

BELLINGHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT
Bellingham, Washington

MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Directors

FROM: Dr. Greg Baker, Superintendent

DATE: March 4, 2021

SUBJECT: Ends Monitoring Report 2.1, Part 2

I am pleased to submit this End 2.1, Part 2 monitoring report to the school district's board of directors. This report encompasses what has been provided in two separate reports in prior years including information on student advancement toward on-time or extended graduation, examination of drop-out rates, as well as post-secondary enrollment rates. Our process for reporting on Ends 2.1 during the 2020-21 school year began with the previously submitted Ends 2.1, Part 1 report at the February 10, 2021 meeting. This report is the second and final installment of the Ends 2.1 sequence for the 2020-21 school year. A report on Ends 1, 2 and 3 will be presented at the May 12, 2021 board meeting focused on The Bellingham Promise vision, mission, and outcomes.

Introduction

The first part of this report 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 have also examined comparisons of Bellingham Public Schools' student graduation trends to those in comparable districts. The second part of the report examines Bellingham students' post-secondary enrollment rates, and how we are preparing students for post-secondary educational options. This work includes a focus on post-secondary enrollments for Bellingham students in higher education, both two-year and four-year options, as well as preparation pathways for students who pursue post-secondary career and technical options.

Our report once again relies 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 (Bellevue, Olympia, Shoreline). We have also relied on comparisons with a cluster of districts that are within +/-5 percent 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 the poverty level within our district. We have also drawn in data from Lynden School District, which is one of the group of districts locally that are within +/- 5 percent of Bellingham's percentage of students eligible for free/reduced priced meals, and within our comparison group for five-year graduation rates.

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. 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 in than 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 2 report, we focus on numbers three and four above.

Section 1: Graduation Rate Comparisons

Graduation Rates in Forty-Two Comparable Districts 2010-2019

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 1 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 percent in 2010 to 89.9 percent in 2019. High-bar peer districts (Bellevue, Olympia, Shoreline) continue to reach higher graduation levels than Bellingham. However, over the nine-year span from 2010 to 2019, our district's graduation rate continues to edge closer to those high bar peers, effectively closing the gap. Furthermore, our district graduation rate has also moved from very near the state average in 2010 to well above the state average in 2019.

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 have

reported in prior years, a group of students in each cohort do extend into a fifth year or beyond to accrue the necessary credits needed to graduate from Bellingham schools. The graphs on page 2 compare the graduation rates for the last five cohorts of Bellingham students with those of Washington State overall, as well as with the group of 15 +/-5 percent peer districts and our three high-bar peer comparison districts. Bellingham students' four-year rate dipped slightly this year (from 87 to 85 percent), as did the six-year rate, while the five-year and seven-year graduation percentages have increased once again this year. We were pleased to see the five-year graduation rate reach the 90 percent mark in this year's analysis. As the data on page 2 also reveal, Bellingham students' graduation rates have continued to exceed the state in terms of overall graduation percentage for four-year, five-year, six-year and seven-year cohorts.

On page 3, we noted the dropout rate for the four-year 2020 cohort appears to have slightly increased. This increase follows several years of decreasing dropout rates and caused us to seek to better understand the stories underneath the numbers. We conducted a subsequent analysis consistent with our work that began with the '94 project' some years ago, to look at each student who either dropped out or who left our schools with an unknown status from the class of 2020. That data dive to understand students' stories, supported by Director of Teaching and Learning Keith Schacht and our high school counseling team, revealed a wide range of reasons students left our system without graduating. These range from students who chose to go full-time running start and not seek a Bellingham high school diploma to students who left our schools and turned to the General Education Development (GED) test route. Others earned far too few credits to consider continuing into a fifth or sixth year, while others were literally one or two credits away and could be helped to achieve graduation possibly by seeking to use the COVID waiver instituted by the state. We know that over 40 students were granted COVID credit waivers allowed by the state, which was a higher percentage of students (5 percent) than the state average (3 percent). And we will keep working to catch those who have graduation within their reach even into the fifth, sixth or seventh year. On that note, we were pleased to see, consistent with recent trends, the dropout rate (shown in orange) for the five-year cohort of Bellingham students continued to decline, falling to the lowest point (6 percent) in the years since we began conducting this analysis and is below the state's overall average by 7 percentage points.

Five-Year Graduation Rates by Student Subgroups

We again analyzed Bellingham's internal graduation data for some of our largest student subgroups that we have used to focus on the equity of our district's graduation rates. Page 4 of the data set displays the five-year graduation rate cohort comparisons for Bellingham students who are English language learners (ELL), Hispanic/Latinx, eligible for free/reduced priced meals and receiving special education services. Graduation rates for English language learners decreased from 77 to 70 percent in year-over-year comparisons. While it is disappointing to see that year-over-year drop, up and down fluctuation is consistent with what we have seen over time in tracking that subgroup, given the sample size is relatively smaller than other subgroups we track and so more prone to wide year-over-year fluctuations. By contrast, graduation rates for our Hispanic/Latinx students increased again from 82 to 85 percent, continuing the upward trend we observed last year. Five-year graduation rates for students with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) dropped slightly but show a significant positive improvement in the number of students continuing into a sixth year or beyond. Five-year graduation rates for students eligible for free/reduced price meals increased from a low of 68 percent in 2014 to 82 percent in 2019, while

drop-out rates have fallen from 29 to 11 percent over this same period. On page 5, we were pleased to note that 94 percent of our Black/African American students from the class of 2019 graduated by the end of their fifth year, and none dropped out. Again, important to recognize this represents a small population in Bellingham, but a stellar outcome nonetheless for those identified students. Five-year graduation rates also bumped up for students of two or more races, while the dropout rate for that same group fell.

The graphs arrayed on page 6 show the breakdown of extended graduation rates for our four largest student subgroups. Seven-year rates held steady or increased for English-language learners, students with IEPs and low-income students. Five-year rates increased for Hispanic/Latinx students and students identified as low income.

Pages 7-10 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. As noted earlier, the graduation percentages for English language learners in Bellingham (page 7) dropped, as did the percentages for that group in Shoreline and Olympia. The five-year rate for Hispanic/Latinx students (page 8) increased again in the most recent year of comparison and the five-year graduation gap between Hispanic/Latinx and White student rates decreased. Graduation rates for students eligible for free/reduced price meals (page 9) 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 point in year-over-year comparisons to 82 percent, edging closer to the rates in Bellevue, Olympia, and Shoreline. Five-year graduation rates for Bellingham students with IEPs (page 10) dropped by a percent.

The Effects of Income on Graduation Rates

A final piece of our analysis of graduation rates introduced within this same report three 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 graph on page 11 of the data set split out four race or ethnicity student groups into categories of low-income and non-low income. The graph on that page once again reveals the stark difference for all students who are low-income vs. their non-low-income peers. Interestingly, Hispanic/Latinx students in the five-year cohort from the class of 2019 who are non-low-income graduated at the highest rate among the other groups represented on the graph who are also non-low-income (Asian, White, and Two or More Races), and well above all the groups identified as low-income.

Section 2: Post-Secondary Success

The focus for Section 2 of the report includes analysis of a set of leading indicators that shed light on our efforts to prepare students for post-secondary success. This section includes an analysis of data concerning dual credit enrollments (e.g., via Advanced Placement (AP) or College in the High School) in comparison with our peer districts, as well as within observed subgroups of our own students. The final part of Section 2 crosses over the finish line of high school graduation and explores trends in Bellingham graduates' post-secondary opportunities and outcomes. We again rely on our comparison set of districts and Washington state noted above.

High School Dual Credit Enrollment

Page 12 of the data set presents high school dual enrollment information. The top chart displays trends over the past six years on the percentage of Bellingham students enrolled in Running Start, International Baccalaureate (IB), College in the High School (CIHS), Career and Technical Education (CTE), dual credit and AP courses. As the chart reveals, Bellingham's student enrollment in all these areas exceeds state averages, and in some cases by a significant margin. The chart at the bottom of the page contrasts the trend lines for all our high bar comparison districts (Bellevue, Olympia, Shoreline), as well as a local peer district (Lynden SD) and Washington state alongside Bellingham trends in students completing dual credit courses. The trendlines show that Bellingham students' completion of dual credit courses remained consistent with the prior year, with numbers below Bellevue and Shoreline, and above the state, Lynden, and Olympia.

Pages 13-14 of the data set show trends in dual enrollment courses by student subgroups for Bellingham and the state. Trend graphs reveal whether the rates of dual enrollment credit are increasing, decreasing or remaining flat and whether gaps between the identified subgroups of students and their majority counterpart group (ELL/Non-ELL, for example) are closing, getting larger or remaining constant. For Bellingham students, the trends over the past few years appear quite positive. Page 13 of the data set tracks this indicator for ELL/Non-ELL students (top chart) and for Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx and White students (bottom chart). Page 14 displays similar graphs for low income/non-low income (top chart), and students with and without an IEP (bottom chart). In each case, the trends for students in our identified subgroups in Bellingham indicate that dual credit enrollments are trending up over time, outpacing the state, and that some of the gaps are narrowing.

We also continue to examine students' participation in career and technical programs in our district. The top graph on page 15 of the data set includes two graphs that array trend data on student participation in career and technical programs/areas of study. As is evident from the trend lines, CTE program completion numbers continue to increase, as do the number of industry certificates awarded in our CTE programs. Data specifically reveals another large increase in industry certificates that Bellingham students earned last year. In 2019, Bellingham students earned over 1,000 industry certificates in various CTE programs.

Finally, we have included a comparison of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates for our students alongside those rates for peer districts and the state. We know from research that completion of the FAFSA is a strong leading indicator for actual enrollment in post-secondary education. Students who take the step to fill out the form are more likely to enroll. As the graph on the bottom of page 15 displays, Bellingham students' rate of FAFSA completion has increased substantially over the past five years. Data for the state and our peer districts are also displayed for purposes of comparison.

Post-Secondary Enrollment in First Year After High School Graduation

We next focus on recent trends in enrollment in post-secondary education for Bellingham graduates. The graph on the top of page 16 reveals that post-secondary enrollment for 2020 Bellingham graduates immediately after high school decreased slightly by comparison with the prior years. The trend shows our enrollment rate in four-year institutions dropped about a

percentage point for 2020 graduates from 41 percent in 2019 to 40 percent in 2020. Our rate of enrollment in two-year institutions also decreased slightly, from 23 percent in 2019 to 18 percent in 2020. However, considering the recent research on college-going rates, it appears Bellingham students' attendance remained fairly steady compared to the national picture. Specifically, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center recently released the eighth annual High School Benchmarks report that shows far fewer high school graduates went to college immediately after high school this past fall, declining by 21.7 percent compared to 2019 graduates.¹ As the lower graph on page 16 reveals, by comparison with our group of peer districts, Bellingham's percentages of students enrolling in post-secondary schools are below those of Bellevue and Shoreline and above Lynden, Olympia, and the state.

While we saw a slight drop in post-secondary attendance for 2020 graduates likely due to the pandemic, it is important to remember with this analysis of post-secondary education trends that our district is graduating a significantly higher percentage of our students now than we were eight or nine years ago. To have maintained comparable percentages of students pursuing high education, even as the graduation rates have risen, continues to be a positive indicator regarding the level of graduates' preparedness for post-secondary. Put another way, even as we have graduated more and more students every year, our enrollment percentages of those students heading off to pursue higher education has remained relatively constant.

The graphs on pages 17-18 show post-secondary enrollment in our identified student subgroups, compared with state data. These are broken out into four different data arrays, starting with page 17 which shows trends over time comparing the post-secondary enrollments of our ELL and non-ELL graduates. One important bit of good news here is that the rate of post-secondary enrollments for graduates in all subgroups (ELL, Hispanic/Latinx, Black/African American, White, low income and students with IEPs) are well above the state averages. We see a slight increase in post-secondary enrollments the first year after high school for ELL students from the class of 2014 to the class of 2018, as well as for students identified as low income from that same year. Post-secondary enrollment dropped slightly for students with IEPs.

Persistence in Two-Year or Four-Year Colleges Post-Graduation

We now turn to examine the persistence of Bellingham graduates once they enter a post-secondary education opportunity. Page 19 of the data set provides a few ways of inquiring into this question. On the upper left we have arrayed the trend data for the past four years on graduates of our system who enrolled in college at any time during the first two years after high school. Over four years, trends suggest that percentages of our graduates persisting in two-year institutions and in four-year institutions has dipped slightly. In exploring a rationale for this slight drop, recent research suggests this may be partly a function of the uptick in the economy over this period. 2018 graduates may have put their post-secondary aspirations on hold to go to work and take advantage of the more robust economy.²

The graphic on the top right of page 19 shows the data on Bellingham graduates compared with a national sample of school districts within a range of similar demographics. Our school district

¹ https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020_HS Benchmarks Report.pdf

² <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/16/787909495/fewer-students-are-going-to-college-heres-why-that-matters>

has the characteristics that allow it to be compared with other districts that are “urban”, “low minority”, and “higher income.” The data shown in this table provides a comparison of how we fare nationally to other districts’ data, aggregated into these three categories. Our graduates do slightly better when compared with urban schools nationally, for example. Our graduates do about the same as other high income and low minority school systems.

The graph on the bottom of page 19 shows trend data over the past four years on what percentage of Bellingham graduates persist after a first year in post-secondary and return for a second year. Data remained constant in year-over-year trends, with some slight drops across the board over a six-year period for those returning to two-year colleges, and a slight increase in the percentages returning to four-year colleges or universities.

Post-School Outcomes for Graduates with IEPs

Page 20 arrays the data from 2019 on students with IEPs and their trajectories in the first year out of high school. A point to reiterate regarding this analysis is that our data are so clear about the importance of ensuring all students, regardless of handicapping condition make it over the high graduation finish line. All the indicators line up around this key point. Our graduates served with an IEP enroll in higher education at rates higher than state averages and do well on measures tracking employment. On average, slightly fewer of our graduates with IEPs are listed as “not engaged” compared with state averages. A slightly higher percentage of our graduates in 2019 with IEPs attended higher education than in prior years. This said, we still have a lot of work to do to ensure the successful matriculation of all our students into the post-high school opportunities and recognize the vulnerability of students served with IEPs who do not make it all the way to graduation, and how this impacts their engagement opportunities in either education or employment as they age out of high school.

Summary Discussion

Overall five-year graduation rates for Bellingham students continue to improve. We continue to hold this measure as an extremely important 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. And, once they graduate, we see a high percentage who can go on and persist in higher education opportunities. We remain committed to seeing improvements in this most basic and important marker of success – student graduation rates from our system and how graduation propels students into educational opportunities at the next level.

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.