

BELLINGHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT  
Bellingham, Washington

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Board of Directors  
**FROM:** Dr. Greg Baker, Superintendent  
**DATE:** February 13, 2020  
**SUBJECT:** Ends Monitoring Report 2.1, Part 2

I am pleased to submit this Ends monitoring report (End 2.1, Part 2 - Student Advancement Toward On-Time or Extended Graduation and Reduction in Drop-Out Rates) to the school district's board of directors. Our process for reporting on Ends 2.1 during the 2019-20 school year began with the previously submitted Ends 2.1, Part 1 report at the January 29, 2020 meeting. This report is the second installment of the Ends 2.1 sequence for the 2019-20 school year. Ends 2.1, Part 3 will be presented at the April 22, 2020 board meeting focusing on students' participation in post-secondary education and career preparation in comparison to peer districts, in anticipation of the board's evaluation of our reporting on Ends 2.1 overall.

**Introduction**

Ends 2.1 Part 2 examines how Bellingham students are faring in terms of on-time and extended graduation rates and draws our attention to trends in student drop-out rates overall and within identified student subgroups. Where possible, we've also examined comparisons of Bellingham Public Schools' student graduation trends to those in comparable districts. We have once again relied on comparisons with a small group of high-bar peer districts whose populations of students eligible for free/reduced priced meals fall below those eligible in our district. We have also relied on comparisons with a cluster of districts that are within +/-5% of Bellingham in terms of percent of students eligible for free/reduced priced meals. As the board will recognize, this free/reduced priced meals percentage comparison is what we have typically used as a proxy for a poverty index in our data comparisons.

Language included in the revised Ends 2.1 policy (revised in 2018) focuses us on comparing progress to districts that are demographically similar to Bellingham, as well as to districts whose students typically outperform our students on the standardized test. 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 ready for participation in post-secondary education and career opportunities. 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 show continuous significant growth, and measures will exceed the Washington state benchmarks and be high performing relative to similar students in demographically comparable districts, as measured by state assessments and other available data, as appropriate.
2. Gaps in achievement, skills and attributes between groups of students will close. For state or federally identified student populations, any gap in achievement will be eliminated, and annual achievement will be greater than that of similar students in demographically comparable districts.
3. Every student will make continuous advancement toward graduation. Measures of on-time and extended graduation attainment will be high performing relative to similar students in demographically comparable districts.
4. After graduation, student participation in post-secondary education and career preparation shall increase and exceed participation than in demographically comparable districts.

While being held accountable to our demographically comparable districts, we also continue to compare our progress to other district, state and national data that offer a more comprehensive view of student competence.

In this Part 2 report, we focus on number three above. The remaining item (number 4) is the subject of the final Ends 2.1 report this year.

### **Graduation Rates in Forty-Two Comparable Districts 2010-2018**

Once again, we begin this year's report by comparing Bellingham student graduation rates (using the metric of five-year adjusted cohort data) with the forty-two demographically comparable districts that we regularly use as our largest comparison group. Page one of the data set highlights the graduation percentages of Bellingham, Bellevue, Olympia and Shoreline school districts set in the context of the larger sample of the top 42 comparable districts. Bellingham students' overall five-year graduation rate increased from 78.8% in 2010 to 89.3% in 2018. High-bar peer districts (Olympia, Shoreline and Bellevue) continue to reach higher graduation levels than Bellingham, but over the eight-year span from 2010 to 2018, the gap between our district's graduation rate and the rates in those high-bar peer districts continues to shrink. Furthermore, our district graduation rate has also moved from very near the state average in 2010 well above the state average in 2018.

### **Four-Year and Extended Graduation Rates Compared with Peer Districts**

We also focus on both the four-year (on time) and extended year graduation rates (students who earn their high school diploma during a fifth, sixth or seventh year of high school). As we've reported earlier, a group of students in each cohort do extend into a fifth year or beyond in order to accrue the necessary credits needed to graduate from Bellingham schools. The graphs on page two compare the 2018 four-year, and prior four cohorts' graduation rates for Bellingham students with those of Washington State overall, as well as with the group of fifteen +/-5% peer districts

and our three high-bar peer comparison districts. Bellingham students' four-year, five-year, six-year and seven-year graduation percentages have increased once again this year, continuing the steadily rising trend we've seen over recent years. As the data on page 2 reveal, Bellingham students' graduation rates have exceeded the state in terms of overall graduation percentage for both four-year, five-year, six-year and seven-year cohorts. Furthermore, Bellingham's four-year graduation numbers remained steady this year at 87% while comparison districts were up 2% (Olympia), up 1% (Shoreline), remaining flat (Bellevue) and up 1% (fifteen +/-5% group district comparison group). Our district's six-year graduation rate (graduating class of 2017) crested to 91% in this year's analysis, which is a number we have been aiming towards for several years. This mark is within just a few percentage points of all three of our high bar comparison districts, above the average of our peer group of +/-5% districts, and well above the state average.

Pages three and four show these trends in a different view as line graphs compared with the high-bar peer district group and the state over the past several student cohorts. In 2010, our four-year and five-year graduation rates were between ten and sixteen percent below our high performing comparable districts. That gap has closed significantly in the last ten years. 2019 data shows that Bellingham students graduated at rates much closer to our high-bar peers. Four-year rates for Bellingham students were within six percent of our highest-bar peer, Bellevue, and within three or four percent of Olympia and Shoreline. Five-year rates are similarly closer with Bellingham students graduating at a rate that is within three percentage points of both Shoreline and Olympia, and about six percentage points away from Bellevue. Page four of the data set shows the six-year and seven-year data which similarly shows Bellingham students' graduation rates getting above 90% and closer to those of our high-bar comparable districts, and well above the state averages. In retrospect, the decrease in the gaps between student graduation rates in our district and the high-bar comparable districts in 2010 and 2019 tell us we are heading in the absolute right direction, and also reveal how we have continued to gain ground in almost every comparison.

On page five, we were also pleased to see that, consistent with recent trends, dropout rates (shown in orange) for both the four-year cohort and the five-year cohort of Bellingham students continued to decline, and are below the state average by nearly 6 % points (four-year) and 5 % points (five-year). Overall, dropout rates in Bellingham have decreased by 5% points (four-year) and 9% points (five-year) since 2013.

### **Five-Year Graduation Rates by Student Subgroups**

We again analyzed Bellingham's internal graduation data for the four largest student subgroups that we've used to focus on the equity of our district's graduation rates across subgroups of students. Page six of the data set displays the five-year graduation rate cohort comparisons for Bellingham students who are English language learners, Hispanic/Latinx, eligible for free/reduced priced meals and receiving special education services. Graduation rates for English language learners increased from 69% to 77% in year-over-year comparisons. Similarly, Hispanic/Latinx students' graduation rate increase from 76% to 82%, reversing the slight drop we observed last year. Five-year graduation trends over time for these two groups of students continue to be pointed in a positive direction.

Five-year graduation rates for students with IEPs dropped slightly, but still show a significant positive improvement over the past seven years. Five-year graduation rates for students eligible for free/reduced price meals showed improvement once again this year, continuing the trend of graduation rate increases for these two subgroups since 2012. Five-year graduation rates for students eligible for free/reduced priced meals have increased from 69% in 2012 to 81% in 2018, while drop-out rates have fallen from 25% to 14% over this same time period. For students with IEPs the five-year graduation rate has improved from a low of 48% in 2012 to 63% in 2018. During this same time period, the drop-out rate for students with IEPs has fallen from 28% to 14% with many students who have an IEP continuing to work toward graduation beyond a fifth year.

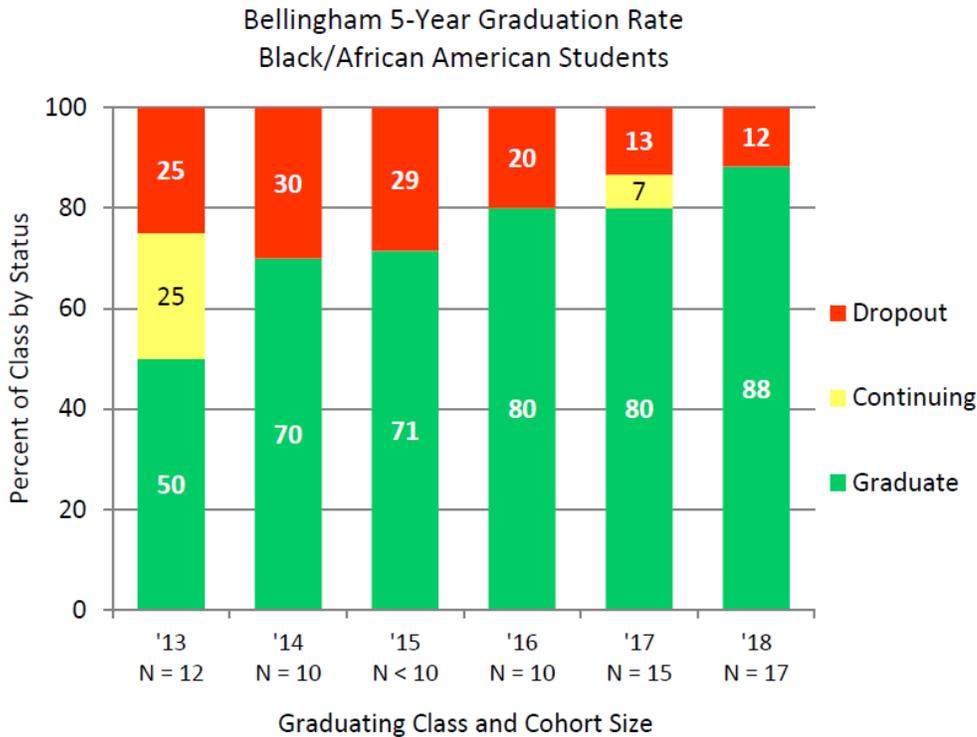
Pages seven through ten of the data set compare the five-year graduation rates of the four subgroups we track with the rates from our high-bar peer group of districts and the overall graduation rates in Washington state. The trends for Bellingham students in all four categories are heading in a very positive direction over the last seven years. As mentioned earlier, the data for English language learners (page seven) and Hispanic/Latinx students (page eight) increased significantly in the most recent year of comparison. Five-year graduation rates for English learners jumped back up from 69% to 77% this year and nudged closer to rates in our high-bar peer districts (page seven). Similarly, our Hispanic/Latinx students' graduation rate jumped back up to 82% from 76% last year, and is above the state average, and near to our high-bar comparable peer districts (page eight).

Graduation rates for students eligible for free/reduced price meals (page nine) also continued to show steady year-over year improvement. The five-year graduation rate for students from families eligible for free/reduced price meals jumped another two points in year-over-year comparisons, equaling the percentage in Olympia, and edging closer to the rates in both Shoreline and Bellevue. Five-year graduation rates for students with IEPs dropped by a percent, but steady improvement has been observed for the past six years, and may be partly a function of a much higher percentage of students on IEPs graduating in four years (60% in 2018, versus 50% in 2017). Notably, five-year rates for students with IEPs in both Bellevue and Olympia dropped this year, and this is evidence of the more volatile nature of this data, which is measuring graduation success on a small portion of the overall district population.

Page 11 of the data set shows Bellingham data for these four subgroups tracked into the seventh year of high school. The focus on our students served by special education shows the power of the extended school programs for those students, as their seventh year completion data (lower left graph on page 11) reveal the increasing percent of students with IEPs graduating in year six and seven of their high school experience. Data for all four subgroups show the importance of tracking graduation rates into the fifth, sixth and seventh year as we continue to see students successfully completing high school in those years within each of the subgroups. Successes including the big jump in five-year graduation rates for ELL students (69% in 2017 compared with 77% in 2018) and continued increases in the latter year graduation rates for Hispanic/Latinx students and students eligible for free/reduced priced meals (low-income).

We've also continued our focus on our Black/African American student population. This is a smaller cohort of students in our district, compared to the other subgroups we routinely track, yet

we felt it important to delve into what can be learned about how this group of students progresses through our school system. As the graphic below reveals, graduation rates are ascending for Black/African American students over the past six years, while dropout rates are declining. It is important to note that the *n* size of this group is quite small in any given class, so we would typically expect some greater variation in year-over-year comparisons. Given that, it is once again good news to see positive trends in this data (see graph included below).



### The Effects of Low-Income on Graduation Rates

A final piece of our analysis of graduation rates introduced within this same report two years ago focused in on the specific influence of income on high school completion. For purposes of comparison, we have included this analysis again this year. The graphs on page 12 of the data set split out three of our identified student subgroups into categories of low-income and non-low income. The graph on the top of that page once again reveals the stark difference for Hispanic/Latinx and white students who are low-income vs. their non-low-income peers. Interestingly, Hispanic/Latinx students in the five-year cohort from the class of 2018 who are non-low-income graduated at exactly the same rate as white students who are also non-low-income, and well above low-income white and low-income Hispanic/Latinx students. Similarly, students with IEPs who low-income face a much steeper climb to graduation are. The graphic in the middle of page 12 reveals that low-income students who have IEPs graduate at a rate 33% points below their cohort mates who are non-low income. The difference in graduation rates between non-low-income students with IEPs and those without is 11% points. The difference in graduation rates between low-income students with IEPs and low-income students who are not

on IEPs is a highly inequitable 35% points. This is a piece of data we will focus on with our school leaders and teachers.

Finally, comparisons of the graduation rates between non-English language learners and English language learners is shown on the graph on the bottom of page 12. The board will note that the non-low-income column for English language learners shows no data. This is because there are so few children in our district who are non-low income who are also ELL. However, we see there is still a gap between non-ELL students and ELL students who are eligible for free/reduced priced meals (bottom graph on page 12). Consistent with the achievement data analysis reported over the past few years, the effects of poverty pose a significant overarching impediment to high school graduation, and we continue to believe it is important to raise up and examine the intersectionality of race, language, disability and poverty on students' successful completion of high school. The work the board has done to create and implement changes in The Bellingham Promise and in board policies related to equity, diversity and inclusion are much appreciated in helping us keep the focus on this important set of issues.

### **Summary Discussion**

Overall graduation rates for Bellingham students continue to improve in most areas. We continue to hold this measure as the ultimate mark of success with our students, and we are proud that trajectories continue to improve overall, and for most student groups we track. That said, we still have areas of significant need for continued work to ensure that all students, regardless of their race, language, socio-economic status or differing abilities are able to accomplish the successful completion of high school in Bellingham Public Schools. We sincerely appreciate the board's role in continuing to put policy into place that supports our work in equity, diversity and inclusion. We remain committed to seeing improvements in this most basic and important marker of success – student graduation rates from our system.

This second installment of the Ends 2.1 monitoring report, in combination with the other parts of the report, is offered 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. I 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.