

Kennedy High School PACE Program

Third Year Evaluation Report Addendum: Student Observations

Overview

During a site visit on May 25, 2006, two groups of students spoke with the evaluators regarding their experiences at Kennedy High School and impressions of the PACE program. One was comprised of graduating seniors, the other juniors. Each consisted of five students. Together, their gender and ethnic distribution mirrored the program's demographics.

Students expressed both positive and negative sentiments with regard to PACE and Kennedy. They often noted a deep connection to teachers and peers within PACE, and a climate of serious students in a friendly, fun, but also challenging environment. This entailed, however, some loss of experiencing Kennedy as a whole. PACE students felt somewhat disconnected from the rest of the school, remarking that they had few friends outside the SLC, and would have liked to participate in more extra curricular activities such as clubs and sports. Simultaneously, separation from the larger school was a positive experience as less serious students, occasionally hostile interactions with peers, and unfair or ineffective teachers tended to be attributed to non- PACE classes a majority of the time.

Students in both groups independently remarked that it was common knowledge that PACE teachers were the best in the school. When probed further, reasons given included: teachers within PACE cared more, challenged students in class (though the homework load was similar to non-PACE classes), were always available when needed, were more likely to contact underperforming students, and knew individual students better.

Both juniors and seniors discussed the looping of at least one teacher from year to year. Juniors took history with the same teacher for two years, and seniors had their English teacher all four years. While some mentioned potential downfalls, such as favoritism of certain students, all agreed that they had benefited from the experience, and were genuinely happy to have stayed with the same teachers.

With regard to teaching style, PACE students felt they had more project based learning than their non-PACE counterparts, and seemed comfortable working in groups. Group project work lessened in the junior and senior years as students took more AP classes in which the intensive curriculum left little time for projects. This may also have been due to the change in the junior year from a block schedule to a six period day.

The groups diverged in their experiences in planning for college. Seniors felt they had been well-prepared, that various people had spoken with them about plans, and that the program requirements ensured they were on the right track. Juniors felt they had less support, were unaware of the college entrance requirements, and did not know where to find resources. Despite the variance, all students mentioned college as a future plan.

In general, students were satisfied with PACE. When asked what they would change, juniors mentioned less crowding, through either a smaller school or more teachers and staff. Seniors asked for more direction on the senior project and flexible schedules that would allow them to take additional classes either during the school day (i.e. seven periods instead of six) or the summer. On the other hand, students were happy with the field trips, internships, community service, and the educational advantages they received in the program (such as access to more AP courses).

Item-by-Item Responses

How would you characterize the school climate? Is it:

Safe?: Yes, within PACE. Outside PACE it depends on the group you hang out with. There is some bullying, but in general you can avoid conflicts.

Fair?: Within PACE, generally yes. It usually depends mostly on the teacher. There is some resentment among students outside PACE, because the program has the best teachers.

Friendly?: For the most part. PACE helps, because you get to know the other kids so well, The projects where you work together also help. Summer school was very helpful, getting to know other kids before starting 9th grade.

How do you like being grouped with other students in several classes?

You do get to know a group of other students better, and your teachers. And the support is good in both regards. We help each other. On balance it's good. But it does restrict the number of other students you get to meet, so it's a little constricting.

How would you compare your PACE classes with the non-PACE ones?

In general, the PACE classes are harder due to more reading assignments. But it varies by subject and teacher and whether it's an AP class or not

How would you describe the amount of contact you've had with teachers and the attention you receive?

The PACE teachers are always available, they track you more, although it does depend on how much help you ask for. The tutoring program is also helpful. There is more parent contact between PACE teachers and our parents. Other teachers are good also, but PACE teachers are on balance more involved.

Does the style instruction vary between PACE and non-PACE classes (e.g., lecturing vs. projects)?

This varies some by subject, and there is generally a mixture of the two. On balance PACE classes have more projects and discussion, especially in grades 9 and 10, and the PACE students get along better, so this is good. PACE teachers are more lenient; exert fewer controls, which is good. We liked the PACE book club, it was different and exposed us to more variety of books, and we liked giving presentations and having visitors who helped.

How serious would you characterize the students at Kennedy and in PACE to be, on a 10-point scale (1=completely non-serious; 10=completely serious)?

Kennedy – average of 5-6

PACE – average of 7-9

Comment: there is a range in PACE as well as the rest of the high school, but the averages are higher in PACE.

How well were you taught college entrance requirements?

The seniors seemed quite happy on this count. The juniors expressed the need for more help; they don't feel they're getting enough. Examples: selecting AP courses, prepping for and taking SATs, applying for scholarships, knowing what to stress on applications.

In general, how do you feel about going to school at Kennedy High School, on a 5-point scale (1=hate it; 5=love it)?

Seniors: four 4's, one 5.

Juniors: four 3s, one 2.

Suppose you were the principal and could change anything to make this a better high school. What would you change?

Seniors: More direction with senior projects; less time stress, more time to try other things (e.g., clubs, electives); being allowed to take seven classes, and PACE classes over the summer, so the schedule is less impacted; less teacher turnover.

Juniors: It's too crowded fewer students; more school spirit and drive; tighten/improve the quality/consistency of the advisory program: better organized clubs.

What would you keep the same?

Field trips; some of the teachers, who are very good; book club; summer school between eighth and ninth grade; block scheduling; internships; community service. Positive comments on all of these.

Do you have a specific plan for what you want to do after high school?

All students did, and for all but one, it was a four-year college (and for that one, a community college leading to a four-year one). Seniors were more specific on this count; all had been accepted somewhere. Juniors were still figuring out where they wanted to apply.