**Have You Asked Your Students Yet?**

By: James Layman, AWSL Director

The importance of student voice in schools has been an undercurrent of the work of the Association of Washington Student Leaders (AWSL) throughout its 65-year history. However, in recent years, AWSL has been working diligently to ensure a poignant yet powerful question that has guided our work and mission: "Have you asked your students yet?"

With the support and guidance of students, AWSL has woven the concepts of "nothing for us, without us" and "people support what they help create" into the lexicon of school culture and climate. The ability and intentionality to recognize students as "Culture and Climate Specialists" are upon us within our current education system.

How do we transform our school culture and climate into an atmosphere where each and every student and adult feels accepted and that they belong? A school culture and climate where each and every student and adult feel seen, loved, heard, and valued. An atmosphere where everybody can authentically show up every day without having to diminish our mute who they are. This type of school culture and climate can be possible if we look inwards and ask the most prominent stakeholders in the educational system - the students.

The students from elementary on up all have opinions and are experts at being students. That's right - the students are the experts at being students. Our seniors are in their 13th professional year as students. Our 4th graders have five years of professional experience at being a student... perhaps, we start learning from that professional experience that our students have. What would happen if we asked our students for their insight, expertise, and suggestions when school culture turbulence begins? We know that people support what they help create; students actively being a part of cultivating their school culture weaves them into being prime-time players.

Students can teach us a lot. The Association of Washington Student Leaders (AWSL) has been lucky. We have two student groups of over 100 students from throughout the state. They have taught us how much they value and cherish their relationships with the adults in their schools. They reminded us how much they look forward to furthering those relationships. The students have taught us the importance of adults being active listeners when students share with us. Students have taught us to be patient with them and extend grace as they navigate societal pressures, grades, jobs, planning for their future, mental health. The multifaceted relationships they have with friends and family.

Our two student groups have helped us shape the future of AWSL, our work, and our programs. The work all started with us asking, "Have we asked the students yet?" That question ignited us to view our work differently. It forced us to ask, "Are we doing *with* students, or *to*students? Our hope has always been that we have been doing *with* students, but they pointed out our blind spots and gave us permission to revaluate how we operate.

This work is not easy; it takes intentionality, patience, and time. From asking elementary students how they would like recess to be set up to navigating the complex issues our secondary students face daily, there is so much for us (the adults) to learn from our students. Every day we get the opportunity to be learners — to learn about their passions, perspectives, dreams, fears, worries, and hopes. Students have brilliant ideas, invaluable insights, and ample energy. So now is the time to ask ourselves the million-dollar question: "Have you asked your students yet?" Let this be the year that we make room at the table, invite students in, and let their brilliance radiate through the education system and the world.