From "Randy Barber <randy.barber@bvsd.org>" <randy.barber@bvsd.org>
Subject **Possible OpEd from BVSD's District Accountability Committee**
To Gary Garrison <ggarrison@prairiemountainmedia.com>
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Gary,

A member of the District Accountability Committee forwarded me the following letter... and I told them that they may want to consider submitting it as an OpEd in the paper.

It's pretty powerful, I think... but I'm imagining that it is a bit long (1434 characters) for the paper. Do you guys have standards that I can share with them? Is Thursday still the deadline for submissions for the Sunday paper?

An Open Letter to BVSD Parents on School Consolidation and Civic Engagement

Dear fellow Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) parents,

This month, we have the opportunity to attend a series of meetings to discuss declining enrollment and the financial pressures facing our schools. Most importantly, we'll get to share *our* ideas for what we can do about it.

These won't be run-of-the-mill community input sessions. District officials will ask us to review our priorities side-by-side with other parents, discuss the real-life tradeoffs of school consolidation scenarios, and generate solutions that are "win-win" for our entire community.

That's *really* different from, say, delivering a two-minute public comment at a BVSD Board of Education meeting. And maybe a little outside of our comfort zones, too!

The District Accountability Committee (or DAC), which I help organize as a volunteer, can help parents wondering how to approach these highly interactive sessions.

The DAC is a group of 50 or so parents and community liaisons representing nearly every BVSD school. We convene each month to learn about and provide input on the district's budget, improvement plan, and policies.

Whether we're reviewing the academic calendar, debating school discipline practices, or discussing the role of technology in our classrooms, DAC members disagree about *a lot*. Yet we have lively discussions, communicate respectfully, and regularly find our way to consensus.

Today, many of us are as committed to the success of fellow DAC members' children and schools as we are to our own.

This doesn't happen by accident.

As we look ahead to the school consolidation meetings, here are three strategies from the DAC that can help parents come together across our lines of difference to propose solutions that benefit our entire community:

1) Do some homework (if you can).

DAC members strive to show up to our meetings with a shared understanding of the issue at hand. Whenever possible, we pull together differentiated pre-work options that reflect DAC members' unique motivations, various background knowledge, and very real time constraints. In that spirit, here are some recommended pre-reads for the declining enrollment sessions:

If you have <5 minutes

- Watch the BVSD Declining Enrollment Video

If you have 10-15 minutes

- Read the BVSD Declining Enrollment 2-Pager
- Review the BVSD Declining Enrollment website, especially a teacher's perspective

If you have 20-30 minutes or more

- Watch the January 27 BVSD Board Meeting as you review the presentation slides

- Review the Boulder Reporting Lab series BVSD: The Enrollment Reckoning
- Skim Revisiting Research on School Closings: Key Learnings

Real talk: DAC members aren't always able to get our homework done, and you might not be able to either. That's okay! Show up anyway. Your voice matters, and you'll learn a lot by listening to the questions, concerns, and ideas of fellow parents.

2) Bring a solutions-orientation (but avoid bringing THE solution).

According to Colorado state law, the DAC's role is to *advise* our elected board members, who ultimately make decisions and provide direction to the superintendent. Our "job" is to work together to support school and district improvement — not to push a specific agenda. To shape our approach, we consulted a superb parent advisory council guidebook and the principles of authentic school-family partnership.

As such, DAC members work together to:

- Provide **information, data, and objective analyses** on shared priorities
- Recommend **options** to inform decision-making
- Focus on **systemic issues/needs** (i.e., district-wide patterns/trends)
- Advance change from **within** the system

This is different from direct advocacy, where we might:

- Share a particular, often **well-defined viewpoint** on a specific issue
- Champion **a defined outcome or course of action** to be taken
- Focus on **individual issues/needs** (i.e., student- or school-specific)
- Demand change from **outside** of the system

Our cooperative approach to wielding influence — building relationships, discussing data, and exploring flexible options rather than a single solution — can feel quite different from the lobbying and activism many of us associate with "good" advocacy. But it has proven effective.

As just one example, two years ago the DAC turned a host of parental concerns into a range of ideas connected to the district's improvement priorities. Today, many of our recommendations are reflected in the All Together for All Students strategic plan and public dashboard. These are big wins, and they didn't happen overnight. The pace of change can sometimes feel frustrating. At the same time, it's inspiring to see how parents' deep partnership with district officials and one another over many years nudged important changes along as larger shifts were unleashed.

If parents can come together at the community engagement sessions next month and provide useful, coordinated input — and avoid rivalrous advocacy campaigns — our district leaders will be able to more effectively move our good ideas into action. I truly believe that's what our kids need from us right now.

3) Advocate, but do it for all kids.

Another benefit of the DAC's approach is that it reveals the many ways our children's needs and priorities overlap with others, and where we can take collaborative action.

As parents, we each have direct knowledge of what's working (or not) for our children and families. One of our most important jobs is to use this information to advocate for our kids. We should *never* stop doing that!

Indeed, our personal insights are invaluable. In the context of district-wide decisions, they are also incomplete — important pieces of a larger puzzle. To place our experiences into a broader context, DAC members listen to one another's stories, learn about the perspectives of families across the district, and regularly encounter narratives that challenge and expand our thinking.

For example, when DAC members were discussing district-wide homework policies last fall, two elementary school parents engaged in a spirited debate. One felt that more homework was critical for his child to build fluency with math facts. Another felt that mandatory worksheets would take time away from the household chores that help her children build responsibility (called "task initiation" in the research).

After reviewing the same information on the pros and cons of homework, these parents had come to different conclusions about what would be best for their kids. Neither was wrong. Both could have tried to get their preferred approach codified into policy. But that's not what happened. Instead, they found common ground. These parent leaders came together to support policy revisions that balanced their differing perspectives. In doing so, they helped

their own children and a lot of other kids (and families), too.

Something else happened, at least for me. As I read the research, reviewed the data we had collected from school teams, and listened to other parents, *I changed my mind.* During the upcoming community conversations, you might, too. Be curious when disagreements arise. Stay open to new and differing perspectives. That's how we'll find those win-win opportunities.

I hope parents will be inspired by the DAC to explore school consolidation options with a mindset that's focused not on a single student or school, but our entire community.

Look, I'm anxious. My family loves the teachers at our neighborhood elementary school and our diverse, caring community. We treasure the school grounds and the vast opportunities it presents for outdoor learning and play. As a single-car household, we also count on the convenience of being able to walk or ride our bikes to and from school. I don't really want anything to change.

But I am mindful that much of what I love about our school and district won't be financially feasible in a few years if we don't take coordinated, mutually beneficial action today.

I don't have the answers. But, together, I think *we do*.

My experience on the DAC has shown time and time again that if we can agree on a single good idea and set it on the right trajectory, it can pick up speed (and other good ideas) and snowball into something even more impactful.

That fills me with hope and resolve. Our kids are counting on us.

And our kids are watching. In the coming weeks, parents will be asked about the learning experiences we want for our children and to share our ideas on what comes next. We'll be invited to participate in *democratic dialogue* and to model *civic engagement* for our children.

We can choose to let our shared values animate these discussions. We can choose to imagine and co-create a future that — if we get things right — could turn out to be pretty spectacular *for all of us*. We can choose to become a stronger community on the other side of this process.

Or we can decide not to. Either way, our kids will be watching.

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