

**Middle School Student Leader Breakfast**

Tuesday, February 12, 2019

The Langley School

**SUMMARY**

**Introduction**

On February 12,46seventh graders from 23Parents Council of Washington member schools gathered at The Langley School (“Langley”) to take part in the annual PCW Middle School Student Leader Breakfast. Twenty-three Administrators also attended but met separately for most of the morning.

After welcoming remarks from PCW Board President Susan Newell and Langley Dean of Students LaMecca Coates, the administrators departed the room to convene their separate meeting while the student program began with Mary Cohen moderating. Mary began by reminding the students that they were selected to represent their schools because they are leaders in their school communities. Students were encouraged to speak up during the program and to share their insights openly and honestly, and to leave with information to take back to their own school communities.

Mary led an “icebreaker” activity to enable the students to move and interact. Students were asked to change seats if they:

* Attend a coed school – 2/3 [*fractions indicate proportion of students responding affirmatively*]
* Have siblings – most
* Play an instrument – 1/2
* Have good study habits – only a few
* Like math – 1/2
* Have a dog – 1/2
* Have cliques at school - most
* Had broken a bone – 1/2
* Take Spanish – almost 2/3
* Have too much homework most days – 3/4
* Have seen bullying at school – 3/4
* Spend time on social media daily – most
* Feel safe at school – all
* Have seen people hurt by gossip – 3/4
* Most of your teachers treat students fairly – most
* Think cheating is an issue - few

After the icebreaker, Mary led the students in a group discussion in which they identified issues that middle school students were facing and dealing with at their schools. Mary asked the students to narrow the list to 3 topics that would be discussed during the program, in a show-of-hands group vote. The following issues received votes for discussion:

* Social media
* Lack of sleep
* Gossip
* Stress, mental illness, exams
* Friendship and romantic relationships
* Sports
* Too much homework
* Religion – acceptance within the student body and bias
* Balancing school and outside activities
* Gender, sexuality stereotypes and acceptance
* Difficulties with group projects and assignments
* High school applications
* Unfair treatment by teachers and teacher favoritism
* Need for more physical activity during the school day

The topics that received the most votes were:

* Lack of sleep
* Too much homework
* Gossip
* Stress and mental illness
* Treatment by teachers

Mary thanked the students for coming up with such a thoughtful, comprehensive list and assured them that ALL the topics they identified were important, even if they were not selected for the group discussion. The students were then divided into 5 breakout groups to discuss the issues. Students from the same school were placed in different breakout groups. After a morning break, the groups divided into 5 new groups. Following are summaries of the student discussions.

**Small Group Breakout Session Topic #1 – Lack of Sleep; Too Much Homework**

* Students do not have enough time, because of homework, sports, other after-school activities, and technology.
* Stress makes it harder to get enough sleep.
* Many students have trouble falling asleep.
* Procrastination is a real problem.
* Most schoolwork is done on computers – emails and other notifications can be very distracting.

Strategies for addressing the need for more sleep:

* The school day should start later – at 9:00 a.m.
* Students should have less homework.
* Schools should do a better job balancing how much homework students have each day.
* There should be more study halls during the school day.
* Leave technology out of bedrooms.
* Teachers can put time limits on assignments – e.g., work for 25 minutes on an assignment and then stop.
* Ask teachers for help – for extensions, time in class to work on projects.
* Find a good study area; prioritize time; learn better organization skills and study habits.

**Small Group Breakout Session Topic #2 – Gossip**

* Gossip leads to drama. The gossip, and the resulting drama, can be related to friendships, relationships, test results, grades, body shape, religion, and sports.
* Some people gossip for attention – those that like drama and attention often are the ones gossiping. Others gossip thinking it will help them become popular.
* Social media spreads gossip very quickly.
* Gossip leads to a great deal of stress.

Strategies for addressing gossip:

* Stand up for your friends.
* Do not jump to conclusions and do not make assumptions.
* Stay neutral; do not choose sides.
* Keep secrets; be reliable. Choose friends you can trust.
* Offer help to someone instead of talking about them; reach out.
* Do not make assumptions about the source of the gossip – it could be someone who overheard something.
* If you hear gossip about someone, let that person know so that person can address it if s/he chooses.
* Think before you speak.
* A helpful analogy: gossip is like a feather pillow cut open on a windy day on the top of a hill. The feathers spread everywhere and cannot all be picked up.

**Small Group Breakout Session Topic #3 – Treatment by Teachers**

* Favoritism and bias are real problems.
* Favoritism affects students’ grades, self-esteem and ability to learn.
* It is frustrating when teachers tell you to study one thing and then something else is on the test.
* Teachers have different standards for their favorites – the favorites do not get in trouble when others would; the favorites get extra help.
* The favorites feel like they have power, and leads to bad behavior on their part.

Strategies for addressing teacher favoritism and other teacher treatment issues:

* It is difficult to come up with solutions.
* It is not smart to talk to the teacher about it. Instead, talk to a parent or a trusted administrator.
* Guidelines provided by teachers need to be specific and apply to everyone.
* There could be a central place for anonymous complaints.
* Written guidelines for teachers would be helpful.

**Small Group Breakout Session Topic #4 – Stress and Mental Illness**

* Stress comes from expectations, grades, anxiety, depression, and missing school when sick.
* Students have so much homework, many tests, many activities, relationship and friendship issues, and not enough sleep – a recipe for stress!
* Social pressure and parental pressure also cause stress.
* Pressure is caused by trying to present a certain image. Students need to remember that no one is perfect, and that they do not need to present an image of perfection.

Strategies for addressing stress and mental illness:

* Get more sleep!
* Make sure to exercise. Physical movement can help reduce stress.
* Take things one step at a time.
* Take breaks at school and at home.
* Focus on organization and good study habits.
* Consider hiring a tutor.
* Talk with your teachers – let them know about these issues, ask for extra help, ask for review sheets.
* Learn to prioritize. Students may need to learn to put academics ahead of other activities.
* Learn to ask for help – from teachers, parents, and friends.
* Take breaks from technology.

Mary wrapped up the program by thanking the students for taking time out of their day to participate in the program. The administrators returned to the room from their discussion and reconvened with their students, to discuss how to bring back to their school communities the information and lessons they had learned. Students and administrators filled out evaluation forms and the program was adjourned.

**Summary of Responses from Student Evaluation Forms:**

**“Please tell us three issues that middle school students face that your school should know about:”**

1. Lack of sleep (*26 students*)
2. Stress (*23 students*)
3. Homework (*17 students*)
4. Teachers/favoritism (*13 students*)
5. Gossip (*10 students*)
6. No time for extracurriculars (*7 students*)
7. Cliques (*4 students*)
8. Grades (*3 students*)
9. Testing (*3 students*)
10. Pressure (*3 students*)
11. Boring classes (*2 students*)
12. LGBTQ discussions (*2 students*)
13. Intro to dating (*2 students*)
14. More student council powers (*2 students*)
15. Bullying (*2 students*)
16. Anxiety/depression (*2 students*)
17. Rumors (*1 student*)
18. Wanting to discuss religion (*1 student*)
19. Anger issues (*1 student*)
20. Later school start time (*1 student*)
21. Backpacks (*1 student*)