

CKHS student diversity summit spreads cultural awareness

By **WESLEY REMMER**

Staff writer

Teachers JD Sweet and wife, Elizabeth Blandin, want to see a unified, diverse Central Kitsap High School (CKHS).

That's why the couple recently hosted a diversity summit, inviting students to learn about — and discuss — stereotypes, cliques, identity, race, class and culture found in CKHS' halls.

Their goal is to spread cultural awareness, encourage activism and embrace diversity.

"We focused on a lot of things, but the focus was diversity, race and culture," said Sweet, who teaches social studies. "The training in and of itself went real well."

Six students and a handful of administrators attended the summit which was designed to give CKHS students an opportunity to identify who they are, who their classmates are and understand how, together, they compromise the about 1,400-student body.

After learning basic terminology, students completed a series of exercises that asked them to think critically.

First, students learned the differences between self-identity and superimposed-identity. They compiled a list of the stereotypes at CKHS, finding about 20.

"All of that was done to get them to think about CKHS' cliques, and what they can do to release the pressure of being in cliques," Sweet said. "We definitely wanted to impress

upon the students that a lot of student voices aren't heard."

Cliques in high school halls may never go away, but that doesn't mean students should be alienated.

"We were really impressed with the seriousness they put forth," Sweet added.

Students also took a "personal inventory," answering questions about their own identity to gain a snapshot into who they are.

"We asked a whole lot of things. We asked them to look at themselves as a cultural being, or not a cultural being," Sweet said. "We were really impressed with the seriousness they put forth."

Pop culture continues to influence students, too, and Sweet said the summit attendees were acute in that understanding.

"Even though it was a small group, they noticed how influential pop culture is," Sweet said. "That was an eye-opener for them."

With more meetings scheduled, Sweet and Blandin hope the students will return with a larger following.

"It's important for them to identify what they want to work on," Blandin said. "It's a start, and hopefully the students will take the initiative."

While six students attended the first summit, Sweet and Blandin plan to host another.

"We're hoping that once we get the students off the ground, we'll have a staff and student body working in various ways," Sweet said. "More kids need to get involved."

"The idea is that we're going to work with them again and have a follow-up session. We're seeing them as a core group."

And by challenging students, Sweet said he believes diversity awareness can increase at CKHS.

"The key element is to raise the bar," he said. "We think that if you challenge students, and hold them accountable, they'll step up."

Sweet, who along with Blandin started the consulting group New Phase, New Ways, said CKHS can learn by researching and examining the trends of other schools.

"We do that, we research and examine," he said. "That's another really important part of it."

First-year Principal Steve Coons praised Sweet for his culturally proficient teaching, educating both staff and students.

"He's been an asset to our staff," Coons said. "His knowledge, perspective and intellect have really helped our staff move forward toward cultural proficiency."

Sweet and Blandin, who have led diversity workshops for CKHS faculty on six different occasions, were invited by Michelle Sotelo and Dianne Winger to host the summit for students.

Both Sotelo and Winger are members of the school's Diversity Alliance.

"One of our school improvement goals, of course, is diversity," Coons said. "The goal all around is trying to close the achievement gap."