

Interview with Ken Struckmeier

Ryan McHill: The following interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history program of the Century High School. The interviewee is Ken Struckmeier. The interviewer is Ryan McHill. The interview took place at his office on Friday, May 24, at 8:00 am.

R: What is the Site Council?

K: Site Council is a group of teachers, parents, students, and administrators that work together to try to foster staff development and to advance programs that help students to learn and to improve the school.

R: What are your responsibilities?

K: As the chair, it is my responsibility to make sure that we hold meetings on at least a monthly basis, that we make sure that we're meeting the needs of the staff to make sure they're aware of not only the responsibilities we have as a school but also to try to look beyond just our responsibilities and kind of carry out goals that advance Century and make it a better place for students to learn. And it's also my responsibility to prepare minutes and to circulate those and to communicate with the staff in our building to make sure they understand what site council is doing.

R: Where and how often do you meet?

K: We, over the course of the last year, have been meeting once a month – the first Wednesday of the month. We have been meeting at 6:45 in the morning in the Media Center.

R: And what does a typical agenda look like?

K: Well, for the second half of this year, a typical agenda will consist of us looking at academic seminar – those are the Monday mornings we have late start – and analyzing the programs we have planned, evaluating the ones we've done in the past, looking for feedback. We've also spent a great deal of time this spring considering a trimester schedule or trimester calendar for Century, so we analyze that. We went to the staff and tried to help them understand what a trimester would be and determine whether or not they were interested in pursuing that. We had a vote on that in April of this year – actually, March of this year – and in that vote the staff determined that they would prefer to stay on our current semester calendar with ninety-minute periods. Also this spring, we worked with the Hillsboro Education Association – the Teachers' Union – to take before the staff a proposal that they continued to waive their contract. The teachers' contract says that teachers should only teach five periods a day

and over a two day period, our teachers teach six courses so Century's schedule violates the contract. So each year, our staff has to approve waiving the contract – essentially that they will teach more than they are required to do without additional pay. And our staff, on April 29, voted to approve of that, and so we will go forward with the same schedule next year. And those two things have kept us very busy this spring.

R: How did you get on the site council?

K: I was on the site council at Glencoe High School, where I had previously taught for two years, and so I have that experience. I had also taught at [another] high school in Florence and I was on the site council there. When I came to Century, I came because it was clear that this staff was really committed to teaching and learning and was very energetic. After spending a year here, it seemed clear to me that I was excited about what was going on here and would like to contribute in any way that I wanted to. I expressed my interest and my peers elected me in September of 2001.

R: How did you come to teach here?

K: I chose to come here in 2000. I requested a transfer from the district to move from Glencoe to here. There was a wonderful opportunity because Mr. Nelson, who had previously taught here, was leaving Century and there was an opening. It was a good time for me because I was looking to teach in an environment such as Century, where there were longer periods of time, but also a staff committed to integrating curriculum, meaning that more than one course would be taught together, and doing some things that really weren't happening at Glencoe. But I was excited to see them happening here.

R: How exactly does Glencoe compare to Century – administration and students?

K: I think that every school has its own, unique culture and sort of a sense of who it is and what it is and that's because you have a mix of very unique students – every year it changes, to begin with. But also, you have a different mix of teachers and staff members that contribute. Schools constantly change. Their culture constantly changes. For me, what was refreshing to see here was a place where teachers are really energized and I think that the teachers here and the staff members here work really hard and are really dedicated to students. So, for me, that was a real nice comparison and very attractive.

R: How do you feel about your participation on the Council?

K: Well, there are times when I'm waking up and coming in and getting things prepared by six o'clock in the morning that I wonder about that. But, I feel that we did some good work this year and I'm really looking forward to next year. I think that we have a great opportunity as we look to the future and we realize that many of our students will be leaving us and many of our staff will be leaving us. It gives us a great opportunity to kind of analyze where Century's been – to evaluate what it's accomplished – but also to kind of set some goals as we have this big change with Liberty opening up in 2003 – trying to really articulate what we believe in and who we are and to make it so that the staff that remains and the students that remain will not be losing through this process but actually gaining – that we'll be a stronger school a year from now than we are today. That's our goal as a site council over the next year.

R: How do you find time to do this?

K: Well, one thing I've learned in education is you can't find time to do everything that you'd like to as well as you would like to. So, you have to make choices and make priorities and for me, Site Council is very important, I think to this school. The work we do – if we are supporting teachers to be better in the classroom – that's helping kids and for me, that's what keeps my commitment to Site Council. If we are helping teachers to make learning better for students at Century and to improve their lives through that, then I will make time for it.

R: Do you feel that students [and] parents have an equal voice?

K: I would like to believe that but I think that sometimes, on our Site Council, some of our students, because of the model we've used in the past – for example, this year we had two seniors – Christina Mahoney and Dave Morgan – they're very articulate and very, very smart and very involved in the school – and I think that it takes them a few months to get used to working with teachers and administrators as peers and actually having the guts to speak their mind and I hope that we have tried to include them well and to treat them as equals. We value their input tremendously. I think that the students provide us with a reality check. A lot of times, we as teachers have a view of the world that comes from our experience and the students provide a real critical reality, I guess, again. They sometimes have corrected assumptions we've made about students and their experiences with programs. They've provided us with a real strong voice when we were looking at schedules about how that would impact their learning. Our students were outspoken in defense of our current schedule. As for parents, I think that again, it's the same thing where by nature, site councils are in the building. It is comprised of classified and certified staff, teachers and staff members, and they're coming onto our turf. We live school everyday and sometimes we use words that are overwhelming,

large, and can be quite intimidating. It's important to try to make school accessible to those parents and to make them feel welcome – to share with them things that we're taking about that they might not understand – but also to value what they have to say because ultimately, if we don't have parents involved and we don't have students involved, then Site Council isn't fulfilling its mission. The mission is to involve all members of the community in making this school a better place and to improve teaching and improving learning. We've worked hard to do that. We'll continue in the future to try to improve that.

R: As a group, have you made a difference in the school?

K: I hope that we have. We go through an evaluation process each year and there are clearly members that feel that we are contributing – that we are helping – and I think that the academic seminar this year has been very beneficial for many staff members. It seems that year after year, more and more requests for responsibilities are put on teachers from the state in terms of state testing and curriculum alignment and things like that. Finally with academic seminar, we had an opportunity to do something with that and I hope that we structured a time and a way that helped teachers to really improve their teaching and be reflective. Of course, there's always an ideal and we shoot for that and there's never enough time to really accomplish everything we set out to do but I think that we've done some good work.

R: What have been the most important decisions you have participated in?

K: Over the course of the past year, I think the trimester schedule was a huge one. We analyzed that in the fall when we were first told by our superintendent Joe Rodriguez that we would be on a trimester schedule this year, it was our job as Site Council to educate staff about what trimester was at that time. We had guest speakers come in. We worked diligently on that. We also had members of our staff that were clearly upset because they had invested so much into building Century that started here. They had gone outside of the box, they had sacrificed their pay to work on a schedule that was, what they thought, ideal for student learning. And to be told that that was not valid because all the other schools needed to be on the same calendar as us, I think they found that frustrating, to say the least. So, it was a very important role the Site Council played, to share information, to allow people to process their emotions, to provide communication between the district and our building, and ultimately, through the hard work of our teachers in communicating with the superintendent on many occasions, the superintendent recommended to the board that we keep our schedule and that in the spring, we reanalyze that and that the question was "When we start the school year in 2003, when Liberty opens, do we then want to be on a trimester?" We analyzed that

again for several months and again the response from our staff was no. It was interesting that the margin in the spring was about 1/3 favoring a trimester schedule and about 2/3 favoring our current schedule. Clearly, there are some people that would prefer a trimester, but the overwhelming majority prefer our current schedule. A lot of our job this year was simply to deal with some controversies – controversial issues – and try to make them accessible to people and also to give people a voice in the process.

R: How do you see the school compared now to when you started [teaching] here?

K: This is the end of my second year and perhaps part of it is because I am becoming more familiar with Century, so this may taint or shape my view – I would say that there are some wonderful things happening here. I would say that we've made great progress in developing CAM programs, for example. We have the community-changing careers program in the resources area. We have two different CAM-related courses in social studies I know of that have developed in the time I have been here. Our FAME CAM has taken off. Century is known throughout the Metro League for its performing arts programs and I think that they continue to get better – our band is improving, our choir is improving, our dramatic productions are renowned and people are coming from all over because they know Century's number one and that there're going to be some perennial issues. If you go to any teacher meeting ever, you're always going to hear people complaining about attendance and that's the number one link to achievement and I don't know that we've made too much progress on that. I don't know that that is something that can ever be solved. It's an ideal. I think that we have more integrated classes than we did when I started here. We have more freshmen involved in teams. I would like to really look at some data and see if that is making a difference in our freshmen students. I know that when I did research last year, there were a high percentage – high in my eyes – of freshmen who were failing courses. I'd really like to do some data analysis after this year to see if we're making any progress there. But, I'm very happy here.

R: Are you benefitting from your participation [in the Site Council]?

K: I would say yes. I would say that by looking at the big picture of Century on Site Council, you're forced to look beyond your own classroom and look beyond your own office, look beyond your own department and to see the needs of teachers and students throughout the building. I think that it makes it very clear to me when I go to class each day how I'm contributing to that puzzle, to put myself in a student's shoes and remember that they don't sit in the same classroom all day and go through the same lessons as many times as I do, that they are faced with all sorts of

demands from all sorts of different people and I think that Site Council helps me keep that in perspective and it makes me a better teacher.

R: Do you benefit from [as a teacher from being on Site Council]?

K: Definitely. I've learned a lot from other people on Site Council. I think that a lot of the issues we're looking at that cause me to do research define the best practices that are helping students learn across the country. I've used my students as a laboratory sometimes and trying some of those things out and using better instructional techniques – I think that that's important as a teacher. I don't know it all. I never will. Every year, it's my job really to push myself and to try new things and to improve my teaching and I think that Site Council helps me to become aware of some options of how to do that.

R: Have you had any frustrations with role on the council?

K: Certainly. I personally believe that the role of SC should be even more prominent than it is. I think that... I wish that there was more control at the building level – what happens in this building. I firmly believe that if you trust people to make good choices and give them the power to do so – that because the people who are here care about this place – they will be responsible. I feel frustrated. I think a lot of the times, those of us on SC, we contribute and we work hard and we have dreams and we know that there are dreams out there in this building that we would like to support, but a lot of times, it's frustrating when you give it your all and then decisions are made outside of our control – either at the state level or the district level – which make those decisions for us or make the dreams seem unattainable. That's discouraging and demoralizing and it causes people to step back and just do what they can. For example, rather than being a contributing member of SC, sometimes, at least I know from my own experience in the past, it's tempting just to take care of yourself and your kids in your classroom and to be more passive when it comes to SC. I definitely would like to see more emphasis placed on governing this school in a way where all the stakeholders have a voice and that voice is legitimate and it is supported. I would really like to see that happen.

R: Have there been any obstacles that the SC has met?

K: I think the largest obstacle would be that we had a vision of what we would do this year – we had some goals set out for this year – and we spent most of the year reacting to the trimester issue, which was not something we had on our agenda, and reacting to the waiver, which was not on our agenda, and continuing to try to address needs that were not anticipated. At times, I felt that we were reacting more than planning and that's something that will always be with us. We're looking at strategies

of how to do that next year better, planning to meet more often to increase communication, and to really focus on what we can do and make a difference in the building and try to let some other things take care of themselves, I guess, more so that they don't dominate and prevent us from making progress.

R: Are there any other things that I haven't covered?

K: Not really. I just, I mean, once again, I think that SC is an important vehicle for change in school. I think that it's important for schools to continue to analyze what they're doing and to be the best they can. I think that the members we have had on our SC the past year have been very dedicated to that and really looking forward to next year. We're going to have two new students joining us next year. We're going to have two new students joining us. We're going to have two new classified members joining us. We'll have a new teacher joining us. So, that will be five new people that will bring fresh ideas and fresh energy to us. We're definitely looking forward to, again, looking at what we've done well in the past, since this is the conclusion of Century's fifth year, and to really putting our eyes on the future and setting some sights and re-energizing some things that are going on around here.