



Upper School Student Leader Breakfast Program Summary

February 5, 2019

EVENT OVERVIEW

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its Upper School Student Leader Breakfast at Bullis 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-six PCW member schools participated, sending 51 junior and senior student leaders representing a variety of independent upper schools in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., including co-ed and single-sex; boarding and day; secular and religious; and large and small schools. Nearly half the participants were students of color. 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 four topics:

- 1. Time Management and Handling Stress*
- 2. Honesty, Academic Integrity, and Cheating*
- 3. Instances of Social Unrest and Events in the News*
- 4. Risk-Taking Behavior*

Two student-led small group discussions followed the large group discussion, with students randomly assigned to one of four groups for each breakout. For the first session, the students chose to prioritize the first four 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 Empowering Students' Well-Being*
- *Social Media*
- *Sports in Schools*

- *Power of Schools to Regulate Student Speech*
- *Gender Issues, Relationships, Consent*
- *Diversity*

General Observations

Students were open, thoughtful and honest throughout the day, while remaining respectful of fellow students. Student leaders were mature, candid, thoughtful, and genuine in their exploration of issues of concern. 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 interact with peers from other schools.

The following themes emerged throughout the program:

1. Students would like more support and understanding of mental health issues.
2. Students are engaging in risk-taking behavior, especially vaping.
3. Relationships, particularly consent, are tricky for students, with more education needed.
4. Stress and work overload continue to be problems, although schools are trying various programs to help.

Support for Mental Health

Students prioritized mental health as a topic they wanted to discuss further and spent a lot of time in small groups on this topic. Students would like more education on mental health, particularly to erase the stigma associated with mental health issues. Lack of understanding leads to lack of empathy towards those suffering, and more stigma. Often, school discussions on mental health only arise after a crisis. Every student needs to find an adult at school that they can trust with confidences. This is not always the Counselor or an Administrator/Teacher as there is worry about confidentiality and/or an impact on academic evaluation. However, when school administration is not involved, the students try to deal with friends' issues themselves, with little support or education. Schools could help students learn to help their friends and destigmatize mental health issues through open conversation. Schools are trying a number of approaches, including retreats, mental health awareness week, assemblies, and advisory groups.

Risk-Taking Behavior in School

Drugs (mainly marijuana), alcohol, and vaping (e-cigarettes) are prevalent amongst high-schoolers, both in and outside of school. All schools have programs about alcohol, drug use, and sex education. However, such programs tend to be targeted toward Middle School or 9th graders, when the information is less relevant. Students recommend multiple sessions during the high school years. Vaping has become a major issue at schools, often taking place in school bathrooms. Students recommend clear consequences that matter and are enforced consistently. They also desire more guidance on how to help friends who they believe are engaging in concerning behavior.

Relationships and Consent

Although not one of the stated topics, many small groups spent a great deal of time talking about relationships and consent. They discussed implicit and explicit bias against coming out as gay, bi-sexual, and/or transgender. People sometimes use homophobic words without thinking – students wish people would pay more attention to whom they could be

hurting. Relationships are uncomfortable topics for students, but they expressed a desire for more information about consent and how to treat others in general. It should not just be education for the girls, but conversation between and among both sexes. Students would like to learn how to make better decisions before they are in college making poor ones.

Stress and Work Overload

Although most students think they do a good job balancing schedules and downtime, few students believe they have enough downtime and almost all are stressed and not getting enough sleep. Students need more guidance how to balance independence while seeking help, when needed, with stress and work overload, especially in the high-pressure environment of independent schools in this area. However, schools are trying many things to mitigate stress and overwork, including late starts once a week, block schedules so students do not have homework in every subject every night, student-teacher appointment times, assignment/assessment guidelines, and upperclass mentorships.

Additional topics addressed:

- There is cheating in schools, usually outside the classroom and often it is the same group of students. However, some “good” students cheat when the pressure to succeed is too great.
- While schools provide forums to discuss issues in the news, students would welcome more tolerance of contrary opinions, especially from faculty, to foster conversation rather than debate.
- Social media is a source of stress and pressure. Students would welcome more education on the permanence of social media (e.g., colleges, jobs).
- Although students see the benefit of school spirit at sports games, they wish that school invested as much money and attention in theater, music, and other non-athletic teams.
- Students recognize the difficulty of schools to regulate students with social media, yet they seek clear and transparent rules with consistent consequences.
- Schools need to continue discussions of diversity, in the broadest sense, and microaggressions.