



Upper School Student Leader Breakfast Program Summary

February 6, 2018

EVENT OVERVIEW

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its Upper School Student Leader Breakfast at St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Potomac, MD. 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 concrete ideas back to their school communities as well as insights on how other schools address common issues.

Twenty-four PCW member schools participated, sending 45 junior and senior student leaders, representing co-ed and single-sex schools as well as schools with a boarding component and/or with religious affiliation. 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 five topics:

1. *Social Media*
2. *Honesty, Academic Integrity, and Cheating*
3. *Instances of Social Unrest and Events in the News*
4. *Power of Schools Beyond School Borders*
5. *Risk Taking Behavior*

Two student-led small group discussions followed the large group discussion, with students randomly assigned to one of four groups. For the first session, the students chose to prioritize the first three topics listed below. For the second session, each group chose discussion topics from a suggested list or determined their own. Students guided their own conversations and, in total, covered the following six topics:

- *Mental Health and Students' Well-Being*
- *Time Management and Stress*
- *Sports in Schools*
- *Diversity*
- *Gender Issues/Sexuality*
- *School Culture/Civility*

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. Uniformly they valued the program for its environment of open and honest discourse, particularly appreciating the opportunity to discover similarities and differences amongst schools and to hear the differing perspectives of their peers.

The following themes emerged throughout the program:

1. Students crave more opportunities for discussion
2. Stress and mental health are important issues for students today
3. Risk-taking behavior in-school is becoming a bigger problem

More opportunities for discussion

Students want to have more opportunities for discussions, particularly student-led discussions, on topics ranging from current events to diversity. Lecturing students is not effective, and if the same voices are always heard in these discussions, students stop listening. They would prefer more balanced discourse including a variety of different viewpoints. In many cases, students with differing viewpoints from the majority of their peers, or the leaders, do not feel that they are able to express their views. Students also find that many of the discussions take place as a reaction to an inflammatory issue, resulting in additional tension if the conversation does not lead to greater understanding.

Some schools explore sensitive topics through creative forums: presentations, games, contests, and plays were mentioned. Effective discussions help people understand similarities and differences, fostering a greater sense of community. Students believe that it is not appropriate for teachers to promote their personal opinions, even when those opinions may be in line with those of the students.

Stress and Mental Health

Participants were asked to vote for the topics that they would like to address in their first small group session. The topics of *Mental Health/Students' Well-Being* and *Time Management/Stress* received, by far, the largest interest. Students are stressed, exhausted, and anxious. They want more support from their schools to help them manage their obligations and not simply accept that stress is the norm for this area. Stress can even become a badge of honor among students. School-led mindfulness and meditation exercises are not effective. Students would rather have greater coordination amongst teachers around assignments, more structured schedules, and built-in free periods to help lessen after-school work.

Students worry that anxiety and depression are commonplace and that schools need to have more concrete support systems in place. The guidance counselors, in many cases, are either not helpful or are unable to keep the students' issues confidential. Therefore, students do not believe that the guidance counselor is a resource to which they can turn in times of need. Students do confide in each other, but they recognize that confidences add additional stress to peers. Students need someone at school that they can trust and talk with and a reliable way to bring mental health concerns to the right people's attention.

Risk-Taking Behavior in School

Drug and alcohol use is becoming a bigger problem during the school day, both on and off campus. Drinking is common but believed to be mostly on the weekends. However, drug use, buying, and selling is widespread, even at school. Juuling (vaping) is the most prevalent form of drug use at school. School-led prevention programs are perceived to be ineffective, as students understand the risks but still choose to drink or use drugs. Some schools have programs for students either to get help anonymously for themselves or for peers who may be struggling with drugs or alcohol. These programs seem to be more effective because they are kept private.