Upper School Student Leader Breakfast
Program Summary
February 15, 2023

EVENT OVERVIEW

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its annual Upper School Student Leader Breakfast at Georgetown Preparatory school in Rockville, MD. This program provides a unique forum for high school 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-one PCW member schools participated, sending 41 junior and senior students. These leaders represented 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. PCW reminded students that the dialogue would be summarized in an 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 student-led small group discussions followed the large group discussion, with students randomly assigned to one of three groups for each breakout. For the first session, the students voted to prioritize the first three 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 six topics:

- *Power of schools to regulate student speech*
- *Students' well-being and mental health*
- *The college process*
- *School community*
- *Romantic relationships*
- *Artificial intelligence and its impact on schools*

General Observations
Students were mature, candid, thoughtful, and genuine in their exploration of issues of concern while remaining respectful of fellow students. Uniformly, they valued the program for its environment of open and honest discourse, particularly appreciating the opportunity to discover similarities and differences amongst schools and to interact with peers from other schools. They actively exchanged contact information at the end of the program.

The following themes emerged throughout the program:

1. Although schools are providing opportunities to discuss social issues and events in the news, students do not find them effective and do not feel like they are being heard, especially minority students.
2. Despite the plethora of issues, especially in the news, students came back time and time again to racial issues. Students of color feel underrepresented in schools and wish for an environment for honest discussion rather than debate.
3. While schools provide mental health resources and programs, students do not find them meaningful and struggle with how to help themselves and/or their peers.
4. Stress, overscheduling, and work overload continue to be problems, especially around expectations in the college process.

TOPICS DISCUSSED

Addressing important student issues
Most students have opportunities to discuss social issues and current events in school and feel empowered to share opinions about those issues. However, schools can do a better job recognizing what is important to their students and truly engaging in these discussions. Some of the assemblies and forums feel performative and can desensitize students to the importance of these issues. Students would like the freedom to act (walk-outs, moments of silence, marches) in response to events in the news. Students offered suggestions for school administrators.

Racial divides
Students of color are underrepresented and feel that their perspectives are not being heard. Students crave a school environment where students can honestly discuss these topics, and white students want guidance on how to have this dialogue without causing offense. However, schools need to consistently address hateful behavior and hurtful comments that are made under the guise of diversity of thought.

Support for mental health
Schools provide resources for students around mental health. However, students are still struggling with how to find help for themselves or their friends. Counselors do not seem to be the "trusted adult" that students need in difficult times as students believe that coming to counselors may result in negative consequences with the school or with their parents. Students would like the opportunity to delve into deeper mental health issues such as the strong link between self-esteem and grades.

Stress, overload, and the college process
Stress continues to be a part of high school. Students are over scheduled and overworked. Schools are addressing this issue in many ways, which students appreciate. However, the pressure to have the best college application is rampant. The college process is very

competitive, and students feel pressure from the school, their parents, their peers, and themselves. This pressure compounds their activity/work overload and stresses their mental health.

Risk-taking behavior

Drugs (mainly marijuana), and vaping (e-cigarettes) are prevalent amongst high-schoolers, both in and outside of school. Vaping occurs in school bathrooms. All schools have programs about alcohol, drug use, and consent. Students recommend starting these programs earlier, as early as 7th grade as drinking and smoking (marijuana or vaping) are starting in middle school. Students recognize that schools can only do so much and that the real influencers are parents and peers. Many noted that alcohol is readily available. When a student or a friend is in trouble with drugs or alcohol, students are not getting the help they need, even if the substance abuse is tied to mental health, because of perceived negative consequences. Students also identify taking photos and videos without permission as a big problem. Students hesitate to use school resources for fear of negatively impacting their college process.

Additional topics addressed:
- Artificial intelligence programs (e.g., Chat GPT) that will write assignments are increasing in sophistication and availability. Schools will need increasingly to address AI in terms of assignments and honor codes/boards.
- School communities are divided in many ways, and students would like opportunities to strengthen the school community as well as interact with other schools.