

**Middle School Student Leader Breakfast
Tuesday, February 18, 2020
The Langley School**

SUMMARY

Introduction

On February 18th, thirty-eight seventh graders from nineteen Parents Council of Washington member schools gathered at The Langley School (“Langley”) to take part in the annual PCW Middle School Student Leader Breakfast. Nineteen 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 students and administrators separated into different rooms. 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. The students were asked to speak 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 – most
- Have siblings – most
- Play an instrument – 2/3
- Have good study habits – only a few
- Like math – 1/4
- Have a dog – most
- Have cliques at school – 3/4
- Had broken a bone – 1/4
- Take Spanish – almost 1/2
- Have too much homework most days – few
- Have seen bullying at school – 1/2
- Spend time on social media daily – most
- Feel safe at school – all
- Have seen people hurt by gossip – most
- Think most teachers treat students fairly – most
- Think cheating takes place at school – 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 five topics that would be discussed during the program, in a show-of-hands group vote. The following issues received votes for discussion:

- Cliques
- Popularity
- Relationships between students
- Boring classes
- How students treat serious issues – such as death, coronavirus
- Bullying – online and in-person
- Need for better recycling
- Politics – need for respectful discussions
- Poor time management
- Effect of social media on study habits and friendships
- Teacher biases, favoring students
- Students not respectful of others' property
- Gossip, rumors, boy-girl drama
- Bragging
- School schedules
- Need for more independence and trust at school

The topics that received the most votes were:

- Scheduling
- Time management
- Cliques / popularity / friend groups
- Social media
- Gossip / rumors / drama

Mary thanked the students for coming up with such a thoughtful, comprehensive list and assured them that ALL identified topics were important, even if not selected for group discussion. The students were then divided into three 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 three new groups to continue discussions.

Small Group Breakout Session Topic #1 – Time Management

- Many students have too much homework.
- Students would like the schools to teach them HOW to study.
- Students wish teachers would coordinate assignments, long-term projects and tests, so that all are not due at the same time.
- It is hard to know when to do schoolwork, how to prioritize, and how not to procrastinate.
- Students also need to learn when to stop studying – when enough is enough.
- Many teachers think their class is the most important.
- Teachers do not understand that students also have activities outside of school.

Strategies for addressing time management issues:

- Teachers should coordinate with each other, and spread out assignments and tests.
- Schools should do a better job balancing how much homework students have daily.
- There should be more study halls during the school day.
- Students should use planners, and be taught how to use them.
- Students appreciate study guides.

Small Group Breakout Session Topic #2 – Scheduling

- School starts very early.
- Transition times are difficult, and too short.
- Break times and lunch periods are short.
- Students need more time for physical activity during the school day.

Strategies for addressing scheduling issues:

- It would be helpful if school started later than 8:00 a.m.
- Having a homeroom period with time to organize and prepare is important.
- Daytime study halls allow students to stay on top of work and meet with teachers.
- Communication between students and teachers/administrators needs to increase.

Small Group Breakout Session Topic #3 – Cliques / Popularity / Friend Groups

- There is a difference between cliques and friend groups; friend groups might not always mingle, but they do not exclude.
- Popular groups definitely are recognizable.
- It is intimidating to try to break into a group.
- Some students feel boxed in and unable to be in more than one friend group.
- Lunchtime can be difficult, trying to decide where to sit.
- Students do want to spend time with friends who share interests; this does not mean the students are part of a clique.
- There is a difference between being left out (not intentional) and being excluded (intentional). Neither is good, but exclusion definitely is worse.
- These situations are exacerbated due to social media – e.g., seeing a group of people together when you were not invited.

Strategies for addressing cliques / popularity / friend groups:

- Assigned lunch seating, at least on occasion, helps students get to know each other.
- Lunchroom table set-up is extremely important! Round tables are more inclusive.
- Remember that friend groups often are welcoming.

Small Group Breakout Session Topic #4 – Social Media

- Things escalate very quickly on social media.
- People post too much about their personal lives and their feelings, and post things they would not say in person.
- It is difficult to figure out intent and tone on social media.
- Anonymous posting really just allows people to be mean.
- Pressure is caused by trying to present a certain image.

Strategies for addressing social media:

- Remember that many people will see what you post!
- Be careful what you post or send, even to people you trust. People often take screenshots of posts and messages, which then are shared.
- Facetime is better than sending “private” messages.
- Consider the source – social media often is a source of incorrect news. For example, news about the coronavirus on social media often is inaccurate.
- Students need to remember that no one is perfect, and that they do not need to present an image of perfection.
- Take breaks from social media!

Small Group Breakout Session Topic #5 – Gossip / Rumors / Drama

- People often gossip just because they are interested in what other people are doing.
- Gossip is hard to control because it spreads so fast.
- People like to hear gossip, to be “in the know.”
- Gossip increases the older you get – high school is worse than middle school.

Strategies for addressing gossip:

- Understand that the information probably is not accurate.
- If you want to know something, just ask the person involved.
- Remember that gossip goes away quickly.

After breakout groups, students went to sit with the other student from their school to discuss what they might be able to share and take back to their school. Mary wrapped up the program by thanking the students for taking time out of their day to participate in the program. Mary asked the students to share the information they learned from the program with their schools. The administrators returned to the room from their discussion and reconvened with their students, discussing how to bring back the information and lessons 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:”

- Gossip
- Cliques
- Improper scheduling/schedules – tests grouped together
- Depression/stress/anxiety
- Cheating
- Social media/online usage
- Time management
- Bullying
- Not enough study halls
- Too much homework
- Lack of sleep
- Freedom to talk about politics
- Death/suicide
- Diversity
- Inclusion/exclusion
- Relationships
- Vaping
- Racial jokes
- PE/sports
- Bragging
- Desiring more access to teachers