

Jump-Start Your Student Advocacy Program

By: Jill Dreer, Jennifer Moyer, Nancy Schneider, Meredith Weiss, Susan Lloyd

Creating a unique climate and culture in which all students feel welcome, safe, and secure is the responsibility of the school community. This is especially important in a middle school where students are trying to find their niche.

During the 2009–2010 school year, Twin Valley Middle School formed a task force to address a growing concern about the deteriorating culture and climate of our school. Although the school had made great academic strides, we lacked student advocacy, which our students needed if they were to grow socially and emotionally. We wanted every student to have a least one adult in the building with whom they could connect in a non-academic relationship.

In the late spring of 2010, a leadership team began to develop a student advocacy program that would be implemented the following school year. The team visited a local middle school to observe their program and met with an educational consultant during the summer to draft a plan.

The leadership team decided that each paraprofessional and teacher in the school would serve as an adult advocate (A Raider Pride leader) to a group of 12–15 students and that these groups would meet twice monthly for 45 minutes during a designated time within the school day.

Next, the leadership team outlined the students' Full Value Contract (pg. 39) and determined the themes for the meetings based on input from parents, teachers, students, administrators, and guidance counselors.

Raider Pride Lessons

Our Raider Pride student advocacy-focused lessons have spurred dynamic discussions on a variety of topics and provided an outlet for students to share within a familiar, safe, small-group setting. The result is student self-confidence and stronger, more sincere peer relationships with the support and guidance of an adult advocate. Staff members often report hearing students use terms from lessons in peer conversations and seeing them put into practice strategies they have learned through Raider Pride.

Each lesson begins with an icebreaker that suits the personality and needs of the group. The icebreaker is followed by a focus lesson that addresses the pre-determined theme. Raider Pride leaders have the freedom to "tweak" the lesson to fit the needs of their group and grade level.

During our initial year of implementation, all grade levels followed the same lesson plan. As we began our second year, however, we felt confident enough in our program to diversify and have each grade level choose the themes for the year.

These lessons explore relationships, school concerns, and social problems, and their impact on the culture and climate of our school. Each lesson includes an objective, vocabulary terms, discussion questions, and a reflection piece. The reflection consists of three basic questions: 1. What? What did we do in this lesson? 2. So What? Why did we do it? 3. Now What? How do we take what we've learned and apply it to our everyday life, both in and outside the school setting?

The reflection can be orally or through journaling, individually, with partners, in a small group, or in class.

On meeting days, our students and staff (teachers, custodians, cafeteria workers, secretaries, paraprofessionals, and administrators) wear their Raider Pride tee shirts to demonstrate and encourage "Raider Pride" and school spirit.

A School-wide Effort

Jump-Start Your Student Advocacy Program

One of the primary goals of our Raider Pride student advocacy initiative is to empower students to be reflective and act respectfully, responsibly, and compassionately each and every day. Because it is a school-wide initiative, we expect all teachers to have input in planning and decision making. Collaboration is essential to the success of this initiative.

Members of the Raider Pride Leadership Team— representatives from each grade level and special subject areas (physical education, music, art—act as "point people" for their colleagues. The leadership team meets monthly to discuss roadblocks, challenges, and issues. In addition, we celebrate successes, always focusing on moving forward.

Our administrators have supported this initiative wholeheartedly, garnering grants and additional funding, providing dedicated time for monthly Raider Pride Leadership meetings, and setting clear expectations that Raider Pride is indeed a part of our school culture.

Communication is a key to success. Dates relative to Raider Pride are posted on the school Intranet and Outlook calendar. Our school website and Facebook page include Raider Pride posts; televised morning announcements provide meeting times and topics. All Raider Pride lessons and additional resources are posted on the school's Intranet for easy access by staff. Staff feedback about each lesson is used to refine lessons and help develop future lessons.

Implementation Tips

If your school wants to implement a student advocacy program, we encourage you to start slowly and be patient. Change takes time; we began our work a full year before implementing our program. In addition,

- Review what you already have in place and begin building your program upon that foundation.
- Seek out your "champions"—people in your building who will be open to and excited about this initiative. Use these people to develop a strong leadership team.
- Make principals and guidance counselors an integral part of this team. Not only do they bring a different skill set, they know community members and parent who will be willing to dedicate resources.
- After the first year, seek out and support student leaders, as they are the ultimate champions of any student advocacy program

To further solidify and build ownership in our second year, we held a school-wide kick-off event to highlight our commitment to Raider Pride. In addition, Unity Day gave 100 of our student leaders across the grade levels a voice in creating school-wide action plans to improve school climate. Those student leaders now act as co-facilitators during our bi-weekly Raider Pride meetings.

Our Reality

Initiating, developing, and implementing a student advocacy program has not been an easy task. Some of our barriers have included lack of teacher "buy-in," scheduling difficulties, lack of time to plan lessons, lack of group meeting space, and unforeseen leader absence on lesson day.

Although there have been some roadblocks, we stick with the motto, "This is our reality." We continue to maintain a positive attitude and move forward.

It is hard to measure matters of the heart, but it is very clear that students are learning life-long lessons during Raider Pride. Growing evidence indicates that Raider Pride is becoming our new school culture. Students and teachers are acting with more compassion, cooperation, empathy, respect for others, kindness, and giving as our program continues to grow. We attribute this positive change to the Raider Pride lessons we teach and our staff and students put into action in our caring community.

Jump-Start Your Student Advocacy Program

Twin Valley's Full Value Contract

1. I agree to keep each other safe, physically and emotionally.
2. I agree to keep comments positive and supportive.
3. I agree to give and receive honest feedback.
4. I agree to "let go" of negative feelings and/or stale issues and move on.
5. I agree to make an effort to participate to the best of my ability in all situations.

Previously published in Middle Ground magazine, April 2012

Jill Dreer is a fifth grade language arts teacher, **Jennifer Moyer** is a grades 5–8 physical education teacher, **Nancy Schneider** is a fifth grade language arts teacher, **Meredith Weiss** is a sixth grade language arts teacher, and **Susan Lloyd** is former principal for grades 5–6 at Twin Valley Middle School in Elverson, Pennsylvania. The Twin Valley team was recognized with a Pearson-AMLE Teams That Makes a Difference Award in 2011.