

November 12, 2024

Dr. Brent Jones
Superintendent
Seattle Public Schools
2445 3rd Ave S, Seattle WA 98134

Dear Dr. Brent Jones,

Thank you for your candor on the Soundside interview that aired November 4, 2024. As you mentioned in the episode, there have been major gaps in the implementation and delivery of the promised Highly Capable (HC) services at neighborhood schools. **Therefore, we ask you to pause sunseting of Highly Capable Cohort (HCC) until Seattle Public Schools (SPS) has a proven, comprehensive neighborhood delivery model in place. This means maintaining Cascadia Elementary as a grades 2-5 school for the 2025-2026 year.**

For several reasons, we believe that pausing the sunseting of HCC is the most cost-effective and equitable way for SPS to deliver accelerated education to students. First, HCC remains very popular with Seattle students. This year, Cascadia beat enrollment projections by over 120 students, demonstrating the considerable interest in the program. This makes sense given there is no HC programming in place at neighborhood schools. Indeed, many parents have written to the Cascadia PTA telling us that if not for the HCC schools, they would unenroll their students from SPS and either go to private schools or move to districts with more robust gifted programs. At a time of a budget crisis, failing to provide any HC programming will further drive down enrollment and cost SPS more funding on a per capita basis.

Second, pausing the sunseting of the HCC program for now would better serve the district's goal of achieving a more equitable education system. Sunseting HCC at a time when no neighborhood delivery model is in place means that only students whose parents can afford tutoring and expensive enrichment programs will be able to access academic acceleration. Students farthest from educational justice who do not have the same type of parental resources are the ones being left behind. Alternatively, the HCC program is a way for students of all backgrounds and socioeconomic status to access accelerated education as a part of their free public education.

Third, for the 2025-2026 year, the district is no longer pursuing the boundary changes that are required for Cascadia to start accepting neighborhood students. Therefore, if you do not pause the sunseting of HCC, Cascadia Elementary, a new school with capacity for 650 students, would be well below capacity in the coming years. Under-utilizing district facilities in this way would erode public trust in the District's financial stewardship and decision-making. Conversely, allowing Cascadia to keep enrolling eligible students will help reduce administrative burden, and rebuild public trust as the district works to reimagine the landscape of schools across the district.

Fourth, even though the district has made significant progress with the implementation of Universal Screening, we believe that identification of HC students must continue to evolve. Cascadia is one of the most diverse schools within its geozone, with the majority of its population identifying as students of color (from 28.9% in 2017 to 51.7% in 2024). The percentage of Black student enrollment has increased by 583% from 0.6% in 2017 to 3.5% in 2024 and Latino student enrollment has increased by almost 300% from 2.9% in 2017 to 8.6% in 2024 according to OSPI data. These impressive gains suggest that SPS has been making the right adjustments, and we hope that SPS will continue to improve its identification to make it more equitable and inclusive. Pausing the sunseting of the HCC program will allow the District to continue to fine-tune and measure the results of its identification process.

As you asked during your interview, “...is this the best time to shake this up? Or should we hold on to some of the things that we know are working and change more gradually over time?” We believe that a robust public education system must include accelerated programming for HC students. We know that the cohort model is working and remains popular with families who would otherwise leave the district, thus a commitment to continue the HC cohort can help attract and retain families back into SPS. Until the neighborhood delivery model is proven and widely implemented, we request that SPS pause sunseting HCC so that eligible students can continue to receive their legally mandated HC services. Pausing the sunseting of HCC will give SPS time to take a step-back and evaluate the best way to implement the neighborhood delivery model. Maintaining Cascadia Elementary as a grades 2-5 school for the 2025-2026 year better promotes equity, optimizes the use of district facilities, and also reassures families that SPS remains committed to academic excellence and prioritizing student outcomes.

Sincerely,
The Cascadia PTA