

Testimonials from Baltimore Area Independent Schools

BOYS LATIN SCHOOL

One way of knowing that we are having a positive impact is that every year the students who were peer educators the prior year want to participate again. And now that we have been doing this for over 9 years, we have students who ask about joining the program due partially to their experience as audience members.

When interviewing a prospective peer educator, he remarked how he remembered when he was in 6th grade and the peer educators would come over. For him, the fact that they took the time to come over had a tremendous impact on him. He said what mattered most was that they were spending time with the older students and that made him feel more important. This year, that same peer educator has become the student body president.

With regards to student government, over the last several years I have noticed that an overwhelming representation of peer educators in the lists of candidates. One reason for this is that we select leaders. Another reason, however, is that some students we select become more confident in their abilities to lead as a result of participating in the program and therefore decide to run for office. With the peer educators as leaders in student government, their positive influence spreads to even greater numbers of students.

At the conclusion of each year, the 6th graders are asked what they remember and have learned from the lessons. Here are some of their responses:

- The reasons for not doing alcohol, drugs, and any bad thing.
- How to face things that come up.
- To pause before you make a decision.
- That you should not take your anger out on anyone.
- Learning that the myths that I thought were facts (about alcohol and other drugs) were not true.
- Not as many kids do drugs as I thought.
- People may look or seem different, but are all the same.
- It is all right to say no.
- Alcoholism is a disease.
- Use excuses less—I learned to tell the truth.
- That drinking and smoking can hurt you in many different ways physically and mentally.
- They taught us to make good decisions that would keep us safe.
- It taught life lessons.

ST. PAUL'S SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

Last month, the peer educators taught a lesson on bullies, victims and bystanders. Today, when the peer educators went in to teach their lesson, one of the sixth graders told them that he broke up a "fight" between a bully and another kid. He said he got punched in the eye which was okay because he felt great about breaking up the fight. He said he would have never stepped in before hearing that lesson. The lesson was two days prior to the "fight."

BRYN MAWR SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

A graduate of the Peer Education who is just finished her senior year in college came back to tell us that she has decided to join Teach for America and credits her experience in the Peer Education program.

A student who has been in the Peer Education program for two years continues to receive daily computer messages from the class she taught last year. She says every night she has dozens of messages to respond to.

Two graduates of the program have e-mailed us from college with ideas for us to use in Peer Education that they came across in one of their college experiences.

Students who now express a desire to be Peer Educators do so because they tell us that they remember how impressed they were when they were younger and received the Peer Education program.

We now watch our seniors who manage the teams of Peer Educators and are able to demonstrate their abilities to lead and to teach as a result of their maturity and past experiences in the program.

We also have watched Peer Educators recover from their mistakes and are able to move on and continue to be viable members of the program.

We have seen Peer Educators struggle with cognitive dissonance around difficult issues such as body image, drinking alcohol and cigarette smoking.

We have watched kids who were quiet and reserved, open up and shine as teachers to younger students.

MOUNT SAINT JOSEPH'S HIGH SCHOOL

A thank you note from a graduate writes, "As I enter college, it is the values and skills that I have received from the O'Neil Peer Education Program that will allow me to better my community and myself."

A senior Peer Educator said, "Students have shared with me things that I can never forget, things that have shaped the way I act towards other people."

A junior Peer Educator reflecting on his experience said, "When I walked out of my last peer education session, my freshman year, I immediately said to myself "I want to do that".

A freshman stated, "It was only after my first day of class that I realized how different the O'Neil program was from the "family life" courses I had grown accustomed to. In peer education the focus was on making enlightened decisions. I really liked having my peers teach me."

The counselor has received several referrals from Peer Educators regarding freshmen who may be at-risk.

A senior stated, "Peer education has given me a purpose in this school. I try to be the best role model that I can."

CALVERT HALL COLLEGE

Calvert Hall's mission is to "prepare its students for a life dedicated to achievement, leadership and service to the church and community." In one senior's mind, the school's Peer Education Program is an essential means to achieving this mission. Under the coordination of Anne Hilgartner, the goal of the Peer Education Program, now in its 7th year, is to provide necessary life skills for positive, healthy decision making. "I enjoy being involved in Peer Education at Calvert Hall because I believe so deeply in its philosophy," said Hilgartner, a member of the Guidance Department.

The faculty recommends a diverse group of upperclassmen to be Peer Educators to serve as members of several Peer Education teams. Their diversity and their unique talents are the basis for a solid program, but each Peer Educator's genuine desire to "give something back to Calvert Hall" is the reason for the success.

Another senior has given back to the Calvert Hall community through the education and mentoring of the freshman. "It gives me a great sense of selfworth and joy when I teach the freshmen because I know that by telling them what I went through at their age, I will increase their awareness of many problems and hopefully help them to make the right decision when faced by certain situations," he said.

One junior peer educator added, "Teaching skills to freshman on health and discussing issues that dominate a teen's life is the most important and serious way I can give back to Calvert Hall.

"Kids listen to other kids-it's as simple as that," said John Mojzisek, a Peer Education advisor. "Year after year, I have seen Peer Educators willing to ask themselves the hard questions about the decisions they are making in their own lives and how those decisions impact others. I have seen them change as people from the experience of reaching out and helping others." After a lesson on drug abuse, a senior peer educator was approached by one of the students in the class who wanted some advice on what to do about friends who were getting together to smoke marijuana. He told the freshman to weigh the consequences and make the decision based on what he knew was right in his heart. A few days later, the same senior was again approached by the freshman who thanked him for his help by saying, "All I needed was someone to tell me that I had choices and that I should not be afraid to do the right thing."

The success of the Peer Education Program is a direct result of the commitment given by the Educators. Not only do the Educators volunteer many hours of free time during school, they are also required to attend an orientation day and a weekend training retreat." Our Peer Educators have shared how positive an influence this experience has been in their lives," Hilgartner said. "Even the freshmen have admitted how the program has benefited them."

"Freshman year was tough adjusting, but the Peer Educators helped me think about the realities of my actions, said a senior who is now an Educator himself. "Being a Peer Educator might have

been the best decision that I've made at Calvert Hall. I strongly believe Peer Education has shaped me to become the person I am today."

Many of the other educators also believe Peer Education is a program that should be established at every school. "It was one thing to hear my teachers and parents telling me that drugs or alcohol are bad, but to hear it from upperclassmen really made me listen," said a second year peer educator. "Students teaching other students makes it possible for everyone to learn from each other which leads to better decisions and healthy lives for all of us."

Another peer educator added, "Peer Education is a program that is designed to help freshmen and teach them healthy ways to deal with new stresses. The possibility of making a beneficial impact on a person's life is the reason I chose to join the program. To be able to know that because of something I have said or taught I have helped change someone for the better is extremely gratifying."