



# Rebuilding Marysville School District

in Washington



## Rebuilding Marysville

For the leaders of the Marysville School District, understanding the thoughts and feelings of their community is important. The District showed this when it began engaging community members in the search for a new superintendent. After the District hired Dr. Becky Berg in the summer of 2013, the conversations continued with an educational summit called Dream Big for the Kids and the first-ever district Thoughtexchange™ process.

The purpose of all of these conversations was to begin developing a culture where the current and future needs of students directly shaped district strategic planning.

It was in this aspirational year that tragedy struck – a popular boy took the lives of several students, injured others and then took his own life. In that moment and the days that followed, the students and teachers of Marysville's Pilchuck High School felt their campus change from a place of connection and specialized learning to a place of deep sadness and shock.

**1,900 participants**

*58,628 stars*

*6,665 thoughts*

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*participants*

*1,900 participants*

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## **Early Days**

Immediately following the tragedy, providing support for the campus community became goal number one. Dr. Berg and her team brought in counselors. Groups were formed and questions were asked. The emotions surrounding the event were complicated, with no easy path forward. And yet, the leadership team felt they had to do something. They needed to offer the school and community an outlet, a concrete project to talk about and get their feelings out. The future of the cafeteria – the site of the shootings – became that project.

From early conversations with students, Dr. Berg and her team understood that the heart of the issue was reclaiming versus rebuilding. Many students wanted the old cafeteria torn down and rebuilt somewhere else, while others spoke of reclaiming the space, and not allowing this incident to define their campus experience. These two perspectives became the foundation of their next community engagement.

*“The value Marysville and Tulalip community members placed on the integrity of the engagement process – the sense it was rooted in true caring – was a powerful insight for District decision leaders. It demonstrated the importance of authenticity, and that genuine two-way dialogue transforms engagement into an essential act of responsive leadership.”*

## **Having the Conversation**

The Rebuilding Marysville process was opened to the entire community and almost 1,900 members joined the conversation. Students, many from the Marysville Pilchuck campus, contributed hundreds of thoughts. In the end, students, staff, parents and community members shared 6,665 Thoughts and assigned 58,628 Stars to help identify and prioritize the ones that were most important to them. This process surfaced insights both for the district leadership team and the community, and helped guide the District’s decisions about the cafeteria project.

These are some of the insights that emerged from and resonated most strongly among students, parents, community members, and staff:

***Supporting students in feeling safe would be key to healing***

A top concern surrounding the rebuilding of the old site was the emotional health of Marysville Pichuck students. Marysville and Tulalip community members spoke of the trauma students experienced and worried that no amount of renovation could effectively remove them from the tragedy they experienced. They also spoke of the need for a “new normal” that would show “how much we value our students,” and that “they are worth the additional money and time.” Community members made it clear that placing student needs at the forefront was a key consideration in creating a solution.

***The Community wanted to ensure the decision aligned with future plans***

For the community, placing a high value on students needed to be balanced with carefully considering their future goals and opportunities. Rebuilding Marysville participants felt strongly that the entire campus was in need of a complete rebuild, and believed that the final decision about the cafeteria needed to take such future improvements into consideration. How would the final cafeteria project fit into an updated or rebuilt campus?

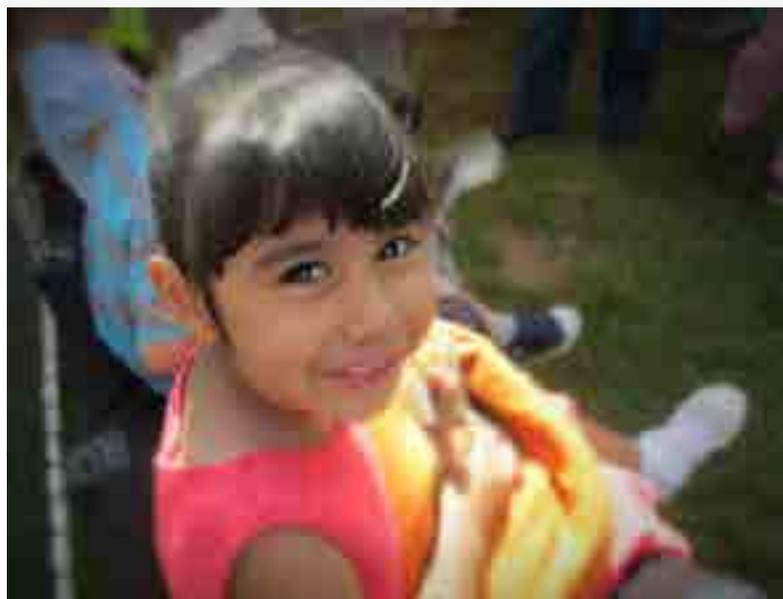
***The citizens of Marysville will not be defined by this tragedy***

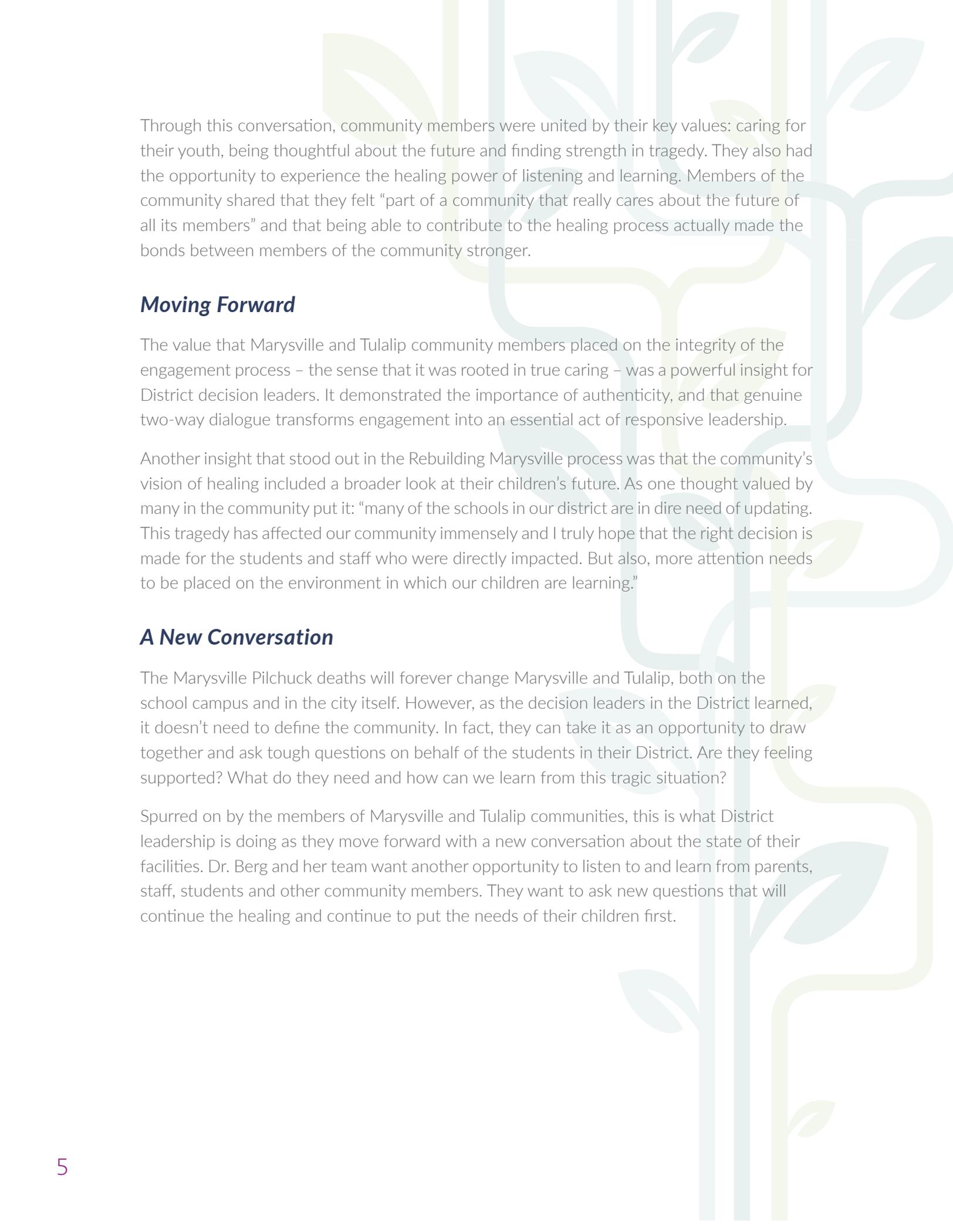
Underpinning many of the thoughts was the belief that the Marysville and Tulalip communities would move forward from this tragic event. Community members spoke of reclaiming the site in order to “show our students that fear doesn’t win” and that it is possible to “move on from tragedy in a positive manner.”

However the site would be reclaimed, the community felt it could be a process, and ultimately a space, of transformative life lessons.



*The Marysville School District in Washington State has a community of learners 11,000 students-strong; in eleven elementary schools, four middle schools, and eight high schools. The District’s vision is to work together to ensure each student becomes a successful and productive citizen in a diverse society.*  
[www.ms25.org](http://www.ms25.org)





Through this conversation, community members were united by their key values: caring for their youth, being thoughtful about the future and finding strength in tragedy. They also had the opportunity to experience the healing power of listening and learning. Members of the community shared that they felt “part of a community that really cares about the future of all its members” and that being able to contribute to the healing process actually made the bonds between members of the community stronger.

### ***Moving Forward***

The value that Marysville and Tulalip community members placed on the integrity of the engagement process – the sense that it was rooted in true caring – was a powerful insight for District decision leaders. It demonstrated the importance of authenticity, and that genuine two-way dialogue transforms engagement into an essential act of responsive leadership.

Another insight that stood out in the Rebuilding Marysville process was that the community’s vision of healing included a broader look at their children’s future. As one thought valued by many in the community put it: “many of the schools in our district are in dire need of updating. This tragedy has affected our community immensely and I truly hope that the right decision is made for the students and staff who were directly impacted. But also, more attention needs to be placed on the environment in which our children are learning.”

### ***A New Conversation***

The Marysville Pilchuck deaths will forever change Marysville and Tulalip, both on the school campus and in the city itself. However, as the decision leaders in the District learned, it doesn’t need to define the community. In fact, they can take it as an opportunity to draw together and ask tough questions on behalf of the students in their District. Are they feeling supported? What do they need and how can we learn from this tragic situation?

Spurred on by the members of Marysville and Tulalip communities, this is what District leadership is doing as they move forward with a new conversation about the state of their facilities. Dr. Berg and her team want another opportunity to listen to and learn from parents, staff, students and other community members. They want to ask new questions that will continue the healing and continue to put the needs of their children first.



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