

December 16, 2020

Fellow BEA members,

We have worked in good faith with the district to negotiate safe plans for the 2020-2021 school year. Our faith in this process was dealt a significant blow by recent district communication and actions, and we have no choice but to start taking stronger collective action. Below is a summary of recent events that have transpired, followed by several actions that we encourage BEA members to take.

At our Meet & Confer session last week Ivan Duran, Eva Collins, Jeff Thomas, and Melissa Devita shared their desire to start planning for a broad return to in-person services after winter break. We sought to understand why they would push for such a change when staff are already exhausted to the point of burnout and given the rising trends in COVID cases. We reminded them of the MOU language we had already spent weeks negotiating that would allow for small groups to safely return and reinforced to district leaders that if supporting student need was truly the goal, then it would be best met through plans developed by the professionals who know the students, have relationships with the families, understand what has worked and not worked over the past months, and could design targeted approaches for the needs of each student. In additional conversations throughout the week, we counseled that if there truly was a valid reason for a shift at this time, the only way to make it successful would be to create time for the impacted staff to understand, discuss, question, and have the autonomy to tailor any plans to meet the needs of individual buildings, students, and staff. District leaders expressed appreciation for the feedback and said they would use it to revise their plans, and at Thursday's Rep Council meeting, December 10, 2020, we communicated to BEA Reps that district leaders were actively working to ensure their communication was clear and supportive of staff.

On Friday, December 11, district and union leaders also met to address our differing interpretations of the current budget situation. Analysis of the district's own reports show excellent financial management and health, with annual end fund balances over \$30 million in each of the last three years – more than double the required reserve amount of 5-6% per Policy 6022. Despite this, district communications have been intent on painting a picture of imminent financial crisis that we do not agree exists. We discussed that we are in extremely uncertain times, and although there is a wide spectrum of potential budget outcomes ranging from best-case to worst-case scenarios, to date the narrative on that has been one-sided. Melissa Devita shared that there are not proposed cuts for the current year, and we agreed that our best path forward is through focusing on what we want to invest in and support rather than potential fears of what could be cut. Jeff Thomas shared a desire for us to overcome the narrative that the district does not care about its people.

Late Friday afternoon, December 11, Jeff Thomas emailed us with thanks for our sincere and heartfelt feedback and a promise that he and the BSD team had taken it very much to heart. He shared they would pause communication around potential broader return to in-person learning and would call a

Superintendent staff meeting on Monday, December 14 with time to focus on the reasoning behind any plans and opportunity for staff teams to discuss how they could make it work. Jeff Thomas shared guiding questions that would be used to facilitate discussion at each building, a Forms link that would be used to collect input, and intent to work with schools and staff on the next steps to “ensure we are prepared, with a focus on making sure we address the themes that we capture from the guiding questions.”

On Monday, December 14 a meeting invite was sent to Elementary principals, some of whom shared it only with Kinder, 1<sup>st</sup>, and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers and others who sent it to their full staff. Only 350 people were able to join the meeting and Ivan Duran spoke for 7 minutes, as the chat erupted with cries of staff being unable to access the meeting, audio functions not working, and requests to pause until technical issues could be resolved. Superintendent Duran shared that 2<sup>nd</sup> grade would be returning to buildings on January 21<sup>st</sup> with 1<sup>st</sup> grade and Kinder following shortly after, and a new schedule with A/B groups, half days, and take-home lunch would be followed. He then gave some of the reasoning for why these steps were necessary. At the end of the speech staff were directed to meet with their building teams and administrators were left to handle the fallout and field questions to which they had few answers.

These happenings are part of an all-too-familiar pattern that is pervasive within the Bellevue School District: A steady stream of stated intents that do not match actions and impacts. A frantic rush from one initiative and priority to the next. A sense of urgency and drive for progress that leaves no time to acknowledge individual human needs or impacts and definitively ensures that we will never focus on one thing long enough to meaningfully change it. This is the culture that can enable a Superintendent on one Monday to send a heartfelt personal plea to “do more than just ‘scratch the surface’ of equitably serving each and every student” and the next issue a directive that uproots all the work being done to that end. This is the culture that guarantees district commitments to disrupting racism and inequity will rarely ever be more than just words.

BEA leaders have worked to problem-solve in good faith as wave after wave of our Special Education, ESA, and MLL staff have paved the way toward establishing functional in-person services for our most impacted students, as scattered schedules and overloaded classes have overwhelmed our counselors and classroom teachers, and as concerns about COVID outbreaks and rising risk have stoked concern in our members. Through it all we have trusted that district leaders were upholding their end of the bargain to resolve needs and concerns, but the slow response and repeated failures of communication have threatened to divide and demoralize our membership. It does not have to be this way.

Therefore, we are calling upon members to leverage the power of our voices and stand up for the health and wellbeing of our staff, our students, and our community. Please engage in as many of the following actions as you are able:

1. **Contact the School Board and Superintendent** ([board@bsd405.org](mailto:board@bsd405.org) & [durani@bsd405.org](mailto:durani@bsd405.org)) and share short stories of what is working well for you now, what you need from district leadership, and any concerns you have about current district actions and the announcement that K-2 students are going back to buildings beginning January 21<sup>st</sup>.
2. **Complete the short survey** that will be sent out soon by BEA leadership to help us gauge further actions we are collectively prepared to take.
3. **Connect with administrators and parents.** Seek to build relationships, identify shared interests, and discuss how we can work together to protect the health and safety of our community and meet the educational needs of our students.
4. **Be hyper-vigilant about enforcing safety requirements** established in our [Memorandum of Understanding](#). Report every safety concern and violation to Human Resources, your district supervisor, and your BEA Rep. A checklist will be sent to all BEA Reps for distribution to members.

In solidarity,

Your BEA Executive Board