

BELLINGHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT  
Bellingham, Washington

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Board of Directors  
**FROM:** Dr. Greg Baker, Superintendent  
**DATE:** March 17, 2016  
**SUBJECT:** Ends Monitoring Report 2.1, Part 3

I am pleased to submit this Ends monitoring report (End 2.1, Part 3 - Student Advancement Toward On-Time or Extended Graduation) 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 a snapshot in time of 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 has taken place over a series of meetings, beginning with the previously submitted Part 1 report at the December 10, 2015 meeting, and the Part 2 report at the February 18, 2016 meeting. This report is the final installment of the Ends 2.1 sequence for this academic year. Yet to come is a summative report on Ends 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0, which will be presented in April 2016.

To recap, Ends 2.1, Part 1 explored student performance in reading, mathematics, writing and science, and compared our progress to comparable high-performing districts. Part 2 took an in-depth look at student participation in post-secondary and career-ready courses, and included available comparisons. Part 3 examines how Bellingham students are faring in terms of on-time and extended graduation, and draws our attention to trends in student drop-out rates overall and within identified subgroups. Where possible, we've also examined comparisons of Bellingham Public Schools' student graduation trends to those in comparable high-performing districts. In addition to this deep look at graduation data, we also offer a leadership perspective on how we consider this information in light of our broader focus on supporting the growth, development and future promise of every student who continues to pursue their education in Bellingham.

By way of reminder, 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 and mathematics that includes comparison to comparable, high performing districts,
- 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

Our approach to this Part 3 report is consistent with the approach we've followed for Ends 2.1, Parts 1 and 2. As with the earlier reports, we have chosen to include representations of the work in specific programs, as well as the experiences of individual students who embody the ultimate reason we do any of this work, in this case in relation to their progress on the road toward high school graduation and post-graduation success.

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.**

This report, Part 3, focuses specifically on the *fifth point* listed above – examination of on-time and extended graduation rates. We've relied on the same methodology for identifying the comparable high performing districts utilized in Parts 1 and 2, so for purposes of brevity, we will not recount that here.

## Graduation Rates in Fifty Comparable Districts 2010-2014

Similar to how we reported on test score growth over time compared to our group of comparable high performing districts in Part 1 of the Ends 2.1 report, we begin this analysis with a comparison of Bellingham student graduation rates (using the metric of five-year adjusted cohort data) with the three comparable high performing districts that we regularly use as our comparison group – Olympia, Shoreline and Bellevue school districts. Page 1 of the data set shows the graduation percentages of Bellingham, Olympia, Shoreline and Bellevue school

districts set in the context of the larger sample of the top fifty comparable districts. Bellingham students' overall five-year graduation rate increased from 79% in 2010 to 82% in 2014. High performing comparable districts Olympia, Shoreline and Bellevue also realized slight graduation rate increases over this period. Despite the increase, Bellingham's overall five-year graduation rate remains well below our three high performing comparable districts, and positions us below the median with regard to our standing in the group of fifty comparable districts. While we'd like to see these numbers trending higher over this period, we also know some of the factors that contribute to our percentage ranking and will delve into explanations later in this report.

#### **Four and Five Year Graduation Rates for High Performing Comparable Districts**

For reporting purposes, we focus on both the four-year (on time) and five-year graduate rates (students who earn their high school diploma during a fifth year). A number of students in each cohort do extend into a fifth year or beyond in order to accrue the necessary credits needed to graduate. Page 2 of the data set presents this trend data beginning with the graduation rates from 2010 through 2015 (4 year only in 2015), displaying Bellingham's data as well as that of our three high performing comparable districts, and the overall state averages. Over this period, as noted above, the trend shows more BPS students graduating on time with their grade level cohort, starting with approximately 75% in 2010, to 82% in 2015. Four-year graduation rates in Bellevue and Shoreline dipped slightly in 2014, while Olympia's rate increased slightly. The overall five-year rate (light blue section added above the dark blue on the graphs) trended down this past year (five-year cohort of 2014) revealing 82% of Bellingham students in that cohort graduating within five years, while the data from our three high performing comparable districts, and that of the state, trended slightly higher.

The graphs on page three compare the 2014 four-year and 2015 five-year graduation rates for Bellingham students with those of Washington State overall. Bellingham students annually have exceeded the State in terms of overall graduation percentage for both four-year and five-year cohorts. That said, the comparisons between the four and five-year cohorts reveal some trends worthy of mention. Overall, the year five data suggests that of the group who continued to pursue the diploma beyond year four, some students do graduate with a fifth year of high school, while some additional students drop out during their fifth year of work. As well, a smaller percentage of students continue to pursue the diploma beyond a fifth year. For example, compare the four-year cohort percentages for Bellingham students in 2014 (79% graduated within four years; 10% continued; and 12% dropped out) to the five year percentages in 2015. The 2015 data reveals that while an additional 3% graduated with the fifth year (up from 79% to 82%), dropouts increased by 4% (from 12% to 16%) and the percent of students continuing beyond the fifth year dropped significantly (to 2%) compared with those who persevered after the fourth year (10%). We see similar trends in prior comparison years in Bellingham, and also with regard to the overall state comparisons. The fifth year produces a small increase in graduation rates overall, but also ends the formal high school experience for more students, and significantly decreases the group who persevere in the formal structure of high school beyond the fifth year.

## **Disparities in Five-Year Graduation Rates by Student Subgroups in BPS**

We again analyzed Bellingham's internal graduation data by the four student subgroups that we've used to focus on the question of how equitable are our district's graduation rates. Page four of the data set reveals that the five-year graduation rate cohort comparisons for Bellingham students dropped slightly in all four subgroup categories, after trending higher over each of the previous four years. Student dropouts in each of the subcategory populations included in our analysis – Hispanic/Latino, special education, English language learners, and low income students-- all increased slightly when comparing the class of 2013 to the class of 2014. The trend over five years, comparing the 2010 cohort to the 2014 cohort, remains a positive picture overall, but the drops between cohorts in 2013 and 2014 raised some questions for which we do not have good answers. Of particular concern are the data on students with IEPs that suggests a significantly higher percentage of dropouts from 2013 to 2014. Whether the 2014 data is an anomaly or not, it raises questions about how well we are supporting students with IEPs to complete high school within the five year time frame. In a later section, we'll review the special education "leaver" data that reveals a more constructive and positive story about what our students with IEPs, both graduates and non-graduates, are engaged in post high school.

## **Gaps in Five-Year Graduation Rates by Student Subgroups for Comparable Districts**

In addition to our internal analysis of Bellingham student graduation data by subgroup, we also ran an analysis comparing our progress in this area with our comparison group of three high performing comparable districts. Page five of the data set offers year to year cohort trends for Bellingham, Bellevue, Olympia and Shoreline comparing ELL and non-ELL student five-year graduation rates, as well as the comparisons from those systems for the graduation rates of Hispanic and non-Hispanic students. Page six shows similar trends comparisons for low income and special education populations. While Bellingham's graduation gaps within these subgroups are closing over the past five years, comparing the Class of 2013 to the Class of 2014 show increases in the gaps between members and non-members of these identified subgroups. Again, this data is of concern because it shows that our gaps are increasing, and that we continue to perform well below our comparable high performing group of districts on these metrics.

## **BPS IEP Student Post-Secondary Outcomes Data**

Our analysis also includes an additional perspective on our students with IEPs and what occurs for them after they leave our system. This group tends to be our most challenged in terms of being at risk to not graduate on time or within the five year window. In the top graph on page seven of the data set, we are pleased to see that our district graduates in this category continue to achieve better outcomes than students in Washington State overall, including more graduates with IEPs going on to higher education opportunities, as well as to competitive employment. We also are pleased to report that fewer district graduates and non-graduates with IEPs fall into the category of "not engaged" than is the typical trend across the state.

The lower graph on page seven shows three-year trends for Bellingham students with IEPs beginning with data from 2011-12, and continuing through 2013-14. Due to the fact that this data is tracking relatively smaller numbers of students, the year over year comparisons tend to

bounce around a bit more sporadically. However, with that caveat, we are pleased to report trends showing more students with IEPs graduating from our school district to competitive employment opportunities, and smaller numbers in the “not engaged” category.

*One additional note:* We have typically included post-secondary college-going data and persistence data in this Ends 2.1, Part 3 report, which tells a broader story about how our students fare post-graduation from Bellingham schools. That data is not yet available for analysis. Given our timeframe for the completion of this report, we are not able to include that in our analysis at this time. As that data becomes available, we will be happy to provide the board with an analysis and update as part of a superintendent’s report on a future board meeting agenda.

### **A BPS Leadership Perspective on Failure and Drop Outs**

When we examine our high school graduation rates and consider the “too high” number of students who fail to graduate within a four or five year window, it is easy to label it a system letdown, or as a failure to take seriously the need for our school district to work toward more students successfully completing high school in a timely manner. For sure, there is more we can do to support many more students completing the requirements for the high school diploma within the four or five year time frame.

That said, there is another set of considerations that we feel it is important for our school board to understand, and these go right to the heart of the Bellingham Promise, the very things we say we stand for as a school system. These considerations are not offered as excuses, but rather as context to help the board understand how the district leadership views graduation rate data from a broader perspective than simply, “let’s get those rates up!” If all we cared about in Bellingham were the numbers of students graduating on time, there are many steps we could take to shore up our percentages. Until recently, the expectations for a Washington State high school diploma were well below the expectations we’ve established locally for credits required, as well as commensurate necessary coursework. We could have dramatically boosted our graduation rates overnight by simply reducing the overall requirements for a Bellingham Public Schools diploma to those spelled out by the State of Washington. In fact, over the past decade or two, districts in our region have taken similar approaches to increasing their public facing graduation rates, while simultaneously downgrading the rigor of the high school diploma. Thankfully, these expectations are now changing at the state level with the introduction of Core 24, which will move all high schools to a more rigorous set of expectations. Moreover, as a system, we continue to take the stance that we will work with any student in any situation to help him or her get a leg up through the process of education. This includes expanding our options for credit retrieval opportunities even for students who are way behind on credits, and growing our GRADS program to open up the educational process to many kids beyond our district borders who otherwise would be out of luck for obtaining a high school diploma in their home school district.

As one example, within the past two weeks we enrolled a seventeen-year-old student in our Sehome GRADS program. She came to us from one of the surrounding Whatcom County districts where she had dropped out of school and was doing some couch surfing with friends in the area. When our Director of Early Childhood, Kristi Dominguez, touched base with this

student's former district their attitude was, "Well, she is seventeen and hardly has any credits." While this was in fact true, Kristi reminded her contact in our neighboring district that this student can be with us until she is twenty-one, so she has plenty of time if her goal is to finish her high school diploma. The response from the neighboring district was something along the lines of, "She will most likely be twenty years of age before she can graduate." Again, this statement was likely a true prediction of what lies ahead for this student. Kristi's response, consistent with our espoused vision of ALL students in the Bellingham Promise was, "Great, if she wants to graduate we will do all we can to support her." We have subsequently arranged to pay for transportation to get this student back and forth from her current residence in Whatcom County to Sehome, where she is now enrolled with our GRADS program with a goal of earning enough credit over the next few years to graduate with a diploma from our school system. In our data reports, this student will never be identified as a four-year graduate, nor a fifth-year graduate. Until the day she manages to walk across the stage and receive her Bellingham Public Schools high school diploma, she will continue to be reported as a "continuing" student, a "non-graduate." But with perseverance and the right supports for her and her young child, she may get it done in year seven or year eight.

By way of comparison, another Whatcom County student who entered under similar conditions is now a fifth year senior in the Squalicum High GRADS program and will graduate in June. Kristi and her team were able to present this student with a \$1000 scholarship two weeks ago as she makes plans to attend Whatcom Community College in the fall. Kristi notes with pride that every day this student, "gets herself, along with her twins, out the door, determined to break the cycle of poverty!"

These examples may come across to board members as bordering on excuse-making, or only highlighting "the exceptions to the rule." But we offer them up for your consideration because they provide commentary about the work we strive to do every day in Bellingham. We work to create opportunities for students to find their way; even for those students who are far, far away from earning the needed credits to graduate, we work to find ways to keep them connected. Even if it means they show up as a "drop out" or "continuing" student beyond the fifth year, we work hard to not give up on anybody. As a result, our on-time graduation data will likely continue to lag behind what it could be, and mask some of the nitty-gritty details of how we work to keep kids connected long after year five has come and gone. We accept this fact as part of the equation of making the best possible opportunities for success happen for students.

### **Summary of Ends 2.1: Markers on the Road to Graduation from the Bellingham Schools**

Increasing graduation rates for Bellingham students starts with efforts to support our youngest learners with high quality teaching, and continues throughout the students' entire educational experience through middle and high school. In our series of Ends 2.1 reports this year, the board was provided a window into how our district measures up with our comparison group of high performing districts, and we reported on schools and programs within Bellingham that built on prior year reports, and offered additional perspectives on student achievement in our school district.

In Ends 2.1, Part 1 we highlighted the results from the most recent round of standardized testing compared to our comparison group of high performing comparable districts. This year established a new benchmark for future comparisons given the implementation of a new standardized test in Washington State. In the first report, Whatcom Middle School emerged as a school that fared well by comparison with other demographically similar schools in our high performing comparable group of districts, and we highlighted Whatcom's long-standing professional learning agenda to connect standards, instructional practices and formative assessments, and made the case for how that work has contributed to growing improvements in student achievement over time.

In Ends 2.1 Part 2, we reviewed progress made in the area of advanced course-taking that prepares students for college and career opportunities. We provided greater detail about efforts to grow our Career and Technical Education (CTE) opportunities in the middle and high schools. We concluded that report with the stories of several students and graduates who have taken advantage of CTE pathways to set themselves up in productive careers beyond high school.

In this final report on Ends 2.1 (Part 3) we reviewed the high school graduation trends in comparison with state and high performing comparable district trends. We've noted some areas of significant need for continued work to ensure that ALL students, regardless of their race, socio-economic status or different abilities are able to realize success in achieving a high school diploma. We concluded with a statement about our shared commitments to serving all students, and the recognition that when you keep the door open wide to any student who wants to keep working toward their high school diploma, and refuse to quit on those kids, the graduation rates will never look as optimal as they otherwise might.

### **Concluding Statement**

We believe that this final installment of the Ends 2.1 monitoring report, in combination with the previous parts of the report, 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 school board's ability to regularly review our ends to ensure they remain relevant and inspire meaningful work throughout the organization and community.

Once again, we want to reiterate our appreciation for 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.