Equity in Extended Learning Opportunities

The root of the ponder for this blog came from Malcolm Gladwell's Revisionist History Podcast titled The Powerball Revolution.

Engaging in a conversation with students at the Lawrenceville School, a prestigious private school in New Jersey, Gladwell explores the thinking of Adam Cronkright, the co-founder and director of Democracy in Practice. This nonprofit, working with schools in Bolivia, focuses on reinventing student government. Their goal is to make student government a richer and more inclusive educational experience. As I listened, I imagined questions and insights around equity in many learning opportunities.

Cronkright proposes these three strategies for changing participation in a student council.

- **Lotteries to replace elections**

All students who would be interested in being a representative on the student government enter their names into a lottery. This now opens the opportunity to engage in a learning experience, where leadership skills can be developed, to a broader student population. Removing the need for public "campaign speeches," the "popularity contests" elements, and the fear of rejection, leads to a more diverse and representative school council. (A blog by Brett Hennig provides an example of how a randomly selected assembly in Ireland produced recommendations that led to national referendums.)

- **Increasing Participation with Rotation**

Students who are selected in the lottery take terms of a semester in length, which Kronkright has found to be long enough to have a quality learning experience. The shorter-term allows more students to be engaged. By eliminating the position of president or other officers of the council, those tasks rotate among members providing a chance for all to practice setting agendas, facilitating meetings, and speaking in front of the school.

- **Supporting the leadership experience**

Students on the council receive training and coaching support in areas such as facilitation, public speaking, and project management. Student representatives are encouraged to go beyond the typical task of organizing a school dance, to work on real and consequential initiatives of their choosing. Cronkright reports, “We’ve seen them (councils) acquire recycling bins and first aid kits for their schools, undertake reforestation projects and even open a library. They’ve cut student transportation costs, organized and financed school-wide trips to museums and botanical gardens, and pressured local authorities to make school repairs and improve school lunches. In the process, they’ve met directly with principles, PTAs, district directors, police, non-profits, mayors, and even the Minister of Education. This experience builds their social skills, self-esteem, and familiarity with school and local government.”

Gladwell and Kronkright have a conversation around how often students whom teachers and classmates would view as not very capable of taking on leadership responsibility shine in their execution. At times, the reverse is seen. Students who may have campaigned well did not deliver with leadership responsibility. The lottery has led to the discovery of individual talents and/or openness to building/learning the needed leadership skills. The school community gained from members, whom without the lottery, would have been overlooked.

Our blind spots or unconscious bias in selecting candidates shows up in many settings.

- Gladwell shares that the National Institutes of Health's peer review process for rewarding research funding has found that the process doesn't necessarily identify the projects leading to the most important learning. A form of lottery with acceptable applications might provide a better process for matching available funds to research options.
- Hampshire College has opted to be test score blind rather than SAT or ACT optional in its application process. When scores are present, they tend to inappropriately influence selection; missing students who can be successful contributors to the learning community and to the greater world community.
- Michael Phair Junior High School in Alberta (grades 7, 8, 9) has a varsity team where students are selected and a junior team that works under a no-cut process. They report an increase from 10%

> to 50% of students taking part in sports with the change in practice. Lauren Sulz, a researcher at the University of Alberta studying the impact on students being cut through tryouts, stated, “We are not saying that competition and winning is bad. We actually think the competition is good. What we’re trying to do with our research is reframe school sports so that we can focus on high participation rates, development, and winning. And we’re getting closer to being able to do that within the junior high setting.”

After the group of students at the Lawrenceville School (including student council members) explored Kronkright’s experiences and findings with a lottery for student government, they shared with Gladwell that the lottery process might be a good idea. They even debated its application in college acceptance.

Equity in participation should be an issue that we continually explore consciously. Personally, looking back on my own youth, I know that the many opportunities to explore and develop in varied in and out of school programs provided important life skills. As educators, we need to explore ways to maximize student participation. Another ponder- should we take a conscious look at which teachers are experiencing leading/learning opportunities within school leadership opportunities?