

## Summary of ALTF Student Voice Project

Date: August 13, 2019

Prepared by: Theresa Yeh, Deenie Berry

<b>Purpose:</b>	A majority of ALTF members expressed interest in including student voice to inform our decision-making process. These initial student focus groups were conducted to begin to develop a better understanding of the academic and social/emotional experiences of SPS students of color at HC cohort schools (including HC-identified students, 2E students, and students in the general education program).
<b>Timeframe:</b>	Two focus group sessions were conducted on June 25 and 26, 2019. Each session lasted approximately 30-40 minutes.
<b>Participants:</b>	All SPS middle schools were invited to participate; however, most were unable to because of timing. Principals and ALTF members were asked to recruit participants. We spoke with four 7 <sup>th</sup> grade students at Washington Middle School. All students were males of color. One student had been in HC since 4 <sup>th</sup> grade, one since K, and two since 6 <sup>th</sup> grade.
<b>Data Collection:</b>	Interview questions were compiled by an ALTF member, using suggestions from other ALTF members. Draft questions were reviewed & edited by two other ALTF members. The final interview protocol included nine questions. Theresa and Deenie conducted the focus groups.

**Summary of Findings:** Below is a snapshot of student responses, organized by question. Follow-up questions are in non-bold italics. Notable quotes are in red text.

### **1. What has your experience in the HC cohort been like? What do you like about it? What are the most effective, most satisfying parts of your experience? What could be better?**

- 7<sup>th</sup> Grade – Just got in to HCC this year.
- Experience: Algebra – didn't get some of the stuff and was able to come in after school for help. He liked that even though they were in HC, they made it so that it didn't seem like they were smarter than the others. (ie: the HC kids didn't act like they were better than gen ed kids). He felt like there wasn't competition between gen ed and HC, which was good. (People said it happened a lot last year).
- Didn't like the substitute situation – bad subs. Chemistry didn't have a permanent teacher and he didn't learn anything for science this whole year. Some teachers graded off of their beliefs not standards (gave example).
- "All in all its pretty good."

*What would you change?*

- More people being able to get in at a younger age.
- They should be doing more projects with groups. Current solo projects are boring.

**2. Do you feel like the HC program is working for you? In what ways has the HC program challenged you?**

- “Classes are pushing us a little more than a regular class – but its not very diverse”
- “Good experience generally but also, not diverse.”
- “Lots of people in there; also not diverse.”
- Currently in History and language arts they are learning the exact same thing, but in separate classes. Next year they will be put together. In Math and Science they’re learning different things.

*Did you notice big differences in the learning between your previous school and HC school?*

- Yes. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade it was only 1 grade ahead. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade he was doing HS math and he actually had to pay attention because it was more complex. If you are only learning a grade ahead, its not that bad - you already know it. Being two years ahead was harder. “I’m just used to getting everything, but that didn’t happen this year.” This year he was challenged and didn’t get everything. Math is the one class that challenged him, or where he felt a big difference from previous school.
- Elementary school – “Experience here is pretty much the same but more hectic.”
- At Thurgood Marshall many kids were in HC so it feels mostly similar
- Three people from John Muir were in HC. They just started in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, so two kids at WMS from his elementary school.

**3. How comfortable do you feel in the HC program?**

- Transition was tough – “it was weird being the one black person in the class, or only one of a few couple people of color.” It was good though - people welcomed him in. Teachers and students both welcomed him.

*Do you feel that your cultural background or experiences are respected? Why or why not?*

- In some ways his culture was respected: ex. He was adopted as a child by his grandparents because his parents had issues. People respected that, which was good. In other ways, he was not respected – some White kids have been saying the N word. He responded that they shouldn’t say it and they responded that his culture says it – “well, but you guys say it.” “That’s the only thing that actually got annoying after awhile, because they kept saying it like it was nothing – they didn’t really care. That’s been the only thing that’s kinda been messed up about being in HCC.” Some substitute teachers used the word, as well. That never happened at [his middle school].
- “I feel pretty comfortable. We are valued, but there’s not many of us.”
- “Overall I’ve had a positive experience and over the years I’ve gotten used to it, cause I’ve been in since Kindergarten.” Had to get used to the harder work and meeting new people.

**4. Do you have true peers in your classes (peers with similar interests with whom you can connect?)**

- Yes. He has peers he developed close relationships with. How was it different from previous relationships at his old middle school? There he knew a lot of people - he already had past relationships. But no one from his old school came to Washington. So he had to meet new people from scratch. But once he made friends, "it was like, they had my back and I had theirs." Everyone is in a big community and that's good.

**5. How do you think your experience would be different if half of your HC cohort were students of color?**

- If cohort had more students of color, it wouldn't be different for him, but the others might apply themselves to their work. "Right now many of them don't try as hard - They say that since they aren't in HCC, then there's no point." "I feel like if there were more students of color, it would be more diverse which is a good thing. Diversity is good. But I think behavior-wise, or in general, things would still be the same.
- More ideas and different perspectives. "Like if we have a class discussion, new ideas and stuff like that."
- Would hear from many types of people. I don't think the core experience would change, other than meeting new people, and the program as a whole is more diverse.

*What are the negative aspects of a lack of diversity?*

- There's just mainly one group of people you hear from...instead of everyone from around the world.

*Do you get a lot of chances to interact with non-HCC students?*

- Yes, but most of the people that I talk to at lunch are in HCC. He sees gen ed kids in his electives. Some of these kids say that he acts like a white kid because he is in HCC - "They kinda say that I act like a White kid." And they also say they can't believe he got in and they didn't. "And they kinda get down on themselves." Cause some people didn't even know that you could take a test to get in. Resources don't seem to be getting out to everybody. "Some people just get down on themselves and some people just try to shake it off and say that I act like a White kid." "But I try and say don't let it get to you cause you can still go hard on your regular classes and you'll be perfectly fine." This is basically everyone in his electives that knows that he's in HCC. He tries to help them see they can progress in their regular classes. The electives are when he interacts with others.

*How did you find out about the HHC testing?*

- Rainier Scholars told him, and encouraged him to test for HCC.

*Do you feel like you made a good choice? Are you happy with your choice?*

- “mmmm...so so.” Not sure this was a good choice for him. He misses his friends from his old middle school. But it’s good for college applications. Socially, not so much. For his future, it’s a good decision.
- He has made good friends. They get into arguments sometimes but it’s pretty good. They are willing to help each other out.

**6. Do you feel supported socially and emotionally at school? Why or why not? Can you give some examples?**

- Some teachers do and some don’t. Two electives and two HCC classes. These teachers helped him through a hard time this year when a close relative died. They let him grieve. They also give some time for free time and conversation in class after work is done. One teacher told him he has to take a different time to grieve...he can’t be sad in public. Another teacher – doesn’t care about their grade. Said she gets paid whether they understand the concepts or not. Teacher didn’t let him leave class to go to counseling – told him he wouldn’t get credit for the project if he left. “If I don’t have the right to use my resources then what’s the point of having them?” Counselor is helpful.
- Students feel supported socially and emotionally. They feel they can talk to teachers or counselor. Or can talk to parents, friends. Lot of people you can talk to if you need something. Usually can find friends in the cohort. There’s probably going to be a few people you can find as friends.
- Friendships? (Kid who entered in K said most of friends were the same from his cohort. Shared same interests.
- Pretty easy to find friends, even though most kids were new. Most of kids he knew from elementary school were not in HCC, so he had to make new friends. He also sees other kids in elective classes.

*How about your academics? Do you feel you have you been challenged?*

- We are being challenged. In history and ELA, the material is the same but they are held to a higher standard.
- One kid was accidentally put in a Gen Ed class for two weeks at the beginning of the semester. Could tell the difference between Gen ed and HCC class. It is a pretty big difference. Its harder and better in math and science. You’re learning harder stuff that you can use in life. Feels other people could get in from gen ed but they haven’t had the experience. “There are other people that are smart but just didn’t have the opportunity to test in and get that experience.” Teachers couldn’t control the class as well. It wasn’t because of the kids. The content, it was really easy for some of the kids that could easily do higher stuff, so they could easily finish the work in half of the class period and then have the rest of the time to hang out.” It wasn’t enough for them so they misbehaved.
- “I know people that could get in but they just never heard about it or didn’t know about it so they’ve been in general ed this whole time and didn’t get the higher learning from the start.”
- At Thurgood Marshall the switch to higher math in fourth grade was tough so he had to catch up because they are bumped up so far.

*Do you think students in general ed (some of the people you know) would take higher/harder classes, if they had the opportunity?*

- “Yes. And just for them to know earlier about the program.”
- “I’m not sure if they would like to do this program or not, to be honest. They’re the type of person that wants to relax instead of stressing out about a bunch of projects.”
- “But they COULD do it.” “They are capable of getting into the program but I’m just not sure if they would want to do it or not, and deal with the hard curriculum.”
- “They probably have more friends in non-HCC so they would want to hang out with them more.” Wouldn’t want to leave their friends. Social aspect. “It’s more diverse in gen ed for sure.”
- Electives and Advisory – Next year 8<sup>th</sup> grade in History gen ed and HCC will be in the same class. “I’m fine with it.” **Students thought it was good for them to all be in the same class since they’re learning the same thing anyway. They feel that they will still be held to the higher standard. “I don’t think they’re gonna bring us down...we’re gonna bring them up.”**

*What do general ed students think about HCC – what have you heard?*

- “No one has really ever said anything about it because we only ever talk about school if we’re working on a project or helping someone with homework.” They don’t really talk about the different programs because we don’t really control any of it. And its fine with us.
- “We don’t really talk about it.”
- Occasionally you will hear people say there is a lot of white people in HCC. Or they’ll say, “Oh you’re in HCC? You’re probably pretty smart. They assume that HCC kids are all smarter than the general ed kids.”

***8. Can you describe how you have been supported to achieve your own goals? Are there some ways in which you could have been better supported?***

- Future goals – Have teachers asked you about that? We don’t really share these things. Only in advisory, in a circle. They talk about those things for the future.
- Advisory... some advisories just have free time, but most have a curriculum... talking about college and goal stuff. Every Friday they have a grade check. Talk about how they could do better.
- One person’s advisory was just free time. But they do talk about this stuff in Leadership class. Its goal oriented.
- One student – his parents help him with his goals
- In HCC classes they focus on content, not really talking about goals.

***9. If you could give advice to teachers (or principals) about how to support students who need extra academic challenges, what would that advice be? What would you want to change? What types of programs would you design?***

- You have to let the student have their side and explain why they think this. Even if you are having a bad day you have to be willing to help. Think what will it take for your students to be successful. If students are having a bad day they need to be willing to ask the teacher. If a teacher is having a bad day they have to still be willing to help. You have to have everyone pull their weight in the class.
- Advice for school structures or policies? He is worried about budget cuts. **Money is going into some things that he doesn't think is useful.** Money for DJ at lunch time every day could have been used for classroom supplies. When they did a walkout/protest, teachers threatened to suspend them. They need to have the ability to express their beliefs. He feels like some classes are more upkeep than others. There are rats in the school. No one is doing anything. They deserve to have a building without rats. The money could have gone toward rat extermination.

*Do you have student council?*

- They have a student equity team. He is not on it. His friend says that equity team comes up with strategies so that each student and teacher is treated with respect. One time everyone was wearing a wire and they caught that some teachers were being racist and cussing at students. Yelling won't make people change. It either makes them shut down or angry. So yelling at them would cause them to do something worse than what they were already doing. (ie: yelling is ineffective)
- "I think that one of the highlights of our school is the equity team. Its really good. Student Equity Team structure – 5 of each grade level – HC and GE status does not matter. Students are chosen from a written thing. He didn't want to join this year since he just started this year. But students do share about what happens at the meeting. There are two adults/teachers that help. He is interested in doing it next year.

*What would you want to change if you are on the team next year?*

- The bathrooms are really bad in the school. Some stalls broken, no toilet paper. Water issue. Can't drink the water due to lead. He might change how lunch is prepared. Some stuff is processed...not good for you. Making meals less expensive. Some kids who pay might struggle to get their lunches. \$100 per month. If it is school related, it should be free.
- More group projects – easier to learn, and there's the social aspect. In the working world, you have to work together with other people.
- Open note tests – closed note test don't make any sense because you have to memorize it. Using phones to look up answers, because its not realistic that you're not going to be able to do that in real life.
- Doing more stuff that you're actually going to use in life. Like in a future job. Most of the stuff we are learning is in a certain field but outside of that field we will never use it. Would be good to learn more stuff that relates to future, in real life.
- Make sure all the students are on the same page before moving on. Give those behind a little help.

*Would you make any changes about how classes are structured?*

- **Asking kids in gen ed if they want a chance to do the higher-level work.** Just try it for two weeks or something like that. “Obviously that’s going to be hard for the grade book, but give them a chance at least.”
- **Communicate better. Every year you aren’t in the program you get farther behind.**

#### **Overall Patterns or Observations:**

- All agreed that the cohort was not diverse enough, but these students seem to have ‘adjusted’ despite this reality
- All said that they knew many students who could benefit from or would be interested in advanced learning opportunities, but had never heard about them or didn’t know how to get in. Suggests need for better communication about the program and strategies for identification.
- All felt generally positive about the HC program as they have experienced it. They did encounter issues with their educational experience and had specific suggestions for improvement, but they weren’t specific to the HC model per se.

#### **Reflections & Next Steps**

The timing of the Student Voice Project allowed us to listen to only a few students this spring. Of course, we would prefer to have more students interviewed and we will systematize the process of gathering student voice as we move forward. Along with the implementation of the HC Advisory team, the AL Office will develop a survey to annually gather input from students and their families who participate in Highly Capable programs and services. A Student Voice subcommittee was formed in July 2019 and they will soon discuss additional goals and next steps.