

## Equity Corner

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### Safe School Ambassadors

## Helping All Students Make Positive High School Memories

#### ■ Mary Ellen Marnholtz, Community Relations Coordinator, Wausau School District

Civility in the United States is on a downswing. That's what a Public Agenda report entitled, *Aggravating Circumstances*, found in 2002. Results from any number of surveys show that rude and selfish behaviors were increasingly a public problem. A 2002 survey by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that less than a third of public high school students reported that classmates typically treat their teachers or each other with respect.

Young people learn what is taught and modeled for them. That's why a program in the Wausau School District teaches high school students the skills they need to make sure that harassment and mistreatment of peers doesn't go unanswered. Safe School Ambassadors began last year at Wausau East High School. The program is based on research showing that 85 percent of people are bystanders when it comes to situations where others are being bullied, mistreated, or put-down. People don't typically speak up when they see mistreatment occur. For teenagers, the pressure to fit in makes it even more difficult to take a stand against an act of cruelty. It's a situation the Wausau School District wants to face head-on.

Last year 38 students and nine adults at Wausau East High School were trained to become Safe School Ambassadors. The program, from Community Matters in Santa Rosa, California, sent a trainer to spend two days teaching these young people what comprises a bullying incident, how to notice and perceive what is truly happening, and how to act to intervene. Research shows that if a student intervenes immediately, it reduces the incidence of mistreatment by 70 percent.

Wausau East students selected as Safe School Ambassadors come from every grade level and from a variety of different student groups. The one thing they have in common—they are all opinion leaders to whom peers look to for direction and leadership. That makes them a perfect peer Ambassador.

Two of the most important things students learn as Ambassadors are how to recognize mistreatment and the steps to take to intervene. The Safe School Ambassadors don't wear special buttons or clothing that set them apart from the rest of the student body; they just go about their day-to-day lives, stepping in when they notice someone is being mistreated. The skills they learn help them act and that has an immediate impact on the situation. Safe School Ambassadors also talk with isolated students and help them fit in. They also have specific training to help them speak up in front of peers and tell them that it's not okay to exclude, tease, or bully classmates. They are also trained to check back with the affected individual to make sure that the situation is resolved.

The Safe School Ambassador's theme is engage, empower, and equip. When students are taught to tune-in to issues of bullying and equipped with the tools to intervene, this changes the very essence of the school's climate.

East is only the second high school in Wisconsin to implement Safe School Ambassadors, but more are soon to follow. Perhaps the best ambassadors for the program are the students. Wausau East Safe School Ambassador Jamie Biesel, in a presentation to the WSD Board of Education, reported that the program is effective. She said, "I think this is a good program that allows us to stop mistreatment before it gets big. We see what is going on and students generally listen to other students." Safe School Ambassadors make their school a friendlier place for all students to build high school memories. ❖

