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Will We Take This Challenge?



Huron's First Challenge Day an Emotional One

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On Valentine's Day, Huron hosted its first ever Challenge Day, an event where people came together, became closer, and spent the school day looking at each other and their worlds without any judgment through a series of activities and games. Teachers nominated participants and volunteers for an event that required careful selection of both participants and volunteers.

Approximately 60 people were present in the lower gymnasium to participate in the event. Activities were coordinated by two Challenge Day leaders, beginning with ice-breaking activities that stressed cooperation and trust between participants. As the event wore on, activities became more personal. People talked to people they had never met and engaged in an activity that revealed personal aspects of their lives.



Imagine a school where...

- Passion for service, leadership, and acceptance of others is the norm
- Former enemies love and respect each other
- Bullying, violence and other forms of oppression are a thing of the past...

Now imagine this possibility in schools everywhere...

This is the compelling introduction to the Challenge Day website. Challenge Day is a nonprofit organization that conducts transformational workshops in schools in 30 states, 2 provinces of Canada, and the International School system. The Challenge Day program provides youth, teachers, families and communities with tools to develop and sustain proactive solutions that address and prevent isolation, violence and other manifestations of social oppression. It seeks to demonstrate the possibility of love and connection through the celebration of diversity, truth and full expression.

Last February 14, an apt day for such a program, 60 Huron students participated in the school's first Challenge Day. The day was conducted by two Challenge Day Leaders trained in creating safety for young people to express their deepest personal feelings and to share their visions for a more fulfilling school. Through a carefully designed series of innovative activities, group discussions, icebreakers and trust-building exercises, participants learned how to break down the walls of separation and create new levels of respect and communication with their peers, teachers, parents

and themselves. The Leaders were assisted by volunteer adult facilitators, who included 18 teachers and counselors and two PTSO board members.

"The feeling of going through Challenge Day with our students is still with me," said Huron teacher and adult facilitator, Diane Rosenblum. "It was such a powerful experience. I will never forget it. I hope all of our students will have the opportunity to participate in it."

The CD leaders promised adult volunteers that the program would be fun and a success. According to the PTSO rep., Sharon Jones, who helped spearhead CD with 9th grade administrator, Jennifer Hein and counselor Denise Eaddy-Richardson, "They said the students would respond and we just had to be their cheerleaders. They were right. At the end of the day, when students left with promises to 'Be the Change', the adults just sat staring at one another."

Teacher Casey Hermoyian described the day as "the single best day of my teaching career (so far...); absolutely amazing." She continued, "I wish we could find a way to hold more Challenge Days, because so many students, teachers, and administrators would benefit."

"It was excellent. A real eye-opener," said junior class participant, Jaime Bradley. "It informed me that it isn't only me... there are other people in the same situation with the same problems." Jaime also described the need for more such workshops, "Our school is so big, with so many students, that it will take more than one day to make a difference. I think once we have a few more Challenge Days we will begin to see a change."

School counselor Denise Eaddy-Richardson, in discussing

her desires and goals for Huron, spoke of the value in creating an environment where students could feel comfortable letting down their barriers, as only then could they notice the similarity in their issues.

Students for the first CD were selected by class administrators and the counseling team to include a broad representation of grade levels, cultures and friendship groups.

Students who attended the first session have formed a Challenge Day Club under the direction of teacher/adult facilitator, Casey Hermoyian. The Club will focus on keeping the spirit of Challenge Day alive and spreading the values learned to others at Huron.

Can We Keep This Going?

Numerous Challenge Days have been held at Pioneer HS and at some of Ann Arbor's middle schools. The cost per student is approximately \$35, which, for Huron's first event, was covered by a contribution from the Ann Arbor Rotary Club and a private donor. Last month, the PTSO Board approved a \$3,500 grant to be used for additional Challenge Days, and they are now slated for May 4 and 5. Counselors will finalize the list, but Huron Challenge Day attendees have been asked to nominate fellow students for participation in the May workshops.

The PTSO also extends an invitation to any parent that would like to attend. Each workshop must have at least twenty adults, with a mix of school staff, community members, and parents being desired.

A cross-functional team is being established to explore funding from a variety of sources, including partnering with Challenge
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