



**Upper School Student Leader Breakfast  
Program Summary  
February 6, 2024**

**EVENT OVERVIEW**

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its annual Upper School Student Leader Breakfast at The Potomac School in McLean, VA. 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-four PCW member schools participated, sending 45 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 meeting of PCW member school Deans of Students.

***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 the various schools and types of schools represented (single sex vs. coed, all girls vs. all boys, religious vs. secular). They enjoyed connecting with their peers from other schools and expressed a desire to do so more often.

A former PCW Board member moderated the **large group discussion**, focusing on the following four topics.

1. ***Time management and handling stress:*** Overscheduling and stress continue to be major issues for students who hear “balance” from their schools, but feel the weight of expectations to “do everything”. Few get enough sleep; nearly all worry that they will fall behind if they miss a single day of school. That being said, the majority of student conversation on this topic focused on the positive scheduling changes and academic policies their schools have implemented in recent years to alleviate some of their stress.

2. **Risk-taking behavior:** Students generally perceive schools' education programs about risk-taking behaviors to be ineffective. They desire more consistent education that is relatable and interactive, with opportunities for follow-up discussions in small groups. They believe schools should spend more time addressing the root causes of risky behavior, such as stress. And finally, they want schools to acknowledge the reality that students ARE going to participate in some risk-taking behavior and provide practical information about how they can keep themselves and their friends safe.
3. **Instances of social unrest and events in the news:** Students have numerous opportunities to process/discuss current events at their schools and appreciate learning about credible vs. unreliable sources. Affinity groups, in-class discussions, and student-led dialogue were highlighted as particularly valuable to students. Some students do worry about voicing unpopular opinions on campus and other students note that it can be parents who create barriers to open conversation.
4. **Honesty, academic integrity, cheating:** AI dominated this conversation. Many students believe that cheating is an issue at their school and nearly all have witnessed someone cheating on academics, often with AI. While some schools have institution-wide AI guidelines, other schools leave AI rules up to individual teachers, who allow or restrict AI in different ways. A number of teachers are experimenting with positive ways to use AI in the classroom, while other teachers are deliberately changing assignments and grading processes to combat AI use.

**Two student-led small group discussions** followed the large group, with students randomly assigned to one of three groups for each breakout. For the first session, students voted to prioritize the first three topics listed below (as shown with \*). 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 eight topics:

1. **Social media\*:** While students enjoy the benefits of social media, such as staying connected with people and as a source of humor and entertainment, they are keenly aware of its dangers, including its addictive nature, the permanence of posts, and the way it causes time drain and emotional drain for its users. More and more schools seem to have phone policies for students during the day, making phones unavailable during class or even during free periods/transition time. Schools are also incorporating lessons on social media by having students regularly monitor their screen time and/or googling themselves to understand their digital footprint.
2. **The college process\*:** While a few students describe the college process at their schools as low key, most students said their processes are competitive, tense, secretive, and sometimes isolating. Those students lament the way the process inevitably invites comparisons between students and agree that it is a major source of stress. A focus of the discussion was when conversations with a college counselor should start, with some students in favor of the current timeline to keep stress at bay longer, and others wishing they knew more as freshman so they could make changes before it was "too late".
3. **Students' well-being and mental health\*:** Students discussed how the stigma around mental health is decreasing and conversations on the topic are becoming

more common. They noted a variety of actions/policies their schools have implemented in support of wellness (e.g., peer counseling, no late penalties for work, mental health days) and consistently called out how opportunities to “have fun!” and “just be a kid” can help reduce pressure. They also noted actions/policies that hurt student mental health, including stringent late-to-class policies, out of touch counselors, and teachers who give unrealistic amounts of work. Some students did note how challenging it is to support mental health within school cultures that are competitive, fast-paced, demanding, and unbalanced.

4. ***Building community:*** Students appreciate the focus on community-building post-covid. They spoke positively and fondly about a wide variety of school traditions that bring fun into their days and relieve stress. They particularly like when faculty participate in these initiatives. There was also strong agreement that overnight retreats are one of the most effective ways to create strong bonds among classmates. Many of these students talked about how they were able to connect deeply with students they didn’t know well beforehand and said they wished the retreat happened earlier in high school, or more often.
5. ***Gender and sexuality issues:*** Issues faced by LGBTQ+ students vary widely depending on the school, with some students reporting widespread acceptance, thriving affinity groups, a culture of respect and supportive allies and other students reporting discomfort with LGBTQ+ students and issues within their school communities. At some schools, bro culture and inappropriate jokes can make life difficult for gay students.
6. ***Stereotyping/pressure to conform:*** Student comments suggest that stereotyping is more of an issue than conformity. Students with uniforms or coat/tie requirements spoke very positively about their experiences – citing fewer decisions, no brand competition, and a more professional look. Peer pressure was not reported to be a huge issue. However, students did note several common social challenges, including difficulties breaking or switching social groups, being pigeon-holed based on notions of a student from lower or middle school, and sorting based on socioeconomic bracket. Student experiences with mean boy or mean girl culture were mixed.
7. ***Romantic relationships:*** The consensus is that hookup culture is prevalent and that a double standard still exists for girls who hook up compared to boys who do the same. Some students at all-boys schools wish they had more opportunities for healthy platonic relationships with the opposite gender.
8. ***Diversity and inclusion:*** Schools have done a lot of work in this area. However, racist behavior is sometimes ignored and sadly, the 5% who can be hateful can ruin it for the 95% who are inclusive and accepting. Students of color are still sometimes asked to represent an entire group and their feelings, which is frustrating, and faculty and student bodies are still not as diverse as they could be. Affinity groups are essential in this space and students suggested new opportunities to bring these groups together across divisions within a school or even across other independent schools. Students also love cultural fairs where they and their families can share their heritage and food traditions.