

## **PROGRAM SUMMARY**

Upper School Student Leader Breakfast

Georgetown Preparatory School

*Thursday, February 11, 2016*

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its Upper School Student Leader Breakfast on Thursday, February 11, 2016 at Georgetown Preparatory School. This annual event provides a unique forum for student leaders to share ideas and discuss relevant issues with peers. Students gain new perspective on how other schools address these shared issues and acquire fresh insights and ideas to take back to their school communities.

Twenty-four participating PCW member schools selected nearly 50 students (juniors and seniors) to attend. They were encouraged to be frank, open and honest throughout the day while remaining respectful of fellow students. PCW informed students that their dialogue would be summarized without attribution and forwarded to upper school administrators prior to a spring lunch meeting of PCW member school Deans of Students.

Seven topics were discussed in the large group setting with an adult moderator:

- *Time Management and Handling Stress*
- *Power of Schools Beyond School Borders*
- *Social Media*
- *Risk Taking Behavior*
- *Whom Teens Confide In*

- *Honesty, Academic Integrity, Cheating*
- *Power of Schools to Regulate Student Speech*

Student-led small group discussions followed, with students randomly assigned to one of four groups. Each group chose discussion topics from a pre-printed list or determined their own. Students guided the conversations and, in all, covered the following nine topics:

- *Male/Female Relationships*
- *Diversity/LGBT*
- *Pressure to Conform*
- *Handling Stress*
- *Bullying/Cyber bullying*
- *Socializing with Kids from Different Schools*
- *Drugs/Alcohol*
- *Competition – Academic, Athletic, etc.*
- *Homework*

### ***General Observations***

Student leaders demonstrated an impressive level of maturity, intellect, thoughtfulness and respect for fellow attendees. The conversations reflected earnest concern for issues discussed and an obvious interest in learning about other students and how their schools handle various situations.

Throughout the day, attendees displayed great pride in their school communities, noting the genuine care of teachers and administrators, an array of meaningful activities and opportunities, and good friends. Categories and themes that emerged from the day's conversation are broadly but briefly described below.

### ***Preparing for Life Beyond High School***

Recognizing that they will soon be on their own to make decisions, students agreed on the benefit of more education and frank discussion about life outside the classroom. Areas of interest include the impact and consequences of risk-taking behaviors (e.g., alcohol, drugs, sex), social media usage and possible ramifications, current events and issues, when and how to seek help to support a friend in need, etc. Several students noted the usefulness of progressive education over the years. Students encourage school support in learning to make good decisions in all areas of life.

### ***Valuing Education Versus Discipline***

Students prefer education to discipline in guiding student actions both on and off campus. Rather than simply receiving a set of rules for undesirable/prohibited activity, students value transparency on how and why their schools make decisions (e.g., school values, expectations of students, disciplinary actions, etc.).

First person accounts, such as having older teens/young adults share real, transformational life experiences, help students make more educated and informed decisions. Identifying underlying causes of unwanted behaviors (e.g., bad stress, cheating, drinking) to help find appropriate solutions is also important.

The students value academic honesty and integrity. In light of the ever-increasing reliance on technology for schoolwork, students see the benefit of greater clarity on how to paraphrase and cite properly to avoid plagiarism and what constitutes acceptable collaboration among peers.

### ***Handling Communication Between Students and Schools***

Students seek opportunities for open and honest dialogue, both for student-only and student-administration discussions. They enjoy discussing topics of importance within and beyond school. Students voiced an interest in working collaboratively with the school administration through student leadership to define and address problems.

### ***Dealing with Stress and Turning to Others for Help***

While students confront stress in myriad ways (academic, social, familial, sports, etc.), they generally feel equipped to handle it.\* In addition, students felt their schools and

teachers typically support their efforts to balance their many priorities. When high school students need to turn to others for help or support, attendees agreed that peers serve as the primary resource with parents as an alternative. Some students reach out to faculty members or advisors, but it is not too common. The school counselor is least often contacted because of concern that the counselor may share information with parents and due to the unfortunate stigma associated with it.

\* Note: Teens do not necessarily feel equipped, however, to support their friends in all issues and would welcome guidance on how, when and whom to turn to when faced with such situations.

### ***Defining Success***

Students receive conflicting messages about success and self worth. When schools applaud students whose achievements result in entry into prestigious colleges (over other accomplishments such as exemplary community service or admirable personal growth and development) it sends a message about priorities. The pressure of college applications and acceptances creates stress and interferes with student focus on learning for knowledge and growth versus attainment of a certain grade or award. Students value the opportunity to learn life skills and to be exposed to a variety of interests and pursuits. They appreciate when schools require participation in the arts and make time for extracurricular activities during the school day.