



Middle School Student Leader Breakfast
February 28, 2023

Event Overview

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) held its annual Middle School Student Leader Breakfast (MSSLB) on February 28, 2023, at The Langley School. Forty-four seventh grade students participated, representing 22 schools. Nine schools were from Maryland, 6 from the District of Columbia, and 6 from Virginia. Schools included 14 secular institutions and 8 schools with a religious affiliation. Three were single-sex schools and 19 were co-educational.

The program provides a unique forum for area student leaders to meet, discuss issues that they and their peers are dealing with, and brainstorm strategies for addressing those issues. Students were informed that their discussions would be summarized in an anonymous manner and shared with Middle School administrators. In lively small group sessions, students discussed the four topics listed below.

Students were thoughtful and respectful in their discussion of issues. The most frequent comment we received in student evaluations of the event was how much the participants enjoyed meeting students from other schools around the DMV. The students enjoyed comparing experiences and being able to share views in an open forum, free of judgment.

Stress

Middle School students perceived many causes of stress, including from social pressures, but most of the small group discussions focused on stress related to academic performance. Students stress about grades, but stress and anxiety can undermine performance on tests. Time management contributes to stress as well, particularly finding time to complete homework after participating in extracurricular activities. Students stated that even missing school due to illness can be stressful because it can be hard to catch up on missed work. Students identified steps they could take individually to manage stress, such as meditating and exercising, as well as effective steps some of their schools have taken like offering study halls and designated time to meet with teachers, limiting the number of tests that can be taken on the same day, and allowing for some self-paced work.

Expectations of parents, teachers, and peers

Students agreed that of the three groups, parents maintain the highest expectations for students – for grades, sports, and how students present themselves. Some students said that when schools offer awards (e.g., quarterly honor roll recognition), their objective shifts from learning to earning the award to please their parents. At some schools, students believe teachers judge them based on their grades rather than on who they are as individuals and wished there was more opportunity to engage with teachers so that this wouldn't be the case. Many students stated that their peers expect them to like/dislike the same things they like/dislike. Many students also said that it's easy to compare themselves to peers because they are constantly with them. However, some also said that they do not like to compare grades with their friends because it can make school feel too competitive. Students tried to identify specific strategies for managing the expectations of each group – parents, teachers, and peers. While they offered several ideas to engage parents and teachers, they offered fewer ideas on how to address peers.

Rumors and gossip

Many students said that rumors and gossip are problems at their schools that can be difficult to ignore. Rumors can be about students' grades, friend groups, and dating. Rumors spread quickly through social media. Recognizing that rumors and gossip can be hurtful, students identified steps they could take and offered suggestions for their schools. For example, students recognized that they should not contribute to gossip. Rather, they should stand up for students when something is untrue or hurtful. Students said that some schools have advisory time that can provide an opportunity to make a trusted teacher aware of what is being said. Suggestions for schools included asking students to take a pledge to treat everyone respectfully and encouraging students to give each other the benefit of the doubt.

Social Media Use

Students concluded that social media offers more drawbacks than benefits. In fact, they demonstrated a strong awareness of its many downsides from contributing to an increase in anxiety and negative self-esteem to its facilitation of bullying and fueling of rumors. Yet, when polled by the moderator during the final large group discussion, every student participating in the MSSLB said that they had used social media within the last 24 hours. Students identified steps they could take to reduce their own social media use by, e.g., leaving their phones at home, as well as how parents and schools can help. For example, schools could challenge students to take a social media break or offer scenario-based discussions to help students understand the potential unintended consequences of social media posts.