



Principal Tory Hill along with counselors Silvia Venegas and Timothy Coleman, work with students like Chris Park, Nathan Brown, Nina Williams, and Samuel Holmes IV to help prevent bullying at Mayde Creek Junior High School

TAKE A STAND

Mayde Creek Junior High gators take a bite out of bullying

Written by Shetye Cypher | Photography by Sara Isola

A seventh-grader sits quietly in the corner. He wears glasses, has acne, wears raggedy clothes, and always has his hair in his face. His classmates make fun of him at school, but it doesn't stop there - the bullying follows him home through text messaging and online social networks. When he comes home, he tells his mom his day was "fine." He is afraid to ask for help and is contemplating suicide.



Students can anonymously let administration know they are being bullied by leaving messages in specified gator lockers around campus

Preventing Tragedy

In almost every junior high or high school across the country, this scenario is all too real. According to the National Bullying Prevention Center, nearly one-third of all school-aged children are bullied each year, and more than 60% did not report it. More than half of all students have personally witnessed bullying at school. "In recent history, America has endured the crippling losses of students that died as the result of bullying," notes Mayde Creek Junior High (MCJH) counselor Silvia Venegas. "We are committed to preventing tragedy on our campus and keeping students safe," she says.

MCJH has recently developed and implemented a program that empowers students to take a stand against bullying. The anti-bullying program includes educating students in compassionate interactions with their peers, open communication between parents, students, and administrators, and swift, appropriate responses to any reports of unacceptable student behavior.

How It Works

The program at Mayde Creek is unique in that it is not only student-centered, but also student-led. MCJH theater arts students, along with students in P.E. classes, created bullying awareness videos to promote the program. QR codes - scannable with students' mobile devices - are located around the building.

The codes connect to Gator Safety Net, an online form that students fill out to notify administration when they are being bullied or to report that another student is being bullied. These forms, also used on other campuses, are always confidential. "Safety Net Online is very helpful because I was worried about a friend and by using the QR codes, the assistant principal and the counselor were able to address the situation right away," says sixth-grader Dashira Hart.

These forms can also be printed out and dropped off in special Gator Lockers located around the campus. "Using the gator lockers last year and the QR codes this year has

made a big difference," says seventh-grader Nina Williams. "I personally like using the QR codes because it is easy to use anywhere and anytime."

Rachel's Challenge

To continue emphasizing the anti-bullying message, MCJH eighth-graders attend the nationally recognized Rachel's Challenge assembly, a student-empowering program that equips students and adults to fight bullying and create a culture of kindness and compassion. Rachel's Challenge is based on the writings and life of 17-year-old Rachel Scott, the first student killed at Columbine High School in 1999. At the end of the assembly, students are invited to sign a pledge to stand up against bullying. Eighth-grader Juseung Park says, "Rachel's Challenge was very inspiring and taught me that being kind to others can change someone's life."

Making a Difference

Since starting the program, leaders on MCJH's campus have seen improved communication between the students, parents, and faculty. They feel situations have been addressed on time, before escalating to larger issues. According to Venegas, "Great strides have been made toward the prevention of bullying before it even begins."

"We have seen a major decline in the number of students who are experiencing bullying," notes principal Tory Hill. Since students can request support in the early phases of bullying, counselors and administrators can help them find strategies to deal with the situations appropriately. "The anti-bullying program has been a great addition to our campus," he says. "This is the first time we have been aggressively proactive in engaging this issue and providing tools to support our students." KM



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What Is Bullying?

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose. Bullying can occur physically, verbally, psychologically, and electronically.