

## **Notes from Parent Meeting with Dr. Alan Goodwin, Principal Whitman HS**

Pyle Counseling Advisory Committee, February 15, 2018

*These notes were compiled by a parent in attendance. In addition to Dr. Goodwin, Pyle Counselor Erika Huck responded to select parent questions.*

### **“Pearls of Wisdom” from Dr. Goodwin**

- On any given day at Whitman, there are over 2300 people in the building. Not everyone is happy every day, but generally kids are smiling and engaged.
- High school is not always a happy time. To help their transition, parents need to relax; your children pick up on your anxiety.
- Some things that make new Whitman students happy: kids tend to be happy with shift away from block schedule; they have the freedom to eat lunch anywhere on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor; they have the chance to get involved in many clubs and activities. So, right away they will be happy...
- ...then the homework comes. We have tried to make homework meaningful, but there’s still a lot
  - Rely on your counselors to help you choose a course load right for your child. They won’t push kids to take excessively hard loads; that pressure generally comes indirectly from peers. Different students have widely different abilities and skills, but they don’t consider that when they are choosing their classes; they pick based on what their friends are taking. Doing so gets some kids in over their heads, because they may not work at the same pace or be able to master the subjects as well as their friends. So, the child who signs up for 3 AP courses because they see other kids with that schedule may end up stressed out and overwhelmed.
- Social issues are immense during HS
  - I’ve been reading a lot about social media; this is biggest change in past several years. I’ve been in the Whitman cluster since 1999. Didn’t worry about social media then; it’s pervasive now.
  - Articles about limiting screen time are so true – do that!
  - I see 2 major effects from the rise in social media
    - “All the mean girl stuff” – cliques, ruining someone’s reputation, excluding people from social activities
    - The more they use social media, the less kids are able to concentrate for long periods of time; they become used to the rapid-fire interaction on social media. I’ve heard of Whitman students doing 4-5 hours of “homework” a night, but some will confess that it’s because they are also on social media at the same time, which can as much as double the homework hours.
- It’s very common after middle school for friendships to change. At Whitman, there is a lot more opportunity for interaction with new kids
  - The only “pure” 9<sup>th</sup> grade class is English 9; in other subjects, 9<sup>th</sup> graders interact with 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders as well. They will make new friendships, join new clubs; tech crew activities around drama productions are very popular; sports clubs that are “not-cut” (e.g., crew) are very popular, but do come with a big time commitment
  - Students will change friends; there may be a time when they don’t have a friend. Advice to parents: don’t force them to join specific clubs (e.g., not everyone can make the soccer

team); encourage them to join something, but it doesn't have to be at Whitman— take Yoga classes, a cycling club, etc.

- Grades bring anxiety.
  - For years, the average GPA at Whitman for students in their first year has been 3.3
  - At graduation, I ask students to stand if they have 3.5 GPA or above; about half of the students stand
  - Next, I ask straight A students to stand. I've never had more than 7 in a single year, and those 7 didn't get into better colleges than everyone else.
  - When your kid gets their first B, the world won't fall apart. Don't worry. The B doesn't make that big of a difference in the big picture.
  - There are some parents who will badger teachers, counselors, administrators to get a 78% up to a B. While this may give your student a better chance to get into college, they go off to college without the skills to study, or the resilience to cope with a C. They'll be back at your doorstep soon, because you haven't prepared them to navigate these challenges.
- Whitman has a good reputation for getting into colleges, but look closely at the list of schools people are going to, you'll see a lot of variety. Back off some on the narrow list of prestigious schools.
  - Getting into a particular college (Georgetown for example), can be a flip of the coin. There are so many kids vying for so few spots. Most applicants have great grades, great leadership positions, great applications, but there is only room for 10% of the applicant pool to be admitted. So, don't set your sights on only prestigious schools.
  - There are so many schools out there. If the coin doesn't flip in your child's favor, there is still a college for them.
  - If your child gets Bs and Cs, there is still a college for them.
- Lots of things to get involved in – including “softer” things with lower time commitments. One example: Sources of strength club, which has become active in the wake of two recent student deaths
  - If they see an upset classmate, they approach or notify counselors
  - Do a range of fun things to lift spirits: Served hot chocolate as kids entered school; created a board for sticky notes: who are you thankful for this week?
- Sleeping – students are generally sleep deprived
  - Don't bother going to School Board to ask for a later starting time
  - No screens after 9 pm will help
- I started Stressbusters group when I first arrived at Whitman
  - Have reduced group assignments on weekends and holidays
  - Tried to eliminate homework over long holidays and make it more meaningful; if 20 math practice problems are enough to reinforce concepts taught in class, then don't assign 40.
  - Have noticed a worrisome trend: more than ever, Pyle parents are contacting Whitman to ask about accelerating – can they take math this summer to get into a higher level next year? Can they take two sciences instead of one? My view: what's the rush? I advise spending your family resources in a different way. Over the summer, you should relax. Sure, have them read a novel from the reading list or other pleasure reading. But have them do camp, sports, work with younger children.

- We don't have a system of organization we advocate – it's up to you. Many kids use folders. They carry their backpacks all day long, so you can't use an approach that requires too much space or is too heavy.
  - Here's where to intervene- by late September, boys' backpacks are a mess. Insist that you dump out the backpack once a month and clean it out. Some kids forget to turn in their homework.
- Some students already experimenting with drugs, alcohol and sex. Used to start in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, now creeping into 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Not parents' fault; behavior is affected by what kids see on prevalent media.
  - Don't be naïve. Some drug users are completely pulled together, so don't assume a pulled-together kid hasn't used drugs. Yes, there are some kids who stay away from alcohol and drugs and who remain virgins through high school, but many don't. Don't be naïve.
  - Remember: you are the parent. Their bedroom is yours. Go in and look around when your child isn't home. Look for drug paraphernalia, tiny bottles of alcohol, a beer can.
  - If you need to wind down at the end of the day with a drink, be careful about the behavior you model. Maybe don't do it in front of the kids. Kids say they use marijuana on Saturdays to relax – "I've worked so hard all week, I've earned the right to unwind."

### **Parent question period**

*Q: What percentage of Whitman kids go on to college?*

94-95% of grads go to college, including 40-50 who go to Montgomery College each year, out of a class of about 500.

*Q: How welcoming is the Counseling office at Whitman? Does it help with anxiety and mental health, or is it primarily college-focused?*

Counselors most definitely devote time to work with your children on social/emotional issues. They have provided extensive counseling this year in the wake of 2 student deaths. They do have a few workload peaks (e.g., registration) that constrain their time, but are otherwise responsive. Each counselor is responsible for 280 children. Do have some new counselors recently. Great esprit de corps. Admin team (including myself) is open-door. I had 14 kids having lunch in my office yesterday.

*Q: With regard to clubs and sports – if they don't make a sports team at tryouts, how do kids find out (besides word of mouth) what activities are offered?*

There are no intramural sports, because there's unfortunately no room for them. Several "non-cut sports" have their own websites (e.g., ice hockey, crew). After fall tryouts for Whitman's athletic teams, the non-cut sports still welcome students, so no one is shut out at the beginning of the year. Club night is held annually in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of September; it's a time when students can go learn about all the different clubs to join; a booklet with descriptions is handed out.

*Q: When do clubs meet?*

They find their own time after school. They don't meet during lunch because there are 2 different lunch periods.

*Q: Is it true that students don't keep the same teachers from first semester to second semester?*

Yes, your child will likely have different teachers in 2<sup>nd</sup> semester. More often than not, their teachers will change. It's a logistical reality because of elective choices. For example, Health is a one semester course. Maybe your child takes it first semester during 3<sup>rd</sup> period. Then, 2<sup>nd</sup> semester, he wants Law, which is 2<sup>nd</sup> period. There are hundreds of permutations of this dynamic. To make the elective schedules work, we have to swap the teachers in their core subjects.

Wheaton HS tried to avoid this and found the only way to keep a pure schedule was by getting teachers to specialize in only one subject/level. One teacher teaches 5 sections of Honors Geometry, so when the schedule of electives drive a kid to change the period they take Math, they can shift to a new period and still have the same teacher. That's not a model we want to adopt. The shift in teachers is not that disruptive. It takes about 2 weeks to adjust at beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> semester.

*Ms. Huck added:* Getting a new set of teachers is not necessarily bad. Your child may move to a teacher they like better. Might get to be with a friend. Also, 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter can be a tough part of the year, feels like a slog; it's nice to changes things up a bit.

*Q: I understand that changes have been made to rules around final exams. What are the current testing requirements?*

We used to have final exams at end of semester. Then we had quarterly assessments, which are no longer called assessments, so now we have quarterly progress checks. The State of Maryland said schools could not give more than 22 assessments per year that are required across all children; final exams already contributed 12 (6 subjects x 2 semesters), so we couldn't have final exams for all classes. Now, academic classes have a progress check in the last 2 weeks of the quarter, which accounts for 10% of the grade. Teachers not so happy with the change. They liked to have the information about how things were going and how well the students were learning the material. The practice of final exams was also good prep for college test-taking.

*Q: I have a child who has enjoyed theater at Pyle. I'm concerned about the drama director at Whitman resigning. I've heard it's kind of a separate entity from the school, run by boosters. How will it change in the wake of this resignation?*

A strong person stepped in to complete the current Spring play. It's a Director from Roundhouse Theatre, so it's definitely someone with the skills needed. Yes, the drama club is a separate entity from Whitman, but we don't have any concerns about that continuing to work well.

It's good for 9<sup>th</sup> grade parents and students to know that there's no guarantee that your child will be a star at Whitman, even if they're a star at Pyle. Stars are generally juniors and seniors. Sometimes, freshman make the cast, but many join the tech group.

*Q: AP classes – do you have to qualify for the class?*

No. Parent, child and counselor make the decision. Keep in mind with AP class, there are 3 parts to the course – 1<sup>st</sup> semester, 2<sup>nd</sup> semester, and the test.

*Ms. Huck added:* We have been getting questions about the AP NSL course (National, State and Local Government). Who is AP NSL appropriate for? For graduation requirements, students must take US History, NSL and Modern World History during their time at Whitman; each course is offered in regular, honors and AP. AP NSL is the first AP course kids can sign up for at Whitman. Used to be a 1 semester offering, but was made it into full year. Because the content is spread across 2 semesters, the pace is more manageable for kids, so kids who want to be on an AP track in Social Studies will start with AP NSL. Kids not choosing the AP track will take US History (either regular or honors) in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The challenge is that, if you take AP NSL in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, then in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, you are on track to take AP US History, which is a very hard, demanding class. Students who take AP NSL in 9<sup>th</sup> but feel intimidated by AP US History in 10<sup>th</sup> have the choice to take Honors US History instead of AP in 10<sup>th</sup>. However, Honors US History is primarily a 9<sup>th</sup> grade class, so many 10<sup>th</sup> graders do not want to take it for appearances' sake. It's the 10<sup>th</sup> grade decision that is tough.

*Q: At Pyle, their reading is broken up into small assignments and kids are dissuaded from reading ahead. At Whitman, can they read ahead?*

Yes!

*Q: From your interactions with other principals around the region and around the country, what would you say is unique about Whitman? Are there any special concerns Whitman parents need to be aware of?*

I don't know that we're unique, but students in this area have abundant resources and mobility. Between their own cars and friends with cars and Ubers, they can get around anywhere. Risks come from freedom. In many families, both parents are working; sometimes that means they can't get home till 8 o'clock. If you haven't helped your teenager fill that time, they will find a way to fill it. There are no gangs at Whitman, so we don't have that threat, but there are plenty of other ways for them to get in trouble.

Try to get them involved in things they like, whether at Whitman or in the community. Do yoga, volunteer for a cause, join programs through your church or synagogue, get involved in Whitman's child development program. If you want to intellectually challenge – debate team. Model UN, robotics. Find something your child enjoys.

Every school has its own culture. Attend parent meetings to be involved at Whitman. In a challenge period for your child, you can request a staff meeting when all their teachers come together with your child present.

*Q: What's the toughest year at Whitman?*

Junior year, because they're starting to think about colleges. Suddenly, realizing they shouldn't have been lazy and gotten that C in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Lots of pressure junior year.

As administrators, the problematic group of kids is 10<sup>th</sup> grade boys. They go through 9<sup>th</sup> grade and are looking around, figuring things out. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, they revert to 7<sup>th</sup> grade behavior. They put books from the library in each other's backpacks to set off alarms. It's a time of practical jokes.

*Q: How does Whitman handle bullying or kids who have disciplinary problems? My 13-year old child perceives, rightly or wrongly, that nothing is done about bullying at Pyle. What are the concrete steps being taken to address bullies at Whitman?*

Of course, we take bullying very seriously. One thing that's been helpful recently is the addition of a concern form on our website—you click on the button—where one can anonymously report bullying, drinking on campus, other concerns. It has opened doors for confrontation and conversation. This helps because, despite a lot of effort to raise awareness, a lot of bullying goes unreported. Our Sources of Strength club tries to get kids to advocate for themselves. When there is a bullying incident, by requirement, there is a form that we must fill out.

*Ms. Huck added:* I'd like to address the perception of how we handle bullying at Pyle. Sometimes kids use the word "bullying" expansively. In middle school, kids can be jerks and cross each other's boundaries. So not every incident of poor treatment is bullying. When kids *are* bullied, kids will let the counselors know and we deal with it, but that is all kept confidential. It may not be visible, but steps are most certainly taken.

*Dr. G continued:* Bullying requires repetition. It's not just Johnny took my banana one time. We have been pushing restorative conversations.

*Q: What's the story with lockers at Whitman?*

We have 2000 lockers the students choose not to use. We'll even let them get multiple lockers, if they want to have them in different parts of the school. Change of classes is only 5 minutes, and it's hard to stop at a locker on the way. It's not the "in" thing to do. In fact, we are ripping out 2 banks of lockers – one for a new trophy case, one for a bench seat kids will use at lunch. If you have a child that will strain under the weight of carrying their books around, you can ask for an extra copy of the class textbooks, to keep one at home and one at school. But we don't have enough for everyone to do that!

*Q: My child wants to take Geometry over the summer and we've signed up at Landon. Will the credits be accepted by MCPS?*

Most likely, but you'll need to confirm with the Math Department on that.

*Q: What's happening with the turf?*

School board hasn't yet decided on it. Needs a final stamp of approval. We will break ground in March. Track around stadium will be the last thing put in.

*Q: At the rising 9<sup>th</sup> graders info night, the SGA President mentioned something about a mentoring program. Can you tell us more?*

Through the mentoring program, participating seniors each adopt 7-10 incoming freshman. They're supposed to have met at lunchtime and exchanged email addresses or other contact information to get the relationship started. We've seen spotty success. Working out ok with some freshmen. Some seniors not following through as well as intended.

*Q: Teen suicides show us that stress is a problem for these kids. Do you see messaging coming from colleges changing so the kids won't feel so much stress?*

Sadly, no. For example, there was some information circulating that Duke University needs to see 6 AP classes on a transcript or the application is non-starter. Parents and students hear these things and children sign up for a load of AP classes. I don't see any change coming.

*Ms. Huck added:* I have a 10<sup>th</sup> grade daughter and I tell her she's going to figure out who she is and find the college that's right for her. We have no expectations of Ivy League and we've told her that. We encourage her to do her thing and find the place that's right for her. Some kids can handle bigger loads and others can't – each kid is different. Be thoughtful and encourage your child to be thoughtful about how they are different from others and use that info in finding the right peer group, the right classes, the right college.

*Dr. G continued:* Many students apply to 10 colleges – safeties, reaches, etc. I don't like the practice of applying to reaches. Rejection for these kids is demoralizing. The kid is upset: I didn't get in! Well, we knew that from the beginning that you weren't getting in.

My own sons went to MCPS schools. I pushed them never to get below a B. if they got As and Bs, we left them alone. If they got a C, there was a response: talk to them, talk to the teacher, get a tutor, shift from honors to regular.

Be sure to talk to your kids about things other than the game or their grades.

Keep *your* balance, too. Watch your peers and who you are hanging out with and what you are talking about. If you are always comparing your kids' achievements, it will accelerate your anxiety level, which gets passed on to kids.

*Q: My kid is not into social media, but loves video games. How do I get him to stop?*

Encourage him to stay away from violent games. Look for sports games instead of shooting. Use the horrible shooting incident as a teaching moment.