



October 16, 2019

Colleagues,

Following eight months of study, stakeholder engagement, and deliberation, the Board reached a unanimous decision at last night's meeting to re-purpose Blue Ridge Elementary School to a building-wide, community Early Learning Center effective the 2020-21 school year. This transition will necessitate the relocation of approximately 200 students and faculty from Blue Ridge to other elementary school sites; an impact that our Board did not take lightly. However, as their near year-long analysis revealed, the financial reality of serving 250 less elementary students than we did just nine years ago, coupled with the dire need to reverse our downward kindergarten readiness trends, resulted in the clear and convincing solution they identified.

Every year, fewer and fewer kindergarten students are coming prepared academically and socially, primarily due to lack of access for most families in our community. With less than 1 in 4 kindergarten students coming to us kindergarten ready, nearly half as less as the statewide average, this has resulted in dramatic challenges in meeting student needs. If you talk to any of our kindergarten or primary teachers they can relay first-hand the impacts and alarming trends they are seeing. Shockingly, recent data reveals that nearly 2/3rds of our incoming kindergarten students have no access to formal early learning exposure before stepping foot into our schools.

Transitioning Blue Ridge to an early learning center will be nothing short of a "game changer" for our school district, community, and students. As we discussed last night, imagine the impact in just two years, when not one-in-four, but two or three-in-four come to kindergarten ready due to the unprecedented access and opportunity that will now be available for Walla Walla families? Instead of pouring immense resources into remediating incoming students (like we are forced to do now), we could be using those same dollars and services to ENRICH their learning. Our School Board has now made this vision a reality with last night's decision.

Although elated with the early learning opportunities this decision provides, our School Board also expressed deep concern for Blue Ridge students, staff and families during this transition. Last night the Board provided specific supports, guidance, and measures be taken to ensure our entire Blue Ridge community is cared for. As directed, they provided the following guidance and expectations as we implement this transition:

- Establish transition plans that allow individual Blue Ridge families/students the ability to remain together in their new school
- Ensure that transportation is made available to Blue Ridge attendance area families to and from their new school
- Maintain dual language program access for current Blue Ridge program students
- Establish a Spanish-speaking point-of-contact person who can serve to assist and support all of our Blue Ridge families through this transition and into the following school year
- Develop a staffing plan that maintains employment for current Blue Ridge staff
- Ensure sufficient resources are available to support Blue Ridge students and families at the transitioned schools

- Develop transition plans that prioritize appropriate class sizes
- Provide the Board with the following reports/data regarding this matter:
  - On or before January 21, 2020: Overview of the transition plan for 2020-21
  - September `20: Update on the transition
  - November `20: Former Blue Ridge family survey and attendance data review
  - May `21: I-ready performance data for former Blue Ridge Students
- In light of this undertaking, the Board also directed that we delay the boundary review process until the 2020-21 school year. This will ensure that staff attention and resources are fully committed to supporting Blue Ridge students, families, and staff this year and next.

As you can imagine, there is a tremendous amount of work, outreach, and coordination that lay ahead as we implement the Board's decision; from Blue Ridge student/staff transitions to the development of the early learning center concept. As we have continued to do throughout this entire process, we remain committed to working collaboratively with staff, union leadership, parents, and community partners. I will continue to communicate and provide regular updates to all staff and stakeholders as we solicit feedback, develop plans, and finalize supports in accordance with our Board's expectations.

As always, if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Wade Smith', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Wade Smith, Ed.D  
Superintendent