



PROGRAM SUMMARY

2013 Middle School Student Leader Breakfast

Potomac School

Tuesday, March 5, 2013

The Parents Council of Washington hosted its annual Middle School Student Leader Breakfast on Tuesday, March 5, 2013 at the Potomac School. Fifty students representing the seventh grade classes of twenty-five Parents Council of Washington member schools attended and participated in the event. Students were accompanied by an administrator, teacher or counselor from each school.

Parents Council Vice President, Ms. Fran Barnes, welcomed the students and administrators, thanked the Potomac School for hosting the program again this year, explained the agenda and encouraged the students to relay the information shared back to their school communities. Ms. Barnes introduced Mr. Jerry Kountz, the Head of Potomac School's Intermediate School as the moderator leading the session for the administrators. Concurrent to the student dialogue, Mr. Kountz facilitated an open discussion with the adults in a different room to allow them to share ideas and converse about perspectives on the social and developmental issues facing Middle School students. He provided an overview of the two separate discussions and thanked the school administrators and students for taking the time to participate. He noted that the program offers the opportunity to share common issues and bridge leaders across schools through conversation, learning and fun. He then introduced Mr. Michael Fishback, a Humanities teacher at the Potomac School's Intermediate School as moderator for the students.

Upon the administrators' departure from the room, Mr. Fishback opened the students' program by welcoming them and encouraging them to actively engage in the discussions to collaborate on ideas and common concerns. He reminded the group to keep an open dialog and that the topics covered would be recorded, but remain confidential. He also mentioned that they were all chosen as rising 8th grade student leaders/role models who are in a position to affect change and positively influence other students, peers and administrators at their schools.

Once the students introduced themselves, Mr. Fishback explained the first activity as an exercise that would start the thinking process on issues affecting middle school students and allow the group to be more at ease to speak freely with one another. The students were to "get up and move" to another chair within the circle if they related to a series of questions. Once seated in a new location, students were told to share the answer to the question with another student seated next to them. The questions varied from whether a student had performed in front of an audience this year or whether they had a friend who may have been stressed in the past week to witnessing someone being bullied or excluded.

Upon conclusion of the large group discussion, Mr. Fishback brainstormed topics with the students that would be further discussed within a smaller group setting. The ideas were to represent the types of issues middle school students find that require skillful decision-making and that may involve diversity, stress, popularity, time management, competition, bullying, online social media, rivalries and confidentiality. The ideas were then compiled into the five following main categories:

1. Friendships and peer pressure
2. Stereotyping and inclusion
3. Adult expectations, control and maturity
4. Trust and confidentiality
5. Time management, stress and technology

Students selected the three topic sessions they were interested in attending and were instructed to discuss openly, listen to each other carefully, make respectful comments and try to share ideas or advice on how to solve the issues.

Regarding friendships and peer pressure, the students discussed the difficulties of integrating and making new friends, breaking through existing cliques, exclusions from groups that are widely perceived as only including popular students and pressure from

parents to be friends with students they choose. Solutions offered included trying to be friends with everyone, worrying more about being oneself, understanding others' feelings and refraining from categorizing/judging others.

Comments from the stereotyping and inclusion group involved cultural diversity ranging from racial slurs that lead to school-wide conversations/presentations to exclusion from the "cool" groups that can be composed of athletic students, smart students or mean students that hold themselves in higher regard than the rest of the student body and are not open to others joining in. Some of the comments stated problems occur at lunch or recess with students excluding others from the tables or conversations and a popular class leader who decides whether everyone should either hate or like a student. Suggestions to improve some of the problems addressed speaking up about wanting more consequences for stereotyping/exclusion behavior, rotating lunch table assignments, holding diversity conferences and giving others a chance to be included.

Within the discussions for adult expectations, control and maturity, students agreed that expectations from adults/parents are difficult to meet and unreasonable. Students felt that they are always trying to do their best under the pressures of afternoon activities, homework, tests, friends and family and should have the chance to "fall short" at times as everyone makes mistakes. Students shared how difficult it is to follow in a sibling's footsteps; teachers and parents expect the same performance on the younger student as the older siblings yet the older siblings feel the younger student is allowed to do more or get away with more. Additional comments addressed how parents often think students are wrong and how adults do not take the students seriously enough. Some of the advice shared to handle the issues included trying to understand that parents want their children to be the best that they can be, to help adults understand that they can trust students more by managing time more effectively and making better decisions and to communicate more with each other.

Trust and confidentiality brought up the issues of friends not keeping information private, widespread gossip at school about who likes who or grades/test scores and adults not providing students with enough independence. Trusting someone, yet not fully disclosing important secrets was one solution offered.

Distractions within and outside of the classroom from the usage of electronic devices were the main problems discussed involving time management, stress and technology. Most students felt it very difficult to unplug from technology to focus more because they use the technology for their schoolwork. Science homework often requires access to YouTube that leads to further distractions. The devices also tend to create distrust with

the teachers who think that students are not using them appropriately. Students are stressed when more than one quiz or test is scheduled with less than two days warning or when there is a lot of homework assigned on days they are balancing other activities or on weekends when they are trying to spend more time with their families. Other forms of stress come from missing school and making the missed work up as well as not getting enough sleep. To improve time management, trying to get ahead when homework is light, prioritizing activities/homework, study skills classes, talking to teachers and removing technology when feasible were suggestions offered.

In conclusion, the students completed evaluation forms and were asked to think about what their next steps should be. What would they like their schools to do? What should their peers be doing? Mr. Kountz rejoined the student group with the school administrators and along with Ms. Barnes and Mr. Fishback, thanked everyone for participating and attending.