

AWSL: An Organizational and Individual JOURNEY IN EQUITY

Susan Fortin

Student Leadership Director, AWSP

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety, Planning with Data, Improving Instruction, Engaging Communities, Closing the Gap

AWSP clearly shared the vision and presented the challenge when, as an organization, it declared its top priority in the current strategic plan: “Support **all** students in our state by tackling historical inequities in our P-16 system.”

With “Equity, Opportunity and Access” as our mantra, AWSL committed to examining all of our programs and practices to better meet the needs of all students. In taking on this

organizational challenge, we reached out to schools to ask them to assess their structures and practices in the realm of student leadership. Once we started the conversation on how to shift our organizational practices, it became clear that this journey to equity also requires a personal journey. Working side by side with administrators, activity advisers and leadership teachers we collectively tackled the Heart and Head work involved in equity. Here’s where our one-year journey has taken us.

Continued on page 34



AWSL's Equity and Access Task Force.

ORGANIZATIONAL INITIATIVES

MARCH 2018 – AWSL staff Susan Fortin, Joe Fenbert and James Layman taught a three-hour preconference session at the Washington Activity Coordinators Association (WACA) conference. The session, “Student Leadership through an Equity Lens,” challenged the 30 participants to assess the current practices of their student leadership programs.

MAY 2018 – Our “Getting Started” document launched in our e-newsletter, “In the Loop,” challenged schools to look at their systems and structures. AWSL made a commitment to include an equity feature in all future issues. AWSL staff attended the AWSP/WASA/WSSDA Equity Summit to deepen our own learning.

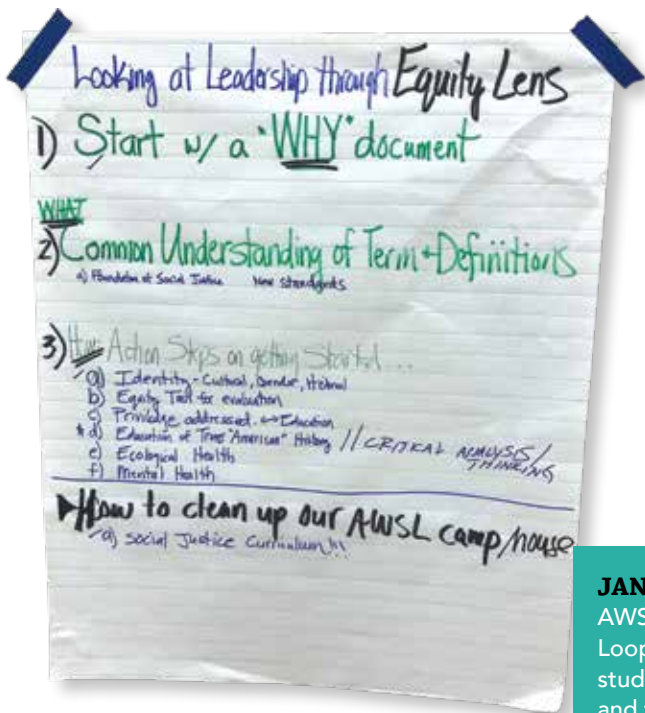
OCTOBER 2018 – Demographic data was collected at AWSL Fall Conference. We wondered going in, compared to summer camp, was this program more accessible to a diverse group given lower registration fees and less of a time commitment?

APRIL 2018 – Sparked by conversations at WACA we discovered that examining leadership programs through a lens of equity was a new concept to most schools. Our work would require a commitment of time and resources. We gathered a few interested administrators and activity coordinators to create a roadmap for our work, informally titled, “WACA to WACA—What difference can we make in one year?”

SUMMER 2018 – We gathered demographic data on students and staff involved in our summer leadership programs for the first time. This was an important first step for us to examine who we serve, who is missing and why. AWSL also launched our first Native American Leadership Camp at Chewelah Peak to better serve the needs of Native youth in a culturally responsive setting.



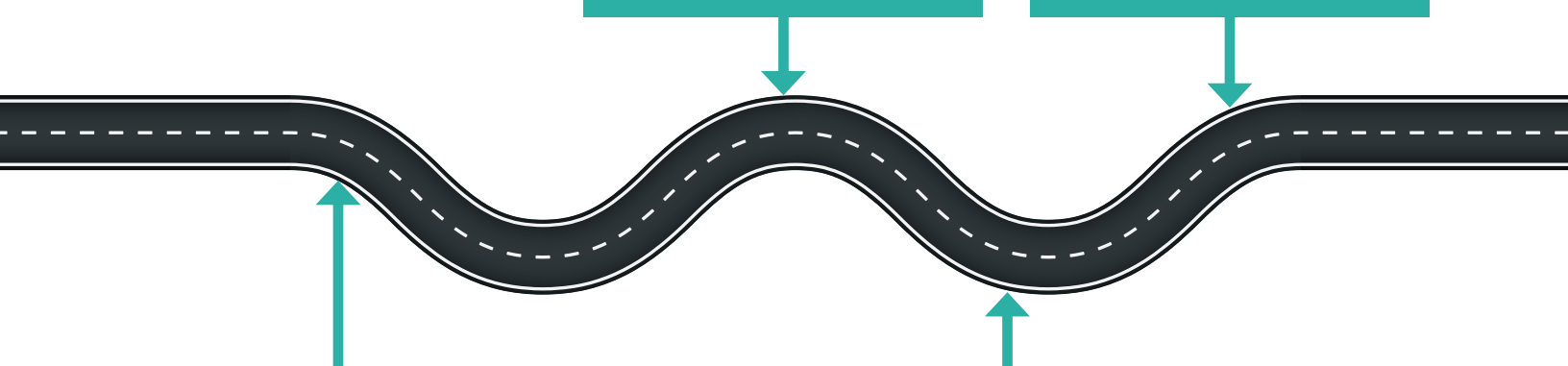
AWSL 2018-19 Student Voice and Advocacy Board



Some ideas from the Equity and Access Task Force's work.

JANUARY 2019 – Launched the AWSL Equity Journey in “In the Loop” — Challenging adults and students to explore their stories and focus on the Heart work on equity.

MARCH 2019 – AWSL Diversity Task Force reconvened at Cispus. The group focused on final revisions to our earlier work while also diving more deeply into our own personal equity journeys. As a group we realized this is a journey on a bumpy road with unexpected curves. We worked through some awkward and uncomfortable conversations and committed to the hard work. We agreed that we will stumble again — which is better than being afraid to take the journey at all.



NOVEMBER 2018 – AWSL Diversity Task Force gathered at Cispus for a three-day work session. Outcomes included:

- A revision of our AWSL belief statement
- Existing goals and objectives written to align with Washington State Social Emotional Learning Standards with strengthened ties to the AWSP Leadership Framework
- Refreshed tools for project planning and evaluation created using equity as a measure of success
- Analysis of demographic data gathered in programs with discoveries and wonderings that were shared with camp directors.

FEBRUARY 2019 – Invited 12 students of color who had served as peer mentors in our programs to AWSP/AWSL sponsored Future Leaders/Educators Day. Student program focused on encouraging teaching as a profession. Also, in February the newly formed AWSL Alumni and Friends group funded camp sponsorship for four underserved schools for summer 2019.



Logo for AWSL's annual Fall Leadership Conference: Unity Starts with You.

Continued on page 34

PERSONAL AND LOCAL INITIATIVES REFLECTED BY WORK OF MEMBERS OF THE AWSL DIVERSITY TASK FORCE

Students at **Renton HS**, Renton SD, have engaged in thoughtful deliberation and as a result have rewritten the ASB Constitution from scratch to ensure equity, better representation and diversity of student voice. Renton activity coordinator Christy Neuschwander helped her students with their efforts. Additionally, student leaders at **Kent-Meridian**, **Sammamish** and **Shorecrest** have also used OSPI School Report Card demographic data to analyze leadership involvement in their schools. Each are assessing barriers to access, and some are rewriting constitutions and election processes to provide more authentic leadership opportunities for all students.

Kent-Meridian HS, Kent SD, under the adult leadership of ASB Adviser Leigh Barry, hosted the AWSL Conference in October. The successful conference-wide service project partnered with Mary's Place Seattle, focusing on the needs of youth who are without secure housing. Students learned that homeless persons of color do not have access to needed hair care products, which are different than products needed for European hair (and what is most commonly donated). In addition, when homeless persons gain access to housing, food stamp programs do not cover cleaning or laundry supplies. The goal was to promote dignity for ALL by providing equitable access to these products.

Megan Baxter, **Union HS**, Evergreen SD, has added topics of Micro Aggressions and Implicit Bias to her leadership class curriculum. They have also begun building-level conversations regarding race, discrimination and intimidation. Additionally, she has been working

on district-wide efforts to promote leadership opportunities for all students through advisories, mentoring and new social emotional curriculum.

Anecia Grigsby, Assistant Principal **Sammamish HS**, Bellevue SD, a voracious reader and former Language Arts teacher has tackled 15 equity focused books so far this school year. Her reading list includes:

EIGHT TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- **"White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism,"** Robin DiAngelo
- **"Tears We Cannot Stop,"** Michael Eric Dyson
- **"Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption,"** Bryan Stevenson
- **"Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City,"** Matthew Desmond
- **"Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools,"** Monique W. Morris
- **"Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race,"** Debby Irving
- **"What Truth Sounds Like,"** Michael Eric Dyson
- **"Rising Out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist,"** Eli Saslow

SEVEN ADDITIONAL IMPORTANT BOOKS

- **"Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea,"** Mitchell Duneier
- **"From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America,"** Elizabeth Hinton
- **"White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America,"** Nancy Isenberg

- **"The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America,"** Richard Rothstein
- **"Defining Moments in Black History: Reading Between the Lies,"** Dick Gregory
- **"White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son,"** Tim Wise
- **"Things That Make White People Uncomfortable,"** Dave Zirin and Michael Bennett

Wenatchee HS, Wenatchee SD, hosted "I AM - WE ARE," an AWSL one-day regional student leadership workshop focused on exploring one's identity, story and aspirations while strengthening relationships with peers. Facilitated by James Layman the session brought together over 100 students from the region. Molly Butler, Student Support Specialist at Wenatchee coordinated the event. She cast a wide net and personally invited 50 Wenatchee students representing all demographics and social groups. Outside of the standard definition of Student Leader at their school, these students had a leadership experience that developed assets and formed deeper school-wide connections.

Randy Heath, former principal, current AWSL middle level camp director and executive director for **Student and Family Support Services** for Kent SD led his department through a book study using Dr. Robin DiAngelo's "White Fragility."

Fernell Miller, teacher at **Arrowhead Elementary**, Northshore SD, worked to create off-campus, afterschool gathering spaces for students through her initiative, Let's BGINN (Black Girls/Guys in Northshore Network). Fernell reminds us, "We have to start somewhere!"

“ Our goal for the future would be that equity is not an add-on, it’s just the way we do business.”

Johanna Phillips, **Shorecrest HS**, rewrote Leadership class project tools to include an equity focus for planning and evaluating. A self-guided Equity Audit created the conditions for Shorecrest student leaders to assess and update traditional activities, removing barriers based on gender and gender identity.

The **Sammamish HS** community engaged in the American History Travelling Museum in order to further their growth and conversations around racial equity. Social Studies teachers altered their schedules to take their students through the exhibit with time provided for reflection and discussion. The staff also experienced the exhibit and engaged in community circles to discuss their thoughts and feelings. Assistant Principal Anecia Grigsby added, “It was a very positive and needed experience for our school.”



Our equity focus influenced our AWSL Fall Leadership Conference theme and schedule. Local agencies share their mission and teach ways to assist affinity groups.

IN CLOSING

From WACA to WACA—What difference can we make in one year? In 2019, WACA added a full equity strand to their program and AWSL was able to recruit sessions based on the work of our equity task force. Nine workshop sessions and five meet-the-pro table talks were directly related to new initiatives in schools that are opening the doors of opportunity and access for all students.

Our goal for the future would be that equity is not an add-on, it’s just the way we do business. We challenge you to look inside – both personally and organizationally to see where a year of reflection and work on your own Equity Journey can take you. ■