

WASHOUGAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Executive Summary
Board Linkage Meeting: Graduates
December 28, 2006

Overview

Washougal School District Board of Directors conducted a Policy Governance Linkage Meeting on December 28, 2006, with graduates and former students of Washougal High School.

To initiate a response from former students, invitations and surveys were sent to 80 students from the classes of 2003, 2004, and 2005. In addition, surveys were posted on the district website in December.

Four graduates attended the linkage meeting, and four others sent written responses to the survey. The summary below is based on information shared during the linkage meeting and in the written responses to the survey.

The sample of respondents is a factor to be considered when reviewing the summary data. Linkage meeting participants were all college students, and it apparent that the written responses were also from college students. What is missing from a larger high school follow-up study is the voices of students who went directly into the workforce, those who enlisted in the military, those who entered vocational training, and those who left high school before graduating.

Summary

1. Expectations for Higher Academic Performance

When asked what they would change about their high school experience, the graduates felt strongly that teacher expectations for high academic performance could be improved. There was a sense that high school students were not encouraged to take more challenging classes or to do better academically.

A separate question asked graduates if there were things that were not beneficial in their high school experience, and several indicated that high school should have been more challenging. Those who felt that high school prepared them for their next step beyond high school cited advanced placement courses and running start as the most valuable classes. One respondent said, "High school doesn't really push you to focus on your future." Graduates said that if they could advise students who are now in high school, they would tell them to start pushing themselves academically. This particular group expressed an interest in having the district work strategically to have more students from Washougal attend college.

2. Academic Preparation for College

Graduates agreed that Washougal offers classes that can prepare a student for college, but that the student has to take the responsibility to work hard. There was a mixed response from graduates on the degree to which their high school experience prepared them for college. Some said they were somewhat prepared, and some said that they were not well prepared even though they had done very well in high school. One graduate said, "You don't have to try very hard to do well; all kids want is a grade, not to be pushed; kids just go through the motions."

Referencing college preparation, one of the write-in surveys said, "Attending the University of Washington has proven to me how high school did not prepare me at all for higher education. I was top ten in my class, and for the longest time I felt lost in college." Another graduate said, "I believe that high school prepared me to enter college, but I don't think it ever really prepared me for the real-life experiences of paying bills, living on your own, etc." Another respondent said that if given the chance to do it over, "I would choose to do better academically."

Finally, graduates suggested that the district should begin to introduce concepts about college beginning in middle school. One student put it this way, “Start hinting at it (college) early.” They also suggested that the district conduct other college awareness activities such as continuing to bring in college recruiters, clarifying financial opportunities and showcasing the financial long term benefits of getting a bachelor’s degree.

3. Most Beneficial Aspects of High School

Graduates highlighted the Senior Project and the Job Acquisition Skills program as two of the most valuable experiences in high school. There was general agreement that both the Senior Project and the JAS program gained significance after graduation when graduates were faced with scholarship applications, job resumes and having to write longer and longer papers in college.

Specifically, graduates highlighted writing skills as one of the most valuable skills learned in high school. One student said, “I learned important essay and paper writing skills in my advanced classes my junior and senior year that have been invaluable.”

The Career Center was highlighted as a valuable aspect of the graduates high school experience. They particularly noted that the staff was friendly. Several students commented on the value of the Career Center in providing resources, in helping them narrow their choices of colleges and careers, and in providing assistance with scholarships and applications. One suggestion was that the Career Center should frequently and routinely go out in classes and interrupt instruction to carry a quick brief message about the Career Center offerings or to focus on different career opportunities or internships. A graduate put it this way, “Throw it in their faces!”

4. Counseling

Graduates had varying experiences with counseling. One student said the counseling and career staff performed their duties very well. Other participants noted that there should have been more counseling, that counselors were spread too thin. Their perception was that counseling time is spent on emotional turmoil rather than on assisting students with their future planning.

One graduate pointed out that even though the counseling and career staff did their jobs very well, some students just are not in a position to make a decision in high school about their future. This graduate said, “It took me a year out of high school and college just to finally decide what I wanted to do; I don’t think any amount of mentoring or career planning could have helped me decide earlier.

Suggestions for improving counseling included having more direct conversations with students about their future and monitoring students who are applying to college throughout the entire senior year.

5. Additional Skills Needed, But Not Gained in High School

Graduates said that there were skills that they needed after high school that they didn’t acquire in high school. The skills they needed but found lacking were:

- Time management—being on your own, having to figure out how to get to class, do homework, find time with friends, make good grades, etc.
- Mathematics—could have used more math instruction and skills
- Literature—we had not read literature that seemed common for other high school students; we didn’t read enough poetry or classics
- Learning skills--study skills, and other skills for learning
- Writing—wish we could have obtained better writing skills and learned to use the library as a resource for research papers
- Real life experiences—paying bills, living on your own, etc.
- Business classes—economics, finance, public speaking, work world skills
- Mathematics—needed more complex math courses, higher level math

- Lack of knowing what we were capable of doing—looking back, would have applied to an Ivy League college if I had known how capable I really was; didn't know I could do more until I got to college

6. Suggested Changes to High School Program

Graduates were asked this question: If you could change one thing about your high school experience, what would you change? Here were their responses:

- More graduates going to college, or trade school, or receiving some kind of training or education after high school
- High school should push students to focus on their future after high school
- Raise the expectations; students don't have to try hard to do well; they just go through the motions to get a grade; students need to be pushed
- Break down cliques; high school is too short to exclude other people
- Schedule office hours for teachers like they do at college and give kids time to go see teachers for extra help or to get an assignment, etc.

7. Final Comments from Graduates

Graduates noted the value of the extracurricular programs at Washougal High School including music, art, sports, and drama. All of the participants in the linkage meeting talked about how valuable the extracurricular programs had been, including the relationships with their teachers in the extracurricular activities.

One graduate said that it made her feel badly when she sees other graduates around Washougal in low-wage jobs, when she knows that they could be doing much better if they had a vision for their life. Another graduate said, "Our high school and community has a great home town feeling, but (you) still need to have a plan for your life." The general agreement seemed to be that more students need to be motivated to do something with their lives beyond high school.

Graduates agreed that Washougal High School was a safe place for students, even though cliques existed and verbal harassment was evident for some students. They thought that breaking down cliques would be beneficial.

Graduates noted that college had given them insights into how the high school might function better for students. They suggested scheduling "office hours" for teachers so that students could get one-to-one help as is done in college. They felt that giving students choices in curriculum was important. They also said it is important to retain the "freedom factor" for students, i.e., open campus for lunch.

Finally, graduates noted how friendly and helpful the teachers are at Washougal High School. They appreciated teachers who got them out of their seats and gave them engaging work to do. They also like teachers who showed their personality in their teaching.