

Girls in Progress empowers Newark middle-schoolers

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Alexis Willey, Haylee Copley and Taylor Steurer, all eighth-graders from Wilson Middle School, work on their art journals in a Girls in Progress class. The girls spent time continuing their discussion on body image and how it is portrayed in the media. Shari Johnston, who leads the class, wants to focus on at-risk girls to prepare them to make healthy and informed choices in life. (Photo: Jessica Phelps/The Advocate)

NEWARK – Madisyn Bryslan opened her art journal to a blank page and picked up a paint brush.

The Wilson Middle School sixth-grader carefully wrote, "I am enough," in large, loopy cursive letters at the top of the page.

Madisyn said that phrase summarizes what she's learned so far in Girls in Progress, a new program at Wilson designed to give young girls the motivation and confidence they need to succeed.

"I think that people think that they are not enough because they want to be like everyone else," she said. "This program influences me to be who I am and to share things and express my feelings."

Shari Johnston, Girls in Progress coordinator, said she's hopeful that students like Madisyn will continue to embrace their self-worth and focus on their goals as they participate in the program.

"I want them to gain a strong sense of themselves and who they are," she said. "I want them to have dreams and hope for the future."

A partnership between Mental Health America of Licking County and Newark City School's Academic Opportunities for Success program, Girls in Progress started at Heritage Middle School in January 2014.

Academic Opportunities for Success, known as AOS, focuses on providing resources and support for students to ensure they graduate from high school.

Dava Kaltenecker, a linkage coordinator who works with students at Heritage and Wilson, saw the need for a program just for female students.

"They were struggling with self-esteem issues, and I wanted to start something for them to give them extra support outside of class," she said.

She reached out to Mental Health America and began working with the agency to structure the program.

Shortly after they started, it was clear the first Girls in Progress group was a huge success at Heritage, Kaltenecker said.

"By the end of the year, they were a close-knit support group that could talk about anything," she said.

Initially, Girls in Progress met five times a week at Heritage but eventually transitioned to three times a week.

Johnston, who began working at MHA during the summer, got involved with the program at Heritage and became the Girls in Progress coordinator in January. Around that same time, the program received a Pay It Forward grant from Denison University and support from the Licking County Foundation.

The additional funding allowed Johnston to start another Girls in Progress group at Wilson.

Johnston, who has a degree in art therapy, gives the students lots of free time to express themselves through art journaling.

"The art is a tool that tears down some walls," she said.

Although the Wilson students just started meeting, Johnston said she'd like to establish the group as a safe space where the girls can talk about the things they are dealing with.

In the remainder of the school year, they'll talk about healthy friendships and relationships, body image, stress and bullying.

The girls also will participate in field trips, designed to expose them to powerful woman, Kaltenecker said.

The students from Heritage visited the Licking Count Municipal Court and met Municipal Court Clerk Marcia Phelps. They also visited the Columbus Museum of Art to learn about female artists and the Licking County Sheriff's Office to meet a female deputy and a detective.

The girls from Wilson were able to join the Heritage students several weeks ago for their first exposure trip. They traveled to the Licking County Board of Developmental Disabilities and participated in a panel of female leaders of local nonprofit organizations.

Members of the panel each talked about their dreams when they were in middle school and how that time in their lives influenced where they are today, Kaltenecker said.

"We want to get the girls out in the community, seeing powerful women in their positions," she said. "We want them to think, 'I can do this too.' "

Bringing Heritage and Wilson students together is just one way Girls in Progress can help build strong, supportive relationships between the girls that they can carry with them as they move on to high school, Kaltenecker said.

"I think they finally realized they are not struggling with things alone," she said. "They saw other classmates going through the same issues and emotions. That's why its so powerful."

Wilson eighth-grader Serena Pitts said she has enjoyed the program and hopes her younger sister will be able to participate when she gets to middle school.

Serena loves art and enjoys trying new materials in her art journal, but she said she knows the program also is helping her in other ways.

"We talk about things that are important, like body image," she said. "It's a circle of people you can trust who you can talk to anytime."