

Don't judge them: Students learn inclusion lessons

Thursday

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Nearly 30 student groups from Stark and surrounding county school districts on Thursday showcased their yearlong efforts to promote awareness and inclusion for all students within their schools. The projects were part of the "All In: Ensuring Success for All Students" initiative funded by a \$499,242 state Straight A grant.

By Kelli Weir / Repository staff writer

PLAIN TWP. Cameron Martin admits he once was the guy who strutted the school halls at Lake Local Schools in a prideful manner and would look down on others who couldn't match his athleticism on the field or in the gym.

"I'm a jerk," Martin, now a sophomore at Lake High School, said Thursday. "I've been a jerk my whole life."

Martin told a roomful of students, educators and parents that he's been able to move on from that lifestyle with the help of his church and Lake High School's student inclusion project that sought to push people out of their comfort zone and to give them a different view of what people experience on a daily basis.

"Coming into this (project) has opened my eyes," Martin said. "It's like, 'Wow, that's who I was?' I don't want to be that way. I've changed. ... I want to love people and I want to care for the people around me."

The team of eight students created a tunnel of oppression that featured eight displays on topics such as gender, race, sexuality and religion. They also created a graffiti poster using words their classmates said they hear throughout the school day. The poster included numerous derogatory words as well as statements such as “How come you can afford an iPhone if you are poor?” “You’re too young to know” and “Are you sure you can handle becoming a doctor? Most girls are nurses.”

The Lake students were among the 27 student groups from Stark and surrounding county school districts to showcase their yearlong efforts that sought to promote awareness and inclusion for all students within their schools.

The event at First Christian Church was the culmination of the student engagement phase of the “All In: Ensuring Success for All Students” initiative funded by a \$499,242 state Straight A grant. The three-phase initiative involves 29 school districts from six counties, the Stark and Tri-County educational service centers, State Support Team Region 9, local colleges and universities and the Stark Education Partnership.

The first phase of the All In initiative included training to help educators approach their classes differently.

Instead of designing lessons to reach the average students, they were tasked with designing experiences that could reach students on the low and high edges of learning. Emerging research suggests providing that type of equitable learning environment will help districts close the existing achievement gaps between different student groups. The next phase of the initiative will include a series of learning sessions and discussions with students and families.

Student projects

Hoover High School’s Student Social Justice League focused its yearlong project on creating a more positive environment for students and staff. The activities included creating signs with uplifting quotes to spread positivity, leading inclusion activities and hosting an All In Week, where they asked students to pledge to make Hoover better by either promoting inclusivity, promoting positivity, creating change or promoting equality.

Freshman Chrissy Nicholson said the inclusion activity called Step Forward taught her a valuable lesson. She said as part of the activity, participants were told to step forward if they agreed with the statement, “You hate yourself.”

“This impacted me the most because there was a girl I knew who seemed like the most confident person ever. ... She seemed like the full package. And she stepped forward,” Nicholson recalled. “This made me realize that I shouldn’t assume from the outside. You never really know what people are feeling. They can look like the happiest person ever and they might be hurting inside. Never judge a book by its cover.”

The students said their survey of Hoover students and staff found 37 percent of respondents said their behaviors or thought process toward others had been positively changed by the group’s project. They are already planning to expand their efforts for next school year.

Other Stark County student projects included:

- Jackson High School’s team held a Support Staff Appreciation Week and created videos that featured students talking about a struggle they overcame during their school career, such as transferring to Jackson from a different school or making the transition from identifying as a girl to identifying as a boy. The videos were given to Jackson seventh-graders who were discussing resilience and perseverance.
- Louisville and Northwest students each created programs to welcome new students to their schools.
- Sandy Valley’s All In Allies team hosted a diversity fair to raise awareness about the differences and commonalities community members share.
- East Canton’s All-In Team created a middle school lunch club where selected students could eat lunch, socialize and play games once a week with their peers and high school mentors.

Reach Kelli at 330-580-8339 or kelli.weir@cantonrep.com.

On Twitter: @kweirREP

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