



PROGRAM SUMMARY

2014 Parent Speak

National Presbyterian School

Wednesday, September 24, 2014 - 8:30am - 11:30am

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its second Parent Speak program for the parent communities of its member schools on Wednesday, November 19, 2014 at The Potomac School. Board Member Nancy Lopez opened the program by welcoming attendees and thanking the school and Parent Association President Ms. Wendy Gagnon for generously hosting and assisting with the event. Ms. Lopez followed by introducing Assistant Head of School, Mr. Bill Cook who further extended a warm welcome and commented on the important role the PCW plays as a network for parents and schools to share a vision and ideas.

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The PCW organizes two separate student leader breakfasts each year at the high school and middle school levels. An 11th and 12th grade student and two 7th grade students, selected by each member school, participate in a platform of confidential, positive discussions on issues important to them. The Parent Speak program is similar to the

student breakfasts as its goal is to offer the same type of discussion format to parents and bring them together to weigh in on issues of interest such as child development, technology or healthy relationships.

To provide parents in attendance an idea of the discussions at the student breakfasts, Board Member Elizabeth Yeonas highlighted first a brief overview of key points raised at the High School Student Leader Breakfast that was held at the Georgetown Preparatory School last February. Time management and stress, integrity and honesty, peer pressure, diversity, cyber bullying and technology, alcohol and drugs, and reach of school in disciplining students on or off school property were topics the 11th and 12th graders chose to debate. A full confidential report from the breakfast is always prepared for the High School Dean of Students of each member school to further address the findings together at a luncheon hosted by the PCW in April.

Board Member D.D. Holcomb then shared an overview from the Middle School Student Leader Breakfast held at St. Andrews Episcopal School last March that included conversations on the meaning and qualities of leadership, self image, influences of social media, bullying, and friends and communication. The summary of the 2014 High School Leader Breakfast is available on the PCW website under the program archives section and can be viewed directly [here](#). The summary of the 2014 Middle School Leader Breakfast is also available on the website and can be accessed [here](#).

AGENDA AND TOPICS

Ms. Lopez introduced moderator Mary Cohen, a former PCW board member who also moderates the annual student leader breakfasts. Ms. Cohen opened the forum by thanking everyone for their participation and surveying how many parents were present with college, high school, middle school or lower school aged children. Each grade division was highly represented. Ms. Cohen continued that one of the greatest challenges of parenting is that no right way to parent exists. When faced with any issue, there is sometimes only a split second to respond accordingly and parents are not

always equipped with many options, which is why it is important to talk to each other to collect information and share solutions about how other parents respond to the many challenges of raising children. She then led a brainstorming session to come up with a variety of topics parents are concerned about and eager for more information. Some of the ideas presented included:

- Sheltered private school experience vs. real world
- Social interactions
- Peer pressure leading to risky behavior
- Social media and strategies to manage electronics
- School policies on cyber bullying behavior
- Homework and schedule workload management
- College: applications, demands on students for admission and transition
- Discipline and reward system
- Driving/curfew rules
- Social justice
- Relationships: friends, dating, screen time vs. face-to-face
- Self avocation
- Body image

DISCUSSION

The following categories of interest were voted on to further discuss:

1. Social media: time management and access
2. Private school “bubble”
3. Peer pressure
4. Time/activity and sleep management

1. Social media: time management and access

Today, children of all ages are influenced by social media and have more access to digital devices. Parents may allow small children to use a cell phone to keep them occupied. School age children may have limited or no exposure to social media or devices at home, but may be able to have access at a friend’s house or school. Ms. Cohen asked what are effective ways to handle social media and limit access. Parents shared that having conversations about managing social media with children are extremely important. Letting them know that comments made on social media should be treated as if you were having a face-to-face, personal encounter with someone. If you can’t look at someone in the eye and speak honestly in person about something, those comments should not be placed on social media. Not only is it hurtful or humiliating to that particular person, it is available for all to see and is a permanent record on the Internet. A few parents also agreed that it is important to make sure children are careful and understand what is appropriate, therefore many added that they try to monitor social media activity as much as possible and communicate with them all the time. One parent mentioned that it is possible for children to block parents. Finding other ways of accessing their online information is crucial and certain restrictions need to be in place. If the restrictions are not followed, consequences will occur.

Ms. Cohen spoke of how children are more and more “digitally native” and understand how to use many different types of devices and programs at earlier ages perhaps due to older siblings or friends. Children who do not necessarily have access to apps such as

Instagram or Snapchat or programs such as Skype may still know about them or even how to navigate them because they have friends using them. Figuring out how to balance the issue of providing children respect of their privacy and establishing trust while at the same time reading their input and monitoring their actions is difficult. Some parents suggested implementing a contract. In most cases parents are the ones paying for the service and the devices, therefore children would sign a contract each year with set limits stating for example that they cannot have the device without providing password information, must agree to using the device(s) appropriately and only during certain hours in the day, etc. Should they not comply, changing the main Wi-Fi password denying them access to the Internet or relinquishing the device were a few key consequences mentioned. Another parent added that as minors, children are not entitled to have any privacy at home and that privacy certainly does not exist within the digital world. Children will find a similar situation throughout life-employers will not allow privacy either.

Overall, it was discussed that it is ultimately the parents' responsibility to check in and guide children with open communication. Children will make mistakes, but when parents remain approachable, they will know that they are there for them and will learn through the process. Punishment is not always the answer. A parent cautioned that while "spying" on our children, information could be easily misinterpreted. By the time the parent finds out and possibly confronts the child, the matter might already have been solved and it will come across that you overreacted. One suggestion to allowing children privacy was to offer them the option of writing in a journal instead of online.

A parent stated that open communication can also lead to better understanding our children and one way to help protect them from making online mistakes. Knowing who their friends are, who they are communicating with online and talking about what is going on in their world. Having other parents watching was also mentioned as a good idea. Someone spoke of how the online world is a similar form of "stranger danger" our children were taught when younger. Continuing the conversation about how it is not

safe to “friend” or talk to others you don’t know can be helpful. Conversational vs. confrontational discussions are key and do make a difference. Walk your children through expectations and offer appropriate guidelines and advice.

Ms. Cohen interjected that the world and technology are changing faster than ever before and while it is difficult to remove social media completely from our children’s lives, they do need to learn how to manage it in a positive way. For example, there are tools available that can assist children with finding a self-regulated approach. Certain apps can help with online time management, restricting online usage to a specific length of time. A few parents expressed that schools are starting to provide parent education programs or hands-on classes on how to understand and use technology to better support their children and teach them online etiquette and responsibility. By giving our children the fundamentals, we help them learn how to make the right decisions on their own. Common Sense Media is a good source for parents to refer to for up-to-date technological information. If parents are struggling with figuring out how much access to give children or what is appropriate for different grade levels, Common Sense Media offers suggestions for age limits.

To balance screen time for younger children, parents suggested insisting that they earn their online time by reading or playing outside first. Someone felt that it is easier for girls to adhere to certain limitations as boys can sometimes become more addictive. One parent shared that their family made the decision to completely unplug and read books instead. Setting up rules that work for the family allows parents to monitor them directly. Insisting that no devices be used during dinnertime, at restaurants or in the car were some examples. However, parents must understand that they cannot control what happens in other homes. One parent asks visiting children to place devices in a basket to encourage more conversations. If children are upset that friends have more access than they do, explaining that all families have different sets of rules to follow may be helpful. Someone added that technology is not all destructive. Parents can encourage children to learn programming. Video games also provide a language of their own and a way for

children to interact with their peers. Today, they have become a form of play in a non-traditional way.

2. Private school “bubble”

Ms. Cohen shifted the conversation to address the different world our children may experience within the private school environment. A parent felt that private schools tend towards touch-feely conversations and may not be preparing children for negative situations they may encounter. They may not know how to handle a hurtful comment for example. The parent suggested that a gradual process of nurturing first at a young age followed by slowly building different experiences into discussions and better equipping older children would teach them how to talk about difficult issues such as bullying and know how to appropriately deal with them later, especially for the upper school level where self-advocacy tends to occur. Another parent noted that being a part of a sports teams mirrors more a real world experience. If a player does not play well or act as a team player, the coaches will generally not incorporate him or her into the game.

Other bubble problems with children attending private school is keeping them grounded and connected with other children in the neighborhood who attend public schools.

Some suggestions to alleviate the struggle with privilege were to create a family culture with open communication and stress the awareness of what children have. By keeping in mind how fortunate they are in a positive manner and reaching out to others to share, remaining true to themselves and investing in diversity, they will remain grounded and realize that they do not have to stay within the “bubble” in order to feel connected.

Encouraging participation in city/town recreational sports leagues, attending the neighborhood block parties, immersing in the community through church, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, fostering relationships with different sets of people, going to public high school football games to support friends outside of school were ways to reconnect outside of the private school environment.

3. Peer pressure

Ms. Cohen asserted that peer pressure starts at a younger age through a variety of levels and asked how we as parents give our children strategies to cope with it. The theme of constant conversation again appeared in this discussion. It was mentioned that if parents keep talking, hopefully the messages are sinking in somehow. Peer pressure can be expressed through different forms: dress, friendships, possessions of certain objects such as latest technological gadgets or drugs and alcohol. One parent commented about making sure that children understand that the most important friendships are the ones that are closest. A small group of dedicated, loyal friends who know your child's qualities and personality is better than a large group of distant people. Many parents agreed that girls succumb more to peer pressure about clothing or looks than boys do. Regarding drugs and alcohol, most parents stressed knowing and monitoring who your children are interacting with is extremely important as it does make a difference on whether drugs and alcohol will be abused and someone added that being in a private school setting was a positive factor to knowing and following more closely their children's friendships. One parent remarked that a statement recently published commented that when questioned about using drugs or consuming alcohol, girls in general responded that it depends who you are with.

Another parent noted that there is peer pressure within the adult world as well. Some parents may not serve alcohol, but children attend parties where alcohol is available. In any case, keep showing your child the right way and allow them to learn by your example. The right peer group for your child will continue to befriend him or her even if stricter rules are enforced. It is important for parents to understand the scene behind the scene. Children know a lot more than we do about what is going on around them and with open communication will be more willing to share that information with parents. Let them know what they are doing right and that wrong choices made today can affect their future. By helping them discover their passions, they will learn about themselves, trust themselves and have the confidence to stand up to peer pressures.

4. Time/activity and sleep management

Ms. Cohen addressed the final topic of the program with the struggles families are faced with managing time, activities and sleep in their households. Homework is increasing for younger children taking up time that would be spent on playing or reading and older children, especially high school juniors and seniors, are overwhelmed with tough classes, overloaded schedules and the college application process.

One parent shared that they had tried to get their child to sleep earlier, but never succeeded. The school finally intervened as the child was falling asleep in class and was the trick for change to occur. Parents agreed that organizing schedules and balancing time is key and to make sure that children are not procrastinating. Depending on the age group, younger children can schedule in playtime before homework. Starting a schedule at an early age sets a good example for the future as to how their time will be spent. Verbalize to children that if there is not enough time for something one day, it will need to be pushed to another day. Most parents felt that bedtime reading and bedtime were not negotiable and needed to remain consistent daily. For high school age children, scheduling 10 minutes to do what they like to do at the end of their day allows them to decompress before tackling a long evening of homework or test preparation. A parent shared that their child's high school offers classes in the summer for students to sign up for to alleviate their schedule during the school year. Starting the college application process early such as sophomore year in terms of discussing geographic locations, private or public, size and areas of study can ease the stress that comes with junior and senior years and initiates conversations about your child's interests and preferences to begin developing lists of schools to further research. There are a multitude of college and universities to visit in the general D.C. area to grasp a feel for the different types of programs and campuses offered without having to travel long distances. By attending information sessions, children can hear questions others are asking and use those they found useful during future visits to other schools. It was highlighted that during the

search process, it is important to always make sure your children know they will accomplish their goal of being accepted to a college.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Ms. Cohen concluded the forum by thanking everyone for their participation and hoped that each person who attended picked up a tidbit to use with their families. She reinforced that communication is key between spouses, families and friends and encouraged parents to take advantage of the programs, network, Facebook page and website offered by the PCW adding that all are resourceful parenting tools.