

STUDENT EQUITY GUIDE



Created by the AWSL Student Equity Cohort
Students focused on Equity, Opportunity, and Access

The Association of Washington Student Leaders is a division of the
Association of Washington School Principals





STUDENT VOICE
COLLABORATION
DECISION-MAKING
BELONGING



From the Association of Washington Student Leaders:

AWSL works in partnership with the Association of Washington School Principals to train and develop student leaders across the state. Since 1956, our mission has grown to develop and create opportunities for all students to develop their leadership skills. We believe leadership in a school comes from all levels—students, staff, and principals.

We are committed to expanding inclusive mindsets and furthering our belief that all students can lead. We look forward to working alongside you to create strong leaders, strong schools, and strong students.

This guide was written and created by high school students representing every ESD in Washington. We know student voice is paramount to a school's academic and social success. It is time we create the opportunities for their wisdom to shine through. We are proud of these students as they lead us in creating a better future.

—Greg Barker, Director, Washington School Principals Education Foundation

—James Layman, Student Programs Director, Association of Washington Student Leaders

Why Student Voice?

We believe student voice is crucial to having a successful and healthy school environment.

We believe students live the full effects of procedures, policies, and curriculum in schools.

We believe student voice doesn't end with a single meeting, a single group of students, or a single decision. Student voice must be woven into every matter in education.

We believe the best results in schools come from collaborative social-emotional learning.

We believe when students feel like they are a part of the school, they will work with the school, rather than just attend school.

We believe students deserve a seat at the table in terms of school decision-making.

We believe adults in schools need to be active listeners and work to understand the knowledge that students have.

We believe a paradigm shift occurs when students and adults partner. We are ready for an environment where students and adults can open their minds to becoming lifelong learners from each other.

We believe in the power of student voice.

—The AWSL Student Voice and Equity Cohort

Needs and Hopes

Entering the World of Students

- Students want to engage with our administration and our teachers authentically. We want to open the doors to real conversations about our needs and hopes.
- Racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and rape culture have become normalized in the halls and classrooms of our schools. We no longer want to remain silent about these issues.
- We need to diversify the curriculum to represent the experiences and history of all people. With the current whitewashed/Eurocentric curriculums, students must actively do their own research - often through social media - to fill in educational gaps about the experiences of women, people of color, and the LGBTQIA+ community.
- Consistency, and a common thread between all classes regarding race and equity, are needed. There is a great deal of disparity between classes in terms of what is (or isn't) being taught.
- Administration and teachers must call out racism and other forms of hate speech when they happen. These issues can no longer be tolerated or dismissed. By not admonishing this behavior, schools are inadvertently granting permission that hate speech and racism are okay.
- We need implicit bias and anti-racism training and education for students and staff.
- School leadership needs to be transparent with actions when a concern is brought forward, especially regarding race, equality, gender, and orientation.
- We need to dismantle the status quo of "ASB/Leadership Culture" and expand the role and definition of leadership while providing opportunities for all students to lead.
- Schools must normalize and address the mental health issues of students and staff.
- There is a need for more significant support in terms of resources for low-income students and low-income schools.
- Students want recognition that they are experts at what they repeatedly do, at what they have done every day for most of their lives: learning in your schools.
- We must teach and train students and adults that there is much more to the world than what each individual has experienced. Learning to understand and respect that many lifestyles exist within schools, and all deserve respect.
- Adults need to hear student's concerns without judgment so students can trust them. This is a way students can open up and share with adults their needs to support their learning and growth.
- The cultural and social climate of our generation is vastly different from that of the adults in our buildings. Adults must be willing to take the time to learn about us and us about them.
- Adults need to meet the students where they are to understand what is going on in order to work together to fix problems.
- Students want adults to be intentional about the steps they take; don't just go through the motions. Understanding people and their experiences will be a big part of building a solid foundation for equity work.
- It takes time to build a foundation for change. If you don't take the time in the beginning, you won't be able to get to the destination you want without having to retroactively repair relationships, and your foundation.
- We must bring more attention to the reality of inequalities based on socioeconomic status because this is often lumped with race (due to regional demographic and/or generational poverty/wealth).

Engage with Us!

Engagement Phrases for Adults to Utilize with Students

- Ask open-ended and guiding questions. Avoid questions where students can answer with a one-word response.
- "What do you think about ____?"
- "Was there ever a situation where you noticed a peer in your school blatantly or subtly disrespect/disregard a student because of their marginalized group?"
- "How do you feel that our school can become more equitable in terms of race, opportunity, access, gender issues, etc.?"
- "If you are comfortable, I would love to hear what you (or you all) have to say around the topics of equity, and let's engage in a meaningful, productive conversation surrounding equity."
- "How can we make this (school, classroom, club, etc.) a safe space for you? What does safe look like, sound like, and feel like to you?"
- "Speak what is on your mind. It is okay if you do not have the right words or phrasing. We can grow and learn together. By keeping these conversations going and ongoing, we can work together to create action plans to dismantle inequities."
- Hello (school name) students, it has come to my attention that (topic) at (school) needs to be addressed because of (incident). Please join me at ____ to engage in a meaningful, civil discussion regarding (topic), and how we can improve the issue of (topic) at (school).
- "We want to hear YOUR voice and start listening to student concerns, so please share your experiences."
- "We want and need students to be a part of the conversation."
- "We WANT to help you feel seen." It needs to be all about hearing from students and adults devoting time to making things better alongside students.
- "I'm so sorry that school hurt you like this; I want to help."
- "Have you or anyone else around you experienced the usage of racial, homophobic, transphobic, or sexist slurs?"
- "Would anyone like to share how you felt when you heard or experienced others using these derogatory terms?"

Strategies and Notes

- Equivocation (the use of vague or ambiguous language to hide meaning or to avoid committing to a point of view) has no place in discussions. Racism isn't a dirty word. Be direct.
- Let students bounce ideas off of each other; don't facilitate too strictly. Sometimes when we talk, we have a partially formed idea and need the input of others to solidify it.
- Do not disregard or discredit the student's experiences. Avoid gaslighting (the act of using denial, misdirection, contradiction, and misinformation to delegitimize a victim's beliefs, experiences, and stories). Avoid making excuses on behalf of teachers, administration, or students. Own it!
- Promises are nice, but don't make them just to placate students. Making empty promises is performative, and students can tell. It is better to be honest with students about the reality of situations concerning equity, opportunity, and access issues. Tell us about the process by which change can happen and involve us in that process.
- The best way to start conversations on these topics is through guiding questions. Even if students would rather keep their thoughts to themselves, they will think about it and ultimately come up with an answer.
- Empty your mind before you engage. Create a blank slate in your mind and allow us to share authentically without preconceived notions.
- Your comfort is not the top priority.
- Be intentional with the environment.
- Listen and digest the experiences. Do not rush to "let's fix this." This will be an ongoing process, not something to check off a list. Check-in with us often. Keep the conversations going.
- Definitions matter. Creating a common language is imperative. We need to make sure we accurately define and teach key definitions: equality, equity, gaslighting, prejudice, bias, racism, etc.
- It makes students uncomfortable when racism and microaggressions take place. Schools need to have clear directives on how to address these issues.
- Start the conversations with students early. The sooner we engage in conversations, it can become normalized.
- Start discussions with learning names and preferred pronouns. Always use preferred pronouns. If a mistake is made, apologize and move on. (Also, it's okay to correct yourself – it shows you care. Don't wait for the individual to correct you; it creates an unfortunate power dynamic, and it isn't their job.) If you forgot someone's name, politely ask again.
- It's good to involve quiet people in discussions by asking them specific questions. It is perfectly acceptable that some people aren't as comfortable and would rather listen.
- It is essential to incorporate students from all around the school in conversations, which expands beyond ASB/leadership students. Students often feel or perceive ASB and leadership students to be an exclusive group or club. It is crucial to create space for all students.
- Students are a part of a new generation that focuses on technology and social media. With that, we learn a lot from the internet and through our research. Social media can be a way to spark conversation between students. An infographic designed to talk about these issues draws anybody in and lets them question if it relates to them or not.
- Students are most likely to respond to people they are comfortable with. Adults can provide the steppingstone needed for students to speak with one another.