BELLINGHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT
Bellingham, Washington

MEMORANDUM

TO: **Board of Directors**

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

DATE: **January 5, 2020**

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

I am pleased to submit this Ends monitoring report (End 2.1 - Student Competence, Part 1) to the school district's board of directors. Ends 2.1, Part 1 explores student testing performance in English language arts, math and science, and compares our students' test performance to comparable and higher-performing districts. The remaining Ends reports for this school year will be presented on the following schedule:

- Ends 2.1, Part 2 will be presented at the February 19, 2020 board meeting and will focus on students' continuous improvement toward graduation in comparison with peer districts.
- Ends 2.1, Part 3 will be presented at the April 22, 2020 board meeting focused on students' participation in post-secondary education and career preparation in comparison with peer districts.
- Ends 1, 2 and 3 which focuses on evaluating the vision, mission and all seventeen outcomes in the Bellingham Promise will be present at the May 13, 2020 board meeting.

Introduction

The report that follows focuses on the Bellingham Public School's student achievement performance levels overall on the Smarter Balanced assessment (SBA) and compares our progress to selected peer districts. We also include additional comparison data that highlight how Bellingham students' test performance measures up to all the states who are included in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

By way of reminder, the board revised the Ends 2.1 policy language in June of 2018. Language included in the revision 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 language 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 students' 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 in comparable high-performing 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 1 report, we focus on numbers 1-2 above. The remaining items are the subject of future Ends 2.1 reports this year.

Methodology for Identifying Comparable Peer Districts

Ends 2.1 relies on big picture comparisons to a total of 38 districts that were selected on the basis of being somewhat demographically similar to Bellingham. The main sections of our report focus in on a smaller group of 15 demographically similar peer districts and additional comparisons to the Bellevue, Olympia and Shoreline school districts which comprise a group of strategically chosen high-bar districts that typically outperform our district on measures of student achievement and graduation rates. Table A below includes the parameters that guided the choice of the larger group of 38 comparison districts. Table B below includes the 15 more-demographically-similar district group. And finally, Table C below arrays Bellingham's key demographic data alongside of the three comparison, high-bar peer districts.

Table A: Parameters to Determine Comparable 38 District Pool

Criteria	Parameters	Low	Bellingham	High
Enrollment	75% above and below	3,017	12,069	21,121
% Free/Reduced Meal	50% above and below	18.1	36.2	54.3
% Asian and White	25% above and below	54.1	72.2	90.2
% English Language Learner	75% above and below	1.8	7.1	12.3
% Special Education	25% above and below	12.3	16.4	20.5

Table B: Demographic Data for Bellingham and Districts Comparable by Free/Reduced Meal Participation

2019 Districts (15) +/- 5% FRL	All Students	% Low-Income
Arlington	5,853	36.1
Battle Ground	13,304	34.3
Bellingham	12,069	36.2
Central Valley	14,593	40.9
Ellensburg	3,353	41.1
Enumclaw	4,152	33.2
Everett	20,948	40.8
Lynden	3,465	35.1
Mead	10,786	31.4
North Kitsap	6,047	34.7
Olympia	10,352	31.7
Richland	14,204	40.4
South Kitsap	9,824	39.1
Tumwater	6,817	32.8
University Place	5,827	39.2
Washougal	3,219	38.6

Table C: Demographic Data for Bellingham and High Performing Comparison Districts

District	Enrollment	% Free or Reduced Meal	% Asian and White	% Limited English	% Special Education
Bellingham	12,069	36.2	72.2	7.1	16.4
Bellevue	21,745	18.7	74.6	14.3	9.3
Olympia	10,352	31.7	74.1	3.0	16.4
Shoreline	9,870	28.9	65.5	8.0	13.5

- ▪ **Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium Comparison**

The SBA is given in fourteen states, including Washington, and as such creates the possibility for us to compare how our district and state performance measures up to those other states that use the same test. While we give the test annually by state law, as a school district we have not made this single assessment a higher priority measure than any other measure we use to track the progress of our students and our district. The Bellingham Promise compels us to focus on the whole child across all seventeen specified outcomes, and to consider the scores from the state assessment as only one part of the overall picture. That said, the performance of our students on the state test is something we need to pay attention to in the context of considering other factors that tell a broader story about the development of the whole child, as it does give one basis for gauging how well our students perform relative to standard in comparison with other districts in our region and beyond.

As the tables on page 1 of the attached data set reveal, Washington state is the top-performing, or near top-performing, state overall when compared with other SBAC states. Understanding where Washington falls as a state provides a national context for understanding what it means to exceed state percentages. At some grade levels, our district students tend to outperform our state proficiency rate, and in fact outperform most of the other states that administer the Smarter Balanced Assessment. As a district, Bellingham students scored above the proficiency rate in Washington state on the English language arts (ELA) test in grades five, seven and eight, and above the state proficiency rate in math at grades seven and eight.

As Bellingham students progress through the grade levels, their state test scores tend to increase. This is a trend we've seen for several years. Middle school students in Bellingham perform better on the SBA than their early grade elementary peers. However, as the data you are about to explore will reveal, Bellingham students' SBA scores have been declining slightly in year-over-year comparisons, particularly in mathematics in the early grades. This has become a trend and is causing us to dig in to figure out what's underneath the decline, and what we need to do to reverse it so that over the next few years Bellingham's student proficiency rates show improvement.

- **2019 Proficiency Rates -- Bellingham Compared to 38 Comparable Districts**

Pages 2-4 of the data set show the proficiency bar charts of the 38 districts in the larger comparable set, plus Washington state. The dark blue highlighted line shows where Bellingham is positioned in terms of overall student achievement on the 2019 Smarter Balanced Assessment in ELA and math for grades 3-8 and grade 10, plus the 2019 Washington Comprehensive Assessment of Science for grades 5 and 8. Overall, approximately 62% of Bellingham students met or exceeded standard in ELA (page 2). In mathematics, approximately 46% of Bellingham students met or exceeded standard (page 3). For ELA and mathematics, University Place, Shoreline and Olympia had the highest proficiency rates. In science, approximately 57% of Bellingham students met or exceeded standard (page 4). Olympia, University Place and Peninsula had the top proficiency rates in science.

We also explored the trends within each grade level cohort of students. Page 5 of the data set displays the state test proficiency by class cohort beginning with fourth graders (two years of test data) arrayed through eighth graders (five years of test data). These data reveal how students within each cohort performed on each year's test that they've taken. For example, on the graph at the top of page 5 in the area of ELA, data reveal that the seventh graders in 2019 (class of 2024) scored 65% proficient on the SBA; five years earlier, as third graders, that group scored 57% proficient. In math, that same group scored 53% proficient as seventh graders in 2019 but had 62% proficiency in math in grade 3, five years earlier. The cohort data overall moves up and down each year, but we did observe more grade level cohorts declining in math in this year's trends, while staying more consistent or improving in ELA.

We have also included an analysis of how Bellingham's students compare with the more demographically similar group of 15 districts that are within +/- 5% of us in terms of the percent of students eligible for free/reduced price meals. Page 6 arrays these peer districts by percent of students eligible for free/reduced price meals. By definition, Bellingham falls in the exact middle

of this group of comparable districts when arrayed this way, with half of the districts within +5% and half within -5% of Bellingham's free/reduced percentage. Page 7 arrays these same districts by the overall percent of students meeting standard. As the graphic reveals, Bellingham students' performance was similar to that of students in many of these districts in ELA putting our district in the same range as districts such as South Kitsap, North Kitsap, Washougal, Lynden, and Richland. In math, our ranking dropped putting us on the lower end of the spectrum compared with this same group. Again, the math score trends have us engaged in figuring out next steps. We provide more details about our exploration of the trends in math and strategies to address this concern later in this report.

- **District Smarter Balanced Scores Compared to Comparable High Performing Peers**

In the data set provided for the board, we also present overall comparisons against the state benchmarks on the first four years of the Smarter Balanced Assessment to the selected high bar comparable group of school districts, namely Bellevue, Shoreline and Olympia. Several different indicators of achievement are tracked and presented. These include:

- ELA in grade bands 3-5 and 6-8; ELA grade 10
- math in grade bands 3-5 and 6-8; math grade 10
- science in grades 5 and 8.

Pages 8-12 of the data set compare percentages of Bellingham students who *met* standard on the state test with percentages of students from the other three comparable high-bar districts, as well as with the state overall. Bar graphs include student overall comparisons, and comparisons on the four subgroup populations we have typically tracked: Hispanic/Latinx students; English language learners, students with individualized education plans (IEPs); and students participating in the free and reduced price meals program. We have included the five-year data picture including the 2019 data to visually show how these scores are trending over this five-year period. The state introduced a new science exam in 2018, so we only have trend data for two years in that subject area. Page 13 compares the percentages of Bellingham students who *exceeded* standard to our comparison group.

Bellingham students tend to underperform those students from our high performing comparable district set (Bellevue, Olympia, Shoreline), and we continue to include comparisons with these school districts because we know their performance sets a high bar. Scores for students in Bellingham were up slightly in elementary ELA, but generally down slightly across the board in the overall picture (page 8). Within subpopulations of students we track, Hispanic students (page 9) showed slight decreases in scores this year in ELA, math and science at the middle level, but scores increased slightly in ELA and science at the elementary level, while remaining consistent with the prior year's score in math. Scores for students receiving English language learner support (page 10) increased in ELA, math and science at grades 6-8, as well as in math in grades 3-5, while declining slightly in grades 3-5 ELA. Scores for students with disabilities (page 11) remained consistent with the prior year in elementary ELA and science, while declining slightly in elementary math. Scores for this population at the middle school dropped slightly in each subject matter category. Similarly, scores for students who are from low income households (page 12) were down slightly across the board. Overall, this paints a mixed picture of

achievement for our tracked subgroups this year, but generally reinforces the downward trend we've observed in the area of mathematics. Interestingly, the subgroup achievement picture for our highest-performing high-bar district, Bellevue, trended down overall and notably with regard to the performance of their Hispanic/Latinx population which trended lower in each content area at both the middle and elementary level, as well as for Bellevue's English learner population.

When we looked at the percent of students exceeding standard, comparing Bellingham with our high bar group of comparable districts, data revealed drops in some categories and flat performance in year-over-year comparisons in others. The percent of Bellingham students exceeding standard dropped in all subject categories in the middle level, while still putting our scores higher than the state averages (page 13). In elementary schools, the percent of students exceeding standard remained flat in ELA, dropped slightly in math, and improved in the area of science. Overall, a mixed picture in terms of Bellingham students exceeding standards.

Pages 14-15 include data on our high school (grade 10) students' performance, and offered some good news in the area of ELA where we saw increases in the percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards, putting the performance of Bellingham's tenth graders near that of our high-bar comparable districts. Conversely, the data in math show a decline in year-over-year comparisons, consistent with some of the other trends in math reported above.

Page 15 of the data set shows the performance of student subgroups in grade 10. Again, we compared the performance of our Hispanic/Latinx students, students with IEPs and our students who are from low income households with that of our high bar peer districts. As the data reveal, Bellingham's Hispanic/Latinx students, students from low income households and students with disabilities outperformed those in Bellevue in the area of ELA. However, we observed drops in math scores across the board for these sub-populations, consistent with the theme regarding trends in mathematics.

A Note on the Decline in Math Scores

As the report has revealed to this point, SBA math scores have declined in some grade levels over the past four to five years. We see this not as a "blip" or an aberration on the radar at this point; rather, scores are trending down in year-over-year comparisons. While the concerns are somewhat mitigated by the fact that it continues to appear that our students' math achievement improves as they progress through our system, district leaders have been working this past year to explore the root causes of the decline in the scores we are seeing, particularly in the elementary grades. The school district adopted the Bridges curriculum for math in the elementary schools six years ago. At that time, this curriculum was widely viewed as among the strongest programs on the market connected to the common core standards. From all accounts, this is still true. We believe the problem is not with the material we adopted, but rather with the way in which implementation has occurred. Our belief is that there are multiple contributing factors influencing this decline. In the paragraphs that follow, we frame an argument regarding the nature of the problem as we understand it now, and then offer a picture of what next steps are needed to address this declining trend.

First, teaching the Bridges curriculum requires teachers to make some pedagogical shifts from the way that math has been traditionally taught. The program has multiple components, including a core lesson that introduces core concepts and ideas in each unit, and a number corner lesson that focuses on numeracy and the development of critical thinking skills in mathematics. In addition, teaching the curriculum requires an extended time commitment from teachers; this is challenging in the context of the elementary instructional day where there are many curricular areas competing for time and attention.

Second, as we've explored what's going on with math instruction, we've learned that the implementation of all parts of the Bridges math curriculum in the elementary schools has waned over the past few years. Observational evidence from classrooms last school year suggested that while some teachers have continued to implement the program with fidelity, others have slowly let parts of it go, replacing it with other math teaching materials that may be more familiar to them. This year, we see this aspect of the problem starting to shift, given the focus from our principals and support from our math teacher on special assignment, but there is still room to improve.

Third, many teachers in our system learned to teach math centered around the idea that all students must achieve mastery of each introduced concept prior to moving ahead with new material. In fact, the adopted curriculum emphasizes mastery for some concepts in each unit, while other concepts are intended only for initial exposure. Because many teachers have held to the idea of mastery, students have not received instruction in all the required units in a given school year. As students matriculate up to the next grade without having received all the math content intended from the prior year, we believe there has been a compounding effect of teachers in the next grade higher trying to "catch kids up" with regard to things they may have missed in the prior grades. We believe this has contributed to the decline in state test scores.

Finally, we believe the challenges with sustaining the curriculum implementation link back to the initial training that teachers and principals received. Teacher professional learning focused heavily on helping teachers get familiar with the instructional materials and less so on the pedagogical shifts that are required to teach the material well. Principal professional development may not have been sustained nor deep enough into support for helping principals coach teachers on the curriculum. Moreover, since the initial adoption of the curriculum, more than half of our principals are new to their schools, and we have turned over approximately 45% of teachers in the elementary schools. Many of these principals and teachers who are newer to the system have received only minimal math professional development with the Bridges curriculum.

So, given this backdrop in terms of what we're learning about the problem, the question becomes what are we doing about it? The answer to this question has multiple dimensions.

First, principals and other system leaders have taken pains since last spring to clarify expectations about the teaching of the curriculum, including how much instructional time should be devoted to math instruction, and the number of units that should be covered in each grade level. Observations in classrooms by principals and other district leaders this fall suggest this

message has been received by our staff, and that teachers are redoubling efforts to implement the Bridges curriculum with fidelity.

Second, teachers continue to need professional learning support around making the pedagogical shifts associated with the Bridges curriculum. To this end, we are working to set up additional professional learning supports with the help of the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership, as well as increasing time to support additional help from teachers on special assignment to provide direct help in classrooms, offering modeling and coaching support for colleagues on the instructional shifts that are needed.

Finally, we are embarking on an investigation exploring classroom level data to understand which teachers in our system are realizing the result of getting most or all of their students to standard. We want to get smarter about how these staff members are able to implement the Bridges curriculum with fidelity and what instructional practices are in use that enables them to get all or most of their students to standard. We believe the lessons learned from this exploration, along with the other strategies noted above will help to continue to inform the overall system about how to turn around the trends we've observed in math scores.

Close Achievement Gaps

Pages 16-20 array comparisons between our district and our high-bar peer districts on achievement gaps for our tracked subgroups. The interest here is to determine whether achievement gaps are closing or growing. Pages 16-18 display the proficiency gaps for three of the subgroup populations we track annually—students who are low income versus those who are not, students receiving special education services versus those not receiving services and Hispanic/Latinx students versus white students. These are presented again in grade bands 3-5 and 6-8 and show the difference between the subgroup population and their counterpart comparison group.

The trends we aim for in this data are reductions in year-over-year comparisons. So anywhere the 2019 bar (darkest blue bars on the graphic) is smaller than the 2018 bar (slightly lighter blue bar on the graphic) indicates a reduction in the gap separating the two subgroups being compared. We have also included the 2016 and 2017 data to support a longer term look at trends in this data. Each graph also includes a "candy cane" column (red horizontal stripes) that shows the relative percentage of each subgroup for each of the four districts and the state. As we have reported in previous years, this is an area where we have seen significant gaps that separate subgroups, and has been a strong focus of our equity work as a system, as we try to ensure greater and greater opportunities for all students regardless of income, race or learning disability.

The non-low income to low income gaps (page 16) form a mixed picture. Elementary ELA, math and science all showed slightly larger gaps than the prior year. By contract, middle school math and science gaps by income showed a decrease this year, while the middle school ELA gap was slightly higher than in the prior year. By comparison, our achievement gaps between non-low income and low income students are lower than Bellevue's in every category we tracked, and in some cases substantially lower.

With regard to proficiency gaps between students with and without an IEP (page 17), we see the continuation of a positive trend of a narrowing gap in elementary math and science, as well as middle school math. The gap in grades 6-8 increased slightly in ELA and science, as well as in elementary ELA. The gaps for Bellingham students with and without an IEP were also significantly smaller than our highest-performing comparable district, Bellevue, in every category.

Comparing gaps in proficiency between white and Hispanic/Latinx students (page 18) decreased at the elementary level in math and science and remained constant in ELA. Conversely, the gaps increased slightly at the middle level in both ELA and science and remained constant in math. We noted that gaps observed in our Bellingham student population were lower than Bellevue's across the elementary grades, but higher than other high-bar peer districts.

On pages 19-20 of the data set, we have included high school data focused on gaps in subgroup performance. Page 19 arrays Bellingham's non-low income to low income student data, and data for students with and without an IEP, alongside our high-bar peer districts and the state. While the gap in math increased slightly, the ELA gap decreased, and we were pleased to see that the proficiency gap between non-low income and low income tenth graders in our district is well below that of Bellevue's. The gap between scores of students with and without an IEP in Bellingham increased in both math and ELA in year-over-year comparisons. That said, our tenth grade ELA and math gap for this subgroup remains is the smallest of all the high-bar peer districts. We were pleased to see that the proficiency gap between white and Hispanic/Latinx students dropped in both ELA and math (page 20) in year-over-year comparisons.

With regard to closing achievement gaps, we continue to have a long way to go toward our goal of ensuring that ALL students are supported to achieve proficiency at standard on the SBA. We remain committed to continuing to grow the work we have focused on equity, diversity and inclusion, and the fact that we have made this a more prominent focus in board policy with the addition of Executive Limitation 10, as well as the additions to the Bellingham Promise, should help to continue to decrease the gaps we continue to see in this subgroup analysis over time.

Student Growth vs. Proficiency Data

We were able to obtain data on growth for students in our system and have arrayed this a couple of different ways in the data set. Pages 21-22 show different views of our student proficiency vs. growth data. Page 21 arrays our tracked subgroup data. As with the tendency we observed in last year's report, the growth scores of students in subgroups are much more tightly grouped than the proficiency scores. Proficiency ranges from the low teens to well above 70% depending on the subgroup, and predictably students who are white or Asian, not from low income households, and who speak English as their first language achieve proficiency on the SBA at higher rates. However, the range of growth scores all fall within about a 20 percentage point spread of each other, across the subgroups. We continue to view this as evidence that as a system we are growing the skills of all students at a more uniform rate, even though proficiency varies much more widely and continues to be a function of privilege, language, and race.

A similar phenomenon occurs with our schools as well. Page 22 arrays the elementary and middle schools on the same grid of proficiency by growth. Proficiency scores range much more widely than growth scores, and predictably tend to follow income patterns. Schools with higher income populations like Columbia, Silver Beach and Fairhaven tend to score on the upper end of the proficiency scale. But there is much more uniformity in the growth scores across our schools and some outliers of interest. We wanted to highlight in particular the growth trajectory of Alderwood Elementary in the area of ELA and Birchwood Elementary in the area of math as schools which showed some of the highest growth among our schools last year.

Concluding Statement

We offer this Ends 2.1 Part 1 monitoring report, in combination with the remaining parts of the report that will follow, 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.