

HIGHLINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

March 28, 2006

Memorandum

TO: All Employees
FROM: John P. Welch

John's Journal *Reflections from the Superintendent*

Dear Colleagues:

Getting to know you

Over the past several weeks I have been visiting schools either during lunch or at staff meetings. So far I have visited 14 of our 32 schools. I do not have any formal agenda other than introducing myself and getting to know the incredible people who are educating our children. This gives me a chance to answer questions or seek out the answers if I don't have them. I get to hear about what is going on at each school and in peoples' lives. I often walk away with a small snippet of what the culture of that school may be like, recognizing that one visit can't tell the whole story.

I would like to share some of what I've heard in these conversations.

At our elementary schools, I have chatted with many about the notion that as a system we have much work to do in math and that each of us have a responsibility to create a culture of mathematical thinkers. I heard over and over again that the professional development around literacy is exceptional and is truly changing the way we teach.

People have expressed concerns about class size and school size at our new schools. Usually at the heart of these questions is a concern about getting all students to high levels. Currently we are working on options for reducing the enrollment in our new schools. Our increase in I-728 dollars will go towards additional teachers. These problems aren't solved, but I believe we are making progress.

Some questions revolved around our fastest-growing student population-- our ELL students. While many folks shared a huge level of satisfaction with our ELL department, they expressed the need for continued professional development and additional supports. Other areas of discussion included our social studies curriculum, the plan for summer school, and attendance. Each of these will result in conversations with others.

At our middle schools, I sat in on a couple conversations around race. I saw a professional learning community come together to reflect on race and what each person might be doing to improve relationships with kids. At another school, we discussed gang activity and its effects on a learning community. I continue to work with our regional public safety people to understand what is happening in our community and how we can best intervene and prevent unsafe activity.

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I heard many times at middle schools the benefits of the job-embedded training. We all agreed that our students deserve quality teaching every day from someone they know. Some shared that being out of the classroom is a burden and talked about having balance between learning new skills and applying them in the classroom. Dr. Carla Jackson, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching, Learning, and School Improvement, feels strongly about this balance and will incorporate that into the professional development plan for 2006-07.

At our high schools, staff talked about the work they are doing to make schools more personalized and to create professional learning communities. They are trying new ways to reach out to our parents and the larger community. Some schools are having students participate in the staff development. One student defined "rigor" as activities and conversations that make students think in new and different ways and cause them to think deeply about their beliefs.

WASL exams have been a big topic in these conversations. As of Friday, March 24, we have 57 days before the end of the year to help our students reach the targets in reading, writing, and math. While we have two years to help those that may struggle in mastering the WASL, we all know the difficulty in making up for lost time. Our summer school program this year will include additional opportunities for those struggling students. We will continue to target interventions and supports over the next 24 months so that our students can graduate on time prepared for their next step in life.

It has become increasingly clear to me that to reach our goal of preparing all students for college, career, and citizenship, we need to listen to one another and hold high expectations of the work we do together. I hope to talk with many more of you over the next few months as I join you for lunch.

Hearing from students

As part of my effort to broaden my perspective and to listen to others, I have formed a student advisory council. Eight high school students and I meet quarterly to discuss issues facing our district. These articulate youth represent varied ethnicities, backgrounds, and interests. All, however, want to have great high schools for all students. Our second meeting will be in June and I will share more then.

Bond passage keeps the momentum going

I want to thank all of you who played a role in the successful passage of our bond. I believe the community has told us that they place a priority on student learning and high-quality learning environments. I am confident if we continue to operate in a fiscally responsible manner, hold ourselves accountable, and keep student achievement front and center, we will see continued support.

Finally, as we inch closer to spring break, may you each find some time to relax, reflect, and spend some time with family and friends. Life is short - enjoy yourself along the way.