

Advice from the K-8 Trenches: Salmon Bay Students Serve on Orca Alumni Middle School Panel

As the panelists introduced themselves at the Orca Alumni Middle School Panel last Friday, they were asked which teachers they'd had when they were at Orca. Most just mentioned their 4th/5th grade teachers, but one girl recited her entire roster of Orca staff, starting with Marletta. The audience of L-Pod students responded with a round of applause, honoring both her feat of memory and the teachers themselves – several of whom were in the audience, smiling proudly.

Fifth grader Camille Pahl moderated the panel of Salmon Bay kids, asking questions generated by L-Pod students. A few questions focused on Orca (“Were you here when they painted the murals on the walls?” Indeed they were – and they can tell you which salmon, watermelon, or lizard they painted). But mostly the Orca fourth and fifth graders wanted to know what middle school is **like**. The news was reassuring, for the most part.

“I couldn’t find any of my classes for like a week. But then I got the hang of it.”

After the initial scary transition – “you’re the smallest one again!” – the panelists reported liking their new life. At Salmon Bay the sixth graders are on a separate floor from the older kids, and “the sixth graders have all their classes together, except for electives.” Our panelists felt this separation helped make the transition from elementary school easier: “I thought it was nice to have your own floor, because seventh and eighth graders scared me a little bit.” They appreciated the orientation they got during the first week of school, meeting the new teachers, getting to know each other, easing into their new schedules.

“Switching classes is one of my favorite parts.”

The news that there’s no recess elicited some groans, but Salmon Bay middle schoolers do get to eat lunch outside with their friends. And “you get five minutes between classes – you can talk to your friends. You go to your locker, and a lot of your friends’ lockers are by your locker – it’s fun.” In addition to social time in the halls, the students enjoyed the range of classes and activities available in middle school. “There are more programs, like skiing and snowboarding for Winter Enrichment.” “You get to do more stuff, have more privileges.”

“In elementary school people are telling you what to do all the time. In middle school you have more control.”

The students all liked being older, feeling more responsible, having more freedom. Among their new responsibilities, student government got mixed reviews. The students liked **doing** things: organizing events, calling up parents to get help with field trips, having “everything that went on at school run by us.” When student government became a calculated effort to teach them about “politics and stuff,” it was deemed “really, really boring.” (We heard this from TOPS students too: “If you’re going to have a student government, give us **real** power!”)

“You need to find a way to organize yourself.”

Asked what advice they had for those preparing for middle school, they responded unhesitatingly: “Use your planner! You can be like, ‘I’ll remember my homework – I don’t need to write it down,’ but a lot of times you don’t.” “Middle school classes are harder. If you fall behind it’s hard to catch up. So turn in your homework!” (During the snack session after the panel, a couple of the Salmon Bay girls had further useful wisdom for a fourth grader who wanted to know, “Why are those boys acting so weird?” The answer, delivered with a shrug and a weary eye-roll: “They’re **boys**.”)

Many thanks to our panelists for taking the time to share their experiences with us: Maddie Bell, Ronnie Coulter, Fiona Lloyd-Muller, Aaron & Tyler Webster, Amber & Jesse Worden. And thanks to Camille Pahl for organizing the event, with assistance from Brianna Heins and Katherine Law.