Combating Bias Can Be A Lot For A 12-Year-Old, But Hopewell Students Pledge To Try

By VIRGINIA ALVINO YOUNG - JUN 22, 2017

Sixth-grader Isiah Martinez, Vice Principal Jessica Webster, and sixth-grader Kylie Kennedy at Hopewell Memorial Junior High School.

Virginia Alvino Young / 90.5 WESA
Last year, Hopewell Memorial Junior High School started noticing some negative race-based comments being made among students. Studies show safe environments are essential for learning, and being victim to identity-based harassment can be especially detrimental in school. Now, the Aliquippa school is engaging student leaders to tackle the problem through peer mediation.

Andrea Joseph with the Anti-Defamation league, in March, led about a dozen students in a crash course on bias – and how to combat it.

“It’s not always easy to stand up, but when we don’t, what happens is sometimes those seeds of bias grow,” she said.

Andrea Joseph teaches Hopewell Middle School students about the "pyramid of hate" and how bias can lead to problems in school, such as the spread of rumors and even violence. 

Credit Virginia Alvino Young / 90.5 WESA
Joseph used a diagram called the “pyramid of hate” to show how bias can have a ripple effect – for instance, how refusing someone a seat at the lunch table could lead to the spread of rumors, or even violence. She used the Holocaust as an historical example – a heavy topic, but one the students recognized from their other classes.

“You think of something so huge as wanting to get rid of an entire group of people. It comes from, as a society, we don’t do anything down here,” Joseph said, pointing to the bottom of the pyramid.

She told them that, as young people, they have an important role to play.

“You have what it takes to take care of what goes on in your community, your school, amongst your friends. You can take care of what’s happening in your bubble,” she said.

Hopewell vice principal Jessica Webster said she was concerned about some things happening in those bubbles. That’s why she applied for the training’s funding through the Sprout Fund’s First 100 Days grant, to empower local communities during the first 100 days of Donald Trump’s presidency.

Webster said the 2016 presidential election intensified some of the problems in the school.

“We did see an increase in conversations … when the election was happening, around that whole idea of building a wall and who’s gonna come in and who’s gonna come out and are you here legally,” she said. The school is about 90 percent white – a mostly rural and suburban population. A school-wide survey last fall showed 72 percent of students felt that their peers were being picked on at school and 54 percent felt that race, religion or other personal characteristics were often the basis of the bullying.

But it can be hard to stand up to your peers.

Sixth grader Isaiah Martinez said he tries to intervene, but the social politics of middle school are tricky.
Students speak with Anti-Defamation League facilitator Andrea Joseph at an anti-bias training earlier this year.

*Credit Virginia Alvino Young / 90.5 WESA*

“If you tell on somebody, you’re labeled as a snitch,” he said.

In the months following the training, the group has been meeting weekly, working on projects like a school-wide anti-bullying pledge. As the school year comes to an end, Counselor Janae Batchelor worked with them on a plan to implement an actual peer mediator program next school year.

“So your job would be to listen to both sides and help them communicate to resolve the problem and come up with an agreed upon solution,” Batchelor told the students. “Some of you who have been in my office know, that doesn’t mean you’re going to help two people be best friends, it just means you’re going to help two people coexist in the building.”
The students broke out in groups to read sample mediation scripts, and talk about the program they’d like to see. Martinez said he’s experienced this type of conflict first hand. “People think I’m Mexican because my skin’s really tan,” he said. “Somebody was like, ‘You’re an immigrant, you need to go back.’ I was like, ‘I’m not even Mexican,’ so it didn’t make any sense, but I kind of took it by heart,” Martinez said. He clarified that he’s Puerto Rican and doesn’t like that Hispanic people are often lumped together. Martinez said he’s also seen what happens when problems like that escalate. “For a while, I thought the school was kind of racist,” he said. “One of my friends got into a fight and he’s pale, it was a really bad fight and he got lunch detention. I got into a fight and it was just a slap and I got suspended for two days.” Webster said the school’s administrators aren’t perfect, but do strive for consistency. She said it’s important to realize that when students are hearing disparaging remarks from their classmates, a fight often doesn’t tell the whole story. “At first, you’re like, ‘Why were you so upset about one incident?’ Then you find out it’s the third time today that’s happened,” she said. Webster and Batchelor said they think peer-to-peer resolution can go a long way towards preventing escalation, especially with all these new trainings and tools. “They know what to say. They don’t always do it. And that’s where we need to get them that they automatically do it as the leaders in the building,” Webster said. “That’ll take a very long time.” Isaiah Martinez said he’s ready to be a leader and a resource for his classmates. But Webster said combating prejudice and bias is a lot of responsibility for a 12-year-old. “I think one of the things we’re going to have to determine with the students is when do you make the decision it’s too big for you alone?” Webster said. The student group is planning to have an intensive mediator training over the summer or early in the school year, and start doing supervised mediation in the fall.