OFFICIAL MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITY LINKAGE SPECIAL MEETING
BELLINGHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD OF DIRECTORS
January 21, 2026 6:00-7:00 p.m.
District Office – Room 102

Topic: Mental Health Providers

Linkage Attendees:

- Northwest ESD 189 Student Assistance Professional **Kelly Giles** (provides services at Shuksan Middle School and Options High School); Compass Health Program Manager **Carly Lonergan;** Compass Health Program Manager **Bobbie Racine;** Whatcom County Health and Community Services Program Specialist **Joe Fuller**.
- School Board Directors: **Douglas Benjamin, Camille Diaz Hackler, Jenn Mason, Katie Rose.** Director Scott Ritchey was unable to attend the meeting.
- Superintendent of Bellingham Public Schools **Greg Baker.**
- District Leadership and Staff: Executive Director of Communications and Community Relations **Jackie Brawley;** Deputy Superintendent **Mike Copland;** Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning **Ari Feeney;** Executive Director of Teaching and Learning **Katie Jones**; Executive Director of Teaching and Learning **Marty Atkins**; Executive Director of Family Engagement **Isabel Meaker;** Chief Technology Officer **Kurt Gazow**; Chief Operations Officer **Jessica Sankey**; Chief Financial Officer **Kathryn Weilage**; Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources **Matt Whitten**; Director of Mental Health Services **Laura Cardinal;** Mental Health Specialist **Laura Burke;** Birchwood Elementary counselor **Anna Harrison;** Family Engagement Liaison **Frank Alvear;** notetaker **Sheri O'Day.**

Call to Order: School Board Vice President Camille Diaz Hackler welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. Community linkage meetings give the school board an opportunity to strengthen our connection with our community members, and the school board looks forward to hearing what attendees today have to say about their experiences. She introduced Superintendent Greg Baker.

Meeting Purpose – Explanation of Community Linkages: Dr. Baker thanked everyone for taking the time to be here this evening and asked attendees to introduce themselves.

Small Group "Fishbowl" Conversation: Laura Cardinal facilitated a conversation with the group, using guiding questions:

Share some mental health challenges children are navigating. How do they differ? Are there similarities?

- Discord and stress have grown since the pandemic.
- Some kids seek out services for their mental health. Social media has been a force for good in that respect.
- We hear more about loneliness and isolation. Kids are opting out of life, not wanting to do anything except be on their phones, with some finding too many barriers to participate in extracurriculars.
- In comparison to a generation ago, teenagers don't want to grow up. For instance, they aren't quick to get their driver's license and don't look forward to graduation from high school.
- Kids feel safer in school in comparison to being out in the community.
- There is a high rate of students who report physical and sexual abuse is a part of their lives.

How does mental health intersect with education? What is the impact on classrooms?

- When kids experience mental health challenges, their attendance suffers.
- Seeing kids physically not able to enter a room because of mental health challenges is sad. We wonder how they can perform well in classes when they find it difficult to focus on anything but their mental health.
- The Healthy Youth Survey is important and provides valuable information.
- Students experiencing depression report getting lower grades and having a higher rate of substance abuse.
- Students report high rates of anxiety and thoughts of suicide.
- It's difficult for teachers to navigate students' mental health while trying to teach.
- The mental health of a student's family members impacts the student's education, including their attendance.
- School provides a safe place and access to resources and services.
- A lot of reasons contribute to students' poor attendance.

Talk about the gaps and challenges when it comes to mental health.

- Newcomer families and unaccompanied youth have Apple Health, which many providers don't accept.
- It's difficult to get thorough care for those not fluent in English.
- Telehealth is not a good fit for all students.

- Higher acuity treatment is not available for some students.
- There is a lack of resources overall, with all services having waitlists – housing, food, health services.
- There is a feeling that calls to Child Protective Services (CPS) do no good because the focus is keeping kids with their families.
- As school counselors we are mental health providers.
- It would make a tremendous difference if we could have bilingual mental health therapists.
- More collaboration time with other staff is needed.
- There is a lack of consistency when students change therapists, with them being retraumatized repeating their experiences multiple times to multiple people.
- There is always a huge unmet need.
- If we can work to do proactive work early with children and reduce the number of emergencies or "fires," there will be benefits down the line.

BPS offers mental health support/resources -- and we know there are kids who still aren't accessing services or asking for help. What if we could wave a magic wand and funding wasn't an issue: what would you do to help more students at school? How would you help them outside of school hours?

- The social emotional piece of growing up is important for kids, with many students not getting that support at home.
- Many students lack the social skills to be in a relationship, which affects their mental health and puts them at risk for substance abuse.
- We need to teach kids skills like managing money and conflict, as well as how to maintain relationships.
- One trusted adult can make a big difference for a kid, but many kids aren't able to identify even one trusted adult.

For community providers/partners: what do you notice about our services at school? How could our schools/ district work more effectively with mental health professionals?

- We have a good thing going, but there is always room for improvement.
- Group services/programs are more cost effective and more time effective.
- Pulling kids out of class to access services is hard.
- Groups (and being with peers) have a bigger impact on more kids.
- Some kids don't want to participate in groups at school because it can be emotionally hard to be vulnerable in a group setting.
- It's difficult for parents to take time off work to take their child to an appointment, and this creates a barrier for many students.

For staff, how is it going with community partners?

- The clinicians are amazing.
- The partnerships make a huge difference.

- We're grateful to be able to refer students to providers in the school instead of a family needing to take the student out of school.

Is there a way to get a sense of how mental health is impacting our broader community (beyond our schools)?

- Adults are extremely dysregulated right now, so many kids don't have a good model for regulation.
- As a society, how do we prioritize mental health?
- Learning about empathy and expressing empathy can prevent so much harm.
- If you're on fire, you're then not able to put out fires for others, and this is where many adults are right now.
- We're worried about how current students will cope with being adults in our world.
- We need to teach kids that hope is something they have control over.
- A sense of belonging, attachment and engagement is important for everyone.
- Even a little hope can make a big difference.
- Connections matter.
- Willingness to seek help when you're struggling is important.

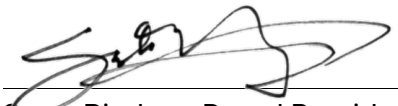
Dr. Baker asked if the school board members had questions or comments:

- One idea is to have an afterschool club that students can join that could also offer mental health services in a group setting.
- What do you feel is going well or works well for students? The amount of effort and energy put into mental health feels good. There are a lot of community partners that want to give support.
- Acknowledging that kids are coming in knowing what their diagnosis is and it being a part of their identity. Capacity holds us back.
- It was great to hear from everyone. As a board, we're interested in outcomes. Things I heard this evening that we should pay attention to include kids opting out of life; the need for onsite mental health therapists and interventionists, which this district values; early intervention and prevention might save us from more costly treatment down the road; it would be good to offer classes on psychological health. Loved hearing about communication between school staff and providers.

Dr. Baker thanked the attendees for participating in this evening's community linkage, which will help to form how we proceed in future years.

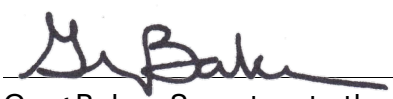
Ms. Diaz Hackler thanked everyone for their valuable input and adjourned the meeting at 7:08 p.m.

Approved:



Scott Ritchey, Board President

Attest:



Greg Baker, Secretary to the Board

Minutes approved: February 19, 2026