



Middle School Student Leader Breakfast  
April 30, 2024

*Event Overview*

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) held its annual Middle School Student Leader Breakfast (MSSLB) on April 30, 2024, at The Langley School. Forty seventh grade students participated, representing 20 schools. Eight schools were from Maryland, five from the District of Columbia, and seven from Virginia. Schools included 14 secular institutions and eight schools with a religious affiliation. Four were single-sex schools and 16 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.

**Feeling Pressure from Parents and Peers to Succeed in School**

Middle school students discussed feeling pressure from parents and peers related to academic performance. Students stated that they do not like sharing test results with friends because doing so can lead to competition or, if they perform poorly, embarrassment. Students also noted that even when parents say that they care more about the level of effort put into an assignment than the resulting grade, parents will often assume that their student did not put in enough effort if the grade was not what they expected. Students suggested that it would be helpful if schools returned graded work electronically at the end of the day so that students can deal with the grade privately and not in front of their peers. They also proposed that schools include an effort grade to help parents understand their student's level of effort.

### **Finding Balance between School and Outside Activities**

Students primarily discussed finding balance between school and outside (travel) sports. In middle school, some students travel over an hour or more for practices multiple times each week and may not get home until very late. As a result, student athletes often eat and do homework in the car, which they recognized as less than ideal. However, in discussing strategies to find balance, none of the students suggested cutting back on outside sports. Rather, they discussed talking to school coaches about missing practices to complete schoolwork and asking teachers to post homework assignments at the start of the week to provide additional time to complete the work.

### **Exclusion of People in Friend Groups in Real Life and on Social Media.**

Students noted that, often, independent schools have smaller-sized grades, so if a student is excluded from one group, everyone knows about it and it is harder to join another. A smaller grade also can make it harder for a student to escape an old image or reinvent themselves as they grow and mature. Students agreed that social media has made cliques worse and made being left out more obvious, as students can see photos posted online of events from which they've been excluded. Students discussed the importance of joining a school sports team, activity, or club to meet more and different people. Students also recognized that school counselors can be a helpful resource for students, but noted that schools should let students select their advisors so that they can choose someone to whom they feel comfortable opening up. When asked by the moderator, about 80% of the MSSLB participants said that there is an adult at their school to whom they could turn for help.

### **Racist, Sexist, or Otherwise Inappropriate Comments as Jokes**

Students noted that some of their peers say inappropriate comments and then say, "just kidding," but don't understand why other students would feel hurt or upset by their comments since they're "only jokes" intended to be funny. Participants suggested that students may hear such comments online and then think it's ok to bring them into school. Participants also noted that some students seem to think it's ok to make jokes about the groups to which they belong. Students recognized that everybody makes mistakes, but that it is important to apologize and make it right. Students also discussed how it can be hard to speak up in the moment to confront a group or even a friend, and brainstormed potential mitigating strategies. For example, students proposed finding another friend to join them in holding a discussion with the student(s) making the comments to explain why such comments are hurtful. Some students also shared that their schools have forms that can be filled out anonymously to report incidents.