

Teens try to dismantle social barriers

Posted: Wednesday, December 17, 2003

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Cliques have been a way of teenage life for years. Now, a group of Westover Park seventh- and eighth-graders have joined a movement to say, "enough is enough."

Mix It Up, a national program that supports students' efforts to identify, question and cross social boundaries, has taken hold at Westover Park, said Amy Lopez, assistant principal, who heard about the program from eighth-grade career connections teacher Jana Meyer and took up the cause as the group's faculty adviser.

But just because the program has been established doesn't necessarily mean the social barriers magically fall away, some of the teens said.

"You always see cliques and groups," eighth-grader Joey Sykes said. "There are always going to be cliques. We're going to try to break them down."

Josh Badillo said the kids look at one another and make judgments based on hairstyles, clothing or behavior.

"They have all these perceptions," Lopez said.

"They don't want to talk to you," said Emily Dunn, an eighth-grader.

During National Mix It Up Day in November, students swapped seats in the cafeteria to meet people they wouldn't ordinarily socialize with.

Seventh-grader Brittany Klein said National Mix It Up Day was a good beginning because it helped teens "make new friends and get to know other people."

The program is intended to shake up people's views of others, said Sytha Cheatheam, a Westover Park eighth-grader, because some people are naturally afraid of change.

"You're afraid of getting out of your comfort zone," she said.

"Some people are set in their ways; they have closed minds," Sykes said. "They worry about what people will think of them."

A number of the members of Westover Park's Mix It Up committee have firsthand knowledge of the social boundaries that exist at the middle school.

"In elementary you don't notice the cliques," said Isaac Olive, an eighth-grader. "I don't belong to a clique, so now I can't talk to certain people."

Eighth-grade cheerleader Gabe Hale said she's encountered some kids' pre-conceived notions of who she is.

"They'll say 'Oh, she's a cheerleader, she's stuck up,'" Hale said. "Yes, I'm a cheerleader, but you haven't gotten to know me."

Mix It Up not only has the goal of breaking down social boundaries, it's also good for students transferring in to the school.

"If you're a new kid, it's a great way of meeting new friends and not have the feeling of being alone," Dunn said.

New students, though, also face pressures to become part of a clique, Hale said.

"When new people come to the school you have to be friends really fast or another group will get to them," she said, thereby possibly losing a potential friend because of social pressures.

Other members of Westover Park's Mix It Up committee are Chase Cossabone, Cole Stutz, Christina Young, Kirsten Evans, Ali Ferguson, Jacob Sims and Clark Boland.

Mix It Up is sponsored by two projects of the Southern Poverty Law Center - Teaching Tolerance and Tolerance.org - and by the Study Circles Resource Center.