Bellingham Public Schools
…where *every* student learns

School Board Community Linkage with Parents of Homeschooled Students
12:30 - 1:30 p.m. Friday, May 3, 2013
District Office Board Room

Linkage attendees included:

- Homeschool Family Representatives:
  - Jolene Baijot
  - Chris Day
  - Kris DeBruine
  - Julie Goebel
  - Heather Hildreth
  - Kierin Lund
  - Gary McGill
  - Nikki Quinn
  - Andrea Rackl
  - Kate Yamamoto

- School Board Members:
  - Kelly Bashaw
  - Ken Gass
  - Camille Hackler
  - Scott Stockburger

- School District Administrators:
  - Greg Baker, Superintendent of Schools
  - Steve Clarke, Executive Director, Teaching and Learning
  - Nora Klewiada, Executive Director, Human Resources
  - Rob McElroy, Executive Administrator
  - Tom Venable, Deputy Superintendent

School Board President Dr. Ken Gass called the meeting to order and, on behalf of the School Board, welcomed parents and district staff.

Dr. Gass introduced Rob McElroy, Executive Administrator and facilitator of today's meeting. Mr. McElroy explained the role of the facilitator and introduced Greg Baker, Superintendent of Schools.

Dr. Baker welcomed the group and asked attendees to introduce themselves and briefly summarize their homeschooling experience.

Following introductions, School Board member Camille Hackler provided an overview of the purpose of the board's community linkage meetings, and she reviewed *The Bellingham Promise*, noting that it is a "living document" that will continue to be refined as needed.

Summary of Comments:

What in *The Bellingham Promise* resonates, and how might it be improved?

- I would like to see more references relating to support of a safe environment. That has been a concern of parents on all levels. Maybe a more uniform policy is needed that has steps and consequences and outcomes that cover all the schools. (Several in the group said they concurred.)
- The mission and vision define what my goal was as a homeschool parent. I am not seeing this at the public school; that is why I chose to homeschool - to let my children develop their gifts and talents. I looked for innovative programs that actually did that.
- It is hard to do that with 30 kids in a class. The students enrolled in the Meridian Parent Partnership Program (MP3) get more individualized instruction.
- My children often taught themselves. I didn't teach them to read, but they are great readers. A lot comes from self-motivation. Teachers are great resources, but we also have a lot within us. I wouldn't argue with anything in *The Bellingham Promise*. I would say "Every child can learn at high levels." But I think it's dangerous to think we can only learn if someone teaches us.
- *Innovators and creators* (Outcomes) resonated with me. But how do you measure the outcomes? It is extremely important to be an independent person and to learn on your own.
- Fostering independent thinkers is important. What is the likelihood of this, however, when teachers are so constricted by teaching to tests? It is wonderful to have creative ideas, but this is difficult within the framework of standardized tests. Teachers have told me they breathe a sigh of relief once all of the tests are over.
- A parent partnership program similar to MP3 would be very beneficial for BSD.
- I think there are a lot of great things within *The Bellingham Promise*. It would be a great world vision, but it's not what is actualized. If the kids really had this, we'd be great. I'm hearing the learning environment is important. But every kid is different – how do we address that? We think we can do it perfectly. I've seen really dedicated teachers, but I feel they must be as frustrated as we are. It's all tied to money, and we are all idealistic, but it's a vanishing pool of money getting disbursed. So much is tied to the state, and there are threats to cut off funding for alternative programs.
- Do we have a real safe learning environment? Sometimes I think the vision at Bellingham High School (the three rules) is really what we are talking about, and the kids really seem to take care of that. It's like the kids own the school. There is something right going on at that school.
- The mission statement within *The Bellingham Promise* is right on, but it is very idealistic. The culture we live in makes it really hard.
- I think *The Bellingham Promise* is a beautiful set of ideals; but honestly, I think a lot of it has to come from home and it just doesn't. A lot of parents expect the schools to teach their kids to be good citizens.

What are some of the reasons families choose to homeschool?

- It's a different lifestyle. It's like choosing to farm instead of working a 9-5 job. We need to make sure all the crops are in and the animals are fed, and whatever time allowance is needed, that's just what we do. We are not angry or want to prove a point; it's just a better lifestyle for us.
- I went to the MP3 program because there wasn't anything here. I'm a strong advocate for schools. I think you'll find more families looking for alternatives as budgets shrink.
- I didn't homeschool any of my children for the same reasons. I felt I knew what each of them needed more than a classroom teacher. When I needed to, I tapped into MP3 for the resources (such as music). It was about fueling each child's passion. If the child was passionate about sports, we would plug them into that at the school level. In our case, I did not drive to the MP3 program, but we took advantage of programs offered (that came to us), with the concept of "tailoring funds to meet needs." Another of our children needed help in math and we found a teacher who offered a specialized curriculum.
- The partnership programs had different policies regarding how funds could be allocated. (For example, MP3 would fund a program that Mt. Baker Academy would not, and vice versa.) In some cases, I was able to use funds through a partnership program for lessons that otherwise would have been prohibitively expensive.
- If families use items that are non-consumable, these can go back to the district that is sponsoring the partnership. For example, we can look for really good textbooks. If those ultimately went back to district archives, we'd be helping the district with a great resource.
- Should the district consider doing a needs assessment, to ask a broader segment of homeschool families what their motivation is and to assess how the district could create a better partnership with these families?
- Such a survey would have to be anonymous.
- People would welcome that type of survey.
- I opted not to use the partnership programs, because they were too cumbersome. I just couldn't do it. I treasure the freedom we do have.
- Whatcom Homeschool Association Representative: We have 400 families, and I know half personally. For hundreds of homeschool families, you are doing great. I personally like your vision, mission, and core beliefs. I like that when my kids needed something, I was encouraged to step up to say "this is what I need." You are fulfilling the mission of *The Bellingham Promise* when you allow us to do what we are doing. It would be helpful if *all* the schools had personnel that were friendly; I have had parents say "I never want to step into that door again." It would be nice to have a liaison office. There are many homeschool parents that like what you are doing and want it to stay that way. Not all school districts are like that.
- I agree that the district should consider hiring a former homeschool parent as a liaison.
- I personally found the paperwork overwhelming when I looked into a partnership program. After five hours of working on it, I ended up saying "no thank you." I was discouraged by the program. I would be happy to do a program – to take a class – but I was not encouraged to do that. The staff seemed overworked, so I turned away from it.
- Because so many people use the local partnership program, some are turned away. That's why Bellingham School District should do something.
- You are doing a smart thing, trying to figure things out from the start. Partnership programs can become really bureaucratic because of the sheer volume of participants.

- There are some cultural issues. My son was 14 when he went to a public school for the first time, and he quickly realized he should not tell anyone he was homeschooled, because it made him a target. Also, he did not want anyone to know that he was a boy scout. I faced challenges as well; for example, going into the office and hearing "this is the way we do it." There seemed to be no room for flexibility or interpretation. I would love to see a high school advocate.
- The advocacy program would really pay off for kids who transition from middle school to high school. We heard, "I'm sorry, you can't get into this AP class, because you did not take this course in eighth grade."
- My experience was different. My experience at Bellingham High School was very positive.

During closing comments, Dr. Baker expressed appreciation to the group for participating today and for providing excellent feedback. He reviewed some of the key points of the discussion, including the following:

- The desire for a liaison between the district and homeschool families. The liaison would be someone knowledgeable about homeschooling and would serve as an advocate for families.
- There is clearly a continuum in terms of the needs of homeschool families. Some families want nothing from the district; others would like more of a partnership.
- The district must figure out how homeschool families can feel welcome. We have 22 schools, and in some ways, what you need is in our schools, but maybe we need another facility as well. We need to determine what courses need to be developed if they are not currently offered in our buildings.
- We have work to do. You are engaging in the process and helping us. We will continue to reach out to you as we determine what the next action steps will be.

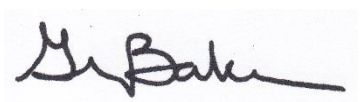
Ms. Hackler concluded the meeting by thanking the group for its participation. She encouraged attendees to use the School Board's Listening Post if they wanted to offer additional comments or suggestions.

President Ken Gass adjourned the meeting at 1:30 p.m.



Dr. Ken Gass, School Board President

ATTEST:



Greg Baker, Secretary to the Board