



# Illuminating Topics that Make a Difference

## Talley Middle School's Student Advisory Program BY COLIN HEFFINGER

FOR THE AVERAGE MIDDLE SCHOOLER, it can be challenging to speak with others about topics that are sensitive and important. At this age in their lives, students typically stray away from confiding in their family members for guidance. This creates a need for a safe space in which students feel comfortable to discuss a variety of important topics such as bullying, handling conflicts with peers, social media behavior and more.

Enter Talley Middle School's Student Advisory Program, a school-wide program that provides lessons where students, parents, teachers and administrators work together to shine light onto topics that are significant and relevant to students. Lessons are taught grade-wide to pocket-sized groups of students, which create an environment where students feel comfortable discussing their perspective on topics that would otherwise be challenging.

Melinda Tartaglione, assistant principal at Talley Middle School, reflects on the success of the program. "The goal of the Student Advisory Program is to give students a safe space and dedicated time to talk about topics that are important to them at their grade level. We used some generic lessons but then adjusted them to fit the overall program and message in our building. Positive behavior lessons are written specifically for topics and built with examples that fit our students and building, as well as giving students an interactive and creative way to process the material. We enjoy using community circles, artwork, modeling, and guided discussions in a small class environment to make lessons powerful."

The Student Advisory Program acts as a catalyst for growth and increased academic performance amongst students. By actively confronting



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daily topics and issues that students face, the program helps students effectively grow as individuals and contribute to the learning opportunities of their grade level.

The program enlightens students on topics such as cyberbullying, anxiety, current events, how to handle issues with peers and understanding the differences between students with disabilities. There's also a larger theme that remains consistent throughout all lessons: the powerful impact of perspective and understanding others through empathy.

"The overarching message of our program is our 212° motto: Go the Extra Degree," Melinda explains. "Be 212° and go the extra degree! At 211° water is hot, but at 212°, water boils. And with boiling water comes steam. With steam you can power a train. One degree makes all the difference. This is a message we learned from author Sam Parker, and we have worked to make it a strong part of the program we share with our Talley Family."

Teachers, administrators, parents and students all play a critical role in the success of the Student Advisory Program. Grade level teams discuss



what they see in their classrooms to shape lessons and determine which topics can be taught to the whole grade level. As the program continues to grow, sharing the topics more will support students further as parents could continue conversations outside of the classrooms to reinforce major themes and structure a level of consistency. A student panel will also provide feedback on the effectiveness of lessons as well as providing new ways to make activities engaging and exciting for students at the end of the year.

Melinda reflects on the future for their program beyond Talley Middle School. "The Student Advisory Program shares ideas with schools in the district," Melinda continues. "Other schools have adopted the program and really enjoy it so far. We

look forward to continuing to provide students with a safe space to discuss topics that are important to them." ■

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