

February 17, 2021

An Open Letter to the Vancouver Community

Fifteen years ago, I was recruited in a national search to be an applicant for Vancouver Public Schools' superintendent successor. At the time, I was the superintendent in Apple Valley, California, a school district of approximately 15,000 students. Most of my career, however, was in Washington's public schools, including a four-year stint teaching and coaching at Camas High School early in my career. I have never regretted landing in America's Vancouver—this is a special place.

Serving as VPS superintendent and stewarding our schools on behalf of children and families has been the honor of my lifetime. To be fair, it has not always been easy. The size and complexity of the system has created unique opportunities, different points of view and challenges.

I have been most proud of our collective impact in partnership with the community. We have kept our “true north” mission—a focus on the whole child—as the central focus of our strategic vision and decisions. The pandemic made our job as educators more difficult. On balance, however, leading the district has been fulfilling and often fun. Together, we have achieved unparalleled results, including:

- Passage of five operating levies and two technology levies with voter approval ranging from 60% to 71%—generating more than \$650.6 million in local funds (VPS has a 56-year record of continuous support for district levies);
- School facility investments—totaling approximately \$563 million from a voter-approved bond measure, a state smaller class-size grant and the state construction assistance program. The last bond sale was financed at historically low rates of 1.39%. The total cost savings from bond sales total approximately \$88 million from original projections;
- A 1:1 technology initiative—providing digital learning devices to all students and teachers in grades K-12 along with a wireless network infrastructure to connect them long before anytime, anywhere learning was a pandemic requisite;
- Family-Community Resource Centers—mobilizing partner services and financial assistance to support poverty-affected children in 20 schools. For every dollar the district invests, we net approximately \$5 in return on that investment from community partners and supporters. In a decade, partnerships have grown from 22 to more than 200. Last year, approximately \$7 million in community resources were channeled to address barriers to student learning in VPS schools;
- New educational choices—including Vancouver Innovation, Technology and Arts (VITA) Elementary, Vancouver iTech Preparatory, Fort Vancouver Center for International Studies and Spanish and Mandarin language learning programs; and
- A dramatic increase in the on-time graduation rate—improving from 64% in 2010 to nearly 90% in 2020—and an extended graduation rate of 92% with African American, Latino, and differently-abled students making the greatest gains.

As Vancouver has shown, public schools can close opportunity and achievement gaps. They can cultivate hope, opportunity and agency for every child. They can prepare each and every graduate for college, careers, and life regardless of zip code. They can serve as a catalyst for community transformation.

Forty years ago, I decided to become an educator. I wanted to give back to those who helped me and pay it forward to future generations. Public schools, and the teachers and staff who served in them, transformed my trajectory. Neither of my parents graduated from high school. Neither sets of grandparents graduated from high school. I know something about generational poverty. For me, district leadership has been heart work.

I applaud Vancouver's educators and their heroic work during this pandemic. It illustrates their undying commitment to serve with love. I also want to thank board members past and present for their commitment to

improving the lives of children and families. Their unwavering dedication to making a positive difference is an inspiration.

Vancouver is my adopted home, and it will remain so in retirement. I love this community. Thank you for the privilege of serving as your superintendent of schools.

I will forever be a champion for Vancouver's children and its public schools.

Gratefully,

Steven T. Webb, Ed.D.