

HIGHLINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

March 27, 2007

Memorandum

TO: All Employees
FROM: John P. Welch

John's Journal

Reflections from the Superintendent

I am so happy to be able to celebrate with you the passage of our levy on March 13! This is the first time since 1994 that we have passed a levy on the first try. I feel like we have entered a new era for Highline Public Schools in terms of community support.

I know many of you spent hours volunteering for the levy campaign; thank you for putting in the extra time on top of the work you already do for our students. I am also grateful for the role you played in getting levy information to our families in the course of your regular work. As school and district staff members, you are the most trusted source of information about our schools and our best ambassadors to the community. Thank you for the important part you play in building relationships for the sake of our students.

My vision for our schools is that every student graduates prepared for college, career, and citizenship. You have probably heard me talk about creating a college-going culture in our schools. I would like to share with you what "college culture" means to me.

In the past, the goal of public schools has been to get students to graduation. We are operating in a new paradigm today. Graduation can no longer be our end game. We know that in order to make it in the careers of today and tomorrow, all students will need further learning beyond high school. It is our job to give students the skills they will need to succeed in the next phase of their learning. That might be a four-year university, community college, vocational/technical training, an apprenticeship, or another type of educational experience. When I talk about college, I am talking about any and all of those post-high school options. The point is that a diploma, though it might have been enough for us and our parents, is not going to be enough for our children to earn a family-wage income.

So what does a college-going culture look like?

It may seem early to talk about college to elementary students, but in a college-going system the seed is planted early. Conversations about college open students' eyes to a possibility they may not have thought about, especially if no one in the family has gone to college. In a college-going culture, elementary schools hold college nights to introduce parents to financial planning for

college. Teachers expect every child to master grade-level expectations for reading, writing, math, and science.

In middle school, teachers and mentors help students set college as an educational goal, and help them see how passing the WASL and doing well in their classes will help them reach that goal. Field trips to college campuses help students envision themselves there. Parents are introduced to the financial aid system and engaged in discussions about ways to pay for college. Students begin to see how course sequences such as math and science build on one another. Teachers have high expectations for all students.

High school is all about college prep. Ninth graders begin by making a four-year academic plan aligned with college entrance requirements. Students are encouraged to challenge themselves with rigorous coursework. Four years of math are strongly encouraged. All students take the SAT. Students are involved in extracurricular activities that make them attractive to colleges. Students and parents are educated about financial aid and the college application process. Students visit college campuses and are advised or required to apply to college.

We are doing some of this work already, but not all of it. This is a new set of expectations for public schools, and we will have to do some things differently if we are to create this college culture. However, I know you are committed to preparing our students for successful, productive lives, and I believe that together, we can build a system that meets the demands our children face.

I recognize that some may feel this college culture puts too much pressure on kids who struggle academically or sets some kids up for failure. But I believe that we set students up for failure when we hand them a diploma that doesn't prepare them for the additional education they'll need to meet the demands of today's jobs. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is not much difference between the skills and knowledge students need for university and those they need for an apprenticeship or vocational training. In our technology-driven world, construction workers need to know trigonometry and auto mechanics need computer skills. Without higher level academics, we are sending our students into the world of work without adequate tools.

It is good to remind ourselves that "commencement" means beginning. With a college culture, we will truly prepare our students to begin their adult lives with the skills and knowledge that will lead to success and financial stability.