

## March Board Newsletter

To the North Mason community –

This past fall, I stepped in as an appointed school board member to fill the remainder of the District 5 term. It has been a whirlwind getting up-to-speed with the goings-on of a District grappling with the effects of a global pandemic and the ensuing see-saw of regulations from state and federal governments.

I'm continually impressed with the tenacity of the District's staff as they've navigated this stressful and complicated time, compounded by the failure of the District's two previous attempts to replace a levy that would have supported and supplemented school programs. I've also commiserated and deeply empathized with all of our parents who've had to juggle so much during this pandemic, including taking on a more hands-on role in their students' learning.

Now that all of our students are back in school for at least part of the week – high school students returned on March 15 – we can all breathe a little easier. I firmly believe that students belong in school, if that is their parents' choice, and that schools provide more than a place to learn. Schools nurture students by supporting their academic learning, their social skills, their mental health and in some cases their physical well-being.

Many of our students are homeless or live below the poverty line, receiving much-needed services through school, such as food, assistance finding housing and in some cases basic health care. Our staff are also mandatory reporters if they see signs of neglect or abuse. Living with a teacher, my husband Garrett Bull, I know the impact a teacher can have on a student's personal safety. By supporting our schools, we support all the children in our community, and especially the most vulnerable.

Even during remote learning, many of our students thrived from the programs offered to them.

This month, I watched a ZOOM performance of "A Wrinkle in Time" from the NMHS theatre students. These student actors were impressive to behold. As one put it, "My favorite thing about working on 'A Wrinkle in Time' was getting to still perform with the theatre kids during this crazy time ... In theatre I have gained confidence and more knowing of myself."

The pandemic lead to not only the loss we all feel at not being able to gather and fully support our students, but it also lead to increased costs (around \$2.3 million in operational and supply costs) and declining revenues (\$2 million loss from the state due to enrollment decline), as well as increased demand on some of our smaller departments.

IT incident requests have increased by more than 40 percent, yet the department has not been able to keep up with the demand, leading to a 32% decrease in efficiency (completed IT incidents) compared to this time last year.

The loss of local levy support during an already stressful time has been demoralizing for staff and has led to other unforeseen financial impacts -- without local levy support, the District has lost out on around \$240,000 in state forest dollars.

Within NMSD's borders, we have a substantial amount of state-owned timberland. In years past, the state has granted NMSD regular funding to make up for the local levy dollars the District would have collected from property taxes if those state timberlands were developed.

Since North Mason no longer has a levy, the state no longer feels compelled to compensate the District for those undeveloped timberlands.

Only a portion of your property taxes goes toward North Mason -- the "school tax" goes toward paying the principal and interest on the 2013 construction bond voters approved for the new high school. The other two "State School" taxes go directly to the state and are re-allocated to local districts. However, funds from taxpayers in a district like North Mason, with more property than students, help support larger districts in Seattle and Bellevue, which have more students than property.

North Mason School District is one of 6 school districts in the state without a local enrichment/operational levy, and those other five districts have a student population of a combined 149. NMSD serves 2,200 students.

It's not all doom and gloom. We have people behind the scenes who are working hard to stretch every penny and go after every opportunity.

Superintendent Dana Rosenbach has set budget guidelines for next year that prudently do not anticipate a levy from voters. Finance Director Ashley Murphy has been banking our month-end balances to hold us over and has been strategic in claiming federal grant dollars from the state to recoup some of our pandemic costs.

We are also one of very few Districts taking advantage of FEMA dollars. Ashley has put in long hours to make this happen, all without the assistance of a grant coordinator, who we had to lay off last year. In the last two years, we've doubled the amount of federal money that's come to the District.

"It will pay off," Ashley said recently of her long hours and weekly check-ins with FEMA. "FEMA has made it unbelievably cumbersome (to claim these dollars). But for us, it's vital. We need it."

Ashley is leaving us for a position in the Federal Way School District next school year, and she will be sorely missed.

I have no doubt that this District and the community will pull through for our students. Echoing Ashley, it's vital that we do this. We need to.

School Board Director #5  
Arla Shephard bull