

CK Students Try to Better Understand One Another

9-25-08

Amid districtwide efforts to amp up diversity training among teachers, a student group is formed to increase cultural awareness among their peers.

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CENTRAL KITSAP

Perched on metal stools in a basement classroom filled with art supplies, a small group of Central Kitsap High School students sat in an uneven circle last week, staring at each other.

Representing different segments of the student population, most of the students spoke only when spoken to, or when urged by guidance counselor Michelle Sotelo.

And so went the first meeting of the year for the CKHS Diversity Alliance.

Sotelo, the adviser to the student-led group, isn't worried about the initial shyness. It takes time to build relationships and create the trust needed to tackle the issues the group hopes to address this year, she said.

"We're hoping to create a way to make things

better than just accepting what happens," Sotelo said about providing the forum for students.

After the meeting, some of the students were animated in their conversations about what they hope to accomplish before the year is over.

"I'm here because diversity is important to me," said senior Melissa Rasmussen. "I think something is lost when we try to separate ourselves and keep each other at bay because of our differences."

To make the CK High student body more aware of the cultural, racial and social divides that exist within the school, members of the Diversity Alliance are in the process of developing creative ways to bridge those barriers.

Their first plan is to hold bimonthly potlucks where foods from various cultures are shared. They also want to post information about other countries and their traditions and holidays on a board in the school's hallway.

They've already brainstormed ideas for hosting a competition for students to come up with a diversity slogan for the school, and they plan to work with art students to paint a welcome sign that includes every language spoken at the school.

The students also want to create a program they can bring to the classroom that raises awareness among their peers about what behaviors will not be tolerated in school.

"I'm here to make the school better in a way," said senior Khri Harvey-Tamplin. "I'm here to show people I'm not a stereotype of the black community."

"Just because I'm black doesn't mean I'm like the black person on TV."

Teachers JD Sweet and Elizabeth Blandin are excited about the student-led effort. Before school started, the pair held a summit for students to get them thinking about ways they could lead their peers to better understand student differences.

Sweet and Blandin have spent the last two years working with CK High teachers and administrators to increase their understanding of the diverse needs of the school's student body.

The summit for students was the latest step in the couple's five-year plan to increase the school's awareness and understanding of the various issues surrounding diversity. The training is done through their consulting company, New Phase, New Ways.

A primary driver for the

pair in starting the training was to eliminate the academic achievement gap between the varying racial groups at CK High.

The couple also wanted their peers to be better equipped to handle students' needs, which vary depending on socio-economic status, cultural backgrounds and how students and teachers treat each other.

"What we want to do is to get them thinking about how they can make all students feel comfortable at CK High," Sweet said of their hopes for the student-led efforts.

Students are excited about the opportunity.

Jasmine Twymon, a junior, is a part of the school's Unity group. Unity was created by Sweet as a safe place for minority students — primarily black students — to discuss problems facing them and how to work through them.

After attending those meetings, Twymon said she's ready to expand her understanding of other cultures and cliques within the school to break through stereotypes.

"If we're all going to try and change things, we have to do it together," she said. "I honestly think what we're doing now is good and I hope it will continue."

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