



Middle School Student Leader Breakfast

February 16, 2017

EVENT OVERVIEW

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its annual Middle School Student Leader Breakfast on Thursday, February 16, 2017 at Washington Episcopal School (WES). This event provides a forum for 7th grade student leaders to share ideas and discuss relevant issues with peers.

Twenty-nine participating PCW member schools sent 58 students and 30 administrators to attend. An administrator/faculty member from each school accompanied the students. Mary Cohen, a former PCW Board member and experienced facilitator, moderated the student program. The administrators/faculty members attended a separate program moderated by Danny Vogelmann, WES's Head of School.

Students were encouraged to speak openly and honestly about issues that middle school students face and to brainstorm ways to solve these problems in their school communities.

The group began by generating a list of issues common to middle school, including:

- *Stress about schoolwork*
- *Gossip*
- *Cheating*
- *Social media*
- *Gender bias in the classroom*
- *Dress codes*
- *Too much homework*
- *Cliques*
- *Use of profanity in schools*
- *Teacher preferences/biases*
- *Balancing school, social life & sports*
- *Concerns about appearance*

The students then selected *Coping with Stress*, *Gossip*, *Social Media* and *Cheating* as issues to discuss in depth. The students then broke into five smaller, student-led groups to discuss these topics. They were tasked with identifying why these issues were of concern and also to come up with strategies and solutions to help alleviate the problems.

Stress

The students reported that the following contribute to stress:

- *Homework and poor time management*
- *Studying and taking tests*
- *Feeling pressure to get good grades*
- *Procrastination*
- *Transition from lower to middle school and increasing workload*
- *Having multiple tests or projects due in a single day*
- *Extracurricular activities and sports may consume any free time*

Students then proposed a number of solutions, including:

- *Use study halls wisely*
- *Talk to teachers if you need help or don't understand*
- *Ask teachers to avoid scheduling tests and projects on same day*
- *Take study skills class if available*
- *Plan ahead if you have tests coming up*
- *Attend help sessions*
- *Listen in class*
- *Don't sit by your friends in class*
- *Put away your phone – both at home and at school*
- *Don't waste time on social media*
- *Get a good night's sleep*

Gossip

According to students, gossip is an issue of concern at their schools because:

- *Gossip often spreads quickly and is hard to stop once it gets started; it doesn't matter if it's true or not*
- *Gossip can hurt someone and damage their reputation*
- *Gossip can be used to make another student jealous, or get revenge on someone*
- *Gossip can be made much worse and spread faster on social media*
- *Gossip often starts because the person who starts it wants attention, or to deflect attention from something that they have done*
- *Sometimes kids start rumors or start gossip and think it's funny. They don't realize that someone is getting hurt*
- *The truth gets twisted and stretched to make it more interesting*
- *It's hard not to join in because students can fear that they might be the next target of gossip or a false rumor*

Students then proposed a number of solutions, including:

- *Stop gossip before it starts, call it out, walk away, don't join in*
- *Gain trust with one's peers*
- *Challenge the person who starts the gossip*
- *Don't give in to peer pressure*
- *Don't assume things; deny rumors, don't spread them*

Social Media

The students identified the following issues around the uses and abuses of social media:

- *Instagram & Snapchat are widely used*
- *Some kids say things about someone via text and/or social media that they would never say to that person's face*
- *Kids can easily read and spread gossip via social media*
- *Social media creates a permanent record that may affect them later in life*
- *Hurtful to see pictures posted of kids at an event that you weren't invited to*
- *"Likes" can be a source of stress and hurt feelings*
- *Social media is all-consuming and it's easy to become obsessed with it*
- *Temptation of social media leads to poor time management and interferes with getting homework done*
- *It is often hard to interpret the "tone" of a text, resulting in confusion around what someone means or doesn't mean*

- *Prevents students from having face-to-face “real” conversations*

- *Texting the opposite sex affects kids’ social skills. Kids say things to others earlier than they typically would*

The students identified the following strategies to combat the pitfalls of social media:

- *Report offensive posts*
- *Think before you post. If you wouldn’t say something to a person’s face, don’t text it. Don’t post what you wouldn’t want your grandmother to see!*
- *Don’t contribute to the spread of gossip via social media*
- *Don’t let social media interfere with the rest of your life. Take a break.*
- *Don’t let people “follow you” (on SnapChat, Instagram, etc.) if you don’t know them.*
- *Follow limits set by your parents*

Cheating

The students identified the following issues around cheating:

- *Cheating means different things to different kids; what one kid sees as “helping a friend,” another kid might see as cheating*
- *Some kids tell their friends what’s on a test after they have taken it, but before their friend has*
- *Kids have different ways to cheat, and are constantly coming up with new ways*
- *Teachers and schools aren’t always consistent in the way that they handle cheating*
- *Copying homework is as bad as cheating on a test. Both are common*
- *Cheating results from the pressure kids feel to get good grades*
- *Sometimes teachers accuse the wrong kid or do not place blame on all the kids involved*
- *Kids “with power” (e.g., popular kids) pressure other kids to give them answers*

Students identified the following strategies to combat cheating at their school:

- *Involve teachers. Ask them to give different tests to different classes*
- *Make sure all teachers are handling cheating in a consistent manner*
- *Don’t tell friends what is on the test before they take it*
- *Listen in class and do your own work*
- *It is important to balance the workload in group work, because if one student does all the work and the rest of the kids take advantage of them, that’s a form of cheating*
- *Tell your teacher if you suspect that someone is cheating off of you*

The morning concluded with a thoughtful full group discussion about cheating. Some schools have Honor Codes that require students to report cheating to a teacher or faculty member. While students said they understood the reason for this rule, some said it is awkward to turn in a classmate or friend. However, there was general consensus that it does not feel good to have your work copied by classmates. Although students do not always identify this behavior as “cheating,” schools consider it to be a rule violation.