

September 2023 Board Beacon article

Student belonging and supports focus this year and beyond

While some may get excited about certain holidays or vacations, the highlight of my year is back-to-school time. “‘Tis the season” takes on new meaning for me every September. Seeing students’ faces as they enter school the first day, or meet their teacher and classmates, often with a blend of nervousness and excitement, is a bucket filler for me. Even more satisfying is to see those same students a few weeks later feeling more confident and joyful as they meet new friends, learn and play at school.

The first few weeks are especially important for students and families to feel supported and a strong sense of belonging as it can set the stage for more positive interactions and ultimately more productive learning. Staff spend a lot of time and effort thinking of ways to foster those early connections. Elementary schools start the year with family-teacher conferences to orient students and their families to the school, classroom, expectations, learning goals, etc. Conferences are also a time for families to ask questions and share about their student’s specific needs. By the time students arrive for their first school day, they have already met their teacher and seen the classroom, which makes for a smoother start for everyone!

Middle and high school students also have supports for students who are just starting middle school as a sixth grader or starting high school as a ninth grader. They get a day to explore the campus with just their grade-level peers, try out their lockers, and get all the information a new student on campus needs to successfully navigate their first days at that school. The rest of the students join in the following school day.

Before students and families even set foot on their school campus, many attend the Back-to-School Fair and meet members of their school leadership, district departments, and community support organizations. Families are supported with access to sports physicals, immunizations, school supplies as well as youth activities and time to get their questions answered before school begins. This was the third-annual fair and I’m impressed to see it grow each year. I am grateful to the district staff who organized the event and for the district and community organizations who provided the activities and information for families. A special thanks goes to Foundry10 for donating funds for school supplies once again, to UW Physicians for providing the sports physicals, and Bird’s Eye Medical for administering the student immunizations.

In addition to what schools do to prepare for students’ first days, many unsung heroes operate behind the scenes to help ensure a successful school year. At their September 12 board meeting, the board heard a presentation from technology, facilities, safety, nutrition services, communications, and human resources departments, who play important roles in opening schools. You can see the depth of information they presented on the [board agenda](#). From culinary creations to entice students to try new foods or see how it is prepared, to completed bond projects to update schools and fields in time for students’ return to campus, to converting most back-to-school paperwork to online processes, our school district keeps improving!