



Upper School Student Leader Breakfast

February 2, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its annual Upper School Student Leader Breakfast on February 2, 2021, via Zoom due to ongoing pandemic considerations. Despite not being able to have the students meet in person, the program still delivered a unique forum allowing student leaders across the region to share ideas, discuss relevant issues, and take new information and insight back to their school communities.

Twenty-two PCW member schools participated, sending 41 junior and senior student leaders representing a variety of independent Upper Schools in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC, including co-ed and single sex, boarding and day, secular and religious, and large and small schools. Participants were 61% female, 39% male, and 44% students of color. PCW reminded students that the dialogue would be summarized in an anonymous format and forwarded to upper school administrators prior to the annual spring meeting of PCW member school Deans of Students, scheduled for March 9, 2021.

Former PCW board member Mary Cohen moderated the large group discussion, focusing on two topics to get the conversation started:

1. *Time Management and Handling Stress*
2. *Events in the News*

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 six 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 ten topics. The two topics dominating conversation were Student Well-Being and Mental Health and Diversity, indicated with asterisks * below:

- *Student Well-Being and Mental Health**
- *Diversity**
- *Risk-Taking Behavior*
- *College Process*
- *Honesty, Academic Integrity, and Cheating*
- *Social Media*
- *Schools' Authority Over Student Behavior*
- *Gender Identity*
- *Romantic Relationships and Consent*
- *Building Community*

General Observations

This past year posed myriad challenges for students, families, and schools. As a result of the pandemic, the USSLB became a virtual program in 2021 but the outcome remained the same – a great opportunity for a wonderful group of motivated and impressive student leaders from area schools to come together to discuss, reflect, and share ideas and insights.

Themes seemed very pronounced this year and focused predominantly on three main topics: stress, mental health and well-being, and diversity. Several other topics were addressed as well, but the aforementioned three dominated conversation throughout.

The following themes emerged throughout the program:

1. While stress seems to play an oversized role in the lives of independent high school students in the region, the level of stress is noticeably heightened this year due to COVID-19 with implications for students, families, schools, and everyday living.
2. Student well-being and mental health are the most prominent issues facing students at this time and are much more evident, salient, and striking than in previous years. Dedicated time to and prioritization of mental health and well-being is critical, as is providing opportunities for students to engage, learn, practice, and reflect on needed skills and strategies, while forming trusted relationships with peers/adults.
3. Schools appear to be much more proactive in allowing students to engage in discussion and advocacy around current issues of interest and concern (e.g., diversity), yet students desire more school-created content and integrated forms of education and conversation around issues such as diversity, equity, and inclusion.
4. Many topics from past student leader breakfasts received scant attention this year due to an animated focus on the three issues above as well as selected others. Topics barely addressed and therefore not summarized in this report include social media, bullying, sports, and school authority over student behavior. Some of these topics are briefly addressed in the companion detailed document.

Time Management and Handling Stress

Conversation revolved heavily around the stressors forced upon students by the pandemic (e.g., the pandemic itself, greater academic pressure, few extracurriculars, little to look forward to, loneliness and isolation, etc.). Stress seems to be a much more prominent issue this year with 89% of students saying the pandemic has added to their stress level. This conversation also addressed stress and its connection to mental health and how students would like more emphasis on mental health and wellness (*see below*).

One recurring theme is how difficult it is for students to use one particular space for most every aspect of life – for example, their bedroom constituting their school space, fun space, sleeping place, etc. Another theme was Zoom fatigue and having to listen to and watch the same screen all day long. However, students acknowledge and are grateful for school efforts to assist students by experimenting with schedules (e.g., asynchronous days, stress-free afternoons, extra time to take a walk, etc.) and trying to be creative.

Events in the News

In this eventful past year, 100% of students agree that schools provide students with opportunity to organize and discuss current issues and events (note: in the past, this percentage has been a high of about 50%). And, even though 72% agree that the school provides a forum/s for discussion (again, much higher than prior years), students are

adamant that they want more community-wide focus on conversations, issues, and events. Student-led initiatives are the norm and students enjoy the freedom to have them; however, they want more commitment and initiative from administrators and prefer mandatory rather than opt-in programs. Students appreciate what their schools are doing to acknowledge and address issues and to provide opportunities to learn and advocate.

Student Well-Being and Mental Health*

This topic, as well as diversity, seems of utmost importance to students, who feel increased isolation during the pandemic. Students continually stress the need for more health and wellness support from schools, and most students acknowledge being sad, depressed, stressed, and/or anxious. The bottom line is that students need schools to prioritize mental health and well-being by helping the students help themselves and each other, and providing professional assistance as needed.

Even though students do not seek out counselors, they want to engage in conversation with trusted individuals and form personal connections so they can discuss daily life, mental health challenges, and other stressors without stigma attached to the outreach. They want conversations to be commonplace rather than “problematic,” and in unbiased and non-judgmental forums. Student-led conversations are most appealing, as students do not want teachers having the burden or ability to dominate or drive conversations and content.

Diversity*

Diversity is at the forefront of most students’ minds. Progress is being made but more is necessary: students are more educated on our combined history; feel empowered and safe to discuss issues and act upon them; desire more diversity in staff and faculty at their respective institutions; want school administration to be more involved in ensuring DEI issues are intertwined throughout the curriculum and school day instead of in opt-in forums only; are vocal about not using diversity as a marketing scheme; and have an interest in more diverse communities not for superficial reasons, but because it is the necessary and right thing to do.

Risk-Taking Behavior

Students do not feel much peer pressure to drink alcohol (although a majority of them appear to do it) and seem to think drugs are less of an issue. Hardcore drug use and other risky behaviors do not come across as prevalent. Students comment on some parents being lenient and allowing drinking parties in their homes for their kids and classmates.

College Process

The college process adds a lot of stress and competition to student lives, especially during the pandemic. Students have several suggestions for decreasing levels of stress: students like the idea of keeping the college search process private, hope counselors can be more proactive and share necessary pertinent information, and school administrators should foster a culture of collaboration rather than competition.

Honesty, Academic Integrity, and Cheating

Cheating appears to be more rampant due to the pandemic, with cheating being “easier” from home. This creates an even more stressful situation as does “don’t be a snitch” culture.

*Topics dominating student discussion.