

The Bandera PROPHET

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Bandera ISD tackles bullying, supports mental health

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The Bandera Prophet

It's tough to be a kid. Aside from the daily responsibilities of school, academics, athletics, extracurricular activities and chores, kids today have the added pressure of Covid fears, the political landscape, personal and social media related stresses from things they experience, see and hear at home, from peers and online. All of this input can cause a data overload for any adult, much less someone whose brain is just five, 12 or 17 years old.

At Bandera ISD, teachers, staff and administrators have adopted a system that not only draws a direct line to students who may need help, but also provides a way for students to help students.

The Bully/Crisis Hotline link, located at the top of the banderaisd.net homepage, allows anyone to make a confidential, anonymous report 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In addition to the website, the number is posted in highly visible locations at every campus, but will a third grader pay attention to it?

"I don't know if they really see that sign," BISD Interim Superintendent Gary Bitzkie said, but he added other more engaged, pro-active programs have been put into place to reach kids at all ages and grade levels.

Every campus works on forming relationships with students, Bitzkie said. Counselors provide professional development input to teachers, so kids will be comfortable going to them about bullying, academic troubles, whatever they're dealing with.

“You really have to have that teacher-student interaction,” Alkek Elementary Counselor Lisa Holdbrook said. “A teacher can get a feel for what’s going on.”

At the elementary and middle schools, kids begin their morning with a meeting in class. Called Five Radical Minutes, students spend five to seven minutes working on their SEL [Social and Emotional Learning] activities, such as anchor charts, circle time and role playing. Teachers can also integrate SELs into their lessonplans.

Fifth graders have an antibullying club, where they make posters, talk about peer intervention, and make daily announcements on kindness, compassion and empathy.

“This month is kindness and antibullying month,” Holdbrook said.

“Every month we have a different theme.”

At the high school, students use the Rhithm App - an online mental health check-in tool that’s filled out daily. Students can use emojis that reflect their mental, emotional and physical status. Their responses are connected to the school’s technology department, so specific words or patterns get flagged, and intervention can be immediate when necessary.

Gone are the days when counselors wait in their offices for students to come to them. They are now an interactive presence in the classrooms.

“We’re very visible. They know who we are,” Holdbrook said. “We’re really working on those relationships.”

Statistically, the proof is in the pudding. Holdbrook said since SEL was implemented district-wide, the number of discipline referrals has decreased by 67 percent, and attendance has increased.

“We have happier students, and happier teachers,” Bitzkie said.

The Bully/Crisis Tipline is 830-460-3902. It is pre-recorded, and callers may leave a detailed, anonymous message. The Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 800-784-2433 or 800-273-8255. The Teen Help Line is 972-233-TEEN (8336). All lines are available 24/7.

For more information on Bandera ISD, go to www.banderaisd.net.