Dear community,

After two remarkable and challenging years in our schools, I am confident we are moving forward past many of the hardest times. 

With the lifting of the state mask mandate in March, it is a joy to see smiles again. Masking remains optional and is based on individual choice.

This edition of InsideSchools is filled with some great stories, especially about our staff. We recently held surprise visits for our annual Promise Awards. These awards reflect key strategies and core beliefs of The Bellingham Promise. While we select just a few recipients, these awards represent the amazing work of our dedicated staff, volunteers and community partners. See inset photo right and page 6 to learn more about the 2022 awards given out.

Other stories highlight our technology students, our traffic safety program and our connection to the Lummi Nation through a story pole in its new home at Alderwood.

And finally, thanks to our supportive community, the 2022 bond was passed by voters in February allowing us to move forward on and finalize important construction projects. Our schools, staff and students are grateful for your support over the years and into the future.

I hope this spring brings a sense of renewal and possibility,

GREG BAKER
Superintendent of Schools
Great Teaching with Strong Support

High quality instruction occurs every day in every classroom, where we establish a safe and engaging learning environment. We support culturally-responsive instruction through effective leadership, ongoing staff learning, and a diverse staff reflective of our students.

Early Childhood Education

We support students and families from prenatal through graduation. We invest in a strong early childhood program because of its powerful long-term return for our students and community.

A One Schoolhouse Approach

Our schools are part of a larger One Schoolhouse, and we focus on taking care of each other. We provide an equitable distribution of resources and services to ensure excellence for all students.

Student, Family, and Community Engagement

We develop partnerships and engage with a wide variety of stakeholders, including families and community partners, to support the success of all students.

We develop skilled users of technology and so much more!

The Sehome Robotics team of Isaac Parsons, Nathan Eisses and Addison Getz (photo right) placed second at state and will go to the VEX Worlds Championship in May held in Dallas, Texas.

Shuksan Middle School sixth graders Avery Neem and Reid Hals (photo top of page) won second place in their category of Website Design at the 2022 Washington Technology Student Association (WTSA) conference in mid-March. In addition, seventh grader Dylan Sager of Whatcom Middle School (photo middle of page) placed third in his category of STEM animation at the same WTSA conference. They are invited to the nationals technology competition this summer.

Visit promise.bellinghamschools.org for the full story.
When Bellingham Public Schools brought Traffic Safety Education (TSE), previously known as driver’s ed, back into high schools in 2018-19, the goal was equity, one of The Bellingham Promise’s cornerstones. TSE was phased out of many Washington schools in 2002 when the Washington state legislature stopped subsidizing it, which made offering it challenging for schools. But that meant students had to pay for private driving education to get their license, and for many families, the cost was and is beyond reach.

For three years and counting, students have been taking TSE for free at their high school. The one-semester class combines TSE and personal finance in a blended course with practice drives scheduled after school or on weekends. For the TSE portion, students complete six hours of supervised drives with a certificated instructor, as well as a classroom portion on driver safety. Half their time is spent in a personal finance class taught by a different teacher that covers topics related to car ownership as well as other personal finance topics. Each high school has its own structure.

The community benefits from school-based TSE, too. Research shows that teens who take a driver safety course are safer on the road. That’s good for everyone.

Older students are prioritized for scheduling if they haven’t taken TSE, but all students aged 15 and up with a driver’s permit can sign up. If no spot is available, they’re put on a waiting list.

So, how’s it been going? The program has exited more than 2,000 students from the semester-long class since it started. “It’s a very popular program,” says Stu Soderquist, TSE instructor at Bellingham High School and coordinator of the program. “The kids are super motivated to be here. I have better attendance, better compliance than most classes, and the students really step up.”

One of the more personalized benefits of the in-school program is that if students need to repeat a drive or class learning module, instructors spend time with them until they’ve achieved proficiency—for no extra cost to the family.

The TSE portion includes bringing in an insurance agent to explain the concept of insurance and why it’s required, as well as a police officer to talk about legal responsibilities and traffic laws.

When students are in the personal finance portion of the class, they learn about topics related to purchasing and owning a car, including how to qualify for a loan, how to pay it off, and how compound interest works. “This class is being taught from a consumer behavioral economic approach, and students are getting good bang for the buck through practical information,” says Chad Squires, who teaches the personal finance module at Squalicum High School.

At Sehome High School, business education teacher Jeff Wood introduces as much personal finance material as fits into his class. A unit on credit teaches students about the importance of credit and credit scores as related to qualifying for a loan. Wood also has students create budgets, distinguish between needs and wants, and learn about different categories of bills. “We also talk about investing, saving your money, and compound interest,” he says.

Sehome freshman Alivia Hernandez appreciates the real-world money skills she’s learning. “It’s preparing us for success after we graduate so we know how to make good decisions financially,” she says.

Traffic Safety Education is a 2018 addition to Project Free Education in Bellingham Public Schools. For a complete review of how the district works to reduce barriers and financial burdens on families, visit bellinghamschools.org/project-free-education.

Become a Behind-the-Wheel (BTW) Instructor!
The traffic safety program often needs additional trained BTW instructors. If you are interested in our in-house training, please contact the traffic safety coordinator at Stuart.Soderquist@bellinghamschools.org.
Thanks to continued voter support, our facilities bonds are helping to fund and finish many capital projects around the district. These projects include finalizing the new Sunnyland Elementary School opening in August 2022 (see aerial and webcam photos below left); breaking ground on a new District Office in the Barkley area this summer; and continuing the design work for our environmental education site at the south end of Lake Whatcom.

We are planning to open our first permanent structure, a flexible and sustainably-designed learning space, on our Gordon Carter Environmental Education Site by summer of 2023. This facility will provide much-needed shelter for our outdoor education programs, including Forest School, science classes, student leadership camps, and meeting space, as well as space for community partners.

We welcome community rentals of our district facilities and fields. Visit bellinghamschools.org/rentals for more information.

Outside of the school day, our newest gyms and playgrounds are available for community use.

Shuksan Middle School opened its new auxiliary gym in fall 2021 and Parkview opened their community gym this spring. Both spaces will be utilized for physical education, school gatherings, and afterschool programs.

We are moving forward with our plans to build a new District Office on Barkley Boulevard and anticipate breaking ground on the new building in June 2022.
We know that safe, functional, durable and equitable outdoor play spaces are great learning environments. They are important to our schools and children; they also provide a fun outdoor experience for our greater community and neighborhoods during non-school hours. An inclusive, universal design playground is one that meets the needs of all children, including those with limited mobility and/or ability.

In the spring of 2021, Bellingham Public Schools convened the Playgrounds Standards Ad-Hoc Advisory Committee as a way to set in place a new set of guidelines for choosing playground equipment and surfacing. At that time, three new elementary schools were under construction, and the district wanted to be intentional and informed as decisions were made for play spaces for elementary students. Knowing how vital play and physical activity are for healthy child development, getting the right playgrounds meant some focused attention on it.

Director of Capital Projects Curtis Lawyer served as the co-chair of the committee. He shared that through the presentations and discussions his eyes were opened to new understanding of the importance of playgrounds and play and that “motion and play are an integral and important aspect of learning for every child on a daily basis.”

“Our playgrounds should be accessible for every student,” he continued. “It really came to my attention through this work that many of our playgrounds are deficient in terms of access.”

As the committee met, they discovered how outdated many of our playgrounds were, and although built to ADA specifications, how difficult many surfaces are for students who are wheelchair users, for example, to access play structures.

Based on the information gathered, the presentations by expert-level guests, explanatory videos by Special Education teachers, and group discussions, the standards committee made a recommendation to Superintendent Greg Baker to move any new school playgrounds or expansions to universal design. Universal design is a term that incorporates not only accessibility and inclusivity, but is a playground design usable by all and enjoyed by everyone. This simple idea is one that encourages inclusion, belonging and healthy relationships on the playground.

Sarah Catudio, Special Education teacher in Wade King’s Life Skills classroom, also served on the playground committee and was very happy to be a part of the district recommendation. She is excited to see the momentum build in this area. “For me, the new playground standards exemplify The Bellingham Promise that all students are loved,” Catudio shared.

“There is such power for our students and their families to be welcomed with play spaces that visually communicate that all children are not only welcome, but have the right to engage in meaningful learning and leisure alongside their peers.”

Alongside the recommendation, the ad hoc advisory committee developed “Playgrounds in Bellingham Public Schools: a Plan for Universal Design” to represent a set of key values and guidelines as the district makes choices about future playgrounds.

The important work of the Playground Standards Ad-Hoc Advisory Committee took place ahead of the construction and installation of the newest playgrounds at Alderwood and Parkview elementary schools, which opened this school year.

The new Sunnyland Elementary School, set to open in September 2022, will also include a universal design playground concept. Thanks to funds from the recently passed 2022 bond, there will be new inclusive playgrounds at Geneva, Silver Beach, Northern Heights and Wade King elementary schools. Silver Beach’s playground committee is meeting this spring.

Future school playgrounds to be guided by inclusive, universal design

Preschool students enjoy the brand new Alderwood Elementary School playground in December 2021. Inset photo: Parkview students scramble across the new inclusive playground during recess
The annual awards program in Bellingham Public Schools is a chance to shine a spotlight on recipients who represent our amazing staff and volunteers and who embody the values of The Bellingham Promise.

We appreciate the Bellingham Public Schools Foundation for their sustained financial support of our annual recognition program.
How did you feel about the passage of our school and facilities bond in February?

**DOUG:** I’m very thankful and appreciative to our community for supporting our bond. This isn’t just a one-off bond but the completion of years of work in past bonds. It’s drawing to a close many projects that have been going on for decades. It would have been tragic if it had been thwarted. The district has a comprehensive long-term construction plan, and this bond helps us replace and repair some of the highest needs.

**KATIE:** It’s really something to celebrate, the fact that a super majority of voters from our community came out and supported this work. It really struck me on a recent tour of Sunnyland, and even I got a little emotional. Here we are, building a space that is so clearly about building community within a school. It really feels like such a shift from how schools used to be built. I value the history of some of our old buildings, but many were built decades ago and not designed to teach kids how we now know they learn best. Now we get to design spaces that work best for kids, how to learn, how to grow. And it’s not just the schools but also the playgrounds. Our schools are really a culmination of community building.

**DOUG:** When I walk in our new spaces, like Alderwood and Parkview, I know those new schools make a difference to our kids and parents, and also our staff. It’s pretty remarkable. I really think our students and community deserve these outstanding schools and facilities.

**KATIE:** The reason I decided to run for school board in the first place was less about schools and more the idea that schools and education are this huge component of our community. They are one of the biggest resources that we have and it’s one of the few places where so many people come together and gather.

It’s a place where kids grow and thrive. Our kids deserve it, but our community deserves it, too. There is no bigger investment that we make in our community than in educating our children. I think that’s a huge testament to how important our kids are and how much we value education.

Can you share some of your hopes for our children and district as we move into the endemic stage?

**DOUG:** As long as we’re following our public health recommendations, the sooner we can get back to normal learning settings, the better. My hope is that we have kids in school where their social emotional interactions are complete and not covered up by masks.

Then we can come to terms with the areas our students need support, whether that is learning loss or mental health challenges. We know resilience is so important, but how can kids be resilient if they are struggling with mental health? This really comes down to our focus on the whole child.

**KATIE:** I believe mental health support is part of the endemic stage. Yes, we want to move on, but so many in our community are still experiencing grief, for lack of a better word, to really get through the mental health consequences. It’s a balance of looking back and looking forward.

My hope is that we also look for opportunities to heal as a community. There is a collective piece too. We need to offer mental health supports and individual care to our children and we also need to mourn and express ourselves as a group, too. It’s extending whole child to whole community.

The United States Deputy Secretary of Education Cindy Marten toured Alderwood Elementary School and Options High School on April 19 as part of her tour of Washington state schools. Marten (left) is pictured here with school board director Kelly Bashaw.
Members of the Lummi Nation unveil story pole at new Alderwood Elementary School

Family members and friends of the late master carver Dale James of the Lummi Nation gathered in February at the new Alderwood Elementary School to unveil a story pole carved by James in the 1970s. Originally, the story pole was a gift to Marietta Elementary School. Later, when that school closed and Marietta students moved to the original Alderwood, the story pole was gifted to Alderwood. Now, the story pole occupies a prominent place in the new school building’s foyer.

James’ brother Doug James spoke at the unveiling and shared that his brother Dale had visions that inspired the subjects of his story and totem poles. “Native people always gave recognition to everything around us,” James said at the ceremony. “The spirits in this story pole are still there. It will be a peaceful guardian over the school.”

Dale James was known for his artistry and visions, which inspired his carvings and silk screens. The story pole depicts two figures: Raven and Bear. Raven was chosen because he always watches over others and is a teller of tales. He is also known as a great leader. Raven and Bear are brothers.

Mica Smith, Alderwood’s principal, views the story pole as emblematic of Alderwood’s journey for inclusion. That might be a journey of gender identity, orientation, race, or something else. “The story pole signifies our inclusive values and building a community of diverse learners who can share their experiences with each other,” Smith says.

Alderwood is deeply grateful to the family of Dale James for attending the unveiling and sharing with us their history of the story pole, so we can give proper thanks in remembrance of Dale.

Two years of pandemic support through YES cards

Since March 2020, the Foundation has distributed more than 600 YES Cards to students and families.

YES Cards fund:
- Winter coats, shoes and clothing for growing kids
- Sports physicals and practice gear
- Food for families quarantining
- And much more!

This amounts to over $60,000 in direct support to students! Thank you to all the donors who have given to our YES Card program; your gifts have made an enormous impact.

Think BIG winners

On March 29, the Foundation held the Think BIG Student Club Challenge. La Chispa Club (pictured) from Bellingham High School won the top prize of $2,500 to carry out their BIG idea of providing serapes to Latino and Hispanic students at graduation to honor their heritage.

In total, $10,000 was given to seven exceptional student clubs. Other teams receiving funds were the Science Olympiad at Sehome High, the Rotary and Environmental Clubs at Squalicum High, the National Honor Society at Sehome High, the Aviation Ground School Club which is a United Middle School Club, Crochet for Community at Sehome High and the Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Club at Whatcom Middle School.

Nearly 150 community members cheered on the presenting clubs and cast their vote at the event. Thanks to all the participants and attendees!