

Johnson High wants kids to run the show



Johnson High School's student government structure is changing in a big way — whereas before it was a small group of students leading, now over 300 are in leadership roles. Shown here, a Tuesday, Oct. 27 homeroom meetings saw a student-led small group meeting where students of mixed grades did a teambuilding exercise, scheming up their design for the school's pumpkin carving contest. (Patrick Larkin/Reivew)

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Dissolving student council, school takes more inclusive student government approach

If all goes according to plan, students could be running the show at Johnson High School within a few years.

Taking inspiration from a prep school in a low-income neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, Johnson High's principal, Micheal Thompson, is hoping for a cultural shift at the school, where students have more say, and ultimately more responsibility.

Thompson has been telling students, "You need to take over part of this school."

To that end, the school got rid of its student council last year.

In its place is this year's test trial for a new model for school government, where a quarter of the school's students are in leadership roles, and every student has input into how things are run.

The hope is that eventually, students will be calling assemblies themselves, sitting on hiring committees and teacher committees, calling parents to inform them their students are absent, and building student-initiated camaraderie and community.

Thompson imagines a school culture where the students form a support network, encouraging each other to do well, providing homework help, and where positive role models in 11th and 12th grades more heavily influence the ninth- and tenth-graders.

Already, things are falling into place — every student is involved in student government, and kids across grade levels are getting to know each other.

More involvement

With the old model, about 70 students were involved in student leadership, but now it's up to over 300 of the school's 1,350 kids.

Each student has a homeroom, which belongs to one of three of the school's "Houses," according to which lunch period they fall under — these houses, named after teachers, are similar to the fiction series Harry Potter's houses. They have friendly competitions between the houses and individual homerooms, comparing scores in terms of their academics, school involvement, and more.

Carving out time

The school's whole schedule was readjusted to accommodate for the new student government structure. A minute was shaved off of each of the school's eight periods, and one minute was shaved off of each passing time, carving out 15 minutes for a new daily activity: Before lunch each day, all the kids participate in 15-minute homeroom meetings, where they sit with about 20 students, five from each grade

level, and discuss a topic suggested by the school's student leadership team.

The discussions and activities are led by the homeroom leaders, who are also students. All the teacher does is sit back and watch, and ensure the school's basic rules are being followed.

Many of the activities are simple community-building exercises, intended to get students from all four grades engaged with each other. Typically, Thompson said, kids wouldn't get much interaction with students from other grades — this model works against that.

The Tuesday, Oct. 27 homeroom meetings saw students sitting casually in a classroom, scheming up their design for the school's pumpkin carving contest. Scrolling through images on websites, they debated the merits of different designs.

Showing can-do

Thompson says the idea came in part out of a protest some seniors organized last year — in December 2014 they organized a "Hands Up, Walk Out" Ferguson protest where a group of 60 walked out of the school in protest of police brutality in the wake of black teenager Michael Brown being killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri.

The 60 kids gathered in the parking lot and made speeches while a TV news station filmed them. Forty-five of them made it to the march at the Capitol; 15 made it to Burger King down Arcade Street, Thompson noted with a smirk.

Before the protest occurred, Thompson met with the organizers, whom he noted were high-achieving students.

He told them there'd be consequences ... but they weren't what they'd expected. He made all participants grab hats from the lost and found to avoid frostbite on the below-zero day. And afterwards, he made them watch a film, and discuss it.

They watched a PBS documentary called "The Rule," which chronicles the success story of St. Benedict's Preparatory School in a rough, low-income neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. There, the students run the day-to-day business of the school — they call assemblies, make announcements, make decisions about how the school operates, and keep each other in check and in line. The film resonated with them.

When seeing what the young people who organized the protest were capable of doing themselves, Thompson figured, why not let the students do more for themselves as a routine practice.

“We don’t ask enough of our students,” he said.

The structure

Similar to the size of a student council, 27 students form the school’s senior leadership team — those kids all applied for the leadership positions, creating a video application.

But from there, the leadership fans out with the school’s 63 homerooms — 21 for each lunch hour. These small-group advisories have three or four upper-classmen leaders, and each advisory is comprised of five students of each grade level. So, each student in the school is in an advisory and thus connected to student government. The 61 homerooms are split into three houses, according to their lunch hour. Each advisory has three or four leaders, who report back to the 27 senior leaders.

And like that, there’s a structure for the whole school to stay connected. Paul Schmitz, the teacher who helps coordinate the new student government structure, reports the structure provides a good route for getting feedback from students and teachers.

Each day’s homeroom is dedicated to a different topic — Tuesdays are Academics, Wednesdays are Character days, Thursdays are Service days, and Fridays are Leadership days.

On Mondays, each house meets before lunch in the auditorium for an overall meeting, which is often comprised mostly of announcements. On Academic Tuesday, students often get a chance to look at how their particular group and their house are performing compared to the rest of the school. Charts and graphs show how each homeroom fares, as well as the house as a whole — the hope is that this will foster competition, and accountability — if one student is not doing well, it affects everyone.

Whereas before, Schmitz notes, teachers were the only ones enforcing rules and keeping students accountable, now there’s peer pressure for the group to perform well as a whole.

To that end, students will soon be the ones calling parents to inform them their kids have an unexcused absence, instead of an automated call from the district.

“In the old way, 90 percent of students sit back and watch the 10 percent of the students who cause problems,” says Paul Schmitz, the school’s curriculum coordinator.

“Now the 10 percent aren’t just dealing with the adults in the building; there’s some peer pressure where it’s like, ‘Hey, that’s not the way we do things at Johnson.’”

Making new connections

Cheryl Werling, a Johnson High science teacher and one of the house leaders (the house is called Werling House), reports that the new program is yielding some positive results.

For one, the kids were enthusiastic about the pumpkin carving competition. But beyond that, they’re making new connections that might have never happened without the new student government model.

“A lot of kids that normally wouldn’t be as outgoing and social with other kids they don’t know are making connections,” she said. So much so that it’s become more common for kids from different grade levels to sit together at lunch.

And some of the advisory leaders serve as mentors and older siblings for the lower classmen in their homeroom.

The system isn’t flawless, she notes, and it’s still hard to get some kids to participate.

But nonetheless, “overall it seems pretty amazing,” she says.

Jane, a senior, captain of the volleyball team, and an advisory leader, reports that from her perspective, the new student government model is working well.

Though her advisory group isn’t necessarily a tight-knit group of friends, they have productive conversations, and every one of the 20 kids participates, she says. It helps that they sometimes are rewarded with treats, but nevertheless it’s working.

Kids from the group, regardless of grade level, say “Hi” to each other in the hallways. One boy in the group will be moving to California in a few weeks, and so the group is planning a pizza party for him. A few weeks ago, a member of the group got into an argument on Facebook with another student — as a group, the advisory team talked about the issue, and was able to confront the problem, she says.

Though it's an experiment, Thompson and Schmitz estimate the program is rolling out well, and will hope to have many of the quirks ironed out by the end of the school year.

Thompson says he's pursuing grant money to help provide leadership training to all the homeroom leaders. The new student government model, he's hoping, will pick up where other school progress has left off. He points to reduced numbers of fights and in-school issues, as signs of progress. But, the culture at the school needs to develop for the school to be in top form, he figures.

"School culture needs to come from the students," he says. "It's not going to get any better unless the students are in control of it."

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