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## Bellingham City Council

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### MEMORANDUM

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**To:** City Council  
**CC:** Mayor Linville; Rick Sepler  
**From:** Councilmember April Barker  
**Re.:** Outcomes of Neighborhood Housing Equity Discussion—Families with Young Children  
**Date:** November 5, 2018

On September 24, 2018, the Council Planning Committee held the first in a series of housing equity discussions. The focus was families with young children. Superintendent of Bellingham Public Schools, Dr. Greg Baker, along with several of his administrative staff, and Dr. Astrid Newell, Community Health Manager of the Whatcom Health Department with several of her staff, joined the committee to discuss current housing in Bellingham related to families with young children. Both the School District and Health Department staff shared their current concerns with the growing trends of socioeconomic segregation in neighborhoods and the negative impacts those trends have on health and opportunity in Bellingham. Residential land zoning around schools informs the demographic of those schools. Currently, 35-40% of Bellingham School students are living at or below the Federal Poverty level, yet several of Bellingham schools are not reflective of the total Bellingham youth population.

Individual schools have very different demographics with schools ranging from under 20% free and reduced price lunch, and other with students where over 80% qualify for free and reduced price lunch. When schools reach these extremes, ensuring we have outstanding equitable schools in our city becomes challenging.

The Bellingham Comprehensive Plan has policies that acknowledge the value of neighborhood schools in our community. Dr. Baker shared his hope that by providing equitable and outstanding schools across the district, families can choose which neighborhood fits their family's needs and wants.

Isabel Meaker, Special Assistant to the Superintendent for Family Engagement, shared that the north end schools have been challenged with the faster growth in youth populations, creating overcrowding in schools. The unbalanced growth to the north has concentrated families who are highly impacted with challenges of living with very low incomes. Coupled together these factors have put a lot of stress on the teachers, the school and the families.

The school district is trying to respond to the north end growth by adjusting the school boundaries in efforts to reach into areas to create a balance of student numbers and diversity in schools. Steve Clark, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, shared his concern about gentrification in the Roosevelt area. He recalled that just a decade or so ago Roosevelt was a

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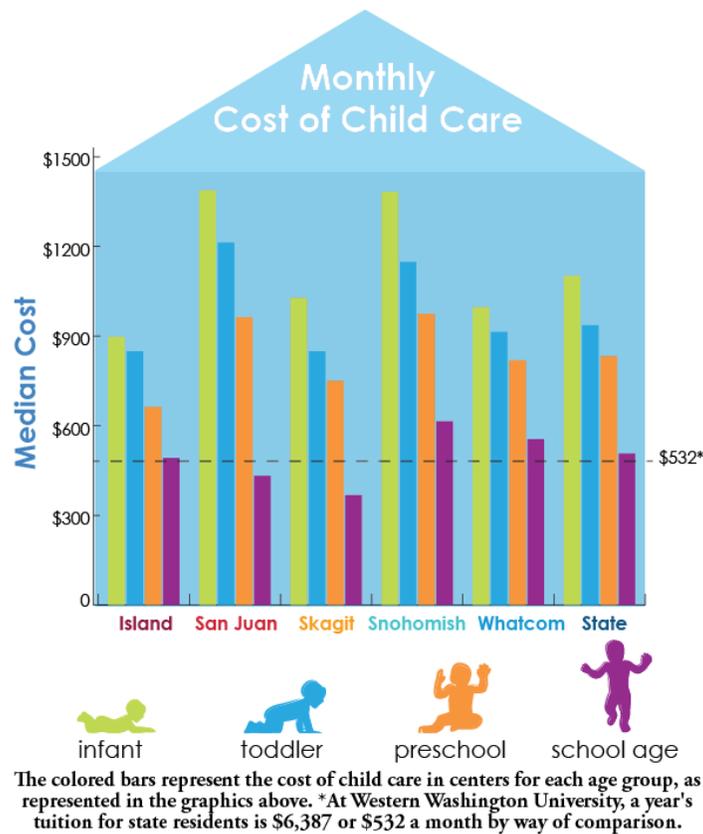
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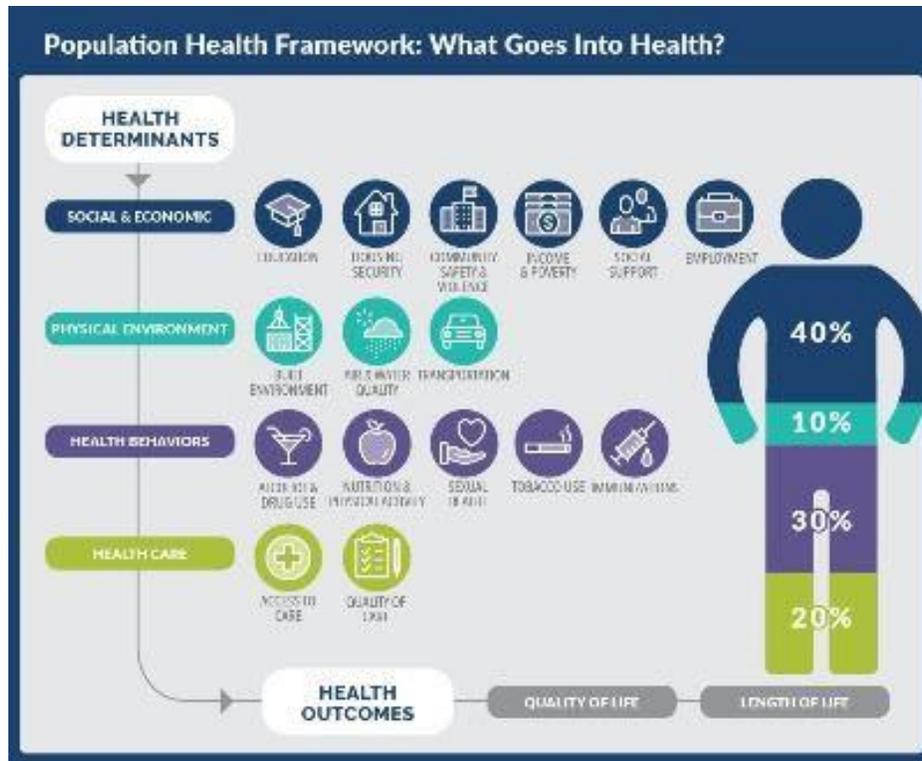
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place where families of varied income levels lived side by side. The stress on housing has pushed lower income families out to other parts of town and often outside of the City, causing a loss of lower income families and the richness they bring to our community.

Kristi Dominguez, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, shared that if we want to change outcomes, we need to think about our children far before kindergarten age. Her work reaches out to families from birth to five. In her experience families with the youngest children are isolated, creating difficult barriers for some of our most burdened parents to access important resources such as parks, early learning opportunities, libraries and grocery stores, food bank and medical services, and child care. The amenities that families need to access in each neighborhood should be considered. The [State of Children and Families 2018 Report](#) showed that the average cost of monthly childcare is nearly the same as the monthly cost to send a young adult to Western Washington University, over \$500 per month.



Astrid Newell, Whatcom County Health Department, discussed some of the work of the [Generations Forward](#) program of her department. She stated that the two main issues of housing and childcare costs impact those even up to 200% of the poverty level. Other members of the staff shared information from the 2018 [Whatcom Community Health Assessment](#) indicating that 40% of one's health is related to their housing.



In the Mayor’s closing comments, she asked if a future housing equity conversation could be focused on those with special needs and disabilities. She also highlighted three points: the good work to update the Community Health Improvement Plan and how it allows people to contribute to the solution; second, the good work of the Bellingham School District to make every school the best school and their value of building empathy in our children; and thirdly, that every neighborhood needs to be part of the solution, and access to basic needs for everyone is very important. She closed with everyone being part of the solution.

Dan Hamill, Council Member, closed by sharing that in his work to reduce incarceration in the community, it has become evident that investments in early childhood and youth and families is the broader issue. The incarceration system is a symptom of not having resilient and healthy families. The current model is not working, depriving families with young children of opportunities and skills to improve their lives.

Just a few days after the Planning Committee meeting an article was published in the *New York Times* titled: [Detailed New National Maps Show How Neighborhoods Shape Children for Life](#). The article gives details of the United States Census Bureau’s new [Opportunity Atlas](#). It is described as a comprehensive Census tract-level dataset of children’s outcomes in adulthood using data covering nearly the entire U.S. population.