

League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces
Education Study Committee

Meeting with High School Student Leadership

In an effort to obtain viewpoints of students about their school experience and what could be done to make their experience better, the study committee decided to interview members of the student government council.

Three schools were selected for interview:

1. Mayfield High School, March 31, 11:30 a.m. – Noon
2. San Andres Learning Center, April 8, 11:52 a.m.-12:20 p.m.
3. Las Cruces High School, April 29, 2:30-3:30 p.m.

At each of these interviews the number of committee members who could attend varied because of personal commitment. Also, the same set of questions, see p. 4 were used at all interviews.

In addition, School Board Members, Las Cruces Public School (LCPS), shared copies of minutes from two special meetings with students. The minutes are Attachments 2 and 3 of this paper.

1. Student Forum with the LCPS Board of Education, October 25, 2010, Las Cruces High School PLC Room.
2. Student Forum with the LCPS Board of Education, November 18, 2010, Vista Middle School Media Center.

Members & Organization: At Las Cruces and Mayfield High Schools, a similar election process is followed. All students seeking to be members of the student government body and class officers run for election for the upcoming school year. There are eligibility requirements:

- Attendance in all classes.
- A minimum cumulative grade point average.
- Passing grade for currently enrolled classes.
- Demonstrated good ethical values and loyalty to the school.

After filing a nomination packet, students run for election for class officers; current junior who are future seniors can run for both class officers and student body officers. Students may be nominated through petition but cannot be elected as a write-in candidate.

Students conduct a campaign that is in good taste, using campaign material that:

- is free of profanity, obscene materials or suggestive matter
- does not name opponents
- is placed in approved places throughout the school
- does not cover up or remove opponents materials
- is removed after the election has occurred

The elections are held in the spring (April or May), and the nominees have to be present on the day of election. In case of a tie, there is a run-off election on the following day.

After election, all class officers are members of student government. From among the members a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer are selected and serve a one year term. Students from all classes may be observers at the student government meetings.

At San Andres, an alternative learning center for high school students that may include some students beyond age 18 and offers flexibility in classes, members of the student body are selected by three teachers. A certain grade point average has to be maintained. The officers of the government council are selected from among its members.

Focus of Student Government: All three student government bodies focus on events and policies that affect students. All members gain experience in valuable skills that are useful throughout life: leadership, planning, budgeting, organizing, and interaction with and communication among students and administration. Each group has a teacher advisor.

- At **San Andres** the student council is responsible for planning major events. Students will communicate with members of the council to resolve issues that arise. Council members, in turn, observe the environment and raise issues of concern. Communication about issues also is accomplished by sending out surveys, polling the students, and receiving input from faculty. There is a monthly school newsletter, and announcements may be made daily on the public address system. The members of the student council are a model for other students and exhibit pride in their school.
- **Mayfield High School** entitled its student body, Student Government Association (GSA). Major emphasis is school activities, social events (e.g., prom) fundraisers, including a charitable contribution for cancer research called Pennies for Patients, and issues as they arise (e.g., student retention, freshman orientation, and parking). Even though there is a large student population, there is a lively “grapevine” and students communicate their concerns and receive information about issues affecting them. A media broadcast and public address system is available. The principals welcome scheduled meetings to resolve issues. Their main interaction with administration involves receiving approval for school events and fundraising activities.
- Members of the GSA at **Las Cruces High School** (LCHS) have to be enrolled in the Student Government Leadership class. There is a student advisory group named FIDO (no interpretation for initials) that is composed of one delegate from each class. A School Advisory Council (SAC) made up of parents, students, and teachers also is available. Greatest concern at present is the renovation that is scheduled for LCHS that will affect daily classes. The impact of a new class schedule to accommodate the NM state budget cuts is of concern. In addition the GSA focuses on school activities and organizes the prom dances and school assemblies. Communication with students may be with surveys, focus groups, discussion in subcommittees, and FIDO. There are also regular breakfast meetings with the principal who has a good relationship with students. Representatives from GSA and other committees attend and share information, ideas, and plans with the principal. A student representative served on the Architectural Committee for the proposed renovation of the high school. GSA worked with school administrators in implementing a cell phone policy.

What would improve the educational experience?

- **Las Cruces High School:** students were very complementary of the government leadership class, and noted that students were eager to enroll in the class. The skills learned here were applicable in business or life and involved planning and budgeting, stress management, advocating for self and groups, confidence building and developing an attitude about getting involved. Suggestions for making education better were small class sizes (now 20-30 in class). Larger classes lend themselves to lecture format and reduced interaction between student and teacher. There are not enough text books. This also is true for advanced classes where sharing occurs, and students wait on each other to complete a page of text before being able to go on. More computers are needed, especially since some students have no computers at home. Equipment such

as projectors and other equipment need to be maintained and fixed when broken. The issue of more hands-on experience in the classroom was raised. The learning environment in the classroom is sacrificed when English learning students are mixed with students functioning at a higher academic level. More parental involvement is encouraged in student education.

- **Mayfield High School** student government members would appreciate having more hands-on-and practical experience in the class room. More supplies are needed in the lab classes, especially the science classes. Lab fees range from \$5-\$15. Newer and sufficient numbers of books are another issue. Some books are 15 years old. Some books are available online. Students have to pay for books used in the dual credit program in which students take courses for which they can simultaneously earn both college and high school credit. Although students have access to information about dual credits and Early College High School, there is concern about retention and graduation of students from high school. Members of GSA encourage students to get more involved with extracurricular activities (e.g., sports or clubs). They believe that this involvement in extracurricular activities provides an incentive for students to strive for a good attendance record and to complete high school.
- At **San Andres** the council members appreciated the learning experience they are receiving here. There is more help for the students. The class size of 15 students per class allows for a lot of 1:1 instruction and interaction. There are eight students to one teacher advisor. Students have access to the dual credit program and to career technical education, a vocational high school. A concern was expressed about daily lunches that are provided by the Las Cruces High School cafeteria. Because there is no kitchen at San Andres, cold lunches are served daily and the selection is limited.

Attachments

1. Questions for Student Government Council
2. Meeting Minutes – School Board Interviews at Las Cruces High School – October 25, 2010
3. Meeting Minutes – School Board Interviews at Vista Middle School – November 18, 2010



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Questions for Student Government Council (March 31, 2011)

1. What does the student council do for students? How do council members learn about the issues important to students? How do council members receive feedback from the students and how do council members give feedback back to the students?
2. Describe the process for resolving issues with school administrators (at the high school and in the administration building in Loretto Plaza).
3. Describe changes in the school system that would give students a better education.
4. Describe the policy that this council develops.
5. How does one get elected to the student government council and why do you want to serve on this council?
6. Describe how in the future you are going to use the skills you learned here.

Attachment 2

**Minutes of the Student Forum with the Las Cruces Public Schools Board of Education held
Monday, October 25, 2010, Las Cruces High School PLC Room.**

Members Present: Dr. Connie Phillips (arrived at 2:00 p.m.)

Mr. Chuck Davis

Dr. Bonnie Votaw

Sra. Maria Flores

Members Absent: Ms. Serena Shoop

Superintendent Stan Rounds was in attendance.

At 1:30 p.m., prior to the start of the forum, Jo Galván, director of communications, asked the students to identify themselves and identify their grade level; visitors also introduced themselves.

There were approximately 40 students from all grade levels, 9th through 12th. Ms. Galván explained that the School Board wanted to hold the forum in order to hear students' perceptions on their high school experiences, in particular their experiences when they entered 9th grade. Superintendent Stan Rounds said 9th grade is the grade where LCPS has the highest number of dropouts. He said statistics are worrisome and the district needs to better prepare students for their futures.

The forum began at 1:40 p.m. Andrea Fletcher, liaison to the Superintendent for community relations, was the forum's facilitator. She led the discussion on many topics during the next 1½ hours. Students took turns providing their opinions, insights, and recommendations with regard to: 9th grade transition; communication between teachers and students; teaching styles, i.e., lecture versus hands-on; preparation for high school during middle school years; motivation by teachers and students; preparing middle school students for more homework when in high school; extracurricular availability; improved support for monolingual Spanish speakers/English language learners; cutbacks to athletic trips; and the availability of textbooks.

Some suggestions from students included: have freshmen attend an orientation to help with transition; ask students who have dropped out as to why they did so; students who skip class should be mandated to return to class instead of sending them to in-school suspension (ISS); ensure teachers adapt to different learning styles; have class sizes smaller; provide the support that AES students receive, such as college preparation, to all students; offer "focus classes" to all students; have high school students act as mentors for students transitioning into high school; don't let students rely on translators when learning English; ensure middle school counselors are knowledgeable about high school prerequisites; eliminate standardized testing; and allow students to do homework during lunch detention.

There was also considerable discussion about whether high school campuses should be open or closed. Opposing viewpoints were discussed and some of the determining factors, according to the students, were: healthy choices and more palatable lunches; adequate space in the cafeteria; students' maturity level; and whether students would return to classes after lunch.

When discussing bullying and harassment, comments included: students are targeted over their sexual orientation; staff doesn't always intervene when they witness bullying; and more needs to be done to combat racism. Students also said they feel safe at school and see teachers helping with monitoring in the halls and outside. They also provided comments about the school's facilities including restroom cleanliness.

At the end of the session, Sra. Flores expressed her appreciation to the students for being open and honest with their comments. She commented that the Board does listen to students and wants to make the educational system better. Dr. Phillips also thanked the students for their willingness to speak and to be honest.

The forum concluded at 3:00 p.m.

Board President

Board Secretary

Minutes by Jo Galván

Attachment 3

**Minutes of the Student Forum with the Las Cruces Public Schools Board of Education held
Monday, November 18, 2010, Vista Middle School Media Center.**

Members Present: Dr. Connie Phillips
 Mr. Chuck Davis
 Dr. Bonnie Votaw
 Sra. Maria Flores
Members Absent: Ms. Serena Shoop

Superintendent Stan Rounds was in attendance.

At 11:30 a.m., Dr. Connie Phillips, Board President, introduced herself and the other members of the Board, Superintendent Stan Rounds, Communications Director Jo Galván, and Special Liaison to the Superintendent Andrea Fletcher, who is today's meeting facilitator.

Dr. Phillips explained to the group of 12 students, grades 6th through 8th, that the School Board is interested in hearing students' opinions. Of particular interest are the experiences of students when moving from 5th to 6th grade — their transition period.

The students introduced themselves and indicated which feeder elementary school they attended.

Prior to opening the discussion with the students, Ms. Fletcher informed the students that if they want to provide feedback on an item that is not discussed, they can fill out the form available at the forum.

Over the next 1½ hours, Ms. Fletcher facilitated the discussion on many topics. Students took turns providing their opinions, insights, and recommendations.

Regarding 6th grade transition and the difficulties in making new friends, many students commented that it was easier than what they expected. They also discussed the amount of homework they have compared to elementary school and the additional freedoms (and responsibilities) they received when moving into middle school. They appreciate teachers who discipline students who are disruptive and they like teachers who can engage them in class.

Some of the qualities of school they enjoy are magnet classes, such as music technology, student council, exploratory classes, such as robotics, band and physical education. When asked what they would change at school if they could, the students suggested allowing the use of lockers and having fewer restrictions to leave class for restroom breaks.

In looking toward the future, the students said high school will offer them organized sports; Spanish classes; additional music opportunities; and greater personal challenges. Their worries about high school included: drug use at school; many students on campus; teasing or bullying; fights; whether teachers will assist them; drugs and alcohol; and, keeping up with grades.

In order to help with their transition to high school, they suggested good counseling on selection of classes and having students understand that late work won't be accepted.

The students also gave their perception about gangs in their school. They commented that the problems students have start in the home and that the gang members need good role models. They also felt instances of bullying have decreased this year. All students indicated they feel safe at school.

Finally, they were asked what they would purchase for the school if they had control of the budget. They suggested: painting the school; buying desks, tables, chairs, lockers, instruments, new recycling bins and library books; and, adding Spanish and Home Economics classes at school.

At the conclusion, Board member Flores thanked the students for their comments. She also asked about their Student Council projects. Dr. Votaw also thanked them for the invitation to visit and complimented the students on being very articulate and for giving the School Board many issues to consider.