

Address by Vickie Ybarra on Behalf of the Board at the Welcome Back Celebration for All Yakima School District Staff on August 28, 2007:

Good Morning. On behalf of the District Board of Directors, I'd like to welcome you to the 2007-2008 school year. I trust your summer was a time of reflection and renewal, and that you're once again ready to take on the joys and challenges of a whole new school year. Thank you for being here and thank you for the work you're prepared to do this school year with your students, with OUR students.

This morning I'd like to take a few moments to honor you all for the work you do with students, to recognize the incredible challenges that you face successfully each day, and to thank you for your great work. I'd also like to talk a bit about the board's work, and share with you a wonderful opportunity on the horizon for us.

The article in the paper this past Saturday on the WASL release caused some of us mixed feelings. Six out of eleven schools in the state now in Step 5 of school improvement are schools in the Yakima Valley, including three in our district.

Unfortunately, the language of classification used in the No Child Left Behind scheme is limiting (to say the least) and doesn't adequately reflect the tremendous strides and success with students being achieved in our buildings, all of our buildings, each and every day. It doesn't reflect that scores have been improving, despite the fact that each year we have a greater proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering our schools. The NCLB classification doesn't show the challenges involved in moving large numbers of students who come to us speaking only Spanish and for whom we are charged with the complex task of moving to English in a constructive deliberate manner that builds on their existing knowledge to strengthen not just their English skills but their future ability to learn complex higher level concepts.

Limited English abilities and abject poverty of our students are not excuses, they are very real challenges that you are meeting each day. Each of you give these students, our students, tools they need to be successful. Scores are improving, students are achieving, and step by step we are creating success TOGETHER.

I want you to know that we, the Board of Directors, recognize the exceptional work you are doing – those of you who interact with students and parents each day in all of our buildings. We know we are asking a great deal of you – asking you to step up, in many cases, to do things in new ways, and, in some cases, to use new tools to address the needs of our students. We know we are asking you to work harder than you ever have before, to continue your own learning, and to engage students who often are in less-than-ideal circumstances - to take students from where they are, not where we wish they were, and bring them to higher standards. We recognize that you are meeting the challenge, and we thank you for your extraordinary work. Please know that we will NOT allow this community to believe that the “Needs Improvement” label that NCLB puts on some of our schools or on our district means “Failing” in this district or in our buildings, and we will continue to communicate the very real success you and our students are producing each day. We are proud to be engaged in this work with you, and proud to be counted as colleagues with you exceptional people.

So, a brief update on the work of the Board. Many of you know that earlier this year, from January through June, the Board was engaged in creating new Goals for the district as a part of our revision of the District Roadmap. In the context of our board move to Policy Governance, we engaged in Community Linkage sessions – small interactive groups of targeted segments of our community, along with larger open meetings. We held 14 of these meetings in all from January through June. We asked all the people in all these groups the same question:

“Envision what the Yakima community will be like when our kindergartners graduate from high school. What skills, knowledge and abilities will they need in order for them to live successful and productive lives and to contribute to the community?”

From their collective answers, along with other information the board had access to, we DRAFTED new goals. We then took that draft back out to the community of people who had helped in the initial feedback sessions for their input prior to finalizing these in June. Using this process, we came up with 4 new goals for the district:

1. **Mastery of the Basics and Beyond:** Students will demonstrate academic proficiency, incorporating technology tools necessary for such proficiency.
2. **Civic and Global Participation:** Students will be actively engaged in the community and be prepared to participate in a global society, culturally and socially.
3. **Innovation and Creative Expression:** Students will demonstrate creativity and artistic expression beginning early in their educational process, resulting in creative problem solving, critical thinking, and an increased appreciation for the arts.
4. **Skills for Successful Living:** Through a collaborative process involving the school, community, parents and families, students will demonstrate skills necessary for success in work, school and life.

Our thanks to the many of you who spent the same six months working on the District Improvement Plan that is currently being aligned with these new goals, so that they fit together to form the revised Roadmap that will be in place by the end of October.

Lastly, I'd like to share with you a great opportunity in early learning that is taking shape in our community, and that will impact all of us in our work. You've probably heard that the Gates Foundation has identified a specific geographic area encompassing north and east Yakima as one of two Community Demonstration projects for early learning in the state. They've pledged a major investment for 10 years starting in 2008. The ESD 105 has been coordinating this effort and has served as the fiscal agent for the planning period over the past 6 months. It is a community-wide effort with hundreds of people involved, and with the district as a major partner. I've had the privilege of being involved in this effort since its inception, when a small group worked to position Yakima County to attract the attention of The Gates Foundation, as we knew they were scouring the state for potential demonstration communities. The Goal of this project, now called Thrive by Five Yakima, is for all children to arrive at kindergarten ready for school.

I share this with you because of the tremendous opportunity this represents for us. Over the coming 2-3 years, I believe that because of this effort and investment we will see **SUBSTANTIALLY** more kindergartners coming to

us prepared to learn - children from the most challenging circumstances in north and east Yakima. And this effort will complement the work we're doing to address the challenges faced by those students. You'll be hearing much more about this effort in the coming months as the Project Plan submitted just yesterday to the Gates Foundation goes through the review, negotiation, and final approval process before implementation beginning in January.

So in conclusion... on behalf of the board, I'd like to thank you once again for the work you're about to undertake for this school year...

- ... for your commitment to students,
-for your commitment to high standards,
- ...and, as always, for your selfless work.

Thank you.