

Link Leaders touring their students around the school as Team PAC-MAN!

LEARN TO BE YOUR BEST SELF

at an AWSP Learning Center

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety, Engaging Communities, Closing the Gap

Wahkiakum High School Students Plan to “Brighten the Light”

with the help of AWSL programming. All students will graduate from Wahkiakum High School with the tools and skills necessary to persevere in their pursuit of a successful life.

A note from the AWSL Director:

This program highlights the perfect marriage between AWSP’s student division - the Association of Washington Students Leaders (AWSL) - and AWSP’s Residential Learning Centers! The enthusiasm of Principal Stephanie Leitz during the retreat showed her belief that this experience would be a game-changer. When I saw her in October at the AWSL Conference she reaffirmed their success. Her high school leaders presented a student-led workshop based on the relationship-building and mentoring that Stephanie outlines in this article. It’s a winning formula: Principal vision for school culture + AWSL programs and AWSP facilities to support that vision = Student Success! — Susan Fortin

As a high school principal who started her career as a kindergarten teacher, creating a positive, student-centered culture that supports the academic growth of all students has been my focus and my passion.

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Students want to be supported, loved and accepted whether they are six or sixteen. As the only administrator at Wahkiakum High School which is in the small, rural community of Cathlamet, I choose to spend my time working directly with the students to ensure this happens with both the adults and peers on our campus. AWSP has identified Culture, Systems and Learning as the three main circles that must continually be juggled in the journey of building a school that ensures that all students succeed. For me, culture is where it all begins — gaining buy-in from staff and students, by rallying around one common theme or purpose and striving to make sure that every single person that walks through our school door feels the energy, pride and love they deserve. Each year when a new group of students arrives on campus I wonder: How will this group impact our school culture? Which students will rise to the top and take on new leadership roles? Will students who have previously been unsuccessful find their way?

At Wahkiakum High School, our students select a theme that is used to support and inspire students. “Knowledge is Power” was our theme the year we added honors and AP to our schedule. When students wanted to honor under-recognized groups, like our Gay Straight Alliance club — the theme was “Being Different, Belonging Together.” The following

year students were asked to “Stand Up, Stand Out and Take a Risk.” This year the theme is, “Brighten the Light.” The words were carefully selected and defined by students:

“At Wah-ki-hi, you brighten your own light by being your best self. You can brighten the light of others by being kind and inclusive and you can brighten the light of our whole school, community and world by coming together to accomplish great things.”

Our theme this year took on a much deeper meaning than those of the past due to the time our leadership students were able to spend with incoming freshman at the Cispus Learning Center in Randle, Washington.

AWSP’s Cispus Learning Center is magical. If you haven’t had the opportunity to leave behind the internet, cell phones and today’s pressures to experience the tranquil, refreshing 68-acre Cispus campus, you are missing out. Last spring, with generous support from Youth Marijuana Prevention and Education Program (YMPEP) funds and Matt Shellhart from CHOICE Regional Health Network, we were able to take high school students and incoming freshmen to Cispus for a three-day retreat. The opportunity to build strong relationships and support our eighth graders as they dreamt about their future — both as high



Pictured above is Daron, the student who wouldn't stop talking about how much fun he was having!

school students and as successful adults - was powerful, inspirational and created a positive vision of Wahkiakum’s future. Working with AWSP facilitators Joe Fenbert and James Layman, the class of 2022 came up with several things they wanted to stand for as they planned for a successful high school experience:

Be Your Best Self!

Turn your cant's into cans and your dreams into plans!

No matter how comfortable you are in life, we can always push each other further.

Have hope, show love and be peaceful.

As our eighth graders worked to develop a vision, the high school leaders reflected on what they stood for and how they hoped others perceived them. They committed to the following:



The lives of these Wahkiakum students have been forever changed. They will start high school with lots of people on their side – ready to accept the challenge and “be their best selves!”

“We will inspire others to be their best self, stand for all and respect everyone’s voice. It is our job to be role models and ‘Brighten the Light’ of every individual that comes to WHS.”

While at Cispus, in addition to spending time reflecting, students were able to attend several sessions on the challenge course which stresses the idea of “challenge by choice.” Students worked as a team to accomplish tasks that required problem solving, teamwork and perseverance — all skills needed in both high school and life. Outdoor education gives students confidence and builds strong relationships and trust among peers that then transforms what occurs in the classroom.

“ When a student-led culture is in place, changing and enhancing structures and ensuring learning comes easy.”

Each night we gathered around the campfire with a culminating activity that summed up the day. Led by both high school students and the amazing AWSL staff, students performed skits, sang songs and walked the blind trail. The bonding and relationship building that took place will last a lifetime! In addition, there were sessions on career exploration, leadership styles, peer pressure and finding your passion in life. To end our amazing retreat, all our students were presented with the ultimate “challenge by choice”... zip lining! As Daron, a student with Cerebral Palsy, was pushed off the cliff by his best friend and high school mentor, he said, “This was the best day of my life... thank you, thank you, thank you.”

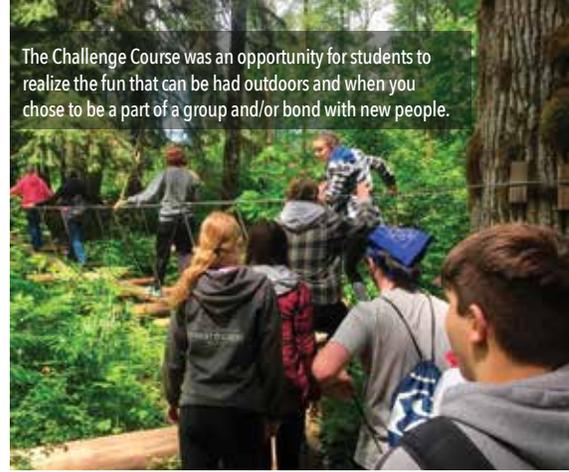
The WHS class of 2022 has some amazing things to accomplish as illustrated by the goals they set. They

have proven they were ready for the challenge of high school. The power in building strong relationships with same-age and older peers — and the importance of helping students build a clear vision for their future - is obvious and occurs easily and naturally at Cispus. The staff and students in the picture below have committed to continuing to mentor their assigned students throughout their 9th grade year. For us at Wahkiakum, team building is this key to creating an inclusive, caring culture that fosters learning in all students. Our high school leaders met again in August for two days of Link Leader Training (The Boomerang Project) and then led all new students through orientation. In addition, the high school leaders have committed to meeting with our 9th graders once a week to support them as they learn to navigate the high school world. With the implementation of Cispus and weekly mentoring, our ninth-grade failure rate is down to less than 5% for the first quarter for the first time in several years.

Being a part of a rural school in a county without a stop light or a fast food restaurant is a beautifully unique experience — although some may say opportunities are limited, I choose to believe that we can provide each individual student exactly what they need. Our statistics aren’t just numbers - they are actual students with names, strengths, weaknesses, hopes and dreams. At Wahkiakum, we strive to help each and every one of our students find their passion and build a program that meets their needs in addition to giving them similar opportunities to those

AWSP is the only principals association in the country to provide facilities for student and staff development. The Cispus Learning Center in Randle is approximately two hours from Puget Sound, Vancouver or Yakima. The newest facility, the Chewelah Peak Learning Center, is located one hour north of Spokane. Both sites are available for your own retreat and challenge course experience. AWSL program staff Joe Fenbert and James Layman are available to help plan an experience to meet your goals.

The Challenge Course was an opportunity for students to realize the fun that can be had outdoors and when you chose to be a part of a group and/or bond with new people.



shared by their urban peers. When a student-led culture is in place, changing and enhancing structures and ensuring learning comes easy.

Building a positive school culture is done in a variety of ways and the needs are different for every school, but striving to ensure students have what they need to be successful starts with building strong relationships and the confidence of each individual student by helping them identify strengths, set goals, overcome fears and strive for a positive future. An AWSL program at Cispus is the perfect place to begin this journey. ■



The cabins were decorated in an ocean theme with lots of reminders about the importance of all!