

Published September 17, 2008

Where Everyone Belongs or Welcome Every Body: WEB is the Way to Middle School

By Sophie Braccini



Back row (L-R): JM WEB leader Mina Lucacher, Patti Forester, Heidi Felt, Annette Finnane and Annette Herbert; Front row, new 6th graders Photo Sophie Braccini

Setting foot for the first time in middle school can be intimidating. The campus is larger, students have to move to different classrooms during the day, and sixth graders go from being at the top of the elementary school food chain to being the little guys. To ease the transition, middle schools organize welcome days during which eighth graders mentor the 6th graders and make them feel good about their new school. The programs are called WEB days in Moraga and Orinda and Buddy Days in Lafayette. Games, talk and fun are at the heart of the programs and both 8th and 6th graders seem to appreciate it. Most 6th graders participated this year in Moraga and Orinda (over 200 in each school), while 64 8th graders were WEB leaders at Orinda Intermediate School (OIS) and 79 at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate (JM). At Stanley Middle School (Stanley) in Lafayette, half of the 6th graders (150) were paired with almost as many 8th graders. At JM, School Counselor Heidi Felt started the program two years ago. "Our former principal, Catherine Mikes, put WEB into my job description when I was hired," said Felt. The PTA, parents and teacher volunteers support the program and it really took off this year with twice as many 8th graders volunteering and events scheduled during the whole school year. "The 8th graders volunteer a significant amount of time," explains Felt. "They apply for a WEB leader position in late spring and once selected (with parent permission), they attend a three-period spring play (training day). In the fall, prior to WEB day, they attend two days of training where they are taught games and a research-based curriculum to work with the 6th graders on WEB day. "I asked to become a WEB leader because I had a rough time in 7th grade and I thought that if I could make a difference for somebody, then I should," said Mina Lucacher, who enjoyed the training and the first WEB day. Emily Holbrook was in Mina's group of 6th graders, and she said, "It was really fun to learn about JM, see and meet new people and get your schedule." Emily added that the day helped her a lot since she was very nervous about attending a new school; she felt much better about it afterwards. She hopes to be a WEB leader herself in 2 years. The training is similar at Orinda Intermediate School (OIS) where the program has been in existence for 8 years. "We know that the more contact a sixth grader has with his/her WEB Leader the more successful the sixth grader will be," says OIS Vice-Principal Ron Langer, who originated the program with art teacher Susan Weiss. The program is now run by Diane Brode and Jennifer Wagner. They highlight that WEB is more than just orientation day, throughout the year the students will participate in parties such as a Valentine's Day event or a group skate. Additionally, the WEB leaders work with small groups of 6th graders on topics such as feeling confident to ask questions, or how harmful rumors can be. At JM, too, 6th graders will be

reunited with their WEB leaders for monthly activities during the school year. Stanley's Buddy program is more a one-on-one experience with one 6th grader paired with an 8th grader. "The students meet once before school begins, and ice breakers are organized like a scavenger hunt. The 6th graders get to ask questions about teachers, schedules, or homework. Once they're paired they meet once a week the first two or three weeks of schools at lunch. After that the 6th graders are comfortable." Westcoat noticed the increasing number of boys who participate in the program. The program started in 2002, at first just with girls, now for a couple of years both genders participate and for the first time this year there were more 6th grade boys than girls, so a few 8th grade boys had two buddies. In the three schools, the adults in charge highlight the dedication of the 8th graders who participate, "I'm constantly impressed by the 8th graders," says Westcoat, "they have a real sense of concern and are very kind, they always go well beyond what is expected."



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