

Listening and Learning

Methow Valley School District Superintendent, Tom Venable's Springboard Report to the Community



Tom Venable
Superintendent, Methow Valley School District

“Parent – *“Thank you for listening and engaging us in the conversation about our schools. We feel heard... Thank you for coming to the Valley!”*”

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Dear Methow Valley Students, Families, Staff, and Community Members,

Several months ago, shortly following my selection as the new superintendent of the Methow Valley School District, I shared a plan of listening and learning through the process of actively engaging with our students, families, community members, and staff using an Entry Plan approach.

This approach has served as a unique opportunity for our community to pause and reflect upon where we've been, where we are at present, and where we wish to be as we look forward to the future. Further, it has been a process that has afforded me the opportunity to listen and learn about the rich history associated with our schools and community, our many successes, and areas needing attention.

During my first six months, I've met with numerous parents and community groups, educational partners, labor leaders, and community leaders. I've engaged in a series of community listening sessions with a variety of stakeholders. I've individually interviewed every staff member and spent time observing teaching and learning within every classroom. I've engaged in numerous conversations with students and student groups about our schools. I've ridden bus routes and participated in a variety of district and community-sponsored events and activities. In addition, I've engaged in a comprehensive review of literature and research and engaged in data analysis in support of my learning about our school district's educational programs and academic performance both past and present.

At this time, I'm prepared to share what I've learned about our schools and our community. While this report does not conclude my learning about our schools and community, it does provide me with an opportunity to share what I've learned thus far, including a series of emerging themes and plan of action that

supports the development of future-ready learners and graduates prepared for a broad range of options.

After examining this report, I'd encourage you to share your feedback using the on-line survey posted on the district website. As you review the information, I

encourage you to reflect upon and respond to two key questions. They include:

- What within this report resonates with you?
- What do you believe I may have missed?

Your feedback in response to this report is essential as it will serve as a "springboard" for our work together to develop a shared vision for the future.

Throughout this process, it has become clear that I am fortunate to be a part of a community that cares deeply about our children, their education, and their future. Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your superintendent.

Sincerely,

Tom Venable

Superintendent, Methow Valley School District



A System of World-Class Teaching and Learning

We ensure high quality teaching and learning in every classroom, resulting in the development of future-ready learners inspired to contribute to a better world.

Parent – “How do we truly develop a ‘world-class’ education for every student in our community? How will we go about developing it within our schools? Thank you for listening... I’m confident you’ll help us answer these questions.”



Yong Zhao, Author of World Class Learners – “In the new global economy, the jobs that exist now might not exist by the time today’s students enter the workplace. To succeed in this ever-changing world, students need to be able to think like entrepreneurs: resourceful, flexible, creative, and global... cultivating independent thinkers who are willing and able to use their learning differently to create jobs and contribute positively to the globalized society.”

Commendations –

The Methow Valley School District enjoys a solid reputation of students performing at relatively high levels academically in comparison to school districts within the North Central region and across the state. Liberty Bell has received recognition as a “School of Distinction” by OSPI for its overall academic excellence as well as a national ranking among high schools by *U.S. News and World Report*. Students attribute their success in school to the strong relationships that exist among students and staff. Staff credits their success to the strong relationships with their students, the diverse talents of the staff, their collaborative and collegial nature, flexibility, and the strong partnership that exists between the community and our schools. Parents and community members state that our classroom teachers serve as our greatest strength within the school district. Certificated staff is actively engaged in Professional Learning Communities designed to support their own professional development. Families and community members describe deep connections to the place we live, an appreciation for our history, and acknowledgement of the tremendous talent that lies within our eclectic community.

Observations –

As parents, staff, and community members, we often hear and have read about the concept of developing world-class learners. Typically, the conversation or article focuses on a single classroom that serves as a pocket of innovation, inspiring us to think about what’s possible. However, it’s not often that we hear of a school providing what would be described as a world-class education and seldom if ever do we hear about an entire school district achieving such status. There are likely many reasons one could infer to as to why...

As a new superintendent in a district that enrolls approximately 630 innately curious learners, taught by a dedicated team of professionals, and supported by an exceptionally talented community, I firmly believe in our capacity to truly develop a world-class system of teaching and learning that prepares all students for a rapidly globalizing world. There are many pockets of innovation that exist within our schools at present to build upon.

Action Items –

- Develop a clear set of district-wide outcomes that promote alignment throughout our schools, focus on the development of the whole child, and are consistent with the values that exist within our community.
- Build and implement a rigorous Pre-K - 12 program of study that embeds common core state standard within highly engaging units of study, supports the monitoring of individual student learning through the use of formative and summative assessments, promotes student exhibitions of their learning, balances direct instruction with inquiry-based instructional strategies, provides students and staff with access to high quality materials, supports opportunities for family and community engagement in their child’s learning, and promotes student-initiated action as a result of their learning.
- Partner and collaborate in the design and implementation engaging, interdisciplinary units of study that capitalize on the tremendous talents that exist within our community and the abundant natural resources that exist within the Methow Valley.
- Expand Career and Technical Education (CTE) and Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) course offerings in support of students who graduate with options that include employment “and” technical education “and” college.
- Coordinate the development of a Pre-K through 12 World Language program, resulting in the development of multilingual students and graduates.
- Coordinate the development of a Pre-K through 12 Health and Fitness program, resulting in the development of healthy, active youth that develop enduring lifestyle attributes. Areas needing immediate attention include the Cub Gym heating system and Liberty Bell Conditioning Center.

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Innovation and Flexibility

We promote the development of innovative and personalized programs of study designed to meet the individual needs of every learner.

Commendations –

The Methow Valley School District collaborates with a variety of educational partners, community members, and families to support a variety of expeditionary and field-based learning experiences.

Using funds generated by the successful passage of a Capital Improvements Technology Levy, a 1:1 technology initiative was originated that included a focus on providing increased levels of professional development for staff in the integration of technology and greater mobility and access to high quality resources across all grade levels. Courses in Video Productions and Photography expose students to ‘industry standard’ equipment and support the development of employable skills.

The recent addition of coursework in the form of robotics, programing, forensics, and bio-medical coursework at Liberty Bell reflect the district’s efforts to increase the level of integration of science, technology, engineering and mathematics throughout the curriculum. Career and Technical Education coursework offered through programs such as the welding and robotics programs represents progress on behalf of the district toward the goal of developing students who are prepared to graduate with employable skills.

The REACH program provides educational programing services to students and families in grades K – 8 electing to home school their children part-time or full-time.

Before and after school course offerings and enrichment activities are facilitated by a talented and diverse group of community members. They provide our students with rich and diverse opportunities to explore their own interests and experience the joy life-long learning.

Observations –

The Independent Learning Center (ILC) is rapidly emerging as a pocket of innovation within our system as reflected by its growing enrollment. With the support of an exceptionally talented teaching staff, ILC students are engaged in the development of independent learning plans aligned to real-world, project-based and action-oriented learning experiences, supported through internships and mentorship. Providing our students with increased opportunities to develop the competencies necessary to graduate with options that include

employment “and” technical education “and” college will require us to strategically align the talents and resources that exist within our community to the interests and aspirations of our students.

Action Items –

- Promote increased flexibility through the development of a competency-based model of learning. Allow participating students to design and engage in rigorous coursework driven by student interests and passion.
- Expand Career and Technical Education course offerings by growing community-based partnerships, promoting increased access to internship and mentorship opportunities, and increasing student and staff access to ‘industry standard’ materials and equipment.
- Increase opportunities for students to engage in relevant, high interest coursework associated with the fields of science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics.
- Ensure the development of skilled users of technology and information and the development of responsible citizens who maintain a safe and responsible digital presence within the world by investing in a reliable technology infrastructure that can support the integration of technology, expanding professional development opportunities for staff, and increasing student access to a “global campus”.
- Expand capacity within the motor pool to provide student shuttle services in support of increased flexibility and internship opportunities for all students.

Building a Country that Builds Things, U.S. News and World Report –
“...Republicans and Democrats in Congress, state and local leaders – actually, just about everyone agrees that a strong manufacturing base is key to our nation’s future success. But we have a problem. We don’t have the people we need. Some 82 percent of manufacturers say they can’t find workers with the right skills. Even with so many people looking for jobs, we’re struggling to attract the next generation of workers... times have changed – manufacturing has changed. The jobs are challenging. Welders, CNC programmers and operators, electricians, pipefitters, machinists – to cite a few examples – are highly skilled. And the jobs pay well. The average manufacturing worker earns roughly \$77,000. The jobs take talent, know-how and teamwork, but they don’t require a four-year college degree. It’s time for us to admit that college isn’t for everyone, and a college degree doesn’t guarantee success.”



Learner Profile

We promote the positive attributes, attitudes, and skills associated with responsible citizens who are inspired to contribute to their communities, locally and globally.

Commendations –

Liberty Bell has established a defined set of character traits referred to as “Lion Pride”. Methow Valley Elementary developed a list of character traits contained within the “Cub Constitution”. Liberty Bell students engage in a variety of community service projects that contribute to their community.

Observations –

As the pace of change within today’s world seems to be increasing exponentially, fueled by continuous advancements in technology and a rapidly-globalizing economy, researchers are paying closer attention to the mounting body of evidence suggesting that the attributes and attitudes associated with one’s character, while not easily measured, are proving to be a strong predictor of a child’s success in family life, school, and future employment. In fact, emerging research in this area suggests that the non-cognitive variables (character traits) associated with a student’s development are as important, if not more so than a student’s cognitive achievement in predicting success and happiness. In Paul Tough’s book, *How Children Learn to Succeed*, he highlights the some of the positive attributes and attitudes displayed by a group of children in Harlem who have succeeded in the face of adversity and challenge. Through his time spent studying the students who participated in the Harlem’s Children Zone, he identifies a couple of key factors in each student’s development – the ability to learn from failure and the critical

role and responsibility of parents, teachers, and community members in the development of the whole child. In addition to reviewing the emerging research, I’ve spent time throughout the fall asking students and staff members to describe the attributes, attitudes, and skills that we wish to see displayed by our students. While each person has been able to provide responses they believe are essential, it has become apparent that we have not yet established a well-defined and clearly articulated set of attributes, attitudes, and skills that are consistently modeled, taught, reinforced, and used to promote individual reflection throughout our district.

Action Items –

- Reshape and refine our Strategic Vision to support the development of a balanced set of district-wide outcomes that include academic competencies and the attributes, attitudes, and skills we wish to develop in our students and graduates.
- Provide all staff with professional development focused in the area of character development.
- Provide families with training focused on developing the skills necessary to support their child’s character development.
- Embed daily opportunities for individual student reflection upon their personal growth and development within the school day using the attributes, attitudes, and skills.

James Heckman, University of Chicago, Nobel Laureate Professor of Economics –
“Much depends on the outcomes of these tests, and education is naturally shaped by them. Unfortunately, most are poor predictors of success in life because they measure only one skill—cognitive achievement—not the full range of skills that make a person valuable in family life, community life and the workforce. There is hard evidence that non-cognitive—or character—skills matter greatly. And, there is widespread evidence that failing to systematically develop, measure and reward positive character traits is failing America—in schools and in the workforce.”

A System of World-Class Teaching and Learning

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- Coordinate the development of a robust Pre-K through 12 Visual and Performing program.
- Promote the social-emotional well-being of our students by providing increased student and family access to support systems that include district-wide counseling services.
- Ensure time for all staff to engage in collaborative on-going, job-embedded professional development and planning time focused on aligning instruction and assessment practices to the vision, values and outcomes.
- Promote increased leadership capacity and development within our schools.



Equity and Excellence for All

We believe every student can achieve at high levels and benefits from access to a free and appropriate public education.

Commendations –

Across the state and throughout the country, curricular areas often thought of as existing outside of the “core” instructional program such as Health and Fitness, Visual and Performing Arts, World Language, and Career and Technical Education programs have been significantly reduced or eliminated over time. Worse yet, many districts have implemented a series of fee-based programs, creating inequities throughout the system. However, unlike many rural school districts elsewhere, our students and families benefit from a strong relationship between our schools and the many educational partners that exist within our community such as Classroom in Bloom, Room One, Twispworks, the Cove, Kiwanis, APT, Boosters, Methow Arts, Public School Funding Alliance, Methow Valley Education Foundation, local donors, and many others not mentioned. This partnership ensures all students have access to enriching, high quality learning experiences that many students would not receive otherwise due to the significant economic barriers faced by many of our families. As a district that places a high value on the development of the whole child, our community and educational partners have demonstrated a strong commitment to providing an equitable distribution of resources in support of all children, as demonstrated by the diverse course offerings and enriching activities available within our schools and community.

Observations –

While our students benefit greatly from the generosity displayed within our community, we continue to see an increase in the percentage of families that qualify for free or reduced meal services and continue to ask families to purchase supplies, pay course fees, contribute to the cost of field trips, pay athletics and activities play-to-pay fees, and various other fees. During the fall, I met with several families that described the financial burden and economic hardship created by the cost associated with supplies, course fees, field trips, athletics, and other school-related fees.

In addition to the financial inequities that exist throughout our system, it appears there are other areas needing attention as well. During the fall semester, fewer than 40% of our high school students were enrolled in at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course. Of the roughly 40%, a disproportionately smaller

percentage of students that qualify for free or reduced meal services were enrolled in at least one AP course.

Another noteworthy area needing attention is the nutritional well-being of our students. Research clearly indicates that for a student to be his or her best self as a learner, it’s important that they have access to a well-balanced and nutritious diet. Given the length of the school day, lunch is not enough for many of our students to sustain focused attention throughout the day. It’s for this reason that some staff provide their students with access to snacks by purchasing snacks out of their own pocket or by asking families to donate snacks while others do not provide snacks within their classroom. At present, our practices vary from one classroom to another.



Action Items –

- Work within the Budget Development Process to eliminate supply fees, course fees, field-trip expenses, pay-to-play fees, and other school related fees over time.
- Engage staff in the reading of the text, “Detracking for Excellence and Equity” by Burris and Garrity in support of our efforts to increase student enrollment in rigorous coursework.
- Establish a district-wide Healthy Snack program in support of the nutritional well-being of our learners.
- Provide translation and interpretation services.

“**Parent** – “As a family of four with two children actively engaged in athletics and activities, we struggle to afford all of the fees.””

“**Parent** – “I work two jobs so my son can participate in athletics.””



Family and Community Engagement

When families and community participate in the education of our youth, students achieve at higher levels. We promote continuous, two-way communication and active engagement in the learning process through a strong partnership between the home, school, and community.

Commendations –

The Methow Valley School District is characterized in part by high levels of family engagement and participation in their child's learning. The numerous educational partners that partner with our schools reflect a high value placed on student learning and commitment to ensuring the success of all students. Liberty Bell and the Methow Valley Elementary School both have an active Association of Parents and Teachers (APT) facilitated by strong leadership. Currently, the Methow Valley Elementary APT is reading the text, *Beyond the Bake Sale* in support of their learning about family and community engagement.

Observations –

The research is clear. Family engagement in a child's learning has a significant impact upon a student's achievement in school. Students whose families are engaged in their child's learning attend class more regularly, achieve at higher levels, and generally have better behavior both at home and at school. It's also clear that communities that make education a priority and partner with their schools positively impact student learning.

Action Items –

- Work with the Liberty Bell and Methow Valley Elementary Association of Parents and Teachers to facilitate an annual needs assessment to determine the needs of families at each school and create a plan to support families.

- Provide professional development for staff in the area of family engagement using the text, *Beyond the Bake Sale* by Karen Mapp.
- Initiate a District-wide Parent Advisory Counsel to the Superintendent beginning in the fall of 2014.
- Develop and distribute one Methow Valley School District *Family Handbook and Calendar* in advance of the fall 2014
- Develop and distribute a *Liberty Bell Course Handbook and Planning Guide* to support students and families as they navigate their way to graduation.
- Establish a District-wide Volunteer and Internship Coordinator.

Karen Mapp, Harvard Graduate School of Education – *“Family engagement is often seen as a separate activity, something that is done out of compliance. When it is an integrated part of the overall strategic plan to improve student performance and schools, that’s when it is systemic. I’m beginning to see in many districts a shift away from isolated, disconnected family engagement programs and activities... to thoughtful, purposeful initiatives that focus on student achievement and whole school improvement.”*



Early Childhood Education

We invest in early childhood education given its long-term academic, social-emotional, and economic benefits to our students and our community.

Commendations –

During the past six years, districts in the state of Washington and across the country have been faced with the significant challenges associated with deep budget cuts as a result of the economic recession. In spite of those challenges, the Methow Valley School District has invested in early childhood education using federal funds to provide kindergarten students with an enhanced program characterized by students attending four full days per week.

Observations –

At present, approximately 43% of the districts across the state currently receive basic education funding to implement a full-day kindergarten program five-days per week throughout the school year. Preliminary estimates suggest the number of fully funded districts in this area will grow to 44% during the 2014-15 school year. Districts receiving basic education funding from the state in support of full-day kindergarten are currently determined by percentage of families eligible for free or reduced meal services. While the percentage of families eligible to receive free or reduced meal services has climbed to nearly 54% in the Methow Valley, suggesting a need for increased services to students and families, we do not anticipate we will be eligible to receive basic education funding from the state to fully fund full-day kindergarten in 2014-15. As a result, our incoming kindergarten students are scheduled to receive seven weeks less instructional time in comparison to many of their same-age peers in many districts elsewhere. As a result, the achievement gap will continue to widen at an early age, resulting in the need to invest increased levels of our limited resources into academic and behavioral interventions.

Many countries elsewhere have already discovered what research associated with early childhood education clearly indicates... an investment into early childhood education generates an economic benefit and substantial rate of return to society. James Heckman, economist and professor at the University of Chicago has been recognized for his work in this area. He estimates that for every dollar invested into high quality early learning programs, there is a 7 – 10% rate of return. The return is reflected in part by the reduction in district spending on intervention and remediation, increased graduation rates, lower

healthcare costs, increased employment, reduced poverty, and lower crime rates. Given the compelling data associated with the benefits of early childhood education, districts such as the Bremerton School District, located on the Olympic peninsula, have invested heavily in the area of early childhood education. Once faced with the fact that nearly 40% of their incoming kindergarten students lacked the necessary readiness skills socially-emotionally and academically to be successful, they have all but eliminated the achievement gap within their community. At present, approximately 95% of their incoming kindergarten students display academic and social-emotional readiness skills upon entering kindergarten. Further they estimate a net savings of approximately \$500,000 annually given the reduced need to provide fewer interventions in grades 1st through 12th, allowing their school district to invest the revenue generated into other innovative programs of study within their schools.

We know this work does not begin at kindergarten, rather at birth or better yet, prior to birth. We can look to districts such as Bremerton and elsewhere to learn more about the relationships they have established with their early learning partners within their communities to ensure all children receive high quality early learning opportunities that support their future success and eliminate the achievement gap.

Action Items –

- Initiate a full-day kindergarten program five days per week as early as the fall of 2014-15 using additional revenue generated by increased student enrollment throughout the district.
- Initiate a comprehensive early childhood education needs assessment beginning in the spring of 2014.
- Work with Early Learning Partners to develop a shared vision and plan for ensuring every child in the Methow Valley receives affordable, high quality childcare and early learning opportunities from 0 to 5 years of age.

Parent – *“As a single parent of two children ages 5 and 1, I’m challenged to be the parent I wish to be, put food on the table, and make sure my children receive the best education possible... Finding affordable daycare for my youngest child throughout the week and for my older child on Fridays when there is no school has made it difficult to live in the Valley.”*



James Heckman, Nobel Laureate and Economics Professor at the University of Chicago – *“Professor Heckman’s analysis of the Perry Preschool program shows a 7% to 10% per year return on investment based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced costs in remedial education, health and criminal justice system expenditures.”*

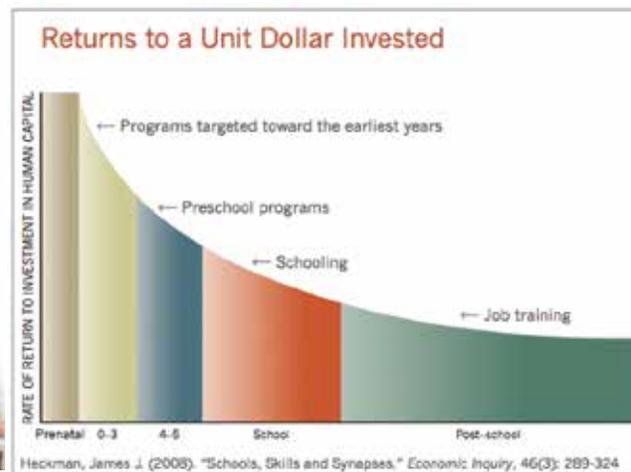
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RESIDENTIAL CUSTOMER



Early Childhood Education *Continued*

Research –



Early childhood education is an efficient and effective investment for economic and workforce development. The earlier the investment, the greater the return on investment.

Budget Development Process Update

The Methow Valley School District has developed an inclusive and transparent Budget Development Process designed to encourage broad stakeholder participation into the development of a balanced budget that strategically aligns our limited resources with the district's Strategic Vision.

As part of the process, we want to hear from you. Please log onto the district's website to access the Above-Baseline and/or the Budget Savings and Reduction form and submit your ideas.