

## Challenge Day Empowers Students at OIS

By Jennifer Wake



OIS eighth graders move chairs in a frenzied activity as a way to get everyone comfortable with each other

Lamorinda schools are well versed in teaching the three “Rs” – reading, writing, and arithmetic – but Orinda Intermediate School (OIS) counselors and administrators believe fourth and fifth “Rs” are equally important: Respect and Responsibility.

As part of OIS’s Character Education Program, Associate Principal Jeanne Cusack helped coordinate Challenge Day at the school two weeks ago. The entire eighth grade class of 300 students, along with 75 parents, staff and teachers, participated in a complete day of workshops designed to increase self-esteem, help shift dangerous peer pressure to positive peer support, and reduce the acceptability of teasing, oppression and all forms of violence on campus.

The day started out with fun and engaging activities to establish an environment of comfort and trust, explained Cusack. The eighth graders are placed in groups away from their friends, and away from their comfort zone.

“It started out light, with lots of fun. It was designed to get kids comfortable with each other,” Cusack said. “In the activities students had the opportunity to reflect on how they treated each other and how they have tolerated differences. At the end of the

day, they realized that they had the power to make a change.”

The Challenge Day program is based on the premise that students should notice what is going on around them, decide the right thing to do, and take action on that decision.

“The Challenge Day leaders referenced ‘Notice, Choose, Act’ throughout the day,” Cusack said. “When kids notice something going on, they need to choose to act. If they see someone being teased, they’ll now step in and say ‘Hey, that’s not cool to be doing that.’ It was amazing for us, as adults, to see and hear students express themselves and offer insights about how they treat each other.”

In addition to Challenge Day, OIS has implemented several other programs as part of their Character Education Program, including Others First – a program that supports charitable, altruistic, and humanitarian activities by students in the local community.

“If we only focused on academics, I think we’d be missing a big piece of what kids need,” Cusack said. “Middle school kids are trying to establish their social status and peer groups. It’s important that their school be an environment where everyone

can feel comfortable and safe.”

In February 2007, OIS was recognized as a 2007 California School of Character by the Character Education Partnership (CEP) and was one of 25 finalists (from 133 applicants across the United States) for the National Schools of Character award for its comprehensive character education program, which has yielded positive results in student behavior, citizenship, school climate, and academic performance.

Following Challenge Day, 60 OIS eighth grade students signed up to continue the efforts in a secondary program called “Be the Change,” which inspires participants to create an environment of compassion, acceptance and respect on campus. Students, staff and teachers met last Thursday to brainstorm things that can be done to promote “Be the Change” around campus and some staff members will attend a training called “The Next Step” to bring back more ideas.

“We have definitely seen our eighth graders embracing the message and being kinder to each other,” Cusack said. “The big challenge for us is to perpetuate that feeling.”

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