

Giving students a voice in their lives at school

At my State of the District speech earlier this month, I brought forward two students to share a perspective of what it's like to be a student in our schools. Island View fifth grader Luke Hanson and AHS senior Miranda Leger spoke about their experiences as representatives of our 2,700 students.

They were powerful speeches.

Luke read aloud the school's pledge, which refers to being confident, capable of success and having dreams for the future. Then he showed how each line of the pledge came to life for him at school through his experience with writing, encouraging teachers and student council.

Miranda explained how she was the first person in her family to go to college. She shared how the high school's college-prep program, AVID, had connected her with peers and mentors to successfully navigate high school. A college tour recently took her to Whitworth College in Spokane, where she proclaimed, "This is the school for me." Weeks later, she received a \$72,000 scholarship.

Empowering student voice

One of the big ideas in our new strategic plan is the importance of student voice. The idea is that when students can have voice in their learning and their lives – when they can shape their experience at school in meaningful ways – the level of engagement, relevance and ownership increases.

Take Luke, for example.

One of the illustrations he gave was how Island View principal Brian Hanrahan brought the student council together and empowered them to make a decision about spending a \$10,000 health grant the school received for the highest participation in last fall's Shell Fun Run. It would be easy for the administration to simply come up with a plan for the funds. But by engaging students in the deci-



Dr. Mark Wenzel, Anacortes superintendent, addresses community members in a speech on January 11. Wenzel addressed key approaches to engaging students with 'purpose, passion and possibility.'

sion, it greatly elevates their role – and worth – at school. It also provides a real-world opportunity for group decision-making – definitely a life skill!

Other ways we strive to elevate student voice in our system include:

- Four students serve as representatives on the school board. They participate in meaty conversations and school visits, digging into data and district challenges. They will also conduct research this year on school fees, alumni perceptions of ASD, social-emotional learning and dropouts

- Middle and high school students serve in student government and direct ASB funds, while organizing school events. Elementary students, meanwhile, have growing student leadership opportunities with assigned roles that allow them

to help on the playground, in the cafeteria and throughout the school

ter Washington state standards to graduate from high school. So choice does not extend to students selecting radically different subject matter to study. That said, we all know that there are a lot of ways to get from Point A to Point B.

Choice means that students have ownership of their learning. When we give them choice, we start to give them voice.

One small example is classroom libraries in our elementary schools. Hundreds of books are categorized according to reading level, and students select them based on their interest. Compare that to the old days when we were told that we could read one book at the teacher's discretion.

Projects are another great way of achieving choice and voice, as students follow individual interests within a larger subject area. One teacher had students select a historical figure, do research on their laptops, and present a monologue to community visitors. Students shined as they came to life in their period costumes.

The future of democracy

A recent paper from a research institute in Washington, D.C. bemoaned the dwindling appreciation for democratic values among young people in the United States. The research cited surveys showing that Americans are becoming more comfortable with authoritarian views, less compelled about choosing their leaders in free elections, and more comfortable with the idea of military rule.

One of the authors' recommendations for schools is to create democratic structures within school itself – opportunities for students to share opinions and be heard – to help deepen appreciation for the value of democratic principles.

Student voice is an important part of this process. It's something we should prioritize and celebrate.

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- Five students serve on the AHS visioning team this year. They work alongside staff members, reviewing research, discussing strengths and weaknesses of current programs and making recommendations for the new school

Classroom learning

As we think about student voice, it's important to focus on the classroom as well. That's where students spend 90 percent of their time at school.

In Anacortes, we ask questions such as: Who is controlling the learning? What opportunities are there for students to exercise "choice" within a given lesson? Are there authentic audiences for students to share their thinking?

Obviously, students must mas-