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## Draper mixes it up

By SEAN AHERN 11/13/09

The students of Draper Middle School in Rotterdam were divided into different groups, sat down at lunch tables and asked to do something painful on Tuesday, Nov. 10: talk to someone outside their own group of friends.



As a part of Respect Month in the Mohonasen School District, students at the middle school have participated in "Stop Bullying Now" week as a way to inspire respect and unity among the students at the school.

During their Tuesday lunch period, students were divided into groups based on the color of their shirts for the Mix It Up at Lunch event. The students were then asked to learn something new about their lunchroom buddies.

"We try to have an environment where the kids feel comfortable with talking to counselors and adults," said guidance counselor Debbie Wood. "The kids are good; most of them are non-judgmental, and the kids have learned about accepting one and other."

Wood said Mohonasen has gained from the teaching methods of educators, guidance counselors and administrators who make it easier for students to discuss issues in their lives. She cited the work of Principal Debra Male as a guiding force in this philosophy.

"Debra Male is a big promoter of this kind of camaraderie," Wood said. "She sees kids all the time and promotes that kids come to adults. She's a very good person." Male said it is all a part of the effort to be "a community school."

"We want the kids to get along in the school," said Male. She said students should learn to talk to people outside their comfort zones not only because it means better communication among peers but also because of future life situations they will encounter. "It's good for social situations and good to stop prejudging people," she said.

Some students were resistant to the change and tried to hang out with their friends in the lunchroom, but members of the school's staff, as well as student groups such as Peers for Peace, help to open up students to new ideas. Male said the anti-bullying week also helps students recognize in themselves that when they act out for any reason, they may be bullying someone without their knowledge.

Encouraged by a sign above the front with positive slogans like, "Don't be shy, introduce yourself" students are asked to connect and strengthen the bonds of the school community.

"It's a great activity to open their own groups," said faculty advisor to Peers for Peace Maria Pacheco. Pacheco stated that students may not like the idea of spending a lunch period away from friends, but learning something new about someone can help open up new ideas and expand groups of friends within the school.

"It's a slow process," said Male. "Some kids are resistant, but some kids are meeting new people." As part of the program, students are given prizes for talking to new people and learning new things about their lunch cohorts. Gift cards to Dunkin' Donuts and peace sign paraphernalia were among the prizes.

"The kids are really into it," said Amy Molina, the seventh-grade home and careers teacher at the school. "They want to stop it [bullying] but don't know how." Molina taught a section on anti-bullying in her class and has helped school guidance counselors create an anti-bullying forum for students to speak out against bullying in the school.

As part of the week's activities, students traced their hands and created a sign with their descriptions of how to stop bullying in their school. Statements included "Stop gossiping," "Stand up for yourself," "Stand up for your friends," "Respect people the way you want to be respected," "If you see bullying. STOP IT," and "Even if you dislike someone you shouldn't say mean things. If it's not nice don't say it at all."

Students will also have the opportunity to talk with guidance counselors, social workers and the school psychiatrist on Thursday, Nov. 11, as a part of the anti-bullying week.

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