



Middle School Student Leader Breakfast

February 9, 2021
via Zoom

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted 18 seventh graders from PCW member schools to its annual Middle School Student Leader Breakfast on February 9, 2021. Due to ongoing pandemic considerations, the program was held via Zoom with one student representing each school. The group was balanced in terms of gender, included eleven students of color, and represented a variety of independent schools in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC, including co-ed and single sex, secular and religious, and large and small schools. Despite not being able to have the students meet in person, the program still delivered a unique forum allowing middle schoolers across the region to share ideas and discuss relevant issues. Thirteen school administrators met simultaneously in a separate Zoom meeting.

After a welcome from PCW board member and program co-chair Michelle Sullivan and a small group icebreaker activity, former PCW board member and program facilitator Mary Cohen introduced the program and solicited topics for discussion. Students brainstormed topics they wanted to discuss and voted on the top four to be addressed in the small groups (indicated by an asterix* below).

- Social Justice and Race*
- Challenges of Virtual and In-Person Learning*
- Social Media*
- Mental Health*
- Community Service
- Academic Honesty
- Sports/Extra Curriculars
- Respect and Empathy

Mary thanked all the students for coming up with such a thoughtful and comprehensive list and assured them that all identified topics were important, even if not selected for group discussion. The students then went into small groups to discuss their chosen topic. After a short break, the students were placed in different small groups for the next topic. Below are highlights from their discussions.

Small Group Breakout Session #1 – Social Justice and Race

Issues:

- Do not shy away from discussing racism. Instead, delve deeply into issues with time for dialogue.
- Discuss and understand the difference between being actively anti-racist (e.g., confronting incidents) and passively anti-racist (e.g., not making racist remarks).
- Understand how race and socioeconomic status at independent schools interrelate and impact the school environment.

Strategies to address social justice and race:

- o Form affinity groups that are inclusive, not delineated by race.
- o Engage in more dialogue around the subject in class.
- o Discuss the socioeconomic implications of being at an independent school.
- o Hire more teachers of color.

Small Group Breakout Session #2 – Challenges of Virtual and In-Person Learning

Issues:

- It can be difficult to get called on and interact when learning virtually (and others are in person). Teachers need to increase engagement with students learning virtually.
- Challenges exist with WIFI issues, crashing websites, and learning new systems.
- Students feel less connected due to the pandemic. Whether it is because they are new to the school, learning virtually, or learning in person in cohorts, each presents challenges.
- Students experience headaches from being online all day.

Strategies to address the challenges of virtual and in person learning issues:

- o Help students feel more connected, especially new students, by:
 - building in social time, even on Zoom;
 - assigning group projects; and
 - conducting whole-school meetings so students can see each other.
- o Ask students to be more patient with teachers and give feedback when teaching strategies are not working.
- o Make homework assignments clear to students who are not in person.
- o Share screens when projecting classwork.
- o Create downtime such as days off, lighter classes in the afternoon, and longer breaks.

Small Group Breakout Session #3 – Social Media

Issues:

- More prevalent use and reliance during the pandemic.
- Positives: fun (games) and social interaction with others with similar interests.

- Negatives: privacy concerns, personal information “out there,” and body positivity (unrealistic, idealized images being shared).
- Media focuses on social media negatives for teens.

Strategies to address social media issues:

- Teach the risks of social media and how to be mindful of postings, e.g., personal information, privacy, and permanence.
- When emotional, walk away and take time to think clearly before responding.
- Reach out to companies to request more privacy features (full privacy setting should be an option on all platforms).
- Reach out to news outlets with positive teen stories about social media usage.

Small Group Breakout Session #4 – Mental Health (primarily pandemic-related)

Issues:

- Too much homework and classwork is assigned.
- The schedule affords too little time to take breaks.
- Days lack physical activity, sports, and extracurriculars.
- Students must recognize the importance of maintaining privacy of friends’ mental health challenges.
- There is a relationship between social media and mental health.
 - Feelings of loneliness posted online.
 - Exposure to dangerous content.
 - Reliance on social media for validation.
 - Fake news and misinformation easily shared.
- Students experience difficulty when changing between in-person and virtual learning.

Strategies to address mental health issues:

- Do not trust everything you see on social media as many things are stretching the truth or completely untrue.
- Have shorter classes, longer and more frequent breaks to refresh, less homework (or provide time in class to do it).
- Practice meditation.
- Get outside and maintain health through exercise.
- Increase the prominence and availability of guidance counselors.

After the small groups reported their highlights in the large group, Mary wrapped up the program by thanking students for taking the time out of their day to participate in the program and asked them to share the information they learned with their schools.