



Upper School Student Leader Breakfast Program Summary

February 4, 2020

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-eight PCW member schools participated, sending 54 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 40% of 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 three topics:

- 1. Time Management and Handling Stress*
- 2. Instances of Social Unrest and Events in the News*
- 3. Risk-Taking Behavior*

Two rounds of 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 voted 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 seven topics:

- *Social Media*
- *Schools Empowering and Supporting Student Well-Being and Mental Health*
- *The College Process*
- *Sports in Schools*

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

General Observations

Students were open and honest throughout the day, remaining respectful of fellow students' comments. Student leaders appreciated the non-judgmental environment and 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. Stress is a large part of students' lives, amplified by the added pressure of social media and the competitiveness of the college process.
2. Students would welcome more opportunities in school to discuss openly difficult issues, such as race, gender, sexual assault, and politics.
3. Students are engaging in risk-taking behavior; adults need to recognize this and provide resources to help students who struggle with drugs, alcohol, sexuality, or mental health.
4. Race and relationships, particularly consent, are tricky for students, with more education needed.

Managing Stress

Stress was a topic discussed explicitly in large group and that came out in small group discussions around social media, sports, and the college process. Students want more help from administrators and parents with managing time, balancing too many priorities, and recognizing and reducing stress. Social media takes precious time and adds social stress, but students need the information social media provides. Sports, both in terms of the time commitment and competitive nature at some schools, can add to student stress. However, the college process in the competitive, pressure-filled DMV area seems to be the greatest source of student stress, and the students would like more help from schools and parents. They recognize the stigma around mental health is lifting, but they want the schools to do more – be more proactive with students who show signs of mental health issues, reexamine the roles of counselors, create truly safe spaces, and help students to find ways to intervene when they recognize peers in trouble.

Small groups proactively brought up and discussed changing to block class schedules, limiting the amount of homework and number of tests in a day, and eliminating AP courses as possible ways to reduce stress and pressure.

Having Meaningful Discussions on Difficult Topics

In both large and small groups, students talked about wanting to learn how to have respectful, difficult conversations around topics such as race, gender/identity, sexual activity/consent, politics, and values. They seek unbiased forums without teacher or administrator personal opinions. There was discussion about the challenges in religious-affiliated schools with regard to addressing issues surrounding gender identity, sexuality, consent, and suicide given church teachings.

Risk-Taking Behaviors

Students are engaging in risk-taking behavior – alcohol, marijuana, vaping (some decrease due to media coverage), drugs, and sexual activity. Students do not think schools are dealing effectively with these behaviors. Schools are taking the “don’t do it” or “it’s illegal” approach instead of recognizing it is happening and providing students with information to help themselves and others in need. Students also perceive unfairness in enforcement. Students exchanged ideas from schools on programs that seem to be effective.

Race, Relationships, and Consent

Issues around diversity were discussed in the small groups. Students want to learn how to converse with others who are different. However, students of color are experiencing incidents of stereotypes, ignorance, and implicit bias. Minority students do not always know how to approach students and administrators about degrading behavior or questions. Students of color would like to see more students and faculty of color in their schools, but recognize the challenges.

Students identified the “hook up” culture as an issue that needs to be better addressed. It is magnified via social media as everyone knows everything by Monday morning, and popularity can be earned (or threatened) by hook ups. There is still a double standard for boys and girls, with the girls being called derogatory names, even by other girls. There should not be a double standard with boys and girls, even when alcohol is involved. Students discussed the need for many more conversations around consent and the nuances around it, e.g., legal and ethical consent and the role of consent in a longer-term relationship. Consent was also discussed in regard to the posting of pictures on social media – schools do not talk enough about how damaging the pictures may be.

Additional topics addressed:

- Schools often have inconsistent responses to speech and pictures in social media; they do not appreciate others posting things or sharing their information.
- Many students believe some sports, and some athletes, are given preferential treatment, even within single sex schools; students request more transparency on where support is going – sports, arts, other extracurriculars.
- Students would like more time to socialize outside of school but struggle to find the time given school, homework, practices, jobs, and other activities.