



Middle School Student Leader Breakfast April 9, 2025 at The Langley School

Event Overview

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) held its annual Middle School Student Leader Breakfast (MSSLB) on April 9, 2025, at The Langley School in McLean, Virginia. Fifty 7th grade students participated, representing 25 schools: 6 schools from the District of Columbia, 10 schools from Maryland, and 9 from Virginia. Of these schools, 3 were single-sex and 22 were co-educational. There were 18 secular institutions and 7 with a religious affiliation.

The program provides a unique forum for student leaders to meet, discuss issues that they and their peers are facing, and brainstorm strategies for addressing those issues with the guidance of a moderator. Students were informed that their discussions would be summarized and shared with school administrators, while remaining completely anonymous. Several PCW Board members were on hand to take notes without attribution to participating students or schools. Students generated a list of potential topics and then voted on four to consider in depth.

Students were very respectful and considerate in their conversations. Their evaluations highlighted how much they enjoyed meeting students from other schools around the DMV, sharing their thoughts and perspectives with each other, comparing experiences in a judgment-free forum, and feeling valued for their contributions. In both small and large group sessions, students discussed the following four topics summarized below.

Social Media's Negative Impact on Students' Lives

Student discussions about social media fell into three main categories: its impact on their academic performance, its social/emotional impact, and how all-consuming and addictive it can be. Students highlighted how distracted they are by social media during school hours, as well as how much time they spend on platforms such as TikTok, or discussing what is posted there, instead of studying, sleeping, and paying attention in class. They noted how social media can cause feelings of anger, sadness and depression by making students aware of social gatherings from which they are excluded, promoting unrealistic expectations and pressures to look or act a certain way, and publicly sharing embarrassing photos, sensitive messages, or inappropriate comments. Those who do not have "apps" like TikTok feel left out and have a harder time making friends; those who do spend too much time trying to keep up with new terms and trends. Students suggested that schools could provide more guidance on social media's risks and impacts through stronger digital citizenship classes, implement and more consistently apply rules limiting social media and devices at school, and encourage more "real life" social

interactions such as phone-free “bonding trips” to help students build trust and healthy relationships with each other.

Collective Discipline - Consequences for All based on the Actions of a Few

Students uniformly agreed that too many teachers and administrators hold an entire class or group accountable for bad behavior by one or two students, and that this is especially unfair as teachers usually know who is directly responsible. Students noted that collective discipline is particularly unjust when consequences are harsh, such as limiting bathroom access for all or taking points off everyone’s test score. They also discussed how and why collective discipline can be counterproductive, including by further encouraging students who are seeking attention to act up and by demoralizing well-behaving students who follow the rules. Students recognized the importance of choosing commensurate consequences, but agreed that, in general, more severe consequences are needed to be effective at deterring offenders. They suggested that if a collective learning experience is warranted, a grade-wide assembly or class meeting on a particular issue is a better and more appropriate option.

School-Related Stress and Anxiety

Students discussed the ways in which school-related stress and anxiety impact both their academic performance and their mental, emotional and physical health. They identified several contributing factors, including: competitive school environments, high parental expectations and pressure regarding grades, a “perfectionist mentality” among students, heavy homework loads and too many assessments, teachers rushing through the curriculum and being less responsive to students seeking help and individual feedback, and the difficulty of managing extracurriculars on top of a heavy academic load. Students noted the importance of having a school counselor for support, but many also said they do not use this resource because they do not know the counselor well or worry they will share confidences with parents or teachers. Students discussed additional strategies schools could implement to reduce student stress and anxiety, such as providing students with strategies for managing parental expectations and building designated study halls into the school day so students can meet with teachers or catch up on work. Students also suggested that teachers could be more responsive to student requests for help and feedback, coordinate with colleagues to make sure there are not too many assessments in one day, and provide more instruction on effective study skills and tips for time and stress management.

Racism and Inappropriate Comments and Slurs

Student discussions centered on concerns about the use of racial slurs and other inappropriate comments relating to slavery (such as, “I’m going to crack the whip”) that are then passed off as “jokes.” Some students pressure or “permit” others to use the “N-word” by giving them “the pass” to say it, or get around restrictions by saying it in a foreign language. Many students feel that teachers do not take these incidents seriously enough and stricter consequences for offending students are needed. Microaggressions and cultural appropriation are also problems at school, and students believe that more education needs to be provided so the difference between being curious and being insensitive is clear. Several students commented that their

schools are not very diverse and that having more diverse student and faculty populations would help. The majority of students believe that the “N-word” should never be allowed to be used in school, even by black students, because then its use is normalized.