

# IMPROVING ACCESS TO STUDENT LEADERSHIP



## Randy Heath

*Executive Director,  
Student and Family  
Support Services,  
Kent School District*

### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Improving Instruction,  
Engaging Communities, Closing the Gap*

**S**ystems are perfectly designed to get the results they get. If we are unhappy with the results we must examine the system and make necessary changes.

Sixty years ago a group of forward-thinking principals who understood the power of student voice and leadership built a system to help teach and cultivate the skills student leaders would need to help shape the climate of their schools. The growth of the student leadership program is proof of the success of this mission.

## DIVERSITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Tens of thousands of individuals who have participated in the myriad of programs offered by the Association of Washington Student Leaders (AWSL) can attest to their positive experiences and share how the skills they learned through the program helped contribute to future success. I have witnessed this directly as both a consumer (advisor and school administrator) and as a deliverer (past AWSP board member and current middle level leadership camp director) of AWSL programs.

Schools are tasked at preparing students for a global society that is more rapidly changing than at any other time in history. The skills



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taught through student leadership, collaboration, problem solving, and creativity, among others, are skills all students need to successfully navigate this new world. The ability to apply those skills in real life leadership experiences at their schools will give them an advantage to be the corporate and civic leaders of their time.

The problem is, in too many schools, this opportunity to formally lead is not accessible to all. There are usually no official policies that state that the most popular, the highest achievers, the students with the most means, or Caucasian and Asian students, are more likely to be elected as student leaders. However in many cases, that is who we see chosen and participating in leadership programs. Looking at the crowd of participants at most AWSL events most will be able to quickly identify a lack of diversity.

## BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

Do the chosen student leaders in your school accurately reflect the demographics of your school? School leaders have an obligation to disaggregate their discipline, special programs, and advanced placement data by race, socio-economic status and gender. Student leadership

programs and opportunities within the school and classroom must be added to this list. School leaders must determine if disproportionality exists and, if so, examine the system that has created it. Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.

A principal who takes this challenge and finds an issue with disproportionate numbers should first look to the election process at your school and/or the class requirements for your leadership class. Have arbitrary barriers been institutionalized to allow only a select group of students to have access to leadership? Grade point requirements, discipline and/or attendance rates, class schedules, staff leadership, decision making and selection, teacher choice and/or written essays are all examples of potential barriers you may discover.

There may have been sound reasons why those requirements were put in place but if they are contributing to unfairly impacting any group of students, then they must be addressed. Additionally, if it is unfairly impacting a protected class of students, you have an additional legal obligation to address it.

The benefits of creating a more inclusive student leadership at your school are many. Experienced school administrators understand the power of relationships and creating equity within the system. They know that students who feel connected to their school attend more, achieve at higher rates and contribute to the positive climate of the school.

### MANY VOICES NEEDED

A student body needs to be able to see leaders who look like them, who have the same interests and struggles as them, and who understand their unique strengths and basic needs. Schools that do not have a diverse student leadership sometimes unintentionally create situations

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that may alienate students instead of helping them feel included.

Spirit Week is one example. A “Hawaiian,” “redneck” or “nerd” dress up day has the potential to damage relationships. A pep assembly where male football students wear female cheerleader outfits and negatively reinforce stereotypes has the potential to alienate instead of unite. If a more diverse group of students were involved in the planning of school events, then potential issues are more likely to be identified early and events that truly unite planned.

There is no single solution to this issue. Every school is unique. When addressing these issues of

disproportionality and equity in student leadership, many voices will be needed. Diverse groups of staff, community members and, most importantly, students will positively contribute to addressing these issues.

A system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets. This is a system that must be fixed and it is best fixed at the local level by powerful school leaders willing to address tough issues. Much like the pioneering school principals who originally built the student leadership programs, this generation of principals can fundamentally change who has access to and who benefits from them. ■

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# Headscarves and Hotheads

## One school photo prompts a lesson in cultural understanding

**Brent Osborn**

Principal, Lakeside High,  
Nine Mile Falls SD

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Engaging Communities



JEFF RIETZ/NINE MILE FALLS SD

**HEADSCARVES:** A photo of Lakeside students attending a refugee training at World Relief Spokane drew angry comments from a community member. From left to right: Brooklynn Mathiason, Shaye Swannack, Ahbrianna Gallagher, and Allisyn Swanger.

Recently I came into work and had a voicemail. The message on the phone was very angry and hostile. It had to do with a picture that appeared in a Nine Mile Falls School District newsletter. The photo featured Lakeside students wearing headscarves while participating in a World Relief refugee training. The caption explained that the students were there as a part of their teaching academy and leadership class in order to gain a better understanding of the refugee process, to learn about refugees in Spokane, and learn about ELL students.

The angry caller asked how dare I let our Nine Mile kids wear a burka and hadn't I ever heard of the separation of church and state? He was going

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I worried about the conclusions that are jumped to simply because three girls were wearing headscarves. The fear that exists based on perceived attire is really quite frightening.

to make sure I get fired or reprimanded by the school board. He did not leave a call back number but assured me, I would hear from him again.

It has been awhile but I have not received a call back. That is unfortunate because I really do want to talk to this gentleman and help him

understand several components of his grievance:

1. The students were role playing the refugee process so that they could better understand the hoops and steps that the refugees to America must go through.
2. Does he know that Spokane receives more than 500 refugees ever year and most of those refugees are actually Christian?
3. The students were wearing scarves and not burkas. A burka is a full face covering used in the Islamic religion. Scarves are actually a very common occurrence throughout the world for women in many religions, particularly in many of the orthodox Christian faiths in Africa and the Middle East. It was

actually Paul in Corinthians that references women should cover their hair.

4. Most importantly, I worried about the conclusions that are jumped to simply because three girls were wearing headscarves. The fear that exists based on perceived attire is really quite frightening.

Recently I traveled to Ethiopia with my family, a beautiful country that has an amazing mix of faith. The country is 63 percent Christian, 35 percent Muslim, and 2 percent are of other faiths. During our visit we were present through one Sunday service and a national holiday for a saint (I forget which one). We witnessed firsthand thousands of people going to church, Christian and Muslim. They looked like the picture in question. All of the women wore scarves, and they looked beautiful.

And yet headscarves on students featured in our newsletter upset a man in our community enough to call me and voice his grievance. I guess that just verifies the importance of the student training opportunity.

I look forward to his call. ■