



Upper School Student Leader Breakfast Program Summary

February 9, 2017

EVENT OVERVIEW

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its Upper School Student Leader Breakfast at The Potomac School in McLean, Virginia. This annual event provides a unique forum for student leaders from across the region to share ideas and discuss relevant issues with peers. Students take back to their school communities concrete ideas and insights on how other schools address issues of mutual interest.

Twenty-six PCW member schools participated, sending nearly 50 junior and senior student leaders. Students were encouraged to be frank, open and honest throughout the day, while remaining respectful of fellow students. PCW reminded students that the dialogue would be summarized in a completely anonymous format and forwarded to upper school administrators prior to an annual spring meeting of PCW member school Deans of Students.

A former PCW Board member moderated the large group discussion, focusing on seven topics:

- 1. Time Management and Handling Stress*
- 2. Power of Schools Beyond School Borders*
- 3. Social Media*
- 4. Risk Taking Behavior*
- 5. Instances of Social Unrest and Events in the News*
- 6. Honesty, Academic Integrity, and Cheating*
- 7. School Supported Learning Beyond Academics*

Small, student-led group discussions followed the large group discussion, 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 their own conversations and, in varying degrees, covered the following seven topics:

- *Male/Female Relationships*
- *Diversity*
- *Affinity Groups/LGBTQ*
- *Bullying*
- *Unacceptable Behavior/Cheating in Schools*
- *Socializing in High School*
- *Homework/Stress*

General Observations

Student leaders were mature, candid, thoughtful and genuine in their exploration of issues of concern. They exhibited insight, sensitivity and respect, addressing sensitive topics in a courteous manner.

The following themes emerged throughout the program:

1. The need for civil, open and respectful discourse
2. The topic of diversity across several dimensions
3. A desire to seek fairness and consistency in addressing issues

The Need for Civil, Open, and Respectful Discourse

Students spoke thoughtfully and openly about how their schools handle current events and the degree to which students are given freedom to organize discussion in response to concerns. Students exchanged ways in which schools provide opportunities for discussion. They agreed that overtly expressed political bias among administrators and faculty can make them reluctant to share opposing viewpoints. Students believe that they should be encouraged to ask questions, discuss controversial topics, and learn to listen. People should be civil, and all ideas should be welcomed and respected.

The Topic of Diversity Across Several Dimensions

Students identified diversity as a concern in many schools, both lack of diversity on many levels (racial, socio-economic, political, religious) and lack of participation in diversity programs. Schools' diversity education varies widely. Students want more inclusion and conversation around these topics. They offered suggestions how schools could do more to foster it and provide additional learning opportunities.

Students do not want to be labeled, or subsequently judged, by any one attribute. They recognize that all people are individuals, and similarities and differences are not always obvious. Their conversations also reflected sensitivity toward LGBTQ issues, and they discussed ways to foster greater awareness and understanding.

Students also raised the issue of socioeconomic diversity and the financial burden of independent schools for many families. They believe all students should be able to attend school-sponsored and related activities, but the added expense can be prohibitive for some students. In addition, students with less means also struggle to keep up with everyday, non-school related activities.

A Desire to Seek Fairness and Consistency in Addressing Issues

A need for fairness and consistency emerged in discussions around multiple areas, including cheating and other in-school infractions; social media uses; and addressing student behaviors and incidents at off-campus, non-school sponsored events.

Students identified the fast-paced school environment, high expectations, and volume of work as contributing factors to academic cheating, which tends to occur primarily on homework or quizzes. Schools address cheating differently, with responses varying from punitive to remedial. Students supported greater decision-making power for student-led honor councils and more consistency in consequences with a focus on rehabilitative solutions.

Social media is a central part of students' lives, and students identify many benefits to using it. However, they recognize that social media is also a distraction and has created new issues that schools need to address, such as boundaries between student/faculty electronic communications; limits to schools monitoring students' social media; guidelines for schools filming students/posting footage; and the extent a student represents a school on social media.

Students agreed that there is a need for clear and consistent guidelines for the role of schools in regulating student behavior off-campus. Students generally agreed on when the school should be involved (e.g., issues of safety or emotional health, school-sanctioned events, clear bullying) but suggested school/faculty involvement in weekend student life and social media should be limited.