Making Advanced Courses Equitable and Effective: Aligning Approaches, Philosophies, and Decision-Making Structures in Bellingham Public Schools

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Aligning Approaches, Philosophies, and Decision-Making Structures in
Bellingham Public Schools

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.) Capstone

Submitted by

Shashwata Prateek Dutta

To the Harvard Graduate School of Education in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education Leadership.

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To baba and ma, who sacrificed so much.

This document would not be possible without the incredible support I received from so many people across the Bellingham School District. I specifically want to acknowledge Dr. Baker for both his mentorship and friendship. Thank you for welcoming me into your school district, allowing me to be a part of your executive team, and granting me unmitigated access to your day-to-day schedule.

I also want to acknowledge the members of room 214 for exemplifying how to incorporate joy and laughter while working tirelessly on behalf of marginalized populations. Keith Schacht, thank you for allowing me to consistently pester you with questions and for spreading your "unique" sense of humor. Becoming friends with you has been one of the highlights of my residency. You will be missed. Kristi Dominguez, your dedication to our earliest learners is contagious. I admire your bravery and passion. In a cloudy place, you are a constant ray of sunshine.

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Kathleen, you have been by my side from the very first page of this document. Thank you for being an incredible thought partner from beginning to end. Now that this capstone is finished, I look forward to doing more entertaining things with you…such as watching the Celtics in the playoffs!

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And finally, to ma and baba. Thank you for your unyielding support. I hope this project makes you proud.

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Abstract

This capstone outlines my strategic project on creating a coherent system for advanced course taking across Bellingham high schools. The Bellingham School District offers three dual-enrollment and dual-credit options for high school students: *Advanced Placement*, *College in the High School*, and *Running Start*. Each high school has their own structure, vision, and philosophy on how students enroll in those advanced classes. However, school board members, district officials, and high school principals realized this model was ineffective and sought a more coherent system. In order to create coherence and alignment for advanced course enrollment across different high schools, I first attempted to understand why each high school created their own system to begin with. From this research, three broad themes emerged: 1) not all stakeholders believed all students can learn at high levels; 2) disaggregated data of students accessing advanced classes were difficult to obtain; and 3) different leaders in high schools had different philosophies on how high school students succeed. These themes not only uncovered incoherence, but revealed mindsets and structures that hampered equitable access to advanced course enrollment. Therefore, the outcome of this project not only brings coherence to advanced classes, but also makes them more equitable and accessible for traditionally disadvantaged populations. This capstone describes the strategies and tactics as well as my successes and failures creating a coherent, equitable, and accessible system for advanced classes across Bellingham high schools. From this work, *Advanced Placement* test fees were fully subsidized for students receiving free and reduced priced lunch, *College in the High School* is in the process of being reformed with fewer partners, students who need extra support in *Running Start* will begin to receive it, and a wide-ranging conversation around the role of quantitative data has begun.

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<h1 style="text-align:center">Chapter One: Introduction</h1>

The Bellingham Promise

   Each day, more than 1,000 employees working across 22 Bellingham public schools are guided by a strategic plan known colloquially as "The Promise." Officially called *The Bellingham Promise,* the document was created after Dr. Greg Baker was named superintendent of Bellingham Public Schools in the summer of 2010. As a part of his entry plan, Dr. Baker listened to a wide variety of important stakeholders, including leaders from all 22 schools, multiple community groups, non-profit organizations, businesses, higher education institutions, as well as district employees, parents, and students. What Dr. Baker heard was clear: The community wanted a more holistic approach to education and better, more robust indicators of student success than just standardized test scores. These ideas became central to *The Bellingham Promise*. The comprehensive strategic plan, now displayed prominently within every Bellingham school building, focuses on 16 outcomes that every student should achieve with a Bellingham education.

<div style="text-align:center">Exhibit 1. The Bellingham Promise Outcomes</div>

Knowledge	Character	Action
• Artists, Performers and Trades People • Historians and Global Thinkers • Multilingual Readers and Speakers • Readers and Writers • Scientists and Mathematicians • Skilled Users of Technology and Information	• Confident Individuals who Challenge Themselves • Dependable and Responsible Workers • Honest and Ethical Citizens • Leaders, Collaborators and Team Players • Respectful and Compassionate Humans	• Critical Thinkers and Problem Solvers • Effective Communicators • Healthy, Active Individuals • Innovators and Creators • Well-rounded Community Members

To achieve these 16 outcomes, the district focuses on five key strategies: *Early Childhood Education* provides support to families with children ranging from pre-natal to third grade; *Student and Family Engagement* aims to build stronger partnerships with parents and community members; *Innovation and Flexibility* focuses on how the needs of all students can be

Exhibit 2: Five Key Strategies of The Bellingham Promise

We will accomplish this through:

Innovation and Flexibility

At all levels, but with particular attention to our middle and high schools, we promote innovation and flexibility to ensure we are meeting the needs of all students.

Early Childhood Education

We invest in a strong early childhood (prenatal to third grade) program because of its powerful long-term return for our students and community.

Great Teaching with Strong Support

High quality instruction occurs in every classroom, every day, resulting in high levels of learning. This is supported by purposeful and ongoing professional development of all staff and effective leadership throughout the organization.

A One Schoolhouse Approach

We provide an equitable distribution of resources and services to ensure excellence for all.

Student, Family, and Community Engagement

Authentic partnerships are essential in order to deliver upon our promise. We actively seek input from and work together with all stakeholders to cultivate both existing and new partnerships.

met, particularly in middle and high schools; *A One Schoolhouse Approach* attempts to distribute resources based on student need to ensure excellence for all students. These four strategies are oriented toward the overall goal of *Great Teaching with Strong Support,* which focuses on differentiated professional development for every teacher and strong instruction in every classroom ("The Bellingham Promise," 2010).

To maintain political capital and support among all demographic and interest groups, *The Bellingham Promise* purposefully does not give the perception that any one group will bear the cost in order to benefit another group. For example, unlike surrounding districts, the term "equity" is not prominently featured in Bellingham's strategic plan. The belief that *all* groups will benefit – not just the most marginalized -

allowed Dr. Baker to create more equitable structures across the school district while maintaining broad support.

Equity by another name

During his tenure as superintendent, Dr. Baker accomplished many concrete and measurable improvements to make Bellingham schools more equitable. Under his leadership, the district added full-day kindergarten in every elementary school, eliminated fees for school supplies and after-school activities, expanded community relations staff to better serve all families, built a brand new high school for students requiring intensive support, made the fundraising activities of school based parent organizations transparent, reorganized the department of teaching and learning to increase collaboration and support for teachers, and initiated a process of changing enrollment boundaries to increase socioeconomic diversity within schools. Additionally, the community overwhelmingly approved multiple school levies and bonds that added hundreds of millions of dollars to provide extra support for students. Through all of these initiatives, Dr. Baker maintained six years of strong support from teachers, parents, and the school board, which enabled a smooth start to his seventh year as superintendent when I joined the organization in the summer of 2016.

Despite these equity-driven initiatives, however, achievement gaps still exist between traditionally disadvantaged students and their more privileged peers. Specifically, the gap in graduation rates persists between low-income students, Hispanic students, and students who are enrolled in Special Education as compared to their peers who are not identified in these categories.[1] Additionally, students who are

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[1] Low-income students are defined as students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch.

[2] Although gaps in graduation rates are found amongst students who identify as African American and Native

identified as low-income, Special Education, or Hispanic in Bellingham Public Schools

perform no better than their counterparts across the state of Washington in academic

achievement when using the metric of high school graduation rates (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit. 3 Four Year Graduation Rates: Traditionally Disadvantaged Students [2]
Source: OSPI Report Card, February 2016

Low Income & Non Low-Income				
Year	Bellingham Low-Income Graduation Rate	Bellingham Non Low-Income Graduation Rate	Washington Low- Income Graduation Rate	Washington Non Low-Income Graduation Rate
2011-2012	62.0%	83.0%	66.2%	86.9%
2012-2013	62.0%	89.2%	64.6%	86.9%
2013-2014	63.9%	90.1%	66.4%	88.3%
2014-2015	66.6%	93.0%	68.0%	88.7%

Special Education & General Education				
Year	Bellingham Special Education Graduation Rate	Bellingham General Education Graduation Rate	Washington Special Education Graduation Rate	Washington General Education Graduation Rate
2011-2012	38.5%	79.5%	57.6%	79.6%
2012-2013	45.6%	83.3%	54.4%	78.7%
2013-2014	44.8%	83.0%	55.7%	80.1%
2014-2015	50.5%	86.8%	57.9%	80.8%

Hispanic & White				
Year	Bellingham Hispanic Graduation Rate	Bellingham White Graduation Rate	Washington Hispanic Graduation Rate	Washington White Graduation Rate
2011-2012	55.3%	78.3%	66.7%	80.4%
2012-2013	60.8%	79.9%	65.6%	79.4%
2013-2014	64.3%	81.0%	67.3%	80.5%
2014-2015	67.8%	85.6%	69.6%	80.9%

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[2] Although gaps in graduation rates are found amongst students who identify as African American and Native American, I do not include data for these groups due to small n-sizes and privacy concerns.

As seen in Exhibit 3, historically underserved students in Bellingham are graduating below the state average (OSPI Report Card, 2016).[3] In contrast, Bellingham students overall are graduating above the state average. For the 2014-2015 school year, Bellingham had a graduation rate of 82.1% compared to a 78.1% graduation rate for the state. Moreover, students in Bellingham who identify as White graduate at a higher rate than their counterparts across the state of Washington for each of the last four years (see Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4. Four-Year Graduation Rates: Overall and White
Source: OSPI Report Card, February 2016

Year	All Students		White	
	Bellingham	Washington	Bellingham	Washington
2011-2012	75.0%	77.2%	78.3%	80.4%
2012-2013	78.3%	76.0%	79.9%	79.4%
2013-2014	78.6%	77.2%	81.0%	80.5%
2014-2015	82.2%	78.1%	85.6%	80.9%

Our 94

On my first day with the district, Dr. Baker brought principals, assistant principals, administrators, and leaders from the central office together and projected a picture of every student who dropped out of high school during the 2014-2015 school year. He called these students "Our 94," named for the number of students who did not graduate within four years. Dr. Baker asked each of us to "own" at least one of these students and find out his or her story. Why did the student drop out? What interventions

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[3] Recent graduation data for 2016 showed Hispanic and low-income students slightly increasing graduation rates, while Special Education students slightly decreasing. This data can be found in greater detail on the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction website (OSPI).

were attempted? What is the student doing now? This project and the stories it uncovered piqued my interest for three reasons.

First, I observed a remarkably high percentage of students who sought alternative routes to obtain college credits prior to dropping out. Many districts have dual-enrollment or dual-credit classes where high school students enroll in credit-bearing college courses. I realized that dual-enrollment and dual credit programs in Bellingham such as *Running Start* (explained in the next chapter) were successful for some students but pathways to dropping out of high school for others. As I interviewed principals, teachers, district staff, and parents from different high schools about college-level classes, I noticed significant variability in how students accessed college-prep classes across different high schools. Some I interviewed were frustrated by the lack of information Bellingham Public Schools gave parents and students about college-level classes. All were frustrated by the lack of coherence and vision the district provided on advanced classes in high school.

Second, I realized the lack of coherence reflected long-established philosophical differences among different district leaders. The depth of passion varied strikingly among stakeholders for different advanced classes. For example, one Bellingham high school offered *Advanced Placement* (AP) classes to all students and mandated that all students who enrolled in AP classes take the corresponding AP test. The school spent tens of thousands of dollars out of its building budget to subsidize students who could not pay for testing. The principal who initiated these changes believed pushing all students to take rigorous courses while providing differentiated support was the best way

to stop the perpetuation of societal inequities. This principal, who carried a reputation for being independent, executed his plans without asking permission from the district.

Just a few minutes away, another high school took a very different approach to advanced coursework. This school believed in a more "whole-child" approach for students and did not push any students into advanced classes or subsidize AP test fees. Teachers here questioned the "AP for all" mentality and believed they were fortunate to work at a school that allowed students to make their own decisions. This particular school offered multiple avenues for high school students to obtain high school and college credit.

This distinction between the two high schools might seem inconsequential, but having inconsistency in systems and structures across different Bellingham schools is an anomaly. Emphasizing similar systems and structures across the school district is paramount as Bellingham students are bound to their neighborhood school. Parents are dissuaded from transferring their child to any school outside of their neighborhood, which is allowed only under special circumstances. Therefore, the Bellingham School District emphasizes a philosophy that centers on equal access to good teaching and learning for all students regardless of the school they attend. As a result, schools eschew competition and it is not uncommon to see schools share resources to overcome comparable challenges. Consequently, confusion arose among many parents when their children enrolled in high school and those beliefs seemed to be abandoned, especially when it came to advanced classes.

Third, and perhaps most surprisingly, I noticed that certain school and district employees did not believe all students were capable of graduating high school. Their

views stemmed largely from two factors: the pernicious effects of poverty and/or the perceived lack of value certain cultures placed on academic achievement. For example, multiple high school administrators expressed to me in interviews that not all students "had the ability to graduate (from high school) because of their home situation." When I asked one principal why so many Hispanic students dropped out or did not access higher-level classes, I was told "those students like doing things with their hands," and "their parents probably don't want them to graduate." Another administrator said, "I am not worried about all students graduating, I am more worried if all students are cared for and loved, especially if they grow up in less-than-ideal living situations."

After receiving many questions from perplexed family members and concerned school board members about the different philosophies for different high schools on advanced classes, Superintendent Baker and I agreed that this topic would be the focus of my strategic project. Initially, I wanted to conduct a broader investigation into why multiple initiatives aimed toward equity have not increased graduation rates and test scores as fast as district leaders wanted among traditionally disadvantaged students. Additionally, I wanted to work on a project that would challenge the idea that poverty or culture pre-determined student achievement. However, I concluded that a narrower project, if structured correctly, would reveal some of the underlying structures and mindsets that have led to large and persistent achievement gaps across the Bellingham School District.

Thus, the strategic project described in this document examines how to limit variability in approaches, philosophies, and decision-making structures for accessing advanced courses across the three different comprehensive high schools in

Bellingham. The following pages will describe the strategies I implemented to bring different stakeholders together in an attempt to create a shared vision for college-prep classes in Bellingham Public Schools.

Chapter Two: Review of Knowledge for Action

To execute this strategic project, I explore the current research on the effectiveness of completing advanced courses in high school and uncover which Bellingham students are enrolling in advanced courses. Therefore, in this Review of Knowledge for Action (RKA), I first examine the research on the effectiveness of advanced classes as measured by high school and college graduation rates across the country. I then analyze the research on advanced classes specific to Washington state and the Bellingham School District. From there, I analyze student enrollment data for advanced courses, disaggregating by ethnic/racial and socioeconomic status to determine whether advanced classes are being accessed equitably by all students.

Definition of "Advanced" and the Bellingham Context

To narrow the scope of my work, I define "advanced" and "college-prep" as any course that is characterized as dual-enrollment or dual-credit. While often used interchangeably, these two terms have different meanings (see Exhibit 5). Kim, Barnett, and Bragg (2003) define dual-enrollment as students who are concurrently enrolled in high school and college while a dual-credit class is a high school class that can potentially receive both high school and college credit (Kim, Barnett & Bragg, 2003). Dual-enrollment classes usually do not have an external exam in order for students to receive college credit, while dual-credit classes such as AP or *International Baccalaureate* (IB) require passing a standardized test.

Exhibit 5. Dual Enrollment vs. Dual Credit

Dual Enrollment	Dual Credit
Provide high school students the opportunity to take college level classes (e.g., *Running Start*). Enrolled simultaneously in high school and a college course. Usually no externally validated test. College credit is attained by successfully passing class.	Enrolled only in high school classes, but have the potential to attain college credit. AP and IB programs require passing an externally validated test to earn college credit. Potentially receive both high school and college credit.

While neither dual-enrollment nor dual-credit classes are conceptually new, they have rapidly increased over the past three decades and are now ubiquitous across high schools across the United States. Nearly all high schools offer dual-credit classes such as AP and 72 percent of high schools report allowing dual enrollment. In the 2010-2011 school year, more than 1.4 million high school students took college credit classes in high school (Department of Education, 2016).

Multiple factors appear to have contributed to the significant growth of high school students taking college credit classes. Some propose families are trying to cut rapidly increasing college costs. Others argue that state legislators are trying to innovate out of arcane laws regarding mandatory seat-time and attendance requirements. Still, others believe that high school curricula are increasingly irrelevant for many upperclassmen, so allowing those students access to college courses will increase motivation and make high school more meaningful (Kronholz, 2011). Additionally, researchers believe advanced courses might help students transition seamlessly from

high school to college as well as nudge students toward college who are unsure of attending (Fincher-Ford, 1997; Clark, 2001; Bailey, Hughes, & Karp, 2002; Bailey & Karp, 2003; Kim & Bragg, 2008; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009; Allen, D., & Dadgar, M., 2012; An, 2013).

The state of Washington has multiple options for students who want to pursue advanced coursework in high school, including programs like *Cambridge, International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and Running Start*. The Bellingham School District has limited the options for advanced coursework to three course categories: *Advanced Placement, College in the High School,* and *Running Start*.

Before I explored the root causes of misalignment of advanced classes in Bellingham, I sought to answer two questions regarding advanced classes to build a stronger research base:

1. How effective are dual-enrollment and dual-credit classes (advanced classes) at moving students to graduate from high school and succeed in post-secondary education?
2. What are the different advanced classes offered in Washington and Bellingham high schools, and who enrolls in those classes?

I hoped that answering these questions would allow me to create a strong foundation of knowledge, propelling me towards the creation of a new vision for advanced course work in Bellingham Public Schools.

Effectiveness of dual-enrollment and dual-credit classes

Question 1: How effective are dual-enrollment and dual-credit classes (advanced classes) at moving students to graduate from high school and succeed in post-secondary education?

Overall, researchers agree that students who enroll in dual-enrollment and dual-credit classes are more likely to graduate high school and finish college. However, it is unclear whether the higher graduation rates are caused by advanced course participation or whether these students would have graduated at higher rates irrespective of advanced course participation. In this section, I examine the current research on the effectiveness of dual-enrollment programs.

Dual-Enrollment

Even a cursory glance at education news highlights the demand for advanced classes. *Education Week* states that the belief in the benefits of dual enrollment is nearly "unanimous" (Education Week, 2016). Legislators and parents are demanding more and more college-credit classes in high schools (Maitre, 2014; Spry, 2016). Former President Obama urged schools to expand dual-enrollment opportunities in order to lower college costs, and the U.S. Department of Education will start allowing certain high school students to receive Pell Grants in order to take college classes (Department of Education, 2014). Unlike other policy proposals in PK-12 public education, crafting different ways for students to gain college credit in high school has broad support across the political spectrum (Florida Department of Education, 2006; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2015). But have dual-enrollment classes been effective in increasing high school and college graduation rates?

Despite the popularity of advanced classes in high school, rigorous studies examining the efficacy of these classes in increasing post-secondary success remain inconclusive. Additionally, analyzing the value of dual-enrollment classes has proven to be difficult since statewide databases have only recently linked high school coursework to post-secondary education.

Many researchers have attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of dual-enrollment classes. Dr. Joni Swanson of the University of Iowa is cautiously optimistic regarding the advantages of dual-enrollment classes. According to Swanson (2010), dual-enrolled students nationally were 12 percent more likely to attend college within a year of graduating high school and 11 percent more likely to persist through a second year of college. Students who enter college with at least 20 credits have much better rates of college persistence and are 28 percent more likely to persist through their second year of college, arguably because of a "nest-egg" of credits that propel them into a second year of college. However, Swanson's (2010) study shows no positive relationship between taking dual-enrollment courses and earning a bachelor's degree within a six-year period when controlling for other factors such as student grades and class rank.

Other studies illustrate the same cautious optimism from the impact of dual-enrollment classes (Speroni, 2011). Low-income students modestly increase their chance of degree attainment if they participate in dual-enrolled classes, while more affluent peers attain less of a boost (An, 2013). Additionally, if a student receives six college credits or more while in high school, his or her likelihood of receiving a bachelor's

degree increases. However, if a student only receives three credits or fewer, there is no statistical difference in attaining a college degree (2013).

A recent report from The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center further exhibits researchers' mild support for dual-enrollment classes. The study examines the success rates between students who completed college-level courses in high school compared to students who did not complete college-level courses in high school. First-time degree-seeking students who completed dual-enrolled classes in high school had a 66 percent college graduation rate while students who did not complete a dual-enrolled class had a 54 percent graduation rate (Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Yuan, & Harrell, 2013). While impressive at first glance, the study did not control for students' academic background, thus creating difficulty in discerning the true impact of dual enrollment classes.

Additionally, a study commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on the effectiveness of the Early College in High School Initiative (ECHSI) showed promising results but was far from conclusive. The initiative's objective was for low-income students to earn both high school and college credit by the time they graduated high school. While many underserved students graduated high school with significant college credits and had higher attendance rates and fewer suspensions, it was unclear if students most at risk of not attending college were actually being reached in this model. The students who earned significant college credit had a higher proportion of college-educated parents than low-income students overall. Moreover, many participating high schools in this study realized that college classes were inaccessible for certain students because of high failure rates, and thus began to screen for students with prior behavioral

problems (AIR/SRI, 2009; Berger, et al, 2013; Edmund, Willse, Arshavsky & Dallas, 2013).

Regional studies have been more promising on the impact of dual-enrollment classes on post-secondary success. In New York City, researchers found that students who enrolled in technical dual-enrollment classes in high school were more likely to enroll in college compared to those who did not. Comparable results were found in Florida, but differed in California (Bailey and Karp, 2003; Florida Department of Education, 2004; Karp, 2007;). Hughes, Rodriguez, Edwards & Belfield (2012) found students in California who enrolled in dual-enrollment classes were *not* more likely to attend a four-year college, but were more likely to persist once they got there. Furthermore, a study of 304 students in Kansas showed a positive association between registering for dual-enrollment classes and attending post-secondary education when controlling for other variables, such as parent education and student factors such as motivation and GPA (Smith, 2007). Researchers cautioned, however, not to extrapolate these conclusions to the rest of the nation since the factors in California, Florida, New York City, and Kansas might not be representative he entire country (Allen, 2010).

Dual-Credit

Dual-credit classes are taken in high school and students potentially receive college credit even though they do not physically enroll on a college campus. This is different from dual-enrollment classes where a student is enrolled at a high school and a college at the same time. Dual-credit can take many forms, such as IB or technical programs where earned credit transfers to a local college or university. Since multiple variations of dual-credit classes exist across the country, examining the research to

determine the effectiveness of dual-credit programs is essentially meaningless. In Bellingham, the only dual-credit option is AP and therefore, will be the focus for this section.

Nationwide, the number of students who take AP courses in high school has increased exponentially. What was once a program confined to a small group of high-performing students has now become widely accessible. One out of every three high school students takes at least one AP exam in high school before they graduate, up from 18 percent more than a decade ago (College Board, 2014). For low-income students, the growth has been even faster. Nearly three in ten students who are eligible to receive free or reduced-priced school lunch have taken an AP exam in 2014, compared to 12 percent of students in 2003 (2014). But how has that impacted post-secondary persistence and success?

Similar difficulties exist when quantifying the effectiveness of dual-enrollment and dual-credit classes, like AP. But much like dual-enrollment classes, expanding AP to more schools and more students has broad support across the political spectrum.

Researchers generally agree that students who enroll in AP classes matriculate to college and graduate at a higher rate than non-AP students. But the actual impact of AP classes on college graduation has remained unclear for multiple reasons. First, students who take AP are more likely to attend college irrespective of the impact of AP classes, as students who take AP courses are possibly more motivated and probably more prepared than the average student. Personal characteristics, rather than the AP course, might be the reason for post-secondary success. Second, AP students are likely to be enrolled in schools with more advantaged and academically focused students.

Differentiating between the positive impact of attending school with more advantaged and academically focused students and the AP course has proven challenging (Dougherty, Mellor, Jian, 2006). Lastly, schools with AP classes might be better organized for academic achievement in other ways, such as better trained teachers or having more professional development for staff, thus making it difficult to delineate the impact of AP classes as opposed to the impact of attending a well-organized school.

Despite the difficulty in measuring the success of AP courses on post-secondary enrollment and graduation, much has been written on the subject. As the number of students taking AP classes has increased, so has the criticism. Stanford researchers show students who take AP courses receive high grades in college, but found no positive impact when controlling for other characteristics such as socioeconomic status and parental education (Challenge Success, 2013). Furthermore, others point to research showing students who earn less than three on the AP test – the score that most colleges require as the minimum to achieve college credit – receive no apparent benefit (Simon, 2013). Research from Harvard Kennedy School and College Board indicate students who receive AP credit graduate college at higher rates compared to students who do not receive credit, but only at universities that accept AP credit (Avery, Smith, & Horowitz, 2015). However, one out of every five students who take AP exams receive the lowest possible score of one, and nearly 50 percent of students earn less than a three (College Board, 2014). Due to the concurrent increase in students taking and failing AP exams, many are wondering if taking AP classes is worth the investment.

Other studies, however, point to a different conclusion. Jackson evaluates a program in Texas that incentivizes students to pass an AP test by giving them money

(Jackson, 2010). He found a slight increase in college enrollment even when controlling for multiple student and school characteristics, including race and socioeconomic status. Jackson (2014), in a follow-up study, makes the college enrollment finding less compelling. However, the study shows a clear positive effect on earnings (despite little gain on college completion). Comparably, Chajewski, Mattern and Shaw (2011) argue that even when controlling for demographic and student academic history, taking just one AP class significantly increases the chance for a student attending a four-year university. Others found that just attempting to take an AP class but not passing the test still increased the 5-year graduation percentage of students, even when controlling for factors such as academic ability and socioeconomic status. (Mattern, Shaw, Xiong, 2009).

As seen by the variations in research, an answer to the efficacy of dual-enrollment and dual-credit classes remains unclear. Certain studies illustrate an optimistic relationship between taking rigorous courses such as AP and higher college attendance and graduation, while others are more cautious about drawing causal relationships. Nonetheless, attaining college credit while enrolled in high school is popular, with wide-spread support from both parents and policy-makers.

Effectiveness of dual-credit and dual enrollment classes in Bellingham

Question 2: How effective are the different advanced classes offered in Bellingham Public Schools, and who enrolls in those courses?

The first question of my RKA broadly examined the research on the effectiveness of advanced courses in relation to high school and college graduation. The second question examines the effectiveness of advanced courses specifically in

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Washington and across Bellingham high schools. The Bellingham School District has two dual-enrollment options for high school students: *Running Start* and *College in the High School* as well as two dual-credit options: *AP* and *Tech Prep*. I do not focus on *Tech Prep* in my project because only certain *Tech Prep* classes are eligible for four-year college credit. Additionally, *Tech Prep* classes are well received across the Bellingham School District and the different Bellingham high schools are in alignment with this program.

In this section, I examine the three advanced programs that are each being implemented differently across Bellingham high schools, explain how they began, and evaluate their effectiveness. Moreover, I analyze student enrollment data for advanced courses by disaggregating race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status to examine whether all programs are being accessed equitably for all students.

Running Start

Running Start was created in Washington as a pilot program within the larger "Learning by Choice" law that was passed and signed in 1990 and expanded statewide in 1992. This program allows 11th and 12th graders to enroll in community colleges and three universities tuition-free. While *Running Start* students have the option of attending college part-time or full-time, they still need to meet statewide high school graduation requirements. Consequently, 14 percent of all *Running Start* students receive both an associate's degree and a high school diploma upon leaving high school.

While *Running Start* is similar to many dual-enrollment programs across the country, three aspects distinguish the program. First, students who decide to enroll in *Running Start* must leave their high school and travel to the college they decide to

attend. Second, the state per-pupil funding follows the *Running Start* student to the college, which subtracts funds from the school district. This allows the student to earn college credit without paying tuition. Lastly, Washington law specifies that high schools cannot put restrictions on whether a student can attend community college based on prior academic records. As long as the college accepts the student, the high school cannot impose any additional requirements. These qualities supply students in Washington a level of independence that is rare when compared to students in other states (Thomas, 2013). However, rigorous evaluations on the effectiveness of *Running Start* have been scarce (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2013).

The most comprehensive study evaluating the success of *Running Start* was conducted by Cowan and Goldhaber, who reported mixed results (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2014). Despite *Running Start* being accessible to all students, those who participate are mostly White and high achieving, while students identified as Special Education or eligible to receive free or reduced-priced school lunch are underrepresented. Therefore, *Running Start* students attend college at a higher rate than non-*Running Start* students. However, when controlling for student characteristics, such as GPA, poverty, race, and Special Education status, Cowan and Goldhaber find students enrolled in *Running Start* are not more likely to graduate high school and *less likely* to enroll in a 4-year college. Additionally, students who are not as academically prepared are more likely to drop out of high school and more likely to earn a GED than students who are more academically prepared (2014).

Reinforcing this finding, a Clark College survey shows that *Running Start* students usually want to attend a four-year university (Survey of High School Seniors, 2006). To date, Clark College is the only higher education institution in Washington that has published a study of how *Running Start* students fare in their particular institution. The vast majority of students who attended Clark College felt *Running Start* was a positive experience and nearly 75 percent planned on immediately attending a 4-year college after graduating (2006). Unfortunately, the survey did not make it possible to compare the college aspirations of *Running Start* participants to other students, nor does it follow up to observe whether participants followed through on their plans to enroll in a 4-year college. Nonetheless, the number of *Running Start* students who want to attend a 4-year college from Clark College is similar to *Running Start* students across Washington, according to Cowan and Goldhaber. However, despite their intent, *Running Start* students are not enrolling at 4-year colleges at the same rate as students not participating in the *Running Start* program (2014).

Cowan and Goldhaber admit their results might be selling *Running Start* short, since some *Running Start* students might forgo a high school diploma in lieu of an associate degree. A recent law in Washington allows any student who receives an associate degree to be automatically eligible for a Washington state high school diploma, which might increase high school graduation rates for *Running Start* participants. Furthermore, many students who earned a 2-year degree through *Running Start* might be in the process of transferring to a 4-year college after taking some time off, which Cowan and Goldhaber's study cannot fully examine. Nonetheless, their study

raises some questions about the effectiveness of *Running Start*, especially among students who are academically behind.

Curiously, within the Bellingham School District, the demographics for *Running Start* are different from the state of Washington. For example, students who are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch and enroll in Special Education participate in *Running Start* at a higher rate than their peers across the state, while White students enroll at a lower rate. While that might lead some to assert that Bellingham Public Schools are systematically pushing traditionally disadvantaged students to access rigorous college coursework, it is important to remember the students in this demographic are also graduating at a lower percentage in Bellingham than the state, even when accounting for those that might graduate early through *Running Start*.

College in the High School

The second dual-enrollment program studied here is *College in the High School*. This program was expanded in Washington state as another pathway for students to earn college credit (House bill 1808, 2011). Unlike *Running Start*, students do not leave high school to receive post-secondary credit. Based on agreements between school districts and post-secondary institutions, high school faculty members are trained by colleges to teach a course equivalent to a college or university class. Additionally, students pay a fraction of the college tuition cost, ranging from $420 to $700 per year for each course. Student achievement (grades, tests, participation) is evaluated similarly to a college course. Participating higher education institutions provide high school teachers a stipend ranging from a flat fee of $350 per course to $45 for every registered student for the

administrative work required as part of the program (grading papers, attending trainings, etc.).

While studies evaluating the effectiveness of *College in the High School* have not been published, statewide enrollment has increased significantly throughout the past five years (Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction, 2015). Enrollment for *College in the High School* has also increased in the Bellingham School District over the past few years, but only two of the three comprehensive high schools participate in the program. Unlike *Running Start*, participating in the *College in the High School* program is optional for school districts and individual schools.

Salient demographic differences exist in these two dual-enrollment programs in Bellingham. Unlike *Running Start*, *College in the High School* enrolls a significantly smaller percentage of students who identify as Hispanic, Special Education and those who are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch when compared to the state, even when accounting for the demographic differences between Bellingham and the state of Washington (Appendix A). Exhibit 6 summarizes the similarities and differences between *College in the High School* and *Running Start*.

Exhibit 6. Running Start vs. College in the High School

Running Start	College in the High School
Overview: Eligibility: 11th and 12th grade students Instruction: Juniors and seniors leave high school and enroll in college classes from partnering higher education institutions. Students who pass college classes receive college credit. Cost: Students do not pay tuition, but have to attend the class and potentially pay for some class materials (roughly $10 per college credit). Student funding leaves the district and follows students to community college (district only receives seven percent of state per pupil funding).	**Overview:** Eligibility 10th, 11th, and 12th graders Instruction: Students in high school enroll in a class that is designated "college in the high school." High school teacher is trained by partnering higher education institution. Teacher uses curriculum, grading scale, and rigor from partnering institution, but teaches in the high school. Cost: Students pay tuition that is a fraction of the cost of full-time university student, which ranges from $125 to $370 per semester, depending on partnering institution.
Selling Point to families: • Students receive college credit for little to no cost • A way for 11th and 12th graders to experience higher education while still enrolled in high school.	**Selling Point to families**: • Students stay in Bellingham high schools. • Students are taught by high school teachers. • Students obtain college credit for a fraction of the cost of a full-time college student.
Drawbacks: • Once a student attends *Running Start*, school "loses" them. • Very hard to advise students who are full-time *Running Start* students. • Parents and teachers cannot obtain grades and attendance until quarter is finished.	**Drawbacks:** • College credit accessible only for students who can pay, raising questions about equity and fairness. • Teachers make extra money from fees that students pay. • Variability in rigor of classes.

Advanced Placement

In response to the demand for a better-educated workforce during the economic boom after World War Two, higher education institutions helped create curricula for

high schools that were rigorous enough for college credit so advanced students can bypass introductory college courses. The fledgling program was taken over by the non-profit College Board in 1955 and officially named *Advanced Placement*. This program is used as a measure of college readiness across the world and is considered the gold standard in high school education today (Byrd, Ellington, Gross, Jago & Stern, 2007). The AP program currently has nearly 40 course options in secondary schools across the world.

The use of the AP program has changed significantly since its inception. According to Jon Rehm (2014) of Florida International University, three important events led to how AP is currently administered. The first event was the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union and the resulting anxiety over the state of American education, which led to the AP program being legitimized. The second event was the publishing of *A Nation at Risk,* which outlined in alarming language the shortcomings of the American education system. This event changed the AP program from a series of end-of-year tests to an emphasis on yearlong rigorous curriculum. The third event was the passing of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2001. This event transformed the AP program as an important tool to reduce the achievement gap and expand access to rigorous instruction for all students (2014). Today, many prominent news organizations rank the quality of high schools in part by the number of AP classes that are offered and the participation rate of students in AP classes (Appendix B).

AP classes are the third option for students enrolling in advanced classes across Bellingham high schools. While the demographics for students taking AP in Bellingham are similar when compared to the state, there is considerable variability depending on

which Bellingham high school a student attends (Appendix C). One high school has more students taking AP classes and exams than the other two high schools combined. Moreover, students taking AP have the option of taking *Running Start* or *College in the High School* classes, though only a few students choose to do so.

RKA Conclusion and Theory of Action:

The general public is more confident in the promise of advanced high school classes than researchers. While studies reveal consistent benefits of taking advanced classes in high school for graduation and post-secondary enrollment, these effects appear to be relatively small. Potential benefits with respect to other outcomes, such as non-cognitive skills (study habits, self-esteem, grit are all reasons that have been given to take rigorous courses) were not evaluated in this RKA, as there is little research to the extent on which advanced classes enhance those outcomes.

The advanced classes Bellingham School District provides high school students need to be examined further. As aforementioned, *Running Start* might be doing more harm than good when it comes to high school and college completion and *College in the High School* has yet to be formally evaluated. However, this has not prevented school districts across the state like Bellingham from adopting both of these programs alongside the longer running *Advanced Placement* classes.

While more research has been done on AP courses and its relationship to college-attendance and graduation, the results show great variability. Some studies indicate just taking one AP course significantly increases attendance at a 4-year institution, while other studies show no correlation. However, unlike *Running Start*, there has not been any published studies that indicate a harmful effect for students taking

AP classes. Criticism of the program centers mostly on the amount of government support it receives for what some believe to be rather small benefits.

The Bellingham School District allowed each of its high schools to create its own approach, philosophy, and decision-making structure on how students enroll in these advanced classes. However, since Bellingham schools do not permit parents to opt into the high school of their choice, it makes little sense for high schools to create their own specific programs. More importantly, high school leaders wanted to align their systems and structures with each other. Therefore, a top priority for the school district was to align these structures to ensure all students receive equal access to high quality education, no matter which high school a student attends.

Based on my RKA and a greater understanding of the Bellingham context, I decided to divide my work in the following two approaches: 1) working one-on-one with district leaders and principals and 2) leading a public taskforce across the Bellingham community. The following theory describes how I planned to lead this work at the outset of the project:

Theory of Action

If I…

Build trust, legitimacy and authentic relationships with multiple stakeholders holding differing opinions on advanced classes in Bellingham;

Offer the most up-to-date information on the demographics of advanced classes in each Bellingham public high school;

Show the variability in approach to advanced classes among high schools;

Convene a diverse and representative task force with the objective of creating more coherence and limiting variability around advanced classes;

Base the work within the *Bellingham Promise* by focusing on creating more equitable outcomes for students*;*

Then…

Every high school in the Bellingham School District will have a similar equitable approach, philosophy and decision-making structure when it comes to advanced-class enrollment.

The next two chapters detail my tests of these assumptions.

Chapter Three: Description of Strategic Project

Project Overview

When I came to Bellingham, Dr. Baker and I agreed not to have a pre-determined project in place. Rather, we thought an important strategic project would organically arise if I immersed myself in the district. The plan was to find a strategic project aligned with my passion and expertise that would help move existing district initiatives forward. That way, I would not be pigeonholed into being a "Harvard Resident" conducting a niche project with little relevance. While I completely agreed to that strategy, it did not proceed exactly as planned.

As mentioned in the introduction, I observed Bellingham students graduating from high school at a similar rate compared to all high school students in Washington. I expected graduation rates to be higher in Bellingham for two reasons: First, the demographics of Bellingham seem favorable to higher graduation rates due to its schools having a larger proportion of higher-income students than the state (OSPI report card, 2015). Furthermore, Bellingham serves a smaller proportion of historically disadvantaged students compared to the state. Second, Dr. Baker has created multiple initiatives to make Bellingham School District more equitable, as described in the introduction.

I assumed these two factors would result in a school district performing well above statewide averages in standard outcome measures such as graduation rates and standardized test scores. Moreover, as I disaggregated the data on graduation rates and test scores, I noticed the achievement gaps between certain ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups were larger in Bellingham than the state of Washington. For

example, Bellingham students who identify as African American, Native American, and Hispanic perform consistently below statewide averages, while students who identify as White and are not low-income perform higher than statewide averages. Similar achievement gaps were found for students enrolled in Special Education. These patterns were found not only in graduation rates, but also in standardized math and English test scores as early as 3rd grade (Appendix D).

I thought I found my strategic project: Why have multiple initiatives geared towards equity not led to quicker improvements for traditionally marginalized students on quantitative metrics such as test scores and graduation rates? This topic would add value to the district and align with my passion of closing opportunity gaps for those who have historically been marginalized.

However, I realized this strategic project did not align comfortably with district culture and established norms. As I solicited feedback for my potential strategic project, I realized the Bellingham School District was skeptical of quantitative metrics and questioned standardized test scores. For example, none of the high school principals I interviewed knew the percentage or demographic breakdown of students who dropped out of their school. When a secretary saw me printing a document with disaggregated graduation rates, she told me she hates how "everything is about race in this country now." District staff boasted about overlooking graduation rates and test scores when making decisions. In various forms, such sentiments as, "If we focus on that number, then we will act in ways that have negative consequences," and "If we do good work based on sound research, the data will eventually follow," were repeated back to me (personal communications). Additionally, the quantitative metrics I shared concerning

opportunity gaps failed to elicit the response I predicted they would. "I think it comes as no surprise that we have achievement gaps," another staff member said dismissively.

I later learned that the weariness of quantitative metrics stemmed from several sources. Many district leaders spent most of their careers in places where relying solely on quantitative metrics resulted in significant unintended consequences. For example, the deputy superintendent of Bellingham Public Schools worked previously as a researcher examining accountability systems in Atlanta Public Schools, where incentives to increase quantitative educational measures engendered widespread cheating and led to the imprisonment of multiple teachers and administrators.

I share this not to commend or criticize my host district, but to illustrate an omission in my entry plan process. If I had a better understanding of both the explicit and implicit norms of the school district, I would not have used quantitative metrics to show large-scale opportunity gaps. Rather, I would have shared my passion about opportunity gaps using the language and the norms of the district. I ultimately proposed a strategic project I believed was most important rather than contributing to the ongoing initiatives put in place by the district.

Realizing I was running out of time to define my strategic project, I met with my superintendent and assistant superintendent at the end of September and devised a narrower and more focused project still concentrated on opportunity gaps. While its scope neglected to reach my original aspirations, I felt this project would uncover some of the reasons for the significant achievement gaps between different student demographics. I stated the question motivating my project as follows:

How can Bellingham create an aligned framework on advanced courses that affords
every student an equitable opportunity to succeed in college-level classes?

I divided my task into two different work streams to better understand a subject in which I lacked expertise. The first stream focused on building trust among different stakeholders and understanding their views on advanced high school courses. The second stream aimed to create a diverse taskforce in the interest of recommending changes to the superintendent by the end of the school year.

First work stream: Understanding the history and building trust

After designing the strategic project, I dedicated one month (September 15 – October 15) to focusing on the first work stream. During this phase, I worked with principals and administrators at Bellingham's three comprehensive high schools. My goal was two-fold: To build trust and learn the history of college-prep classes in Bellingham. I wanted to better understand how the current system of advanced classes was created across Bellingham high schools. Additionally, I needed to understand the belief systems of important stakeholders regarding the different advanced course options and whether they were open to changing their beliefs. To accomplish these two goals, I attended high school leadership meetings, scoured through memos and emails, organized off-the-record meetings with individual administrators, and interviewed high school counselors. I also spoke with district officials who were instrumental in managing the current system of advanced classes. In this first phase of work, three key themes emerged from my observations: 1) Difficulty obtaining correct information; 2) No overarching vision, leading to a lack of coherence; and 3) Two conflicting belief systems. I explain each in greater detail below.

School and district officials lack knowledge on the data and the demographics of students accessing district or school wide college-prep classes. Accessing the data was another obstacle. For example, I wanted the number of Bellingham high school students who enrolled in college-prep classes disaggregated into racial and socioeconomic groups. This meant meeting with the registrar, the *Running Start* coordinator, and the individual with access to free and reduced priced lunch data. Before they could share this data with me, I had to receive clearance from principals at all three high schools. Additionally, much of that data did not match other published reports from the state of Washington. For example, according to district reports, only 5 percent of *Running Start* students receive free and reduced priced lunch compared to 27 percent in state reports (OSPI Report Card, 2015). No one I interviewed at the school or district levels knew why such a large discrepancy existed. This discrepancy in data also happened with *Advanced Placement* and *College in the High School* courses.

The difficulty in acquiring such information was not limited to district employees as parents face similar hindrances. It appears that affluent parents were able to gather information on college-prep classes by conducting research and talking with other parents who were familiar with the system to determine the best class for their child. Conversely, less-affluent parents were left uninformed (personal communication). For example, one of the parents I interviewed was a recent immigrant from Pakistan, and she was not aware that high school students had the option to take classes for college credit.

Since information was nontransparent and hard to obtain, incoherence exists within the district and across schools. For example, in each high school, there is an employee at the counseling office who is considered a *Running Start* "cheerleader" (personal communication). This employee encourages students to enroll in *Running Start* and helps them fill out necessary paperwork. Since students accessing *Running Start* leave high school and attend community college (taking their school's funding with them), it is in the high school's best interest to keep students within their buildings. Therefore, having employees in each high school promoting *Running Start* elicited confusion and frustration from many high school and district officials. When I asked district officials whether there was a state law or state regulation that required such a position, all of them were unclear. My own research did not show any such requirement by the state.

Comparable confusion was also seen for *College in the High School*. In this program, the numerous higher education institutions that partnered with the Bellingham School District have their own sets of deadlines, MOUs, and payment structures. These disparate procedures created a system difficult to navigate by school administrators, teachers, parents, and students.

A former registrar I interviewed explained the day before summer break, she discovered 10 checks on her desk with a note from a teacher stating these checks were for a *College in the High School* class. Since the deadline to pay for a *College in the High School* class already passed, she was unsure of what to do and told me she "placed

the checks on the principal's desk, hoping (the principal) would know what to do with them."

The district also attempted to make AP classes more accessible to students by eliminating many pre-requisites. However, barriers remained for historically low-achieving students attempting to access AP courses. A student I interviewed disclosed that an AP teacher dissuaded her from taking an AP class by stating, "All the students I teach earn a three or higher on the AP test. I don't want you to mess up my record."

Two conflicting belief systems

The discussion surrounding college-prep classes is a proxy for interpersonal and professional conflict centered on how to best enable students to succeed in high school. Based on my findings, Bellingham high schools have two different belief systems on how to prepare high school students. One perspective believes in creating many pathways for student success, and empowering students to choose the best fit. The other perspective believes all students should be expected to take rigorous courses, and this is the only way not to perpetuate inequities mirrored in society. These two perspectives have clashed across Bellingham high schools throughout the past decade, creating the incoherent system seen today. I explain the two perspectives in more detail below.

Multiple Pathways for Success: Over the last decade, Bellingham Public Schools provided students and families the option to enroll into or abstain from college-prep classes, like AP*, College in the High School,* or *Running Start*. Students were encouraged to pursue their passions and all avenues were accepted and celebrated. Due to this attitude, there was minimal attempt to place all students in advanced classes. Moreover, this outlook allowed multiple colleges to partner with Bellingham high

schools and teach *College in the High School* courses. The overall belief was that students would succeed if they were just allowed to do what they wanted to do.

Equity through Standardization: This dominant viewpoint was challenged when a new principal drastically expanded the AP program by providing all students with access to AP classes regardless of academic achievement or grade level. The expansion also required all students who took AP classes to take the test. Additionally, this principal did not allow the *College in the High School* program. He felt the program was inequitable as only those with financial means could take the class for college credit. As a result, AP remained the sole college-prep option at the high school.

Within two years, this particular high school had more students enrolled in AP classes and passing AP exams than the other two comprehensive high schools combined, earning a badge of distinction from *College Board*. Furthermore, the number of low-income and Hispanic students taking AP classes increased by more than 400 percent within three years of this principal's new policies (Report obtained from College Board, 2016).

Despite the positive outcomes, the expansion also exposed its limitations. Students who desired college credit without taking AP classes had few other options. Additionally, all students were expected to take at least one AP class, even if they were not fully prepared to take the class. This principal believed that allowing students choice replicated systemic inequalities. "Those who have been failed by the system are never going to choose the best, most rigorous college-prep classes if they have a choice…and those who take rigorous classes are usually the ones who happen to be wealthy and confident in academic coursework." Therefore, schools need to ensure certain policies

are established that do not implicitly track students (personal communication). This exemplifies the belief of those in the *Equity through standardization* camp.

While it would be grossly unfair and overly simplistic to think that those who believed in equity did not somehow believe in choice, and those that believed in multiple pathways did not somehow believe in equity, it is safe to say those who believed in the "providing choice" model primarily focused on students having as much choice as possible. Equity might be a positive byproduct. Conversely, those who believed in the "equity by standardization" model primarily focused on equal access to rigorous classes for all students. Allowing choice for students was a secondary concern.

These two perspectives came to play a very important role in my project. The principal who firmly believes in "creating equity" and who expanded AP to all students currently works at the district office. His direct supervisor, the assistant superintendent, was the former principal of the high school that was central to developing the "multiple pathways for success" perspective. Although these former principals now work closely in the district office, they vigorously disagreed on how to move forward when they were both principals. The same disagreement continues among new principals, older assistant principals, and veteran teachers. Meetings to enact a uniform system across high schools are consistently postponed (Personal observations).

As my first phase of work concluded, I realized it would be difficult to create a coherent system that all high school principals, administrators, and district officials would agree on. A combination of a lack of readily accessible data, different people working in divergent directions, and interpersonal conflict persisting for nearly a decade made this a dynamic opportunity for my leadership development.

Second work stream: Leading a diverse taskforce

I concluded it was essential to form an official taskforce for the school district so individuals with different perspectives could meaningfully listen to one another. Despite the history of gridlock on this subject, I was confident different members could reach common ground. Additionally, organizing an official task force is the primary mechanism used by the school district to move controversial topics forward. Through official taskforces, decisions on school closures, schedule changes, school levies, and high quality pre-school were debated and implemented. The participants, notes, and recommendations are made public. While a taskforce for the subject of advanced classes was necessary, I worried about the potential pitfalls of creating a taskforce. Harvard professor and seminal leadership expert Ronald Heifitz (2002) states taskforces are often used on controversial topics to separate them from day-to-day work and give the perception that someone is working on the problem.

To mitigate this risk, I attempted to forge as diverse and influential of a taskforce as possible, believing that its recommendations would be harder to ignore if people from different parts of the Bellingham education system were at the table. In addition, I hoped having different stakeholders who were not part of the high school system would yield different perspectives and imbue fresh ideas. This meant that in addition to having high school principals, I invited counselors, administrators, teachers, and central office staff, elementary school principals, a district grant-writer, directors of teaching and learning, and the head of early childhood education.

After much deliberation, I left out two important groups from the taskforce: parents and students. I did this for two reasons. First, after sitting on other taskforces

within the district, I noticed that individual parents and students were many times put in the position of speaking for *all* parents and students. For example, when a taskforce focused on eliminating a particular class could not agree on its importance, members asked a student participating on the taskforce what fellow students thought of the particular class. When the student answered that many students perceived the class as ineffective, the members of the taskforce concluded the class should not be included for the 2017-2018 school year, in part because students did not value the class.

While there is nothing necessarily wrong with incorporating parents and students on taskforces, I was apprehensive about this dynamic because I noticed the parents and students who were involved in these taskforces did not always represent a wide range of Bellingham students or parents. For example, parents who had time to participate in taskforces were usually ones who were economically and socially advantaged. I worried including parents on the taskforce would reinforce ideas of inequity, especially if these parents have traditionally spoken for a group broader than themselves. I also did not incorporate teachers, but this was primarily due to scheduling conflicts rather than any strategic reasoning.

To lead this project successfully, I obviously had to receive parent, student and teacher input, but I decided to do so by arranging four different focus groups with the different high schools. Through these focus groups, I informally met with dozens of students, parents, and teachers in lunchrooms, classrooms, counseling offices and PTSA meetings about their experiences with advanced course work in high school, and consistently shared those findings with the taskforce.

"*I have no dog in the fight. My only objective is to help facilitate a process that leads to our school district having a similar philosophy on advanced courses in high school.*"

This statement is how I started my first meeting with the committee, but in hindsight, I might not have been fully transparent. I knew leading a committee on aligning college-prep courses across different high schools was going to be controversial. The first phase of my work prepared me for that. Explicitly stating that I was not partial to one program over another put many members of my taskforce immediately at ease. But based on my research, I already started to form opinions about what was equitable and what was not.

Having worked in a decentralized education system in New Orleans and seen the opportunities such an approach can provide for marginalized populations, I strongly endorse schools creating different educational programs that tailor to the needs of parents and students. However, since Bellingham students are expected to attend their assigned neighborhood school, it makes little sense to create different programs at different schools, especially since schools themselves were asking for coherence and standardization. Moreover, I believed certain advanced classes were fundamentally inequitable and unfair. For example, I thought the *College in the High School* program, as implemented in Bellingham, was a fundamentally inequitable system designed to allow children from wealthy families who wanted their children to earn easy college credits. If a family paid anywhere from $125 to $375 per semester, their child earned five college credits, presuming they passed (which almost all did). Students unable to pay can still access the class, but they would not earn any college credit. Therefore, I observed students sitting side by side in a *College in the High School* class, learning the

same material, but only the student who could pay obtained college credit. Moreover, higher education institutions paid teachers extra money depending on how many students enrolled in their class, creating an incentive for teachers to register students for *College in the High School* over other programs.[4]

In effect, I saw this as a system benefitting those with privilege. Higher education institutions were making money because high school students were paying tuition, teachers were making extra money by teaching *College in the High School* courses, and wealthy students were earning easy college credit. The system was great for a lot of important stakeholders, just not great for the average student.

Conversely, I agreed with those who decided to make AP accessible for all students and require students who take AP classes to take the AP test. I thought this policy was a proxy for a belief that all students can achieve at high levels. Furthermore, I grew impatient with the argument that AP was not for all students. I observed district policies across the state of Washington in higher-poverty districts like Tacoma, Highline, and Federal Way making AP accessible for all, requiring students to take the AP test, and subsidizing test fees. I thought those districts were an ideal model for Bellingham to follow.

At the first meeting, I told participants our task was to align systems and philosophies for advanced course taking in the district. I did not say, however, our objective was also to align them to benefit all students, especially the most marginalized students in the district. This action was taken partly because Dr. Baker has created a norm of "one schoolhouse" where it is expected that all topics are inherently about all

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[4] University of Washington pays a flat stipend of $350, plus $50 training fee to teachers.

students, not just the most marginalized. Additionally, this was partially done because I did not want to alienate members of the taskforce into thinking this was a committee focused exclusively on equity at the expense of aligning classes. I was confident that data and good facilitation would lead the taskforce to a conclusion that made advanced courses in Bellingham both equitable and cohesive.

The first couple of meetings with the taskforce were dedicated to examining data and primary source documents. I made sure all members of the taskforce had a similar foundation of knowledge on advanced classes. We examined statements from college admissions counselors on their thoughts about different advanced classes, studied graduation rates for different demographics, went to the district website to observe how accessible information about college-prep options were for parents, looked at the reasons why *Running Start*, *College in the High School*, and *Advanced Placement* were created, and examined parts of my RKA to see what the research revealed on the effectiveness of advanced courses.

Moreover, we created shared criteria on the qualities all advanced classes should have. This was done strategically to avoid debating one program over another based on personal preferences. Having criteria by which to evaluate a program or an idea would make the debate and discussion more objective and less personal. The committee came up with the following:

- Equitable access
- Rigor
- Cost-Effectiveness
- College-Perception (i.e., how it might impact admissions decisions)

After creating both a strong foundation of knowledge and shared criteria, our taskforce began to discuss each of the three college-prep programs at the end of the first

semester. The first program we attempted to align across high schools was the AP program. More specifically, the question we focused on was whether the Bellingham School District should encourage all students to take AP classes and subsidize the cost of AP test fees.

Since one high school made AP classes available to all students, helped pay for the AP test, and required all students to take the test, we started by closely examining this school as a local case study. The data indicated that allowing and encouraging all students to access AP classes and requiring students to take the AP test increased the percentage of Hispanic students (the largest minority group in Bellingham) taking AP classes. For example, in 2015 the gap between White and Hispanic students enrolling in AP classes is 11% for the school making AP accessible for all, compared to 37% at another Bellingham high school (see Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7. AP enrollment across Bellingham high schools (2015)

	Schoo#1	School #2	School #3 (AP for All)
Total Hispanic students enrolled	15%	14%	21%
Percentage of Hispanic students taking AP courses	13%	18%	42%
Gap between White and Hispanic students enrolling in AP courses	21%	37%	11%

But was this enough to justify a district-wide approach? Was this enough for the school district to subsidize AP test fees? Almost everyone in the taskforce who looked at this

number was surprised about the large gap between Hispanic and White students taking AP courses at two of the three high schools, and I thought we were making progress towards a common vision.

But eventually the discussion struggled to move forward and the two groups who held different philosophies on student success continued the same argument that splintered the district for years. Those who believed in more student choice thought there were better programs for the district to subsidize, since many students who took the AP test did not earn a high enough score to receive college credit. Those who supported equity by standardization thought there was immense value in just taking an AP class and taking the AP test, regardless of whether or not the student obtained college credit.

We ended the first semester in a stalemate, and we still had *College in the High School* and *Running Start* to work through. As the first semester ended, I was proud of the strong foundation we created, but also realized I had to change tactics if the taskforce was to make progress toward aligning philosophies and structures on advanced courses. In addition to the divided taskforce, the changing policy landscape at both the federal and state level made any proposed solutions with respect to funding more complicated, as I explain below.

Federal policy changes impacting Advanced Placement funding

When the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2015, the funding stream dedicated to subsidizing AP tests for low-income

students was eliminated. Under the new legislation, dozens of disparate grant programs are rolled into a block grant and allocated to states based on a formula. States then disperse the funds to school districts, which subsequently disperse money to actual schools. However, since ESSA will not be implemented until the 2017-2018 school year, the money for the block grant is not available for states to use in the current 2016-2017 school year. Instead, to ease the burden on states, the U.S. Department of Education is allowing states to have the option to subsidize AP tests this year from *next year's* allocation. This decision has been controversial, since districts are placed in a position where if they decide to fund AP this year from next year's allocation, they might have to eliminate a vital program next year. At the time of writing, Washington state has not decided whether they will allow school districts to take advantage of this rule, which effectively means the price of an AP test for students eligible to receive free or reduced-price school lunch increases from $15 to $53 for the 2016-2017 school year.

State policy changes impacting Advanced Placement

ESSA marked a profound shift in the federal government's role in public education. At the same time this law was debated in the halls of Congress, an equally profound shift in public education happened at the state level in Washington. On January 5, 2012, the state Supreme Court ruled in *McCleary vs. Washington* that the state was violating the state constitution by failing to live up to its "paramount duty" to fully fund K-12 education for all students. When lawmakers failed to create a funding formula that met the standard set by the Supreme Court, the state was held in contempt and was fined $100,000 every day until they create a funding formula that fully funds education. At the beginning of 2017, the Governor of Washington, the State House, and the State

Senate all put forward different proposals in an attempt to fully fund education as mandated by the Supreme Court. No consensus has been reached at the time of this document being written. Additionally, the state has been fined over $50 million (though it appears to be mostly symbolic, as the court has no mechanism to collect such a fine).

Impact on my project

The changes in education policy both at the state and federal role greatly impacted my project. When I became aware of losing the AP subsidy for low-income students at the end of November, my first priority was to make sure the price of AP tests remained affordable. Unfortunately, I felt the goalposts of my project moved. Rather than attempting to expand funding for AP classes, I had to secure funding in order to keep the price similar to previous years. Luckily, this was not a difficult task; when I made Dr. Baker aware of this price increase, he asked me to write a memo describing how much it would cost the district to keep the price at $15 for students eligible to receive free or reduced-priced school lunch (Appendix E). After I wrote the memo, Dr. Baker immediately announced to the school board that AP tests for students in poverty will remain at $15 and the district will pay the costs out of available general funds. Dr. Baker believed increasing the price of AP tests for students in poverty was against what *The Bellingham Promise* stood for.

Unfortunately, the uncertainty resulting from the *McCleary* case made any funding decision resulting from my project a short-term, one-year solution. If legislators create a funding formula the state Supreme Court upholds as constitutional, it is possible that the district will have substantially more financial resources. However, if legislators do not comply with the court, it is possible districts like Bellingham would lose

significant funding, since they would no longer be allowed to use a percentage of local levy dollars to support daily operations, creating a large gap in the budget (Appendix G). The uncertainty of how Washington state funds education would not allow for any funding stream resulting from this project to extend beyond this year.

Second Semester: Building Consensus

As the second semester started, I realized I lacked the positional authority to bring this large taskforce to consensus on widening access for AP classes and financially support students who cannot afford it, even for the short-term. Despite the taskforce being comprised of different parts of the education system, the arguments were the same ones that have divided the district for many years. Multiple taskforce members were not persuaded that subsidizing AP tests aligned with district policies. If I was to secure funding for AP tests, it was imperative I pursue a different strategy. I needed to find someone with more influence who could use their standing to persuade the taskforce that AP classes and exams should be available for all students, that all students should take the test, and that the test cost should be subsidized.

In the hopes of changing the trajectory of my project, I set up three meetings with the former high school principal and current assistant superintendent who historically opposed funding AP tests and requiring students to take the test. As mentioned earlier, he was the leader in creating the "multiple pathways for success" in high school. I met with him because I observed that he carried significant clout in the district and has historically been against spending resources on subsidizing AP tests. Additionally, he had strong ties to the current high school principals and almost every member of the taskforce. If I could convince him that expanding access for AP classes

and financially supporting students across all high schools was aligned to district priorities, I knew the taskforce would be inclined to agree.

It turned out I didn't need three meetings. In my very first meeting, I told him what I strongly believed: Expanding AP classes and funding AP tests was in the best interest of the Bellingham School District. Moreover, students who take the AP class should be required to take the test as a matter of equity and class culture. He disagreed, and we had a wide-ranging conversation on the positives and negatives of such a policy. I then showed him the data from the high school in Bellingham that made AP accessible for all. He was visibly skeptical of some of the data – especially the data on how the racial gap in AP enrollment was nearly eliminated at the school that embraced AP classes. He even pulled out his calculator and double-checked the numbers showing the racial gap closing in one school while remaining persistent in the other two schools, including the school of which he was the former principal. He peppered me with question after question, which I did my best to answer. At the end of the meeting, he stated, "Prateek, you have changed the position I have held for nearly 20 years. I agree with you. Let's get this funded."

This conversation likely changed the course of my entire strategic project. The person I assumed would be a roadblock became my most forceful and passionate advocate. When our taskforce met for the first time in the second semester—the fourth time overall—the assistant superintendent spoke passionately, urging that all students should take the AP test and the district should fully fund all tests for students eligible to receive free or reduced-priced school lunch. After a lengthy discussion, I asked the taskforce whether they supported expecting all students to take the AP test and the

district subsidizing most of the fees. Rather than a simple yes/no vote, I used a technique called "fist to five," where raising a fist would mean "strong disagreement" and putting up five fingers would signal "strong agreement." Almost everyone in the room put up four or five fingers, with a smattering of participants putting up three fingers. Our taskforce made our first recommendation – AP tests should be expanded and funded by the Bellingham School District. To what extent it would be funded was not fully defined by the committee because I wanted to discuss the nuts and bolts of funding with my superintendent and the executive team.

With agreement on the topic of AP courses, the committee focused on the other two advanced courses: *College in the High School* and *Running Start*, along with a plan to clearly communicate the benefits and drawbacks of the different classes to parents and students on the district website. Unlike AP, these topics did not end with a clear change to district-wide policy. With the *College in the High School* program, the taskforce agreed that the program as implemented was not effective or equitable for teachers or students. But the path to move forward was unclear, since this program was popular for students who could afford it and for the teachers who participated in it. The taskforce decided that a smaller working group of high school principals and other administrators needed to do the following before any policy changes could be recommended:

1) Gather more information on what other districts in Washington were doing around *College in the High School*
2) Create criteria and a simple statement for why the district offers *College in the High School*
3) Bring in partnering higher institutions and ask them why the district should continue their partnership

On March 14, 2017, I invited all our *College in the High School* higher education partners to Bellingham in an effort to understand whether or not we should continue the partnership. Essentially, I wanted each institution to explain to the district the benefits of partnering with them, including whether they were open to reducing prices for our students and whether they would jettison the extra stipend for our teachers.

As the small working group met outside of the formal taskforce, the official task force turned its attention to the last two topics in our final meeting: *Running Start* and revamping the website to make the information on advanced courses more clear and readily accessible.

The *Running Start* program was not amenable to significant reforms because state laws and regulations did not allow for it. However, there were a few recommendations the taskforce put forward that were well within the boundaries of state regulations. First, for students who were failing or academically behind enrolling in the *Running Start* program, the taskforce recommended students have a periodic check-in with their counselor. An example of this could be a bi-weekly progress report that is turned in with their grades, much like what a high school athlete must do to stay eligible. Additionally, principals agreed to talk with their counselors and make sure parent phone calls and better relationships with higher education institutions become a higher priority. Lastly, principals at each of the high schools will meet with the "*Running Start* Cheerleader" at each of the high schools and go over their job descriptions.

These recommendations were all voluntary since restricting access to the *Running Start* program was against state regulations. Overall, the taskforce concluded the only way the district would not lose students to *Running Start* was to ensure high

school programs remain engaging and relevant. The taskforce was optimistic that numerous initiatives in the district focused on increasing high school engagement—such as every student having a personal laptop, shifting from a six-period day to an eight-period day, and creating a course catalogue that allowed for more academic choice—will stem the tide of students attending the *Running Start* program.

Finally, at the end of the second semester, the taskforce worked to make the Bellingham School District website on advanced courses easier to navigate for parents and students. These solutions were given to the communications team, which is in the process of updating the website for the 2017-2018 school year. With those recommendations, our taskforce came to a close and my project officially ended.

Chapter Four: Project Results

I evaluate the results of my strategic project by a simple measurement: does the district have a clear and coherent policy on how advanced courses are accessed across all Bellingham high schools? I attempt to answer this question in two ways. First, I examine the results from my theory of action. I then describe the policy changes that happened as a result of our taskforce recommendations.

Exhibit 8. Theory of Action

IF I....	Results
Build trust, legitimacy and authentic relationships with multiple stakeholders holding differing opinions on advanced classes in Bellingham	Met with every high school principal, assistant principal, and high school counselor and *Running Start* coordinator. Conducted focus groups with parents, students and teachers. Over 40 members across the Bellingham School District were interested and signed up for the committee and on the email listserv (25 were official members). Created a consensus between the Director of Teaching and Learning and Assistant Superintendent, which have historically opposed each other on the issues of AP class enrollment and financially supporting AP tests.
Offer the most up-to-date information on the demographics of advanced classes in each of the Bellingham public high schools	Taskforce members were given data that illustrated racial and socioeconomic differences in which students access which courses. This was the first time any member of the taskforce analyzed racial/socioeconomic data in Bellingham School District. Members were surprised to see such a wide gap between those who were White and Asian and those who were not and wanted to take action to reduce the disparity. The surprising demographic differences in AP classes led to the assistant superintendent changing his mind about funding AP classes, leading to a financial subsidy for the AP program.

Show the variability in approach of advanced classes among high schools, leading to parent and student confusion	A similar system for *Advanced Placement* and *Running Start* classes were created. For *College in the High School*, one high school still did not join, and the work is ongoing in the other two schools. A revamped website for parents and teachers with easy access to the similarities and difference of the advanced classes (work ongoing).
Convene a diverse and representative task force with the objective of limiting the variability and create more coherence around advanced classes	Taskforce represented Principals and Assistant Principals for each of the three high schools, Directors of Teaching and Learning, Assistant Superintendent, a Grant Writer, Counselors, Early Childhood Specialists, and Administrators from elementary and middle schools
Ground the work within the *Bellingham Promise* and more equitable outcomes for students	Believing access to rigorous course work was central to the *Bellingham Promise*, Superintendent Baker approved $100,000 to support AP funding this year and supported all of the recommendations by the taskforce.

Policy changes in Bellingham School District

Before the start of my strategic project, Bellingham high schools implemented three advanced classes with great variability: *Advanced Placement*, *College in the High School*, and *Running Start*. My task was to limit the variability for these three programs. I briefly explain the policy changes from my project below.

Advanced Placement: All students enrolling in an AP class and taking the corresponding test will be financially supported this school year (2016-2017). The district hopes financial support will continue in subsequent years, but the uncertainty around state funding makes it hard to confirm. Students who are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch will have their test fully subsidized. All other students will have 50% of their test subsidized. According to the analysis I shared with the district, the estimated cost will be

$98,000 this year and will increase by 15% for three consecutive years, as more students are projected to enroll in AP because of the financial subsidy.

This change impacts all high schools in the district equally. While there is still variability in how the *Advanced Placement* program is implemented at different schools, the financial support is now standard across Bellingham high schools.

College in the High School: At one of our committee meetings, Dr. Baker stated transparently: "If we had to do it all over again, I am not sure if this program would exist." Our committee uncovered that *College in the High School*, as implemented, is extremely confusing for parents and students as well as teachers and administrators. There is no overall philosophy on why the program exists and no gatekeeper of the multitude of higher education institutions clamoring to partner with the Bellingham School District. Our committee created criteria to evaluate each higher education institution that partners with the school district. The goal is to narrow the different higher education partners to one or two (there are currently six). The criteria to evaluate the different *College in the High School* higher education institutions were:

- Cost (How expensive is this program for our students?)
- Professional development opportunities (What training opportunities are available for high school teachers who partnered with the higher education institution?)
- Ease of transferring credits (If students wanted to transfer credits to another institution, how easy/simple is that in-state or out of state?)
- Accommodations for Special Education (Will they accommodate for students with Individualized Education Plans?)
- Class choices (Do they align with what Bellingham School District wants students to learn?)
- Stipend to teachers (How much is the stipend, and are they willing to get rid of it?)

To determine which higher education institution best fit the criteria, our taskforce worked on bringing all higher education institutions together (as mentioned in chapter 3). Through the process, higher education institutions that do not meet our criteria will be weeded out, leading to a simpler, more coherent system. The work is ongoing, and will impact all the high schools equally.

Running Start: This program is embedded in state law; thus, significant portions of the program were not allowed to be modified. Understanding these limitations, the committee decided the best way not to lose students to *Running Start* was to make high school rigorous and relevant for *all* students. Additionally, the committee debated applying short-term solutions across the three high schools. There is an ongoing discussion with the three comprehensive high school principals of a bi-monthly progress report and a mandatory phone call to all students enrolling in *Running Start* who have a GPA below 2.5. Furthermore, every high school principal agreed to have a conversation with the unofficial *Running Start* "cheerleader" at their school and make sure they were not pushing *Running Start* any further than what state regulations mandate. Any additional modifications for this program would not be allowed under existing laws and regulations.

Bellingham School Website: Communication to parents and community members about the different advanced programs in high school did not exist on the Bellingham School District website. After examining how other school districts shared information of advanced courses on their websites, our taskforce provided recommendations to the communications department. The work is ongoing, and I am working closely with the communication team to ensure the website will be easy to navigate so parents and

students have one central place to understand the nuances of the different advanced courses available in high school. The work on the website is being completed at the time of my writing.

Because of my strategic project and the work of our committee, the school district is much more aligned on advanced classes in high school. *Advanced Placement* will be expanded and funded across each high school. We are in the process of streamlining the different higher education institutions so *College in the High School* becomes simpler (and hopefully more equitable) for students and families. We are creating a safety net for *Running Start* students and revealed to high school principals that employees in their buildings were aggressively persuading students to enroll in *Running Start*, contrary to the strategic vision of the district. Lastly, we are making the website more accessible and understandable for parents and students.

Chapter Five: Analysis

In this chapter, I analyze the results from my strategic project and reflect on the strategies and frameworks I use to lead the committee. I do this for two reasons. First, I use this chapter to reflect on my leadership development and learn from my experience leading a strategic project within a traditional school district. I hope this guides my work in the future. Moreover, I also write this chapter with the hope that other practitioners find it useful in projects they are leading around equitable access to advanced classes in high school.

The purpose of my strategic project was to align advanced courses across Bellingham high schools. I expanded the scope of the project to make those courses more equitable and accessible. I did this for two important reasons. First, the data released by the state of Washington demonstrated that advanced courses in Bellingham were being accessed by the privileged (Dual enrollment data, OSPI). Second, I observed important stakeholders across the district who believed students from certain backgrounds could not achieve at a high level. I wanted the results of my project to directly challenge those structures and those mindsets.

I knew this would be difficult. As I explain in chapter 3, the topic of advanced course work was fraught with politics and interpersonal conflict between competing viewpoints. Trying to align three advanced classes in less than seven months without formal authority was bound to be difficult. In fact, Dr. Baker said as much when he told me simply to "start the conversation" on this topic; actually making changes in policy would be an added bonus.

Moreover, focusing on equity and access would add another layer of complication. Explicit conversations around educational equity and opportunity gaps between racial and ethnic groups were not common across the Bellingham School District. Over my 10-month residency, I do not recall attending a meeting where student information was disaggregated by subgroups or hearing any proposal to specifically increase the student achievement of lower-performing subgroups such as Special Education, Hispanic, Black, low-income, etc. outside of school board meetings. This stemmed from the overarching philosophy of not mentioning equity explicitly but promoting equitable policies to maintain broad support from the community. Over his seven years as superintendent, Dr. Baker has strategically created change at a pace he believes the community can handle. Part of his belief was to use a euphemism for equity because he believed it would come across as less threatening to the community. Therefore, instead of using the word equity, *The Bellingham Promise* mentions a "One School House Approach."

I did not know how I could both challenge mindsets related to equity *and* align advanced coursework in a finite period and do so in the model Dr. Baker has created. I also questioned how I should begin the conversation on advanced courses with my taskforce. Should I aggressively call out inequities across the system regarding advanced classes or use a more nuanced approach? Would explicitly calling out inequities help my project or marginalize it?

With only seven months to complete the project, I did not know how to answer these questions and where to begin. However, I did know the first program I tackled with the committee would be paramount. Since each individual program had
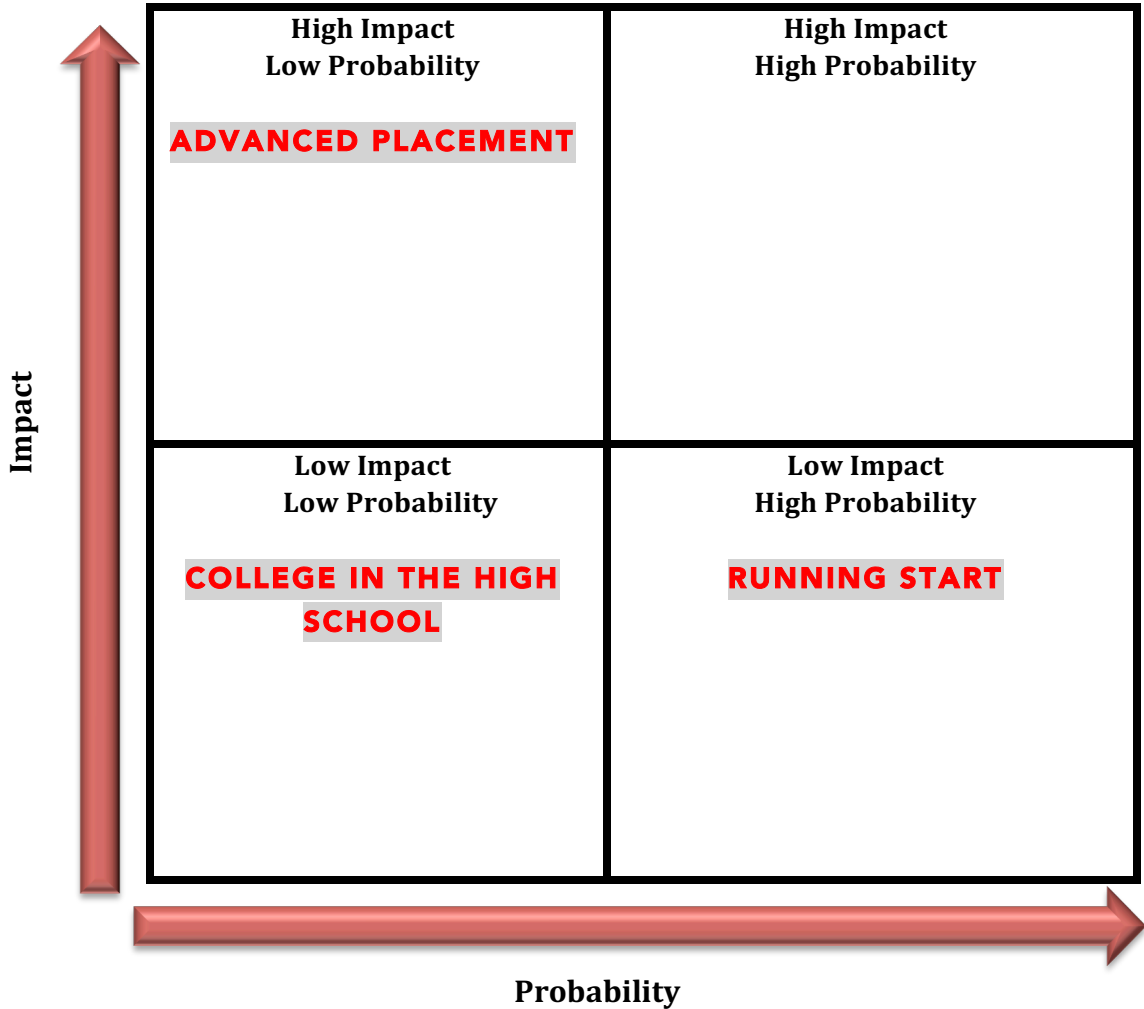
complicated layers, I knew there was a strong possibility of the committee not examining each program thoroughly. Therefore, I assumed the first program the committee chose to reform would have the best chance of success. To examine which program the committee should focus on first, I used two different frameworks. I explain below.

Framework #1: Impact/Probability

I was relieved to know I was not expected to complete my strategic project within the given timeframe. The current system of advanced courses was built over many years and it was unreasonable to think a completely new system could be created in a few months. With the understanding that a successful project did not necessarily mean a completed project, I decided I could afford to take greater risks. Consequently, unlike previous work experiences, I did not attempt to achieve a "quick win" by creating a consensus on trivial issues in the hope of gaining momentum and building trust. I wanted to swing for the fences immediately. Even if I failed, I would at least begin a conversation on an important subject.

To evaluate which program would have the most impact, I placed the three different advanced high school programs under an impact/probability matrix. Ideally, the program with the highest impact on students and the highest probability to embrace reform would be the program I tackle first. I did not use any one measure in placing the programs on the matrix. Instead, I used the information I gathered from interviews and research to make a hypothesis about the impact and probability of successfully reforming each program.

Exhibit 9. Impact/Probability Matrix

High Impact **Low Probability** ADVANCED PLACEMENT	**High Impact** **High Probability**
Low Impact **Low Probability** COLLEGE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL	**Low Impact** **High Probability** RUNNING START

Impact (vertical axis)

Probability (horizontal axis)

I placed *Advanced Placement* as high impact because of both its reputation as the "gold standard" of rigorous classes in the United States in addition to the large number of students who enroll in the program. I placed the program as a low probability for reform because of the long, complicated history of AP implementation across the Bellingham School District.

I placed *College in the High School* as low impact and low probability since enrollment in the program was relatively small. I assumed this was because of the tuition payment that only certain parents can afford to pay. Additionally, the program was

confusing for principals and administrators across the district, and there were no clear answers on what to do with *College in the High School* classes. I also realized the probability of reforming this program was low since teachers who participated in the program were making extra money and were protective of the program. Moreover, students who participated in *College in the High School* were generally happy obtaining college credit for a reduced price. Making changes to this program would be very difficult, and I was not sure if starting my project with something that was this challenging and had relatively small enrollment numbers would be most effective.

Finally, I placed *Running Start* as a high probability of change. Important stakeholders across the school district were not happy with the *Running Start* program. A broad consensus emerged across the different high schools that the program had to be implemented differently. However, I also knew there was very little room to maneuver with *Running Start* because of state laws and regulations, and therefore policy changes would have a low impact.

According to this matrix, I should begin my strategic project with an attempt to align *Advanced Placement* courses. However, I hesitated with starting my project with a topic that had a history of controversy in Bellingham. I wanted to use another model to make sure I was making the correct decision in starting with aligning AP courses.

Framework #2: Structures over mindsets

In my two years of attending classes at Harvard, we had extensive conversations on how to make schools and school systems more equitable in terms of race and socioeconomic status. Core curriculum and multiple discussions centered on how to change mindsets and beliefs of individuals who work closely with students. A change in

mindsets would lead to a change in behavior that promotes equity. This change in behavior would lead to the creation of more equitable policies and structures, which would lead to equitable outcomes for students. I illustrate the philosophy below:

CHANGE MINDSETS TO MAKE SURE ALL ADULTS BELIEVE STUDENTS CAN ACHIEVE AT HIGH LEVELS

↓

A DIFFERENT MINDSET LEADS TO CHANGES IN ADULT BEHAVIOR

↓

DIFFERENT MINDSETS AND BEHAVIORS CREATES EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS

↓

EQUITABLE OPPORTUNTIES FOR STUDENTS LEAD TO EQUITABLE SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

I thought this theory was flawed for two reasons. First, when it came to the conversation on race and socioeconomic equity, it seemed as if everyone wanted to signal their virtue and give the "correct answer." Participants are usually eager to voice their passion for reducing the opportunity gap between those that were traditionally advantaged and those that were traditionally disadvantaged. Few people in education would confess to believing all students cannot learn at a high level. Changing mindsets, therefore, seemed to be more of a theoretical argument rather than a practical one. An entire industry has been created on the premise of changing mindsets, leading to school districts across the country requiring teachers to attend professional development on cultural competency, anti-racist pedagogy, and examining personal privilege (Appendix

F). I have not seen convincing evidence that shows this has been effective, nor am I convinced that this has led to better outcomes for traditionally disadvantaged students.

Additionally, even if changing mindsets was the first step to creating equitable policies, it seems to be an ineffective way to create change. Changing the mind of someone who believes all students cannot learn at a high level would take a long time. I felt a different philosophy that promotes systems and structures over mindsets would be more effective. The philosophy I believe would be more effective is illustrated below:

CREATE SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES THAT LEAD TO EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS

EQUITABLE SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES LEAD TO A CHANGE IN ADULT BEHAVIOR

A CHANGE IN ADULT BEHAVIOR LEADS TO A CHANGE IN ADULT MINDSET

DIFFERENT ADULT MINDSETS LEAD TO EQUITABLE OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

Starting with Advanced Placement

Using the two frameworks above, I was convinced my committee should start by discussing the *Advanced Placement* program. I had an ideal opportunity to change the structure of a very popular program to make it more equitable and more aligned across the district. If I could lead the taskforce to increase access to AP classes, and allow those that have been historically marginalized easier access to enroll in those classes across the

school district, it would lead to a more aligned and equitable system. I illustrate a simplified version of my thoughts below.

Once traditionally disadvantaged students are placed in rigorous classes such as AP and are expected to take the test, teachers will be compelled to hold high expectations for all students. When teachers hold students to high expectations, students will perform better. Once students perform better, teachers will disabuse themselves of the notion that college-prep classes are only for certain students.

I acknowledge there are plenty of flaws to this theory. Even if AP classes were accessible, many disadvantaged students might not join. Additionally, without proper support certain students might struggle, perpetuating existing stereotypes. Nonetheless, I thought if we created an aligned system where the AP structure incentivized all students to access the program - especially students who might not be inclined to join – then changes in mindsets would follow.

I already saw a proof-point: the results of the high school in Bellingham that increased the number of AP options for students, allowed all students to access AP, and financially supported students who could not take the test. I thought this model, as compared to the "laissez-faire" model the other high schools believed in, was more equitable and accessible for all students. Additionally, I thought this project was a great opportunity to get all high schools in Bellingham to adopt a similar philosophy of high expectations for all students.

These were the reasons why I chose to tackle *Advanced Placement* classes first. If reformed correctly, the program would have a large impact for individual students, and the structural changes might impact mindsets around equity. Our committee took a

large step making the structure more equitable by fully funding *Advanced Placement* exams for those who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school lunch. Moreover, there is now a clear expectation that all students who enroll in an AP class will take the AP test. These changes hopefully lead to higher expectations for all students.

Success in starting with Advanced Placement

I made a bet that starting with *Advanced Placement* courses would be the correct strategic move. The bet paid off. While I attribute much of the success to my ability to bring the taskforce to a consensus, there were three important factors outside of my work on the taskforce that led to the successful funding of *Advanced Placement*: 1) *Project Free Education* and 2) The influence of the assistant superintendent and 3) the creation of a high school handbook. I mention each factor in further detail below.

Project Free Education*:* In 2011, the Bellingham School District launched an initiative dubbed *Project Free Education*. This initiative attempted to eliminate all fees for school supplies and other school related activities. Since the beginning of the initiative, families no longer had to pay for extracurricular fees such as athletics, music, and other after school fees. Graphing calculators and course workbooks in high school were also provided. Dr. Baker made it a priority to eliminate any student fees which were associated with the school district. It was within this context that funding for *Advanced Placement* happened. If Dr. Baker and important leaders in the district were convinced that taking the AP test was part of the standard curriculum, then funding the test could be incorporated into *Project Free Education*.

The influence of the assistant superintendent: As I mentioned previously, the assistant superintendent is arguably the most influential person in the school district. When I entered the organization, people described him as "the Mayor of Bellingham." The assistant superintendent was someone that had deep ties to the district because he was principal of one of the high schools for over a decade. Furthermore, he was well known as a leader of a church and of a popular youth ministry, and has a reputation for being a kind and thoughtful man. His opinions carry a lot of weight. For my project, however, I thought he would be a significant barrier. The high school he used to lead began offering multiple options for students. Additionally, he did not support funding AP tests or expanding access to AP and believed there were better ways to promote equity. His views clashed repeatedly with the former principal who supported an aggressive expansion of AP when they both worked together. I knew this was problematic for me. Since I was using the high school that used "AP for all" as a model, I worried that I was going to have the most popular man in the school district opposed to my vision of changing the structure of AP. I needed him on my side. Thankfully, that was not much of an issue and after just one meeting, the assistant superintendent became my most influential and passionate advocate for expanding and funding AP.

My strategic project was always geared towards the 2017-2018 school year. I assumed any policy changes would not be possible in the current year. However, after my meeting with the assistant superintendent, the timeline drastically changed. He passionately urged me to move up the timeline and fully fund AP tests this year. Realizing how passionate he was about this issue, I asked the assistant superintendent to set up a meeting with Dr. Baker and press him to give the "green light" to subsidize AP

exams this year. Dr. Baker and I meet on a weekly basis; thus, I knew he would be open to funding the program if it would make the school district more equitable. Even so, hearing it from the man that was directly below him and historically opposed to the plan would carry more weight and more urgency.

As the three of us met in Dr. Baker's office, I didn't say a word. The assistant superintendent did all the talking. He persuasively talked about all the reasons why funding AP tests this year for all students was vitally important for the district. He mentioned the closing of the gap between White and Hispanic students, and he plainly stated that funding this program would be a part of the overall mission of attempting to eliminate school fees. Dr. Baker agreed, but he wanted to make sure all current high school principals were ok with it. Since the three high schools were on my committee and have worked closely with me on this topic, they all emphatically agreed to support fully funding AP. Subsequently, the green light was given to take $100,000 out of the general fund and subsidize the cost of AP tests.

Funding AP tests this year does nothing to impact equity, since those that enrolled this year did so without knowing about the subsidy. In fact, it might have the opposite impact by subsidizing the cost for wealthier families that are taking AP classes this year. However, I hope once families have gotten the subsidy, and the communications team has blasted this proposal across the district, it would become hard to rescind. The hope is now to get hundreds of families that are below the poverty line and recruit those who are traditionally disadvantaged to take AP classes since the test is now free for them. This part is potentially the most important part of my strategic project, but something I will not be here to see through to completion.

Creation of the high school handbook: For the first time in Bellingham, a common high school catalogue was created. The vision was that a common catalogue for all students, parents, and teachers would list the classes all Bellingham high schools offered. This initiative dovetailed with my project because it forced the different high schools to work together on aligning their vision for different programs. The creation of the high school catalogue allowed different school leaders to come together and figure out a common mission and vision for all Bellingham high school students. It was within this broad context that funding AP tests came to fruition.

I believe my decision to start with reforming the structure of *Advanced Placement* classes was the right decision. A combination of reaching consensus in the taskforce, having the assistant superintendent persuasively advocate for funding AP exams, the creation of a high school handbook, and the broader *Project Free Education* initiative all combined into creating the right environment for the changing of the AP program.

Mitigate potential problems

Of course, these changes to the AP program are not enough. This is hopefully just the beginning of an ongoing conversation that will continue long after I leave. I also understand the potential of these changes not having a meaningful impact. If traditionally disadvantaged students are not actively recruited for AP classes, or do not feel supported in those classes, these policy changes will do very little to make the current structure more equitable. Currently, I am working closely with the family engagement team and high school counselors to ensure that does not happen. Each high school hosts a "dual-credit" night, and for the first time this year, materials and phone

calls will be placed in English and Spanish. Additionally, there is an attempt to have teachers from the high school that made "AP for all" meet with teachers from the other two high schools and discuss the strategies they used to make the classes more accessible to students who might be academically behind while retaining the same level of rigor.

It is my hope that these will mitigate the possible unintended consequence of making AP classes free for students who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school lunch.

College in the High School and Running Start

The discussion around the *College in the High School* and *Running Start* did not come to a conclusion, and the conversation around alignment, equity, and support for these two programs is ongoing. This was partially by design. Understanding the difficulty of getting any *one* program aligned across three schools - much less three - I chose to put all my eggs in the AP basket. Reforming access to AP classes was my priority. Nonetheless, our committee made some progress in reforming two other programs.

The taskforce concluded that the *College in the High School* program is inequitable and needs fewer higher education partners involved. Also, Dr. Baker and senior district leaders have made clear they do not support an extra "stipend" going to teachers, especially since it is unclear whether they are doing any more work than any other teacher. While I am slightly disappointed that we could not come to an agreement on *College in the High School,* I think having the entire committee and Superintendent

Baker agree that the *College in the High School* program is no longer acceptable without significant reforms is a good start.

While I could have intensified the focus on creating a more equitable structure for *College in the High School*– or attempt to jettison the program altogether – I worried it would come at the cost of reforming *Advanced Placement*. I knew attempting to change both programs simultaneously might lead to neither program making any change.

Similarly, the *Running Start* program did not change significantly once we realized state laws and regulations did not allow for large-scale improvements or reforms. The taskforce agreed to put in some support that made sure students did not fall through the cracks. Admittedly, these were mostly cosmetic and did not address the root causes of why a disproportionate number of students were not academically achieving in the *Running Start* program. Much like *College in the High School,* I hope these small changes create the momentum for further conversations in the future.

Chapter Six: Implications and Conclusion

While my strategic project focused specifically on aligning advanced courses across Bellingham high schools, I hope the strategies and structures used and the results garnered have a larger significance. Therefore, in this chapter I conclude my strategic project by stating the potential implications of this project on Bellingham Public Schools, the broader education sector, and finally, my own leadership development. I begin with Bellingham Public Schools.

Implications for Bellingham Public Schools

On the week of February 5th, a heavy snowstorm swept through western Washington, forcing Bellingham and surrounding school districts to close its schools for an entire week. When this announcement was made public on February 6th, different members of the community rushed into action. Teachers, administrators, neighbors, and district leaders mobilized to make sure students who rely on the school district for breakfast and lunch would not go hungry. Over 150 volunteers packed into a local middle school and filled 1,000 lunch boxes with carrots, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, apples and yogurts. Volunteers broke into 11 different teams and travelled directly to the neighborhoods that housed a high concentration of poverty-stricken families and served over 1,000 families. This was an example of the *Bellingham Promise* in action.

Dr. Baker developed a strong sense of community across the school district. In addition to the food drive, I saw many examples of the *Bellingham Promise* in action over the 10-months I worked with the organization. I saw parent organizations in wealthier schools volunteer to share money they raised with schools that were unable to

fundraise. I saw a policy that promoted breakfast in the classroom, ensuring students do not skip breakfast to play outside. I also observed how Dr. Baker and his executive team strived to make sure all students were served effectively across the school district at each executive team meeting.

This sense of community was created because of policies Dr. Baker championed. Many stakeholders in the district believe Dr. Baker has served their interests and understands their perspective, even as the district drastically expanded services to serve the most marginalized students and families. While Dr. Baker worked to make the school district more equitable, he has also articulated those who are disadvantaged are not getting more resources at the expense of those that are more advantaged. The image below is what Dr. Baker has in his office, illustrating his perception of equity (see Exhibit 10).

Exhibit 10: Equity vs. Equality

Equality

Equity
(where we take some from one to give to another)

Equity
(requires additional resources)
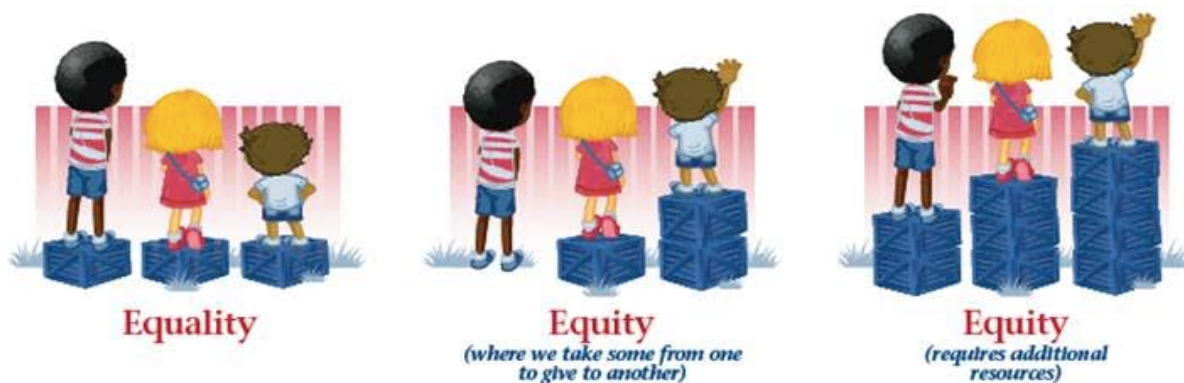
This image has been adapted multiple times, and the actual source of the document is unclear, but the basic premise of the picture is that equality is not the same as equity. The picture on the far left is of three students standing on one box, attempting to watch a baseball game. While this is equal, only two of the three students can see over the fence while the shortest student has her view obstructed. In the traditional version of

equity, the tallest child will have his box taken away and given to the shortest child, allowing all three children to be able to peer over the fence (picture 2). However, this requires taking from the tallest child and giving to the shortest child.

Dr. Baker has a different vision of equity where *all* children receive boxes, but the shortest child gets more boxes (picture 3). Therefore, everyone wins. This model has allowed Dr. Baker to fundamentally reshape the school district (as explained in the introduction) by providing resources to all students, but additional resources to historically disadvantaged students. However, as my strategic project suggests, the school district should evaluate whether this framework has actually created a more equitable school district. Specifically, there are three areas the district might benefit from further exploration.

1) Having a clear, bold policy on equity

Surreptitiously pushing equitable policies has created a collaborative and cohesive community where no specific group feels targeted and where all groups feel the benefits. This has been one of the reasons why the district does not have a pronounced statement on equity in its strategic plan. However, the district should examine whether a specific policy on equity would actually lead to a lack of cohesion or collaboration, as some fear. And if it were true that certain stakeholders might feel uncomfortable around a clear statement around equity, would this fear outweigh the potential benefits to the school district?

My strategic project, for example, was somewhat successful because I used another high school in the district as a proof point. A specific, clear policy around equity might help others who are trying to break down barriers to access, especially if they do

not have a proof point to work towards. I understand the reluctance of district leaders who believe that specific policies around equity might undermine the sense of unity and camaraderie the district has fostered, but I find these fears to be unfounded based on my experience in the district. Additionally, districts surrounding Bellingham have clear equity policies along with almost every major district in the state of Washington. Foundational to the *Bellingham Promise* is equity and there is no reason to continue using euphemisms for promoting equitable policies. Equity by another name should be replaced by a bold policy prominently placing equity at the center of all initiatives.

2) Access to data

Having easy to access and easy to read data on how students are performing across Bellingham schools is an important implication derived from my strategic project. While the amount of resources spent has significantly increased over the last five years, the results from these large investments have not been quantified in any meaningful way outside of specialized reports to the school board. While there is a hesitancy to focus on standardized test scores in Bellingham, this access to data can and should incorporate other metrics that are central to the *Bellingham Promise* such as truancy, after school participation, parent and student engagement, social and emotional skills, etc.

Moreover, data should be disaggregated by ethnic/racial subgroups and free/reduced lunch status to present a more holistic and accurate picture of the district. Members of my taskforce stated the first time they saw district data disaggregated by race and ethnicity was during my committee meetings. Without disaggregated data, achievement measures are misleading.

As I led my strategic project, I consistently ran into barriers when attempting to attain up-to-date information for students. It would often take days to get basic reports from individual school sites, and the data I eventually acquired would sometimes be significantly different from reports the state of Washington published. This is not in any way attempting to cast a negative light on those that work in the data and assessment team. On the contrary, those that worked in the data and assessment team were thrilled and eager to help when I asked questions around student achievement and quantifiable metrics, as they do not get very many opportunities to share this information.

The resources allocated towards data, research, and assessments are quite small when compared to other district priorities, such as communications or family engagement. As a result, those working with data seem to be doing a lot with little. Making student data easy to read and easy to access should be an important district priority for two important reasons. First, this is a requirement under the Every Student Succeeds Act. But more importantly, this access to data will help important stakeholders across the district make informed decisions regarding which outcomes of the *Bellingham Promise* are on track and which ones need more focus.

3) Creating benchmarks for success

The district believes an overemphasis on quantitative metrics will lead to unintended consequences, and that might be true. However, it seems not focusing on quantitative metrics leads to *intended* consequences. Without intentional and specific interventions, coupled with clear and transparent metrics to measure those interventions, the school system might be replicating broad societal inequities. I noticed the anxiety around quantifiable metrics in Bellingham has very little to do with metrics, but a lot

more to do with accountability. A belief that metrics and numbers will lead to heavy-handed tactics around accountability has led to hardly any quantifiable metrics at all. This has resulted in persistently large achievement gaps across the district that are unintentionally shrouded.

The Bellingham School District should embrace some form of quantitative metrics to make sure they know whether they are headed down the right path. The *Bellingham Promise* is an admirable goal, but not one that is easily measurable. District administrators and school staff cannot confidently state how close the school district is to reaching the goals associated with the *Bellingham Promise*. However, that should not be an excuse to not intentionally and thoroughly examine student achievement results. In the words of James Baldwin (1962) "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can me changed until it is faced." Collecting and analyzing student data is the first step to identifying inequities; setting clear and public goals to reduce them does not go against the spirit of the *Bellingham Promise* – it is central to it.

Implications for the Education Sector

Students who take advanced courses in high school graduate from high school, matriculate to college, and finish college at a higher rate than students who do not take advanced courses. That is not surprising. However, there are a paucity of studies that isolate the impact of enrolling in advanced courses. For example, students who take advanced courses in high school are probably the students who attend college regardless of whether they enrolled or did not enroll in advanced classes. With dual enrollment, dual credit, and high school-college partnerships expanding across the nation, rigorous studies measuring the impact of high school students enrolling in college classes should

be conducted. The studies administered to date show mixed results. For example, *Running Start* is extremely popular. Counselors recall students as early as 9th grade walk in and say they are excited about going to college for free. Juniors and seniors who think they are ready to leave high school can take college classes with little to no support. Some thrive and eventually earn an associate's degree. Others fail and are made to feel discouraged that college is not for them.

The state of Washington created stringent regulations that do not allow school districts to put any barriers for student entering the *Running Start* program. The intention is to make the program accessible for all, ensuring every student can access rigorous college level courses for free. In practice, however, this has sometimes resulted in students enrolling in *Running Start* because they do not feel confident or feel marginalized in the high school community and want to escape. Additionally, students opting for *Running Start* are sometimes not mature enough to handle going to classes with adults. Consequently, students enrolling in *Running Start* do not graduate from high school and complete college at a higher rate than students who do not enroll in *Running Start*. I recommend the state of Washington – and every state that has a similar program – undergo a rigorous analysis on dual-enrollment programs to make sure policies that are geared towards incentivizing college attendance are not inadvertently doing the opposite.

Moreover, a closer look at the balance between a focus on changing mindsets and changing structures is needed around the conversation around educational equity. While districts and schools might find value in continuing to have professional development and engage in conversations around implicit bias, privilege, structural racism, and culturally-relevant curriculums, I hope the education sector can also

simultaneously take down structural barriers and increase access to quality education for all students, especially the most marginalized. I fear that the conversation in education has centered on changing mindsets first and dismantling structures later.

Using the language from leadership expert Ronald Heifitz, this is sometimes described as the difference between a technical vs. adaptive challenge (2002). Adaptive challenges have no clear answers and are in their nature difficult problems to solve. Technical problems can be fixed with expertise and knowledge. Problems in education are deemed mostly as adaptive. A premium is placed on having conversations and changing mindsets on equity, race, and class. These conversations should continue, but in concert with dismantling structures that promote inequities.

For example, this is the first time I worked in a traditional school system where students attend schools according to the neighborhood they reside in. This is the norm for almost every school district in the state of Washington. In an era where housing patterns have re-segregated schools based on race and social class, I do not see the same urgency of tearing down arbitrary lines of school boundaries as I see around the conversation on "unpacking White privilege." Both might be important to talk about, but I hope the conversation around White privilege and other adaptive challenges can happen simultaneously with the creation of more equitable structures, such as eliminating arbitrary lines around school attendance zones. If we are waiting on changing people's minds before we engage in the difficult work of changing structures, I fear change will never actually be implemented.

Implications for Self

At times in this document, I have been critical of Bellingham School District and their work on reducing the opportunity gap between those that have historically been advantaged and those that have historically been disadvantaged. However, as I wrap up my project and my time in Bellingham, the question I ask myself is: What would I do differently?

What if I was the leader and made equity the focal point of my strategic plan? What if I pushed for a conversation around eliminating school boundaries? What if I made data and accountability structures more pronounced? What if I disaggregated data to show the inequities across different schools and different classrooms? While these are policies I have either directly or indirectly pushed for throughout this paper, I haven't given equal weight to the potential ramifications if such policies were promoted, let alone implemented, in a school district like Bellingham.

There is a world where the term "equity" being placed front and center in a strategic plan makes certain wealthy families scared and defensive, precluding other district-wide initiatives such as "*project free education*" from gaining traction. Just by a cursory glance across the education landscape, a conversation around changing school boundaries – or abolishing them altogether – is the fastest way for superintendents to lose their jobs. Disaggregating data and examining what it illustrates might be uncomfortable and hurt the overall mission of building a cohesive community.

When it comes to the subject of equity and access, when do I push forward and dismantle structures wherever and whenever they exist and when do I slow down and attempt to bring everyone on board? After completing this project, I understand this to

be the question at the heart of my own leadership development. Based on the roles I have taken in my career, I should not be surprised that I am grappling with this question.

I worked in New Orleans for most of my education career where I witnessed an entirely new education system created after Hurricane Katrina. The education system, quantifiably, has dramatically improved since the days before Katrina. However, not involving the community and important stakeholders generated a backlash that still reverberates today.

My experience in Bellingham seems to be, in some respects, at the other end of the spectrum. Decisions are not made until formal taskforces are convened, community groups are consulted, and multiple presentations are made to the widest range of stakeholders possible. If the topic is deemed too controversial, it is never discussed for fear that it might sow division in the community. Consensus is held in high esteem, and it has allowed the school district to gain a level of trust that community members say they never had in the system before. Unlike my experience in New Orleans, I see a community united behind its school system and devoid of controversy. However, unlike New Orleans, quantifiable metrics on equity have not improved quickly.

An old proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." But in reflecting on my leadership and how I decided to lead my strategic project, I am not sure how much I brought people along and forged consensus. To be fair, in this strategic project I had some limitations that were inherent in the position I was in. I was charged with a task that had not been resolved in nearly a decade. I wanted to create a system that was more equitable, and I had less than seven months to do so. If

I wanted to build consensus and bring people together, I might not be able to get my strategic project completed.

While I built trust with a wide group of stakeholders for the first few months of this project, I also moved relatively quickly after I convened the taskforce. Within three months, *Advanced Placement* classes were subsidized, *College in the High School* was admitted as being unfair and unequal, and access to *Running Start* was tweaked in an attempt to support those that need extra support – all issues that were considered controversial before I started. In an attempt to codify these changes after I left, financial support for AP classes was guaranteed for this year, with the understanding it will continue next year barring an unforeseen circumstance in the state's funding formula. This structural change would hopefully incentivize those who usually do not enroll in *Advanced Placement* classes to enroll next year. Additionally, I hope these changes will continue a conversation around equitable access to rigorous course work across the school district.

Due to my constraints, I had to move quickly across a project and challenge the systems and structures that perpetuate inequity rather than tackle the adaptive challenges around mindsets and beliefs, which I knew would take much longer. But what happens when I become a leader with the ability to establish my own timetable? Would I take the approach that Bellingham School District has – building consensus, quietly promoting equitable policies, and staying away from hot-button topics such as structural racism in order to build a cohesive community that slowly moves towards an equitable system? Or would I move much faster, especially on issues of inequity in the education system of which I am deeply passionate about?

I have experienced two polarities in my career so far – my work in New Orleans and my work in Bellingham - and I have seen the strengths and weaknesses of each theory of action. What if after the storm, the city of New Orleans took a more community centric approach and used some of the tactics used by Dr. Baker and the Bellingham School District? Would the issues of local control or the hiring and firing of teachers be as divisive over the last decade in New Orleans? Maybe. Or would extensive community engagement allow the loudest voices to hijack the process, stymying all hopes of changing the system?

This might seem like a theoretical question, but this question is the most important implication from my residency in Bellingham and my strategic project. How fast do I go to make changes in order to create an equitable education system? How long is too long when dealing with systemic inequality in schools? Which path is correct: The Bellingham way or the New Orleans way?

While it would be ideal to have a clear answer to this question as I wrap up my strategic project, I realize just grappling with this question might be better than trying to find the correct answer. Of course, my answer will depend on the context and the work environment I find myself in the future. But still, this question about the rate of change in reforming education is a question that has a vital implication for my leadership development and something I will continually reflect on.

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College in the High School: One Pager

What is it: A program in which a high school and a higher education institution enter a contract to have a college course taught in the high school by a college/university approved high school teacher. High school teacher is expected to hold master's degree or higher in content they are teaching. The agreement between the school and college/university is governed by a local contract. The student must meet college/university course requirements and pre-requisites. Once a student has enrolled, the course is listed on both the high school and college transcripts.

School Name	Course Fees (semester)	Teacher Stipend
University of Washington	$325 + $45 for registration	$350.00 per course plus $50.00 per day to attend UW course trainings
Skagit Valley College	$210 per course	Between $250 - $1000 per course, depending on student enrollment
Everett Community College	$210	$43.00 per student
Bellingham Technical College	$125.00	$45.00 per student
Whatcom Community College	$210	$43.00 per student

Demographics of *College in the High School* – Bellingham School District – the last three years

	F/R Lunch	SPED	Hispanic	Asian	White
2013-2014	15.2%	3%	10.6%	1.5%	83.3%
2014-2015	15.2%	1.4%	11.6%	3.2%	72.7%
2015-2016	9.6%	4.1%	8.2%	2.1%	87.7%

Racial/Ethnic Demographics of Bellingham/Sehome *2016-2017: First Semester**

Bellingham High School

Total	F/R Lunch	White	Hispanic	Two or more	Other
46 students	2.2% (1 student)	69.5%	10.8%	11%	8.7%

Sehome High School

Total	F/R Lunch	White	Hispanic	Two or more	Other
41 Students	0%	89%	6.8%	2%	2%

How U.S. News Calculated the 2016 Best High Schools Rankings

We looked at thousands of public schools to identify the top performers.

By Robert Morse, Chief Data Strategist | April 18, 2016, at 9:41 p.m.

How U.S. News Calculated the 2016 Best High Schools Rankings

To produce the 2016 Best High Schools rankings, U.S. News & World Report teamed with North Carolina-based RTI International, a global nonprofit social science research firm.

RTI implemented the U.S. News comprehensive rankings methodology, which is based on these key principles: that a great high school must serve all of its students well, not just those who are college bound, and that it must be able to produce measurable academic outcomes to show it is successfully educating its student body across a range of performance indicators.

We started by reviewing 28,561 public high schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Some of those schools had to be eliminated from consideration, mainly because they were too small to be analyzed. This reduced the count to 19,908, which is the total number of public high schools across the country that had high enough 12th-grade enrollment and/or sufficient enrollment in other grades during the 2013-2014 school year to be eligible for the rankings.

In a major change to the Best High Schools rankings methodology, U.S. News has added a new step this year focused on graduation rates. High schools that make it past the first two steps of the methodology, which remain unchanged and are detailed below, now have to meet or exceed a national standard high school graduation rate to be considered top-performing schools and to be ranked at a national level.

This marks the first time graduation rates have been used in ranking high schools at this scale. As part of this effort, U.S. News has published graduation rates for all high schools on its website for the first time.

National Rankings

A four-step process determined the Best High Schools. The first three steps ensured that the schools serve all of their students well, using their performance on the math and reading parts of their state proficiency tests and graduation rates as the benchmarks. For those schools that made it past the first three steps, a fourth step assessed the degree to

which schools prepare students for college-level work.

• Step 1: The first step determined whether each school's students were performing better than statistically expected for students in that state.

We started by looking at reading and math results for all students on each state's high school proficiency tests. We then factored in the percentages of economically disadvantaged students – who tend to score lower – enrolled at the schools to identify schools performing much better than statistical expectations. To pass Step 1, high schools' performance had to be one-third of one standard deviation above the average.

This threshold was applied to a school's performance compared with what would be statistically expected for that school in its state, based on its percentage of economically disadvantaged students.

U.S. News made one important change to Step 1 in the 2016 rankings. This year, for the first time, an absolute performance adjustment was used.

This enabled the 10 percent of schools with the highest absolute performance on each state's reading and math assessment tests to automatically pass Step 1. In addition, schools in the bottom 10 percent of their state's reading and math assessment test results were barred from passing Step 1.

U.S. News made this adjustment to reward schools for exceptionally high performance on state assessment tests, regardless of their poverty level, as well as to prevent schools with exceptionally low state assessment test performance from being able to win a gold, silver or bronze medal.

• Step 2: For schools passing the first step, the second step assessed whether their disadvantaged students – black, Hispanic and low-income – were outperforming disadvantaged students in the state.

We compared each school's math and reading proficiency rates for disadvantaged students with the statewide results for these student groups and then selected schools that were performing better than their state averages.

• Step 3: U.S. News introduced a new Step 3 to the methodology for the 2016 rankings. Schools now have to meet or surpass a basic benchmark for their graduation rate.

As with the assessment data used in the previous steps, high schools' graduation rates were collected from each state. Although there is some variation in how states calculate graduation rates, the foundation of all states' calculations is the percentage of first-time ninth-graders who were awarded diplomas four years later. For the 2016 rankings, the graduation rate reflects the 2014 cohort – students who entered ninth grade in the 2010-2011 school year.

High schools were only allowed to pass Step 3 if their rounded graduation rate was 68

percent or greater. This threshold was based on the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, which was passed in 2015 and is the successor to the No Child Left Behind Act. The law stipulates that states are required to provide additional resources to schools whose graduation rates are 67 percent or lower.

The 68 percent threshold is lower than the national average graduation rate as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics, which was 82 percent in 2013-2014. U.S. News believes that the 68 percent threshold provides a basic measure to ensure that ranked schools do not struggle to graduate their students. Graduation rates are an important indicator of how well a school is succeeding for all its students. In future rankings, U.S. News may increase the threshold rate needed to pass Step 3.

Schools without a graduation rate value were allowed to pass Step 3 as well, to account for varying state rules about which high schools a graduation rate is calculated for, which high schools themselves have limited control over.

• Step 4: Schools that made it through the first three steps became eligible to be judged nationally on the final step – college-readiness performance – using Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate test data as the benchmark for success, depending on which program was largest at the school. This step is unchanged and was Step 3 in past U.S. News Best High Schools rankings.

AP is a College Board program that offers college-level courses at high schools across the country. The International Baccalaureate program also offers a college-level curriculum.

South Dakota was the only state that did not give U.S. News permission to use its schools' Advanced Placement data in Step 4 of the rankings. In addition, South Dakota had no schools with IB data. Therefore, no South Dakota schools could be evaluated in Step 4 of the methodology.

This fourth step measured which schools produced the best college-level achievement for the highest percentages of their students. This was done by computing a College Readiness Index based on the school's AP or IB participation rate – the number of 12th-grade students in the 2013-2014 academic year who took at least one AP or IB test before or during their senior year, divided by the number of 12th-graders – and how well the students did on those tests.

The latter part, called the quality-adjusted AP or IB participation rate, is the number of 12th-grade students in the 2013-2014 academic year who took and passed – received an AP score of 3 or higher or an IB score of 4 or higher – at least one of the tests before or during their senior year, divided by the number of 12th-graders at that school. Any individual AP or IB subject test was considered when determining if a student took or passed at least one test.

For the College Readiness Index, the quality-adjusted participation rate was weighted 75 percent in the calculation and the simple AP or IB participation rate was weighted 25 percent. The test that was taken by the most students at a particular school – either AP or IB – was used to calculate that school's College Readiness Index.

The maximum College Readiness Index value is 100, which means that every 12th-grade student during the 2013-2014 academic year in a particular school took and passed at least one AP or IB test before or during their senior year.

To summarize, to be numerically ranked, a high school had to pass Steps 1, 2 and 3 and have a CRI at or above the median benchmark.

In total, U.S. News nationally ranked the 6,218 highest-scoring schools as gold, silver or bronze depending on their CRIs.

• Gold medals: Schools with the highest unrounded College Readiness Index values were numerically ranked from No. 1 to No. 500 and were the gold medal winners.

Seventeen gold medal high schools achieved the maximum College Readiness Index of 100. There were also other instances in which gold or silver medal schools were tied based on their unrounded CRI values. These values, when published online as part of the Best High Schools rankings, are rounded to one decimal place.

To avoid ties in the rankings, there is a tiebreaker measuring students' absolute level of success in passing AP or IB tests. The unrounded quality-adjusted exams per test-taker equals the number of AP or IB exams that received passing scores divided by the number of students who took at least one exam.

• Silver medals: The high schools ranked from No. 501 to No. 2,673 were the 2,173 silver medal winners. Only schools with CRI values at or above 20.17 received this medal because that was the median – the statistical midpoint – of all the College Readiness Index values among high schools with AP or IB test-takers.

• Bronze medals: An additional 3,545 high schools that passed the first three steps in the methodology were awarded bronze medals and are listed alphabetically. A bronze medal school either does not offer any AP or IB courses or its College Readiness Index was less than the median of 20.17 needed to receive a silver medal.

In addition to the main gold, silver and bronze national rankings, we have also published numerical rankings of the Best High Schools within each state and of the Best Charter Schools, Best Magnet Schools and Best STEM Schools on a national level.…

To read full article, visit: https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/articles/how-us-news-calculated-the-rankings

Appendix C: Advanced Placement enrollment numbers for different Bellingham high school

Grade Level

School	Total Exams	Total Students	12th Grade	11th Grade	10th Grade	9th Grade
Bellingham	396	255	62	88	61	34
Sehome	517	249	65	122	55	7
Squalicum	1123	642	108	154	180	182

AP Scores

Score	Total Exams	% of Total Exam
5	289	14.2%
4	448	22.0%
3	540	26.5%
2	461	22.6%
1	298	14.6%
Total	2,036	100.0%

AP Scores divided by High School

School	Total Exams	5	4	3	2	1
Bellingham	396	61 (15%)	94 (24%)	113 (29%)	93 (23%)	35 (9%)
Sehome	517	108 (21%)	150 (29%)	149 (29%)	86 (17%)	24 (5%)
Squalicum	1,123	120 (11%)	204 (18%)	278 (25%)	282 (25%)	239 (21%)

Participation of ALL students taking AP Exam

Bellingham: Average Score	
White	25.6%
Asian	21.2%
Black	*
Hispanic	18%
Two or More	36.5%

Sehome: Average Score	
White	21.1%
Asian	32.9%
Black	*
Hispanic	13.3%
Two or More	26.5%

Squalicum: Average Score	
White	47.4%
Asian	47.7%
Black	*
Hispanic	41.7%
Two or More	51.1%

White/Hispanic gap: AP Test

Bellingham: 29.7%
Sehome: 37%
Squalicum: 12%

Appendix D: Elementary and Middle School Smarter Balance Assessment Scores; 2015-2016

Smarter Balance Assessment: Percentage of <u>Elementary</u> school students meeting standard, ELA and Math

	Hispanic & White - ELA			
Grade	Bellingham Hispanic Students meeting standard	Bellingham White students meeting standard	Washington Hispanic Students meeting standard	Washington White students meeting standard
3rd Grade	33.6%	64.4%	35.1%	62.4%
4th Grade	40.1%	67.9%	38.8%	65.0%
5th Grade	38.5%	74.1%	42.2%	67.1%

	Hispanic & White - Math			
Grade	Bellingham Hispanic Students meeting standard	Bellingham White students meeting standard	Washington Hispanic Students meeting standard	Washington White students meeting standard
3rd Grade	31.0%	65.4%	41.0%	66.0%
4th Grade	37.6%	66.4%	37.5%	63.0%
5th Grade	26.2%	62.5%	30.4%	56.4%

Smarter Balance Assessment: Percentage of <u>Middle</u> school students meeting standard, ELA and Math

	Hispanic & White - ELA			
Grade	Bellingham Hispanic Students meeting standard	Bellingham White students meeting standard	Washington Hispanic Students meeting standard	Washington White students meeting standard
6th Grade	44.2%	69.2%	37.7%	63.6%
7th Grade	47.9%	77.2%	40.6%	65.1%
8th Grade	57.9%	76.7%	42.4%	65.9%

	Hispanic & White - Math			
Grade	Bellingham Hispanic Students meeting standard	Bellingham White students meeting standard	Washington Hispanic Students meeting standard	Washington White students meeting standard
6th Grade	26.2%	57.0%	28.8%	56.2%
7th Grade	29.8%	68.5%	31.2%	65.1%
8th Grade	38.1%	66.3%	29.6%	53.6%

Smarter Balance Assessment: Percentage of <u>Elementary</u> school students meeting standard, ELA and Math

Grade	Low Income & Non Low-Income Gap - ELA			
	Bellingham low-Income Students meeting standard	Bellingham non-low income students meeting standard	Washington low-Income students meeting standard	Washington White students meeting standard
3rd Grade	34.1%	72.0%	37.7%	69.7%
4th Grade	40.9%	75.8%	40.2%	72.0%
5th Grade	49.3%	77.1%	43.5%	74.3%

Grade	Low Income & Non Low-Income Gap - Math			
	Bellingham low-income students meeting standard	Bellingham non low-income students meeting standard	Washington low-income students meeting standard	Washington non low-income students meeting standard
6th Grade	39.5%	69.7%	39.5%	72.7%
7th Grade	36.0%	76.0%	38.9%	70.2%
8th Grade	36.1%	66.8%	32.5%	63.5%

Smarter Balance Assessment: Percentage of <u>Middle</u> school students meeting standard, ELA and Math

Grade	Low Income & Non-Low-Income - ELA			
	Bellingham low-income Students meeting standard	Bellingham non low-income students meeting standard	Washington low-Income Students meeting standard	Washington non low-income students meeting standard
3rd Grade	45.0%	78.2%	39.3%	70.8%
4th Grade	45.8%	85.1%	41.9%	71.7%
5th Grade	50.8%	84.5%	43.6%	72.1%

Grade	Low Income & Non-Low-Income - Math			
	Bellingham low-income Students meeting standard	Bellingham non low-income students meeting standard	Washington low-Income Students meeting standard	Washington non low-income students meeting standard
6th Grade	29.7%	66.7%	30.5%	62.6%
7th Grade	35.2%	75.0%	32.6%	63.3%
8th Grade	33.7%	74.6%	30.4%	61.0%

Smarter Balance Assessment: Percentage of Elementary school students meeting standard, ELA and Math

Grade	Special Education & General Education - ELA			
	Bellingham Special Education students meeting standard	Bellingham general education students meeting standard	Washington Special Education students meeting standard	Washington general education students meeting standard
3rd Grade	31.3%	59.7%	26.3%	58.6%
4th Grade	29.6%	68.3%	24.9%	62.0%
5th Grade	25.6%	74.0%	24.5%	65.6%

Grade	Special Education & General Education - Math			
	Bellingham Special Education students meeting standard	Bellingham general education students meeting standard	Washington Special Education students meeting standard	Washington general education students meeting standard
5th Grade	33.0%	60.6%	29.5%	63.3%
6th Grade	27.2%	66.6%	26.0%	60.0%
7th Grade	19.8%	61.7%	18.7%	53.9%

Smarter Balance Assessment: Percentage of Middle school students meeting standard, ELA and Math

Grade	Special Education & General Education - ELA			
	Bellingham Special Education students meeting standard	Bellingham general education students meeting standard	Washington Special Education students meeting standard	Washington general education students meeting standard
3rd Grade	19.5%	73.0%	18.0%	62.1%
4th Grade	26.7%	76.4%	18.7%	64.1%
5th Grade	24.4%	78.9%	18.8%	65.2%

Grade	Special Education & General Education - Math			
	Bellingham Special Education students meeting standard	Bellingham general education students meeting standard	Washington Special Education students meeting standard	Washington general education students meeting standard
6th Grade	19.5%	73.0%	18.0%	62.1%
7th Grade	26.7%	76.4%	18.7%	64.1%
8th Grade	24.4%	78.9%	18.8%	65.2%

Appendix E: Memo to Dr. Baker on Advanced Placement funding

Dr. Baker,

For nearly twenty years, the federal government partially subsidized exam fees for college-prep programs such as Advanced Placement (AP). In the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), the AP Test Fee Program was removed from Title I and placed into a block grant in Title IV. Consequently, the state of Washington will now have more flexibility in how to spend that money, but the dedicated funding stream for subsidizing AP tests has been eliminated.

Since the AP Test Fee program was politically popular, most believe the state of Washington will continue to use that money to subsidize AP tests. However, ESSA is not fully implemented until the 2017–18 school year, leaving a gap in funding for 2017 exams. This means the price of AP exams will increase significantly for low-income students this year.

Last year, the cost for taking an AP exam was $15 for those who qualified for free or reduced lunch. This year, it will most likely jump to $53 since the only financial support for low-income students will come from College Board.

At the school board meeting on December 15, 2016, there was a conversation about the Bellingham School District potentially filling the funding gap for AP tests. Below is an estimate of how much the district will have to pay if we were to keep the price at $15 – or slightly increase the price to $20 - for every free/reduced lunch student taking an AP test this year.

The amount of AP test takers are from 2015-2016 school year. The assumption is these numbers will remain stable for 2016-2017 school year (with financial support). Low-income students were 22% of all AP test-takers last year, and we have no reason to believe this number will have drastically increased or decreased this year.

GOLD STATUS: FREE/REDUCED LUNCH STUDENTS SEE NO INCREASE IN AP TEST FEES (AP TESTS REMAIN AT $15)

Test takers	Test-takers who are Free/Reduced Lunch (estimate)	Free Reduced Lunch total	District cost to keep test at $15 for F/R lunch students
2,036	25%	509	$19,342
	22%	448	$17,024
	20%	407	$15,466

Below is an estimate of how much the district will have to pay if we were to partially fill the federal funding gap by allowing a slight increase in AP tests to $20 for every free/reduced lunch student.

SILVER STATUS: <mark>**FREE/REDUCED LUNCH STUDENTS SEE 25% INCREASE IN AP TEST FEES, MAKING AP TESTS $20.**</mark>

Test takers	Test-takers who are Free/Reduced Lunch (estimate)	Free Reduced Lunch total students	District cost to keep test at $20 for F/R lunch students
2,036	25%	509	$16,797
	22%	448	$14,784
	20%	407	$13,431

'Levy cliff' looms over Legislature's education funding debate

School districts will lose some property tax authority in 2018

District officials say they need the deadline extended

Legislature still must correct school funding as ordered by state Supreme Court

BY MELISSA SANTOS

msantos@thenewstribune.com

State lawmakers say 2016 will be the year they finally will agree on a plan to fully fund basic education, something the state Supreme Court ordered them to do two years ago.

Paying for that plan, however, is something that probably won't happen until 2017. And school districts throughout the state say they can't afford to wait for the Legislature to come up with the money.

Districts are approaching what officials call a "levy cliff," an upcoming reduction in how much money school districts can collect through local property tax levies.

Because of that, district officials say they urgently need the Legislature to either fix the unconstitutional way the state funds education — a big job that legislative leaders have said they are unlikely to tackle this year — or else delay the planned reduction in local levy authority that threatens to cut millions from school district budgets in the 2017-18 school year.

Lawmakers return to Olympia for a new 60-day session starting Monday.

"It's clearly going to be a year where they're going to punt — it's unfortunate, but it's the reality of the political situation they face," said Tom Seigel, superintendent of the Bethel School District in Pierce County. "The best we can ask for is for them not to punish us any more, and one way to do that is to extend the current authorized levy lid."

> "IT'S CLEARLY GOING TO BE A YEAR WHERE THEY'RE GOING TO PUNT. ... THE BEST WE CAN ASK FOR IS FOR THEM NOT TO PUNISH US ANY MORE"
>
> Tom Seigel, superintendent of the Bethel School District

If lawmakers don't intervene, school districts statewide will be able to raise $260 million less in local property taxes in 2018 than they could in 2015, according to a state Senate committee presentation from last year.

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The Washington Association of School Administrators estimates the effect will be even higher — closer to $480 million statewide — and that at least half of the state's 295 school districts will be negatively affected.

Some lawmakers, however, say pushing back the dreaded levy cliff would only delay progress toward the Legislature's overall goal of fully funding public schools, something the state is under a court order to do by 2018. The reduction in local levy authority, as written in state law, would take effect the same year.

"The current deadline provides significant motivation to solve the overall problem," said state Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup. "If you do what folks are talking about — just extend the current deadline — it just allows the problem to continue and get worse."

THE PROBLEM

Right now, lawmakers are in contempt of court for failing to come up with a detailed plan to fully fund public education, something the state court first ordered in January 2014 as part of the ongoing McCleary school funding lawsuit.

Originally in the McCleary case, the high court ruled in 2012 that the state was failing to meet its constitutional duty to fully fund basic education, and must correct the funding problem by 2018. Lawmakers' slow progress since the initial ruling has prompted more court orders and, most recently, a court sanction of $100,000 a day.

IF YOU DO WHAT FOLKS ARE TALKING ABOUT — JUST EXTEND THE CURRENT DEADLINE — IT JUST ALLOWS THE PROBLEM TO CONTINUE AND GET WORSE.
State Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup

Although the Legislature has addressed several parts of the McCleary ruling, lawmakers have yet to resolve the state's unconstitutional reliance on local property tax levies to pay for teacher and other school employee salaries. The court has said those basic education costs are a state responsibility and shouldn't be paid through local school district levies.
While a state law from the 1970s capped how much school districts could raise through local levies, lawmakers have periodically raised the levy lid over the years, allowing school districts to seek additional funding from local voters to help cover their operating costs, including salaries.

In 2011, lawmakers increased school districts' local levy capacity yet again to help cash-strapped school districts during the economic recession.

24%	Previous local lid for most school districts, based on state and federal dollars they receive
28%	Temporary levy lid lift for most districts, which expires in 2018
4%	Levy authority that school districts would lose in 2018, if lawmakers don't change law

With the increase, most districts could use local levies to generate up to 28 percent of the revenue they received the previous year from state and federal sources. Previously, most districts' levy authority was capped at 24 percent, though some districts were grandfathered in at higher levels.

The grandfathered districts, too, had their levy authority increased by four percentage points between 2011 and 2017.

"They gave us the extra 4 percent as kind of a way to keep us moving along without falling totally over, while giving them additional years to fix the problem," said Seigel, the Bethel superintendent.

Now, the temporary increase in the levy lid is set to expire, creating the levy cliff starting in 2018.

"The levy cliff is a small symptom of the much larger levy inequity problem where we have pushed so much of the state's responsibility onto local school districts," Dammeier said. "And that just hits our schools and our taxpayers in an unfair way."

Also in 2018, school districts stand to lose some levy equalization money, which is state funds to help even out disparities in how much school districts can raise through local property taxes.

THE EFFECTS

Seigel said unless the Legislature delays the 2018 levy cliff, Bethel officials will have to cut $10.2 million from the school district's 2017-18 budget.

He and officials from other districts have said they would need to start planning for those cuts in January 2017, which is why they want the Legislature to act this year.

If lawmakers wait until 2017, school districts will probably have to start issuing layoff notices while the Legislature still is in session debating school funding issues, said Jennifer Priddy, assistant superintendent in the Olympia School District.

"IF THEY DON'T TAKE ACTION THIS SESSION, THEY'RE NOT GOING TO HAVE FINISHED THEIR NEXT SESSION BY THE TIME WE'RE STARTING OUR BUDGETS. SO WE WILL BE PLANNING FOR CUTS"
Jennifer Piddy, assistant superintendent for the Olympia School District

Each year, school district officials face a May deadline for issuing layoff notices to teachers. Last year, the Legislature took until July to finalize the state's new two-year budget, and still dodged the issue of how the state should assume the cost of teacher and other school employee salaries.

Priddy said she worries that next year, the Legislature's process could take equally long.
"If they don't take action this session, they're not going to have finished their next session by the time we're starting our budgets," Priddy said. "So we will be planning for cuts in the event they don't fix this problem."

In Olympia, the levy cliff threatens to reduce the district's budget by 4.3 percent, or $4.7 million, in the 2017-18 school year, district officials said.

North Thurston Public Schools would need to cut about $10 million from its budget in the the 2017-18 school year, while Tacoma Public Schools would have to reduce its annual budget that school year by about $7 million, according to figures provided by the districts.

Appendix G: Districts spending money on "White privilege" with PEG

Districts contracting with PEG, a consulting firm specializing in racial "equity" by urging "educators to address racial issues in order to uncover personal and institutional biases that prevent all students, and especially students of color, from reaching their fullest potential."

DISTRICT	DISTRICT PEG SPENDING					
	2014-15	2013-14	2012-13	2011-12	2010-11	TOTAL
Adams County School District (CO)		$20,000*				$20,000
Aurora County School District 14 (CO)					$111,000	$111,000
Cherry Creek School District (CO)	$19,250					$19,250
Berkeley Unified School District (CA)		$5,045*				$5,045
Hayward Unified School District (CA)		$1,770*				$1,770
Juvenile Court and Community Schools (CA) (San Diego Office of Education)				$14,900		$14,900
San Leandro Unified School District (CA)			$9,900		$18,070	$27,970
Janesville School District (WI)					$7,000	$7,000
Kenosha Unified School District (WI)		$127,123*		$24,520*		$151,644
Stoughton Area School District (WI)			$9,700^^			$9,700
Sun Prairie Area School District (WI)		$10,300	$19,400	$9,700		$39,400
Verona Area School District (WI)	$21,000	$20,600^	$19,400			$61,000
Wauwatosa School District (WI)		$30,900	$9,700			$40,600
Plymouth-Canton Community Schools (MI)			$5,200		$38,000	$43,200
Baltimore County Public Schools (MD)	$261,050~	$160,250	$5,700			$427,000
Talbot County Public Schools (MD)	$50,600	$51,500	$74,800	$79,700	$38,500	$295,100
Bloomington Public Schools (MN)		$21,100				$21,100
Eden Prairie Schools (MN)				$52,800	$53,500	$106,300
Edina Public Schools (MN)				$28,700	$2,500	$31,200
Inver Grove Heights Community Schools (MN)		$20,600				$20,600
Osseo Area Schools (MN)	$208,800	$225,000	$100,000			$533,800
Robbinsdale Area Schools (MN)		$570*	$5,701*			$6,271
Rochester Public Schools (MN)				$28,400		$28,400
Corvallis School District (OR)	$63,280					$63,280
Hillsboro School District (OR)				$15,600	$20,700	$36,300
Bellevue School District (NE)				$9,700		$9,700
Bellevue School District (WA)	$153,600	$83,500				$237,100
Hickman Mills School District (MO)	$60,200					$60,200
Bibb County School District (GA)			$18,700			$18,700
Broward County Public Schools (FL)		$13,000				$13,000
Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools (NC)		$24,655*	$10,740*	$9,700*	$8,200*	$53,295
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (NC)			$11,400*			$11,400
Salt Lake City School District (UT)				$11,200		$11,200
Harlem School District #122 (IL)	$57,200		$20,100			$77,300
New Trier Township High School (IL)	$5,500	$15,300	$9,700		$19,400	$49,900
Oak Park River Forest High School (IL)		$16,500		$46,100	$8,700	$71,300
Township High School District 113 (IL)		$19,000*			$5,000*	$24,000
Pittsburgh Public Schools (PA)		$76,000	$183,200	$96,100	$231,000	$586,300
Sto-Rox School District (PA)		$30,900				$30,900
West Chester Area School District (PA)	$8,250	$23,250		$9,700		$41,200
Lawrence Public Schools (KS)	$89,200	$89,250	$80,800	$68,500	$35,000	$362,750
Topeka Public Schools (KS)	$70,000	$21,600	$65,100			$156,700
Total:	$1,067,930	$1,107,713	$659,241	$505,321	$596,570	$3,936,775