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EDUCATION

New Blaine nonprofit forms to support school district's drop in funding

Peace Arch Education Foundation a 'beacon' for Blaine School District

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The Peace Arch Education Foundation, including President Charles Gibson, center left, and Secretary Bob Feaster, center right, hold a meeting Wednesday, Nov. 13 at Gibson's home in Blaine. *(Finn Wendt/Cascadia Daily News)*

By **CHARLOTTE ALDEN**

General Assignment/Enterprise Reporter

A new nonprofit in Blaine plans to help support the school district as it faces budget challenges with declining enrollment and insufficient state funding.

The **Peace Arch Education Foundation**, spearheaded by a former school board member, is conducting listening sessions with parents, teachers, school staff and community members to determine the district's biggest needs. About 12-15 people are involved with the foundation, including five board members and several advisors from the community and the school district.

Foundation President Charles Gibson, who served on the school board for 17 years until December 2023, said he began working on the idea of a foundation due to budget cuts. The district eliminated around 60 full-time positions in 2023, and **another 30 this year** due to challenges with state funding and enrollment.

"We were having to lay off good people and cut programs that were really important," Gibson said. "It seemed like the time was right to be doing something outside of the normal process, which is what the foundation does."

In an initial listening session in September, foundation members invited the community to identify challenges and dream big about what they want the district to look like. Answers included wanting funds for school trips, more support for behavior challenges in the classrooms, funding after-school programs and supporting the district's Family Service Center for basic needs.

Parent Vanessa Rushing thanked the foundation members for their work and devotion to the school district at the session.

"I heard about the education foundation at a real low point of my feelings about the school [district]," Rushing said. "It really did feel like a beacon in a time when we weren't getting a lot of good news ... Thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving us hope that things can turn around."

Bob Feaster, the foundation's treasurer, made it clear that the foundation is not there to "throw money" at the district's budget, but plans to look at specific needs.

Superintendent Chris Granger said in school districts he previously worked for, educational foundations proved to be "a really strong partnership to fill the gaps in state funding to provide additional opportunities for staff and students."

Granger said he's seen foundations support after-school programming, professional development for teachers, robots in classrooms, and more.

"I'm super excited," he said. "I know it's in the early stages but knowing how much passion that people have for this community and the students that it serves and the families that are here, once the ball gets rolling, I think great things are ahead."

The foundation is over a year in the making, and Feaster said it's taken "baby steps."

"We all want to get money right away and start doing stuff, but a part of planning this is doing it right, rather than doing it fast," he said.

Elsewhere in Whatcom County, educational foundations like the Bellingham Public Schools Foundation, a nonprofit independent from the Bellingham School District, can help provide extra funds to teachers and students to fund projects the district can't fund through basic state education funding.

For example, the Bellingham Public Schools Foundation has provided grants for a sixth-grade field trip to spend a day with a marine biologist at the Community Boating Center in Fairhaven, and to purchase equipment for high school robotics teams.

Next year, the Peace Arch Educational Foundation plans to kick off fundraising in earnest with a gala in the spring, potentially in March, to introduce the foundation to potential donors.

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