

BELLINGHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT  
Bellingham, Washington

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Board of Directors

**FROM:** Dr. Greg Baker, Superintendent

**DATE:** December 3, 2015

**SUBJECT:** Ends Monitoring Report 2.1, Part 1

I am pleased to submit this Ends monitoring report (Ends 2.1 - Student Competence, Part 1) to the school district's board of directors. Monitoring reports are intended to provide members of the school board, and the community we serve, with an update on our progress toward the mission, vision, and outcomes defined within our district's strategic plan, *The Bellingham Promise*. Our process for reporting on Ends 2.1 during the 2015-16 school year will take place over three meetings, beginning with this Ends 2.1, Part 1 report prepared for the December 10, 2015 meeting.

Ends 2.1, Part 1 explores student performance in reading, math and science, and compares our progress to comparable high-performing districts. Part 2 of Ends 2.1 will be reported in February, taking a deep look at students' coursework/course-taking participation in college and advanced placement experiences, relative to our high-performing comparable districts. Part 3 will be presented in March and focuses on students' continuous improvement toward graduation in comparison to high-performing peer districts, and a summative conversation in anticipation of the Board's evaluation of our reporting on Ends 2.1 overall. In addition to our reporting on Ends 2.1, the reporting on Ends 2.0 and 3.0 are the subject of attention in ongoing meetings throughout this year that will culminate in a final report in April 2016.

This Ends monitoring report is intended to serve as both an analytic and evaluative tool that allows us to:

- demonstrate a reasonable interpretation of Ends 2.1, focusing specifically on data and evidence in reading, math and science that includes comparison to comparable, high performing districts, where available;
- identify areas where our interpretation does not align with our mission and outcomes;
- use data to demonstrate progress toward achievement of these Ends, and;
- review our Ends to ensure they remain relevant and inspire meaningful work throughout the organization and community.

## Introduction

Consistent with our approach to the reports last year (2014-15 Ends 2.1 reports), we have included sources of information in our analysis focused on the Bellingham Public Schools student achievement performance overall, and in comparison to selected comparable high performing districts, as well as selected school level comparisons. Differences in the Ends 2.1 reports this year mainly stem from the fact that over the past nine months, school districts across Washington state have transitioned to the new Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium exam (hereafter “SBA”), and so we are not able to include year-over-year comparisons for student cohorts that have been included in previous years’ reports. Given the new test, trend data that were previously available using the prior test results are not available this year. That said, this year’s scores do establish a new benchmark for comparisons into the future, as well as give us the opportunity to compare our overall performance at the state level to other states that are giving the SBA.

By way of reminder, the Ends 2.1 policy follows:

**E - 2.1:** Consistent with the district Vision and Mission, all children of the Bellingham Public Schools Community will attain high academic achievement, develop essential skills and attributes necessary for continuous growth in learning, and graduate from high school. All students will succeed and grow regardless of ethnicity, socio-economic status, English language proficiency or disabilities.

1. Every student’s achievement, skills and attributes will exceed: (a) the Washington State benchmarks and (b) similar students in comparable high performing districts, as measured by state assessments and other available data, as appropriate.
2. Every student’s achievement, skills and attributes will show continuous significant growth relative to similar students in comparable high performing districts as measured by state assessments and other available data, as appropriate.
3. Every student with a gap in achievement, skills and attributes will close the gap. For state or federally identified student populations, any gap will be eliminated and annual progress will be greater than that of similar students in comparable high performing districts.
4. Student participation in post-secondary and career-ready courses shall increase and exceed participation in comparable high-performing districts. This shall include high school credits in middle school, college credits in high school, technical and career ready coursework, Advanced Placement, and other advanced learning opportunities.
5. All children of the Bellingham Public Schools community shall make continuous advancement toward on-time graduation or extended graduation, thereby reducing Bellingham Public Schools’ drop-out rates.

In this Part 1 report, we focus on numbers 1-3 above. The data and evidence we’ve relied upon here have a number of limitations. State tests, including the newly adopted SBA, provide one relatively narrow set of measures that enable us to do some comparisons, looking in the rear-view mirror, about how Bellingham students’ achievement stacks up with a set of high performing comparable school districts. The majority of outcomes included in *The Bellingham Promise* are not the subject of these Ends 2.1 comparisons, nor are good measures available in a standardized format that would allow for such comparisons across district lines. The comparisons we are able to construct and analyze are limited by these available sources.

Limitations aside, these data are helpful for the school district as a gauge of progress over time, for shining an equity spotlight on the performance of particular subgroups of students and for tracking proficiency trends to chart the big picture of how Bellingham students’ achievement stacks up against some of our highest performing peer districts. Part of the rationale for including a window into school-level achievement is to provide the board with a look at some of the sources of information and evidence that are used to drive instructional changes and developments more immediately than big picture state test results. For example, you will see references to teacher-created assessments in the section comparing student performance on the SBA at Whatcom Middle School to other comparable high-performing schools that are directly tied to the standards and used by teachers and students in classrooms. There are many examples that we could include from our schools, and to narrow the focus, we’ve tried to connect the examples used in this report to one of the school visits that the board conducted last year at Whatcom Middle School.

### **Methodology for Identifying Comparable High Performing Districts**

Ends 2.1 require us to establish a methodology to identify a sample of comparable, high performing districts. The original comparison group was established as a part of our report in 2012. Last year, we expanded the group of comparison districts to a total of 50, responding to board comments that encouraged us to include some of the higher wealth districts that are still reasonably close in demographic comparisons. As such, we narrowed our focus in on three comparable high-performing districts, including the Bellevue, Olympia and Shoreline school districts. These districts serve as somewhat close demographic peers who have outperformed Bellingham Public Schools’ students on measures of student achievement and graduation rates. Table A below includes the parameters that guided the choice of comparison districts. Table B below arrays Bellingham’s key demographic data alongside of the three comparison high-performing peer districts.

**Table A: Parameters to Determine Comparable District Pool**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Parameters</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Bellingham</b>	<b>High</b>
Enrollment	0.67 above and below	3675	11109	18597
% Free/Reduced Meal	no lower than 0.5 below	19	37	100
% Asian and White	no higher than 0.15 above	0	75	86
% Limited English	no lower than 0.3 below	2	6	100

**Table B: Demographic Data for Bellingham and High Performing Comparison Districts**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Bellingham</b>	<b>Bellevue</b>	<b>Olympia</b>	<b>Shoreline</b>
Enrollment	11109	19463	9745	9175
% Free/Reduced Meal	37	18	30	28
% Asian and White	75	76	77	69
% Limited English	6	11	2	7

By design, we have selected districts that are among our highest performing peer districts, rather than using a mean of all comparable districts, as this provides a more rigorous comparison set for Bellingham. This means that we are comparing ourselves to districts that typically outperform us on these measures. We could choose a different comparison set, for example, school districts that have more similar profiles of students from low income households or districts that are in our local county. But by choosing districts that are typically higher performing and still relatively comparable on many of the indicators, we believe we gain a better sense of what we need to strive for as a system in terms of student performance on these measures.

For purposes of review, the demographic factors utilized to identify a list of comparable districts followed this order:

1. For comparable size, we used K-12 enrollment to find districts relatively similar in enrollment (5,000 to 19,000 students).
2. For impact by poverty, we used student participation in free/reduced price meal program to include districts that were at least at half of our rate of 37%.
3. For race and ethnicity consideration, we included districts that had no higher than 15% more students in the highest-performing groups, Asian and White students.
4. For the impact by English proficiency, we used the number of students identified as Transitional Bilingual to find districts that had no lower than 30% fewer students in this subgroup.
5. The percentage of students with disabilities was similar across all districts at this point and not a discriminating demographic.

To ensure we did not rule out districts that may be outperforming Bellingham Public Schools, despite greater demographic challenges, those with student populations that exhibit higher limited English proficiency rates, higher free/reduced price meal participation, and lower Asian/White enrollments were not excluded from the list of comparable districts.

Page 1 of the data set shows the scatterplot of the 50 districts in the comparable set and where Bellingham is positioned versus the three other comparable high performing districts in terms of student achievement on the SBA in both reading and math, grades 3-8 in 2015, graphed against the overall percentage of students eligible for free/reduced priced meals. Bellevue, Shoreline and Olympia, the three comparable high performing districts in our comparison set, all achieve at a higher rate than Bellingham overall and have lower percentages of students eligible for free/reduced priced meals. The choice of these districts sets a higher bar for us to compare against rather than choosing districts that are equal to Bellingham in terms of our percent of students eligible for free/reduced priced meals. The bottom line is that the comparisons we've chosen to highlight here are known to be districts that typically are lower in overall poverty rates and outperforming Bellingham on the standardized measures.

#### ▪ **Washington State Compared with Other SBA States**

One of the reference points we will use throughout the analysis is comparison of student achievement performance at the district level with that of the average overall student

achievement performance for the state of Washington. Given that many states have adopted the SBA, we have the ability to analyze how students in our state perform in comparison with others giving the same exam. We think this information may be helpful to the board, creating a frame on what it means in comparison to the national picture, for our district to perform at or above the level of our state overall on this new exam. As is apparent from the tables on Page 2 of the data set, Washington state compared quite favorably to other states in terms of overall proficiency rates in both English language arts (ELA) and math on the 2015 SBA, and this is true across all tested grade levels. Washington was a consistent #1 in nearly every grade level tested in math and in the top three states in English Language Arts (ELA).

- **Overall Percentile Ranking Comparison to Comparable High Performing Districts**

We next explored how Bellingham Public Schools' overall student achievement stacks up against the range of fifty comparable districts included in our broader sample set. The bar graphs on pages 3-6 of the data set show percentiles of the aggregate proficiency rates for reading and for math in years 2010 and 2015. The 2010 graphs array the 50 districts in the comparison group on the MSP/HSPE exams, which were the state assessments given at that time. The 2015 data shows the relative position of the 50 comparable districts on the SBA. While these two graphs are comparing "apples to oranges" in terms of two different specific exams used in these two years, they are comparing "apples to apples" in each of these two years regarding the relative position of districts' overall student proficiency rates on the exams given in those years.

As is evident from the visual representation, Bellingham's overall achievement index (all grades, reading and math) was higher in 2015 than in 2010, and the district also drew nearer to the three high performing comparable districts (shown in red on the graphs). The overall achievement index shows that Bellingham's student performance was higher than most districts in our 50 district comparison group over this period of time and suggests that overall, Bellingham is drawing closer to the three comparable high-performing districts used for purposes of this analysis.

- **District State Exam Scores Compared to Comparable High Performing Peers**

**2.1.1 (Exceed state benchmarks).** In the data set provided for the Board, we also present overall comparisons against the state benchmarks on the first year of the SBA to the high-performing comparable school districts. Several different indicators of achievement are tracked and presented. These include: English language arts in grade bands 3-5 and 6-8; math in grade bands 3-5 and 6-8; as well as the science Measurement of Student Progress (MSP) in grades 5 and 8. Page 7 of the data set compares percentages of Bellingham students who *met* standard on state exams with percentages of students from the other three comparable high performing districts, as well as with the state overall. Page 8 of the data set compares the different district percentages of students who *exceeded* standard. In each case, Bellingham students consistently outperform the state averages, both in terms of students meeting standard, and students exceeding standard. That said, the percentage of Bellingham students meeting or exceeding standards mostly lags behind in comparison with the three comparable high performing peer districts, with a few exceptions. Eighth graders from Bellingham met or exceeded standards at a higher rate than one of the comparable peer districts (Shoreline) in both ELA and Math.

Similarly, Bellingham fifth graders outperformed one of the districts in the comparable group (Olympia) on both English language arts and math measures. Given that we chose to compare with districts that are typically higher performing, this is not a surprise, but it does provide a push for us to think about how we can continue to measure up to higher performing peers on achievement tests and work on the challenge of teaching the whole child that is embodied in *The Bellingham Promise* outcomes.

Board members may wonder why this report has not mentioned high school students in comparisons thus far. Page 9 of the data set is included as a reference point for why high school scores have not been included in this analysis. If you recall, last spring, a number of Bellingham high school juniors “opted out” of taking the SBA. This same phenomenon occurred in some of our high performing comparison districts as well. As a result, the data we have from the SBA in high school from spring of 2015 are not useable for comparison purposes, nor do they even give an accurate picture of the achievement levels of students within the Bellingham schools. As you will note in the data on page 9, the percentage of juniors who were tested last spring ranged from 61% in Shoreline to 18% in Bellevue.

In Bellingham, 32% of grade 11 students were tested in the spring of 2015. This is not a representative group. The most accurate estimate of how our juniors might have performed had they all been tested is likely revealed in the column to the far right. The English language arts version of the SBA was given to all grade 10 students in 2105, the same exam that was given to juniors. Those tenth graders (this year’s juniors), met standard at a rate of 78% on the SBA. We do not have comparison data available from the other comparable high performing districts for their grade 10 students, but Bellingham grade 10 students outperformed the state average of 73% passing during the initial administration of the SBA.

**2.1.2 (Show continuous significant growth).** In past years we have utilized proficiency rates following specific cohorts of students over time as a proxy measure for continuous growth. This year, due to the fact that we are relying on the new SBA, we do not have the ability to report cohort trend data by grade level or subgroup category. Currently, OSPI is calculating student growth percentiles in an attempt to describe each student’s growth in 2015 when compared to a cohort of students with similar performance on the 2014 MSP exams. The state’s intent is to then report those median student growth percentiles for schools and districts. However, with the move to SBA, the 2015 data are still being calculated and will not be available until January. As noted earlier, we are able to report on big picture growth over time for the overall district and how we compare to the 50 comparable districts in the larger comparison group, relying on data referenced on pages 3-6 of the data set. This data suggests that Bellingham student achievement has continued to show growth over the past five years, relative to the 50 comparable districts in our comparison group. In future analyses, provided the SBA does not shift in some radically new direction, we will be able to benchmark growth against this year’s scores. This work will also allow us to make more nuanced comparisons within cohort groups, or identified subgroups typically used for analysis.

**2.1.3 (Close achievement gaps).** For state or federally identified student populations, we highlighted the four student groups with the greatest difference in proficiency compared to all students. These include: Hispanic, limited English, low income and students identified for

special education services. Page 10 of the data set shows how student subgroups in Bellingham performed on the new exam and how those subgroup scores compare internally. Limited English, Hispanic, low income, and special education student subgroups all underperform compared to the overall percentage of students in comparison categories meeting or exceeding standard. As noted earlier, we are not able to report on trends given the change in the test. But, consistent with gaps observed and reported on in previous years, we still have much work to do to ensure that all students are achieving at high levels and need to continue our focus to ensure that students in these specific subcategories are served well.

Pages 11-12 graphically represent student subgroup data for Bellingham students, and compare our gaps in the identified student subgroups to those in the three comparable high performing school districts. As the graphs reveal, students with limited English, Hispanic students, students from low income homes and students receiving special education services all performed at rates far below comparison groups across all four districts. Currently we are not doing as well, in most cases, in ensuring our students in these subgroups achieve standard as our comparable high performing peer districts.

Perhaps most troubling, our analysis revealed that the comparative gaps between subgroup and non-subgroup populations of students in Bellingham are quite large. We are not alone in figuring out this problem. Gaps that show the disparity in performance for our students in these identified subgroups are, in many cases, consistent with those gaps revealed in the subgroup data of our comparable high-performing peer districts. Toward our goal of ensuring that ALL students are enabled to perform at standard, we have a long way to go. This is also true for our state overall and for the three comparable high-performing peer districts. Given how results are reported on the SBA, we will have the ability from here on to analyze changes in the gaps reported both internal to our district and in comparison to the state and to our comparable higher performing peer districts. This will bring greater clarity in future years about whether our gaps are in fact closing in some or all of these identified categories.

### **School Level Comparisons with High Performing Comparable Peers**

In addition to the district comparisons discussed above, we were curious to drill down and develop some comparisons between our schools and those from high performing comparable districts, particularly with an eye toward determining any Bellingham schools that appeared to be outperforming expectations when compared to similar schools in our high performing peer district comparison group. Should such a case exist, we envisioned how we could mine the specific work at that site for the benefit of the rest of the system. Given the results revealed this year with our grade 8 students, we chose to focus on this middle level grade for 2015. With this goal in mind, we arrayed all middle schools from across the four districts on two key variables.

Page 13 arrays all middle schools from the four districts (Bellingham's middle schools plus all middle schools from the three comparable high-performing peer) plotted by proficiency and percent low income. Bellingham's four middle schools, as the scatterplot display reveals, have the greatest variation in low income percentages of the four districts and include two of the three middle schools with the highest rates of free/reduced priced meals. While Bellingham is by no means a high poverty district in comparison to schools in the broader landscape of the state or

nation, it is relevant to consider that within this small comparison group of higher performing districts, Bellingham's schools represent the greatest range of diversity in income levels, serving higher rates of students eligible for free/reduced price meals than middle schools within the other three districts.

Through this analysis, Whatcom Middle School emerged as a school in our district that compared favorably to similar schools in the other three comparison districts. Three schools were selected to highlight the comparisons: Odle Middle School, Bellevue SD; Washington Middle School, Olympia SD; and, Kellogg Middle School, Shoreline SD. These schools all serve student populations with relatively similar percentages of low-income students. As page 14 in the data set reveals, the percentage of Whatcom students meeting standard in math and science was higher than the rest of the comparison group schools and a close second in the percent of students meeting standard in ELA. Whatcom students also exceeded standard at a percentage higher than two of the three comparison schools in each of the areas of ELA and science.

### **Standards, Assessments and Achievement at Whatcom**

Given these relatively strong results compared to high performing comparable schools, we considered what has been happening at Whatcom that might account for this relatively higher student achievement on the SBA, compared to schools with similar demographic profiles in the comparable high performing districts. Answering this question in the absolute is difficult. Many factors contribute to student achievement.

However, veteran members of the board may recall that during the board visit to Whatcom last school year (2014-15), the eighth grade team of Jim Zurcher and Peggy Zehnder presented their work related to teaching the new state standards, and the process they used to dig down and define what the standards meant for student performance within their classrooms. The emphasis on teaching to the standards, and the utilization of teacher-developed standards-based assessments in the day-to-day assessment of student progress has been a focus of Whatcom's eighth grade team for many years. These Whatcom teachers understand that when students are expected to take ownership over their own progress toward standards, great things happen for learning.

Whatcom's emphasis on integrating the standards into classroom-based assessments and the development of this work within grade level professional learning communities has been a hallmark of the school's work under the leadership of Principal Jeff Coulter. Teaching to the common core standards is not an easy task; Whatcom teachers like Jim Zurcher have devoted numerous hours and incredible energy to making sure that students achieve at or above the standards. This [video](#) gives a brief glimpse into the strategies that Jim and other Whatcom teachers use to engage students in self-assessing their progress against the standards. The power of getting students to first, understand what the learning expectations are for their work in the grade level, and second, to own the assessment of their own progress toward these expectations over time is a powerful recipe. Does this work equal better test scores? It is not a simple causal equation. But our belief is that student achievement IS impacted when teachers engage students

in developing their understanding and ownership of what it means to meet or exceed standards for learning at the grade level.

### **Concluding Statement**

We believe that this Ends 2.1 (Part 1) monitoring report, in combination with the remaining parts of the report that will follow, serves as evidence of a reasonable interpretation of Ends 2.1 that aligns with our vision, mission and outcomes and is supported by data that demonstrates progress toward achievement of these Ends. Further, we hope this report serves as a useful tool in support of the board's ability to regularly review our ends to ensure they remain relevant and inspire meaningful work throughout the organization and community.

We appreciate the direction provided by the School Board to focus on the development of exceptional students with strong character, a passion for learning and graduates who are ready for the widest range of educational and vocational options to support a diversity of life choices.