



Mr. Barry Buchanan  
Chair, Homeless Strategies Workgroup  
Whatcom County Council

July 7, 2020

Dear Mr. Buchanan:

I'm interested in the open positions on Whatcom County's Homeless Strategies Workgroup. My skill base and interests fit well against the open Workgroup areas. I've been retired for almost seven years and am currently working on a number of community endeavors. I know a number of members of the Workgroup and offer my services if you are still in need of additional members.

In brief, I was a school administrator (elementary principal and special services director) for the Ferndale, Bellingham and Seattle School Districts. I retired from Ferndale in 2013 where I served as Special Services Director which included managing 22 programs/grants/initiatives (approximately 215 staff; approximately \$11 million annual budget). Three of the programs were: 1) managing the federal McKinney-Vento program supporting approximately 200 students without housing; 2) managing the district's special education program for 700+ special needs students (e.g., those with developmental, behavioral, health, medically-fragile, communication, severe-profound needs,...), and 3) managing programs for students caught in domestic violence and abuse situations (e.g., co-managing with DVSAS a three-year national demonstration grant through the Violence Against Women Act on helping middle-school 'bystanders' to take active roles against sexual harassment/assault).

Specifically, the McKinney-Vento task resulted in our district doubling our count of students in need of housing from approximately 100 to 200. It wasn't a case of the actual number of students without housing doubling—it was an issue of using better child find and outreach strategies to key neighborhood information sources. We developed an extremely assertive approach to serving students without housing—essentially providing services to homeless youth by the day after we located them, and in no case, taking more than three working days to provide educational services in the student's home school. This was challenging in that district budgets throughout our County (and throughout Washington) consistently underfund district transportation, special education, and McKinney-Vento budgets—meaning that district folks would frequently have to hammer out multi-district transportation arrangements and staffing support models when no or few dollars existed for such collaborations. It also meant drawing community partners (e.g., Brigid Collins, Lydia Place, Catholic Community Services, the Opportunity Council) into whatever sort of partnership a child or teenager would need.

Imagine the dilemma of a student showing up in the district late on a Friday afternoon (the time when so many fragile youth appear in school districts) because of a state-made placement in a Ferndale state-funded group home, finding out that the homeless youth is now in Ferndale because of sexual or developmental or severe aggression issues, and further learning that the youth's prior district served the child with two full-time paraeducators. Again, it's just past 5:00 pm, the usual community partners are closed for the weekend, and this teen needs to be in school on Monday. Thank goodness that we had so many wonderful agency, district, and private folks who persevered in creating support umbrellas—even when having to deal with budget shortfalls and union contracts.

During my seven years of retirement, I've been involved with a number of homelessness efforts, though to be clear, most have been in support of my wife's (Ann) efforts. She has been the Unitarian

Fellowship's Family Promise Coordinator working with the Interfaith Coalition for the past three years...and I've been Ann's primary assistant/gopher/helper/driver/whatever-is-needed person. This meant occasionally sleeping at the Garden Street Methodist's Family Promise shelter during pre-Covid days. (Ann did far more of this work as she slept at the Civic Field Women's shelter every Monday night for three months this last Winter). Because I've been committed to other community endeavors (Civil Advocacy Committee, Whatcom Humane Shelter, staging electoral forums for community groups,...), I've enjoyed being a bit in the background while supporting Ann's work.

In terms of academic/research/document development comments, I've a doctorate from Syracuse University in creating school-based partnerships for children's emotional disturbance; a master's degree in children's behavior disorders from American University; and an early childhood (preschool-second grade) teaching credential from the University of California at Santa Barbara. I've written two books on serving students with moderate/severe/profound special needs in inclusive schools (Program Models for Mainstreaming, Aspen Publishers; Creating Tomorrow's Schools Today, Teacher's College Press/Columbia University). Both books are compilations of stories of educators and parents creating systemic change in their local systems in spite of bureaucratic and budgetary resistance. And as with all school administrators, I've written or co-written countless grants and project progress reports.

I know from listening to and working with literally hundreds of homeless youth and their families that homelessness is a traumatic situation. It results in long-term hurt and pain for almost every youth and parent in such situations. It also goes without saying that whenever possible, our work must address not only reactive strategies around homelessness, but also strategies that address the forces that push people into homelessness. Again, I'm very involved in our community, but do believe strongly in public service. If you are interested in my being a part of the Workgroup or in talking further, please call at your convenience.

Sincerely,



Michael S. Berres, Ph.D

3040 Silvern Lane  
Bellingham, WA 98225  
(360) 738-7083 (h); (360) 393-6802 (c)  
ammab81@gmail.com