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Subject: Welcome Back & Sally Forth!
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Dear Colleague:

Good morning, and welcome back from spring break! I hope you had a wonderful break, whether you spent time with family, friends, or you chaperoned students to such events as [championship choir competitions](#) in New York City! While many of us were away from schools, our custodial, maintenance, technology, and other support staff were preparing schools for our return. Please join me in thanking all of them, and considering for just a moment how far we've traveled in preparing to *sally forth* into the challenge of new online state assessments that begin this month.

You may recall that last year at this time, a number of Washington districts were "testing" the new Smarter Balanced assessments (SBA) our district's students will take this year. We did not participate in that pilot; instead, we stayed focused on our priorities, learned from those pilot districts, and as a result, we are in a solid position to administer those tests successfully beginning next week.

Leading up to this testing season, you have likely heard of —*and been involved in*— at least some of the buzz and strategic work of preparing us well for the new experience. Many staff have been immersed for months to ensure this new assessment, administered online, is a reliable indicator of what our students know and are able to do.

1. **A year ago**, our information systems and technology (IT) department was evaluating the new Chromebooks technology. The board was considering an August budget approval that included \$1.7 million to buy 3,400 Chromebooks. (Voter approval of the 2010 Building Repair & Technology Levy made this possible.) It was IT's responsibility to solicit bids for and buy Chromebooks, to ensure infrastructure was in place for them, and to deploy them in schools by September. Since the Chromebook-laden carts rolled out last fall, IT has been testing and balancing wireless connections to ensure that each student will have seamless internet access. IT has been troubleshooting *all things Chromebook* to anticipate and eliminate test-day issues.
2. **While IT was planning the logistics last summer**, teaching and learning staff created and scheduled hundreds of hours of professional development that started in September. This PD included the basics of simply turning on a Chromebook and showcased the artistry possible when technology is infused into instruction and learning. [Online videos and instructions](#) made just-in-time and when-it-is-convenient PD available for every skill level.
3. Curriculum and Assessment Director Catherine Matthews launched a **winter-to-spring "road show,"** travelling upon request from school to school to demonstrate and explain everything SBA to staff and parents. If you attended one of Dr. Matthews' SBA parent information sessions, you saw a transformation. Most parents had never seen a Chromebook, and they came to the sessions with concerns about a new test that some criticize as "too hard."

However, after an hour's time overcoming tech worries and trying their hands at a sample SBA on a Chromebook, parents gained a different perspective. Yes, they agree that the tests are rigorous. They also left with a better understanding and appreciation for the level of learning and instruction happening every day in Everett Public Schools. (You can also check out the assessment department's [SBA videos for parents](#) online.) The [Daily Herald front page](#) article on Sunday featured some of those parent comments —and much in-depth information about the benefits of SBA.

4. **Because voters approved this technology investment,** because IT staff moved at great speed to deploy 3,400 Chromebooks into schools, and because of pro-active, before-school-started PD planning and staff collaboration, students and staff have had their hands on Chromebooks almost from day one this year. Each of our students taking the SBA and every staff member administering SBA has been provided the opportunity to be familiar with the tool. This is quite an undertaking, and one that I believe is unmatched by most districts in the state.

Even with this level of preparation and support, the SBA can feel like “one more thing” when so much is changing. Washington States’ move into the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Teacher Principal Evaluation Project (TPEP) have required significant investments of preparation time and support. This level of change and the physical and emotional energy to gear up and to prevail is both exhausting and exhilarating, often at the very same time.

Whether it is exhausting or exhilarating, frustrating or challenging, as education professionals you and I know that we are accountable and responsible for doing our best in these challenging times for our students —they very much need us to be steady as a rock and focused on their learning. In the end (as if there is ever any end to “change” in our time), we will acclimate to these changes, and we will leverage these changes to improve how and what students learn. In the time I’ve been a part of this school district, I’ve learned that is the essence of the Everett Way. We confront these challenges straight on and make the very best of them for our students.

I applaud all who have jumped into the SBA practice test experiences over these past several months. Overall, I’ve observed and staff have told me that students are excited to use the new Chromebooks, and to approach assessments this way. What can be an intimidating experience for adults is simply “the way things are done” for most students —citizens who only know a world with continuous online access. It’s the way their world is unfolding.

The collaborative efforts of our employee associations, the “can do” work ethic of district departments, the voters’ approval of the 2010 Building Repair & Technology Levy all came together to ensure Everett Public Schools is poised to give each of our students *equal access* to the first statewide administration of Smarter Balanced assessments. Together we are creating a *more level playing field* for kids for whom that hasn’t existed. Together we are positioning schools to move into a one-to-one digital environment in our classrooms —a one-to-one computing environment. I invite you to take a moment to thank someone who helped lay the foundation for what will be an SBA success for our kids.

I am absolutely certain we will learn from this year’s SBA experience and we’ll make it even better

next year and the year after that. Continuous improvement and the confidence and courage to *sally forth* into a new challenge are hallmarks of this district. I'm grateful for your contribution to that reputation, and kids' successes. Thank you so very much.

Warm regards,

Gary



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