



**MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT LEADERS BREAKFAST  
PROGRAM SUMMARY**  
April 21, 2026

**EVENT OVERVIEW**

---

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its Middle School Student Leader Breakfast on April 21, 2026, at The Langley School in McLean, Virginia. This program provides a unique forum for middle school student leaders from across the greater Washington, D.C. region to discuss the issues they find most pressing in their day-to-day school experience, connect with peers from other independent schools, and surface ideas that can be carried back to their own communities.

PCW member schools were invited to send 7th grade student leaders. Twenty-nine schools sent 58 students representing co-ed and single-sex; secular and religious; and large and small schools across Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. Students were reminded that all discussion would be summarized in an anonymous format and shared with school administrators to inform ongoing efforts to support student well-being, equity, and engagement. The conversation was candid, thoughtful, and entirely student-driven throughout.

**STUDENT-IDENTIFIED DISCUSSION TOPICS**

---

A former PCW Board member moderated the large group discussion with the full group of student leaders. At the outset of the program, students collectively identified the topics they most wanted to discuss. The breadth of their input reflects the complexity of the middle school experience and the maturity with which these young leaders approach the challenges in their schools. The eight major topic areas they surfaced were:

- Student Well-Being & Safety
- Technology & Digital Life
- Academics & School Structure
- Athletics & Extracurricular Balance
- Diversity, Equity & Inclusion
- School Culture & Discipline
- Student Voice & Leadership
- Student Experience (Daily Life)

Within Student Well-Being & Safety alone, students raised seven distinct subtopics from mental health and suicide awareness to gun violence, sexual assault education, and the use of slurs and harmful language. This depth of concern signals that well-being is not a single issue but a constellation of interconnected pressures that students navigate daily.

## BREAKOUT SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

Students participated in small-group discussions focused on four of the most prioritized topics. Each group was student-led, with adult facilitators present only to take notes. The following summaries capture the key challenges students named and the strategies they proposed.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Mental Health &amp; Suicide Awareness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student-to-counselor ratio feels too low; limited access during the school day</li> <li>• Students fear confidentiality will be broken, reducing willingness to seek help</li> <li>• Mental health is often joked about or normalized, masking real distress</li> <li>• Social media significantly amplifies anxiety about appearance and peer comparison</li> <li>• Boys’ mental health struggles go largely unacknowledged; society expects them to suppress emotions</li> <li>• Students want anonymous ways to report concerns about themselves or peers</li> </ul> | <p><b>Balancing School &amp; Sports / Time Management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students regularly arrive home as late as 8 PM, leaving little time for homework</li> <li>• Average sleep is 5 to 8 hours which is well below recommendations for adolescents</li> <li>• Weekend tournaments and travel sports push homework to late Sunday nights</li> <li>• Study hall periods exist but are often disruptive or insufficient</li> <li>• Students feel caught between coaches’, teachers’, and families’ competing expectations</li> <li>• Several students admitted: “How do I balance school and sports? I don’t.”</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Slurs, Racism &amp; Sexism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slurs are most used when adults are not present, making intervention difficult</li> <li>• Some teachers are unfamiliar with current slang or the impact of evolving language</li> <li>• Harmful language is sometimes used casually within friend groups, normalizing it over time</li> <li>• Students lack peer intervention skills and safe language for bystander moments</li> <li>• Repeated exposure leads to desensitization, reducing students’ sense of safety</li> </ul>  | <p><b>Perceived Favoritism by Teachers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students feel new students and high-profile athletes receive disproportionate attention</li> <li>• Some students are unfairly judged based on a sibling’s prior reputation at the school</li> <li>• Grading in subjective areas (e.g., art) feels inconsistent or effort is not recognized</li> <li>• Unconscious bias may drive favoritism that teachers themselves do not notice</li> <li>• Students want to be seen as individuals and not defined by their family or social status</li> </ul>  |

## WHAT STUDENTS ARE ASKING FOR

---

Across all four breakout discussions, students did not simply raise problems, but they came with concrete ideas for improvements. Their suggestions fell into several clear themes:

### Access & Flexibility

- Build dedicated, protected time into the school day for counselor access
- Offer anonymous digital check-in tools or “concern boxes” so students can seek help without fear of social exposure
- Provide extended deadlines and makeup work plans for student-athletes managing travel schedules
- Limit the number of tests administered on any single day

### Communication & Trust

- Clearly communicate counselor confidentiality policies so students understand what will and will not be shared
- Create informal opportunities for students to get to know school counselors outside of crisis moments
- Improve teacher–athlete communication around schedules, workload, and expectations
- Consider younger or peer-adjacent counselors who can relate to current student experiences, including social media

### Education & Awareness

- Move beyond one-time assemblies to ongoing, practical mental health programming
- Provide structured education on the history, meaning, and impact of slurs and harmful language
- Equip students with tools for safe bystander intervention when they hear harmful language
- Train teachers with consistent, up-to-date guidance for responding to language incidents

### Equity & Consistency

- Publish and apply transparent rubrics so that grading feels fair and effort is recognized
- Encourage teachers to reflect on unconscious bias and treat each student independently of siblings or perceived social status
- Assign longer projects at the start of the week to give students control over their own scheduling

## EVENT CONCLUSION

---

As with similar PCW programs, the Middle School Student Leader Breakfast demonstrated that students at this age are not only aware of the pressures around them, but they are thoughtful, articulate, and eager to be part of the solution. From the importance of counselor relationships to the logistical challenge of juggling sports and academics, these students described their world with honesty and nuance.

Several consistent themes emerged across all discussions: the desire to be trusted, the need for more flexible systems that recognize the whole student, and a genuine wish to feel seen as individuals rather than defined by their performance, reputation, or social group. Schools that create structured space for student voice and act visibly on what they hear will likely see meaningful dividends in student engagement, well-being, and community trust.

PCW thanks all participating schools and the student leaders who brought their candor and energy to this conversation. These takeaways will be shared with school administrators as part of PCW's ongoing commitment to supporting independent school communities across the Washington region.

# MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT LEADER BREAKFAST

## KEY STUDENT INSIGHTS

### TOP STUDENT CONCERNS



#### WELL-BEING & MENTAL HEALTH

- Limited counselor access
- Concerns about confidentiality
- Social media-driven stress and anxiety



#### ACADEMIC & ATHLETIC PRESSURES

- Difficulty balancing school and sports
- Lack of sleep and downtime
- Competing expectations from adults



#### SCHOOL CULTURE & BELONGING

- Slurs, racism, and sexism remain concerns
- Harmful language often goes unchecked
- Students want safer, more inclusive environments



#### FAIRNESS & STUDENT VOICE

- Perceived favoritism and bias
- Desire to be treated as individuals
- Need for greater trust and student input

### WHAT STUDENTS RECOMMEND



#### ACCESS & SUPPORT

- More counselor availability
- Anonymous reporting and check-in tools
- Flexibility for student-athletes



#### COMMUNICATION & TRUST

- Clear confidentiality expectations
- Stronger student-adult relationships
- Better coordination among teachers, coaches, and families



#### EDUCATION & AWARENESS

- Ongoing mental health education
- Practical guidance on harmful language
- Bystander intervention training



#### EQUITY & CONSISTENCY

- Transparent grading practices
- Recognition of individual effort
- Reduced bias and more consistent expectations



#### THE BOTTOM LINE

Students want schools that are flexible, fair, supportive, and responsive to **student voice**.

