



PROGRAM SUMMARY

2015 Middle School Student Leader Breakfast

St Andrew's Episcopal School

Tuesday, March 3, 2015

“If I Knew Then What I Know Now”

PCW hosted 48 students at its annual Middle School Student Leader Breakfast on Tuesday, March 3, 2015, at St. Andrew's Episcopal School. An administrator/faculty member from each of the 24 participating member schools accompanied the students and attended a separate meeting led by Mr. Rodney Glasgow, SAES Head of Middle School.

After breakfast and an ice-breaker, SAES Middle School Dean of Students Ms. Kristin Cuddihy welcomed the group and introduced Mr. Robert Kosasky, SAES Head of School, who seconded the welcome and noted the importance of coming together to discuss leadership and collaboration. He highlighted that a good leader listens and engages in conversation. PCW Board Member and event co-chair Ms. D.D. Holcomb added thanks to SAES on behalf of the PCW and thanked the students for attending, noting that it was an honor for them to have been selected to participate. A final welcome came from Mr. Glasgow, who stressed that the goal of the day was for students to gather ideas to take back to their schools, and to share their viewpoints and those of other students who could not attend the meeting. At that point the administrators left for a separate program with Mr. Glasgow.

Facilitators Cuddihy and Mr. Michael Chapper, SAES 7th Grade Lead Advisor, began by engaging students in an activity to introduce themselves and shed some light on the interests and needs of the group. Students were encouraged to speak honestly and openly about issues on their minds. They began with the question, “what is a middle school leader?” Students offered that a leader is someone who helps other students and who is not afraid to say things and be heard. A leader manages the group and gives feedback, while listening to and supporting others and moving ideas forward. A leader stands up for other kids.

Ms. Cuddihy and Mr. Chapper then asked the students to brainstorm on topics to be discussed in smaller groups. The students proposed topics: bullying, respecting others, taking responsibility for actions, exclusion, cliques, teacher favoritism, personal space, group dynamics, gender issues, popularity, and qualities of leaders/types of leadership programs that exist at schools. Based on student votes of interest, small group discussions focused on the following topics: popularity, cliques and exclusion (discussed by all small groups), the culture of respect, teacher favoritism, gender inequality and bullying.

Students were randomly divided into four small groups, and each of the groups had two topics to discuss. In the first round, each group explored the issue of popularity, cliques and exclusion, topics of interest to all present. Students discussed the dynamics of clique membership, facts and stereotypes about cliques and popularity, and how popularity or clique membership as a goal can affect teen behavior. In the larger group, the students continued the exploration, further defining what makes a student popular, which included sports success, clothing, sense of humor, looks, social media capability and material items/money. They brainstormed on structures and techniques that encourage inclusion, such as character or leadership education classes, group projects or activities and advisory groups. They also emphasized mutual respect and making an effort to draw in those who are excluded, while being open and trying not to push kids.

In the second small group round, each of the four groups discussed a different assigned topic: the culture of respect, teacher favoritism, gender inequality and bullying/behaviors targeting others.

The Culture of Respect discussion group raised the point that “jk” (just kidding) may be ok with friends who are in on the joke, but with others it can be easy to misunderstand. Some jokes are always wrong, such as jokes based on gender or race. Text jokes may also be misunderstood because they lack a tone of voice.

In the Teacher Favoritism discussion, students expressed the opinion that teachers gossip too much and hold grudges. They felt teachers stereotyped kids and made

assumptions about students based on gender, race, sports or older siblings. This approach leads to kids being unfairly labeled and favoritism, an example of which was unfair enforcement of the dress code.

On the topic of Gender Inequality, students commented that looks are very important, in some cases, in terms of how people view each other. Girls are assumed to be less athletic than boys, and some kids make unwelcome comments like “you throw like a girl.” Gender jokes are made against each other, which is not fair. In the larger group setting, some girls did note feeling uncomfortable in their schools settings.

In the Bullying/Behaviors Targeting Others discussion, students said that is can be difficult to stand up for others without being dragged into a dispute. They expressed concern that defending others can lead to problems or blame from others. Bullying happens a lot on social media and it can be manifested as repeated overtures.

In the large group follow-up, students explored how to solve bullying and behaviors targeting others. Solutions offered included turning off or blocking social media, and engaging others to do the same to stop the behavior. They felt that there is force in numbers. Sometimes bullying behavior needs to be reported. They also explored engaging the bully to see if a misunderstanding caused the problem.

The students discussed the importance of helping the person being bullied by talking to them or including them in something. Another helpful suggestion was to create affinity groups, like a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance), Black Students Association or other ethnic associations in which students can talk through issues with people who understand. Getting support from other students or a trusted adult may also be necessary in the case of bullying.

Due to time limitations, these first three issues were not discussed at length in the large group. Facilitators Chapper and Cuddihy concluded the program, thanking participants and noting that students are expected and encouraged as student leaders to determine ideas that can be taken back to their respective schools. Students regrouped with their administrators and discussed what they could take away from the event that would lead to continued conversation and concrete solutions at their respective schools.