helped with yard work and other chores. This allowed the students and seniors to get to know one another and helped bridge the generation gap. Other ideas: high school students could visit seniors at nursing homes, or senior citizens could serve as tutors. Senior citizens and retirees are energetic and can get involved.
- We need to keep in mind the quote, "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it." How much emphasis is placed on history? I am concerned that our kids don't have much comprehension of the past.
- I would like to address use of school facilities after hours. Every place I have lived, schools have been closed down at the end of the day. Schools have amenities that would be useful for neighborhood groups and families.
- Senior citizens want to stay in touch with their kids and families. They want to communicate with them effectively. This is a way students can be of service, by offering their technical expertise to senior citizens.
- With all the senior resources here, how can we seniors communicate our valuable experience? How can we tap into that resource pool and start the flow of communications? How can we develop a centralized venue that will provide a link to all community resources?
- Election outreach is important. The League of Women Voters has reached out to eligible high school students to encourage them to register to vote. Students must understand the importance of civic engagement and how important their vote is. Some have little understanding about the voter registration process.
- Retiree and senior citizens are a good resource to help high school students register to vote.

    - Young people need to have a better grasp of civics and the workings of the government. A recent poll showed only 25 percent of the population could identify the three branches of government.
- *How can Bellingham Public Schools strengthen its relationship with our senior citizens/retirement community?*
    - Unless they have grandchildren in the schools, senior citizens only hear from the district when a levy or bond is on the ballot.
    - In my former community, lack of communication from school administrators except during elections was a huge issue. As a [retired] district administrator, I made it a point to meet with senior groups and retiree associations on a regular basis, rather than waiting until bonds or levies were on the ballot. I think your newsletter [*Inside Schools*] is outstanding. Your communications in general are good, but personal, face-to-face outreach is very important. For example, a fair amount of seniors in this community probably want to know about the rationale behind early dismissal. If the district reaches out on various topics not related to levies or bonds, people will start to say, "Oh, they really care what we think."
    - We have many new seniors moving into the area, and many are not registered to vote. We need to be cognizant of that; get them involved and make sure they can vote locally and understand school district issues.
    - People who live in Fairhaven and the south end are well organized. In the north end, there is not as much a sense of community. Those connected to Cordata Elementary School and other schools in that area could make a big difference if they reached out – not just to retirees but to all of the families in the north end.
    - During election season, the Meridian School District had high school seniors personally call every registered voter to ask them to vote. It made an impression.
    - It is important to keep in mind that the population in the north end will expand significantly as building continues.

- *What is one thing you want our School Board to take away from this meeting*?
    - I grew up before trained counselors worked in the schools. It is so important for a troubled child to have someone to talk with. At one point I worked with expelled students. I was there for them because I understood their issues. Connection is critically important.
    - Organize ways in which seniors can help.
    - People have all kinds of skills to offer. There are ways students and seniors can participate in hands-on projects involving the arts. These could ultimately be brought into the classroom and could possibly translate into dollars for the schools.
    - Our demographics are changing dramatically. Make sure you are hearing from all segments of the community by planning outreach efforts in various gathering places outside of the district. Many community members are intimidated by educators. It is important that you hear from them.

- Shuksan Middle School is doing an excellent job. The assistant principal makes home visits to at-risk families. The school sponsors family nights and other events outside of normal school hours, as a way to connect to the community.
- It is important to keep in mind that many families are focused on basic necessities, so education is not their first priority.
- I hope your staff will have an opportunity to read these meeting notes.
- Suggestion for a classroom assignment: students interview senior citizens, write reports on the interviews, then meet again to share their reports with the interviewees.
- More information on Common Core would be useful. I have a bad impression of Common Core; I have the impression it is a way to "dumb down" our students.
- How many families are at or below the poverty level in our school district? Can we work with the data to connect senior citizens to these students? Seniors could help with fund raising, or provide tutoring after school. The students could earn extra money by doing chores for senior citizens. We need to find ways to connect students with our seniors and retirees.
- Publicize the needs of individual schools.
- Steve Clarke [Assistant Superintendent] was recently part of a City Club panel discussion relating to poverty and food insecurity. Many senior citizens were in attendance, and it was impressive to simply view their reactions and how much education is needed on this topic. This is a good example of effective outreach.

In closing, Dr. Smith thanked attendees for their feedback. He said the Board's responsibilities include monitoring outcomes, and one way to do this is to listen to community members and learn what they want. Linkage meetings are an excellent vehicle to accomplish that.

Dr. Baker summarized key topics and thanked everyone for their participation.

The meeting adjourned at 1:04 p.m.



Steve Smith, Board President

ATTEST:



Greg Baker, Secretary to the Board