

Parents Council

OF WASHINGTON

CONNECTING SCHOOLS • SHARING IDEAS • ENGAGING PARENTS

UPPERS SCHOOL STUDENT LEADERS BREAKFAST PROGRAM SUMMARY

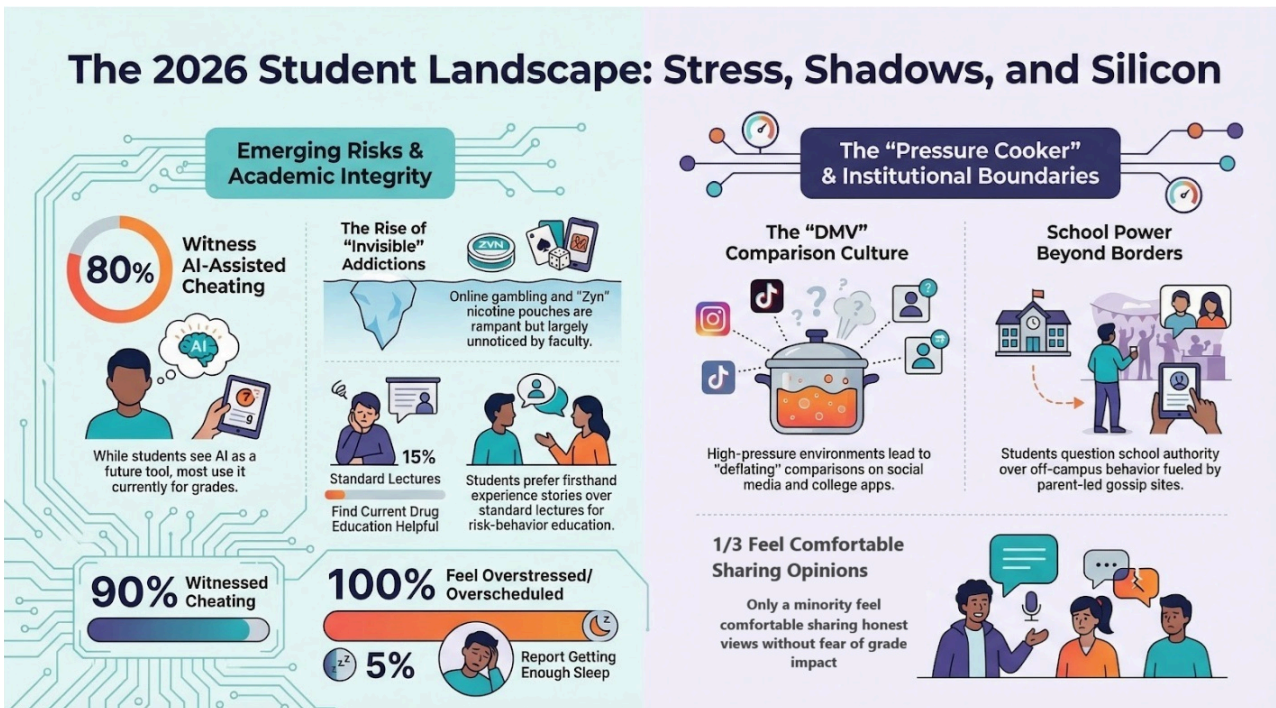
February 19, 2026

EVENT OVERVIEW

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its annual Upper School Student Leader Breakfast at The Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda, Maryland. 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-five PCW member schools registered to send 50 students who were mostly juniors and seniors. These student 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.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS VIA AN INFOGRAPHIC



LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

A former PCW Board member moderated the **large group discussion** with the full group of student leaders, focusing on the following four topics:

- 1. Time Management and Handling Stress.** Students report feeling completely overscheduled and entirely overstressed, with many noting a severe lack of sleep and a fear of falling behind if they miss even a single day of school. This stress is deeply tied to the college admissions process, particularly in the high-pressure DMV area, where students feel constant pressure to take the most AP classes and get into the best colleges. The environment fosters toxic comparison, and platforms like SCOIR are criticized for reducing students to just their GPAs and SAT scores. Furthermore, social media exacerbates this anxiety, as students compare their deferrals and rejections to the acceptances posted by their peers.
- 2. Opportunities to Process/Discuss Events in the News.** Approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the students felt their school empowered them to share honest opinions. Some students expressed concern about being too honest with teachers as they felt certain opinions may impact their grades or create tension. Others felt that the teachers may also be somewhat reluctant to share their views as they need to be objective. That said, students responded positively to opportunities to discuss current events in their AP Government class or school assemblies. More than teacher-led discussions, students overwhelmingly expressed a desire for student-led, “honest” discussion opportunities, e.g., through various political clubs, “brown bag lunches,” or even in small groups with an advisor.
- 3. Risk-Taking Behavior.** While traditional risky behaviors like drinking are still highly prevalent (with 90% of students reporting that they drink), new trends are exploding without adequate intervention from schools.
 - **Zyn Nicotine Pouches:** Zyn is becoming increasingly popular and addictive. Because the pouches are easily hidden in the mouth, students are actively using them unnoticed during the school day.
 - **Online Gambling:** Students report that online sports betting and gambling via video games (like Roblox) have become highly normalized, but serious discussions about gambling addiction are completely absent from school education.Students suggest that education on risky behaviors needs to start as early as middle school and should rely on firsthand stories of recovery rather than traditional lectures
- 4. Honesty, Academic Integrity, Cheating.** The use of Artificial Intelligence (like ChatGPT) is widespread, with 80% of students witnessing its use for cheating. However, students are highly frustrated by schools that respond with outright bans or inconsistent policies. Instead of just punishing students, they strongly desire clear guidance and instruction on how to use AI responsibly and effectively as a learning tool for the future, much like a calculator. Students also discussed cheating and their consequences, mentioning Honor Boards/Honor Councils and their frameworks at their schools. Some schools had students who were on the “jury of their peers,” others preferred having administrators issue the academic consequences rather than having to punish their classmates, and others mentioned not having such a framework.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The students were randomly assigned to one of three groups for **two student-led small group discussions**. For the first session, students voted to prioritize the first two 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, with the following being the most talked-about subjects:

- ***Power of Schools beyond School Borders****. Students feel pressure to represent their school at all times, even when they are off-campus. Some expressed that it is unfair to be punished for off-campus behaviors, such as wearing a school sweatshirt to a party or having an offensive sticker on a personal car. This overreach is frequently fueled by parents who use the school to discipline their children, or worse, spread rumors about specific students on local message boards like "DC Urban Moms." Students feel schools often unfairly crack down on them merely to protect their reputation from this toxic parent gossip.

- ***The College Process****: The college process is a major source of stress for students, though school culture around getting into college varies widely. Many felt the college counselors at their school were overwhelmed and possibly missing deadlines. Some relayed that the environment at their schools is competitive and secretive, creating tension. Some stated that it would be nice if students shared their rejections. A student mentioned that their school limited the number of colleges that they could apply to, to help decrease overlap and competition with classmates. Other schools encourage students to withdraw applications once they are accepted to a college they would want to attend so that it opens up spots for other students.

Along with the pressures of taking standardized tests, students also discussed the increase in the number of classmates who received "extra time" for tests. Some felt these accommodations were being abused and/or allowed for cheating, which then maligned by association those who actually needed the extra time. Some students liked returning to standardized testing because it created a "baseline."

- ***Diversity and Inclusion***. Students feel some DEI programming can be excessive or "preachy," defeating its own purpose. It is much more effective and engaging when it is student-run, or when diverse perspectives are naturally embedded into the standard academic curriculum. Positive DEI programs included a cultural-theme activity sponsored by affinity groups such as cultural dances or an international food-tasting to showcase students' heritage.

- ***Building Community and School Traditions***. Students definitely enjoy school traditions and seek to build community. Traditions such as "Harry Potter" style house systems, spirit weeks, juniors v. seniors games, cross-grade retreats (especially without phones), and coordinating sports schedules so the whole school can attend games are highlighted as the best ways to build genuine school camaraderie. While many want to attend sports games to support their friends, many schools require athletic participation, so students claimed that schedules often conflicted and did not allow for sports attendance to support their school.

- ***Ways to Socialize Outside of School.*** All the students seek ways to socialize within and outside of school. While parties are one way to socialize, some mentioned that parties do not allow for real connections. Various school events such as dances, school-sponsored trips and team events allow for socialization. Students compared the pros and cons of single sex and coed schools. Most acknowledged that the coed schools allowed for more organic social connections either through classes or participating in extracurricular activities. Boarders mentioned that they were often unable to leave campus, so developed relationships with other boarders. While certain students at single-sex schools felt that their voice was heard a little more, all students seemed to want more interaction opportunities with other schools.

EVENT CONCLUSION

As in past years, students were candid, thoughtful, and respectful of their fellow students throughout the program. While it is difficult for the students to take time away from school, the evaluations were exceedingly positive. In a post-event survey, students expressed an appreciation for being able to share their honest opinions free of judgement, uniformly enjoyed learning about the similarities and differences amongst the various schools and types of schools represented, and many wished the program could be longer so they had more time to discuss these topics together!