



Making All Welcome

• All-day summit for Los Alamitos Unified sixth-graders teaches compassion, kindness, and inclusion.

By Robert Ostmann

All Los Alamitos Unified School District sixth-graders spent an entire day recently examining who they are as people and how they can join together to support and encourage one other.

The students participated in the district's first Sixth-Grade Summit, part of the C.A.R.E.S. Program (Compassion, Action, Responsibility, Empathy, and Support) taught by sixth grade teachers at McAuliffe and Oak middle schools. The teachers had been trained a few weeks earlier by Embassy Consulting Services LLC, a human relations training firm run by long-time district parents, Josef Levy and Lysa Gamboa-Levy.

The summit provided an intensive, one-day training for students in a wide range of interactive social and emotional learning skills, including character education, communication, team building and conflict management. All the lessons were designed to provide students with a foundation to increase positive classroom and school-wide community behavior and academic performance.

In addition, students also took a brief journey through the peculiarities of the adolescent brain, learning about the amygdala's role in regulating emotion and how the hippocampus may affect how they process conflict. They also learned some techniques that can help them pause, focus

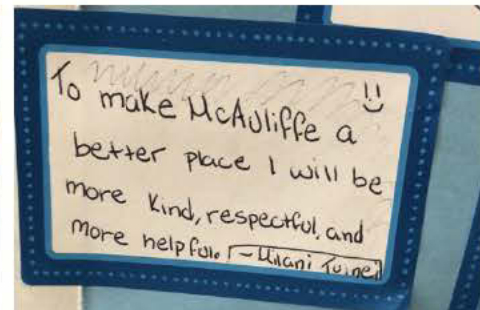
their thoughts, and reflect before they act. “We all should take a mindful moment before making big decisions,” said Oak student Juliet Nelligan.

At the start of the summit, Oak Principal Erin Kominsky told her 375 sixth-graders that she knows middle school is an exciting time, filled with demands and personal change. “Learning to be compassionate, learning to care, leaning to be respectful, and learning to be inclusive takes hard work. So we are going to spend the whole day talking about how we all— me included — can get better at this,” she said. “Our goal is to be an inclusive campus where everyone belongs.”

Ryan Weiss-Wright, principal of McAuliffe Middle School, said the summit for his 400 sixth-graders “was an opportunity for students to grow in their understanding of people and their unique differences. We have been doing a lot of work at McAuliffe around inclusion, kindness, and making a positive impact in the world. Students in the Summit had a unique opportunity to work with their peers to develop critical competencies that align with our school vision and mission.”

The Los Alamitos Education Foundation (LAEF) underwrote the summit with a \$10,000 grant to the district. Carrie Logue, LAEF’s executive director, said the foundation’s board of directors “was very excited to support this important social-emotional learning opportunity for every Los Al sixth-grader. Our mission is to prepare every child in our district for college and beyond and having strong self-awareness, social awareness and decision-making skills are critical for a productive, happy life.”

The all-day summit seemed to reach its target audience. “I learned that in most situations you can compromise and make a win-win situation,” said Oak student Stevie Holguin. “I am committed to compromising so everyone can have a win-win situation, and this will help to maintain a great school. “



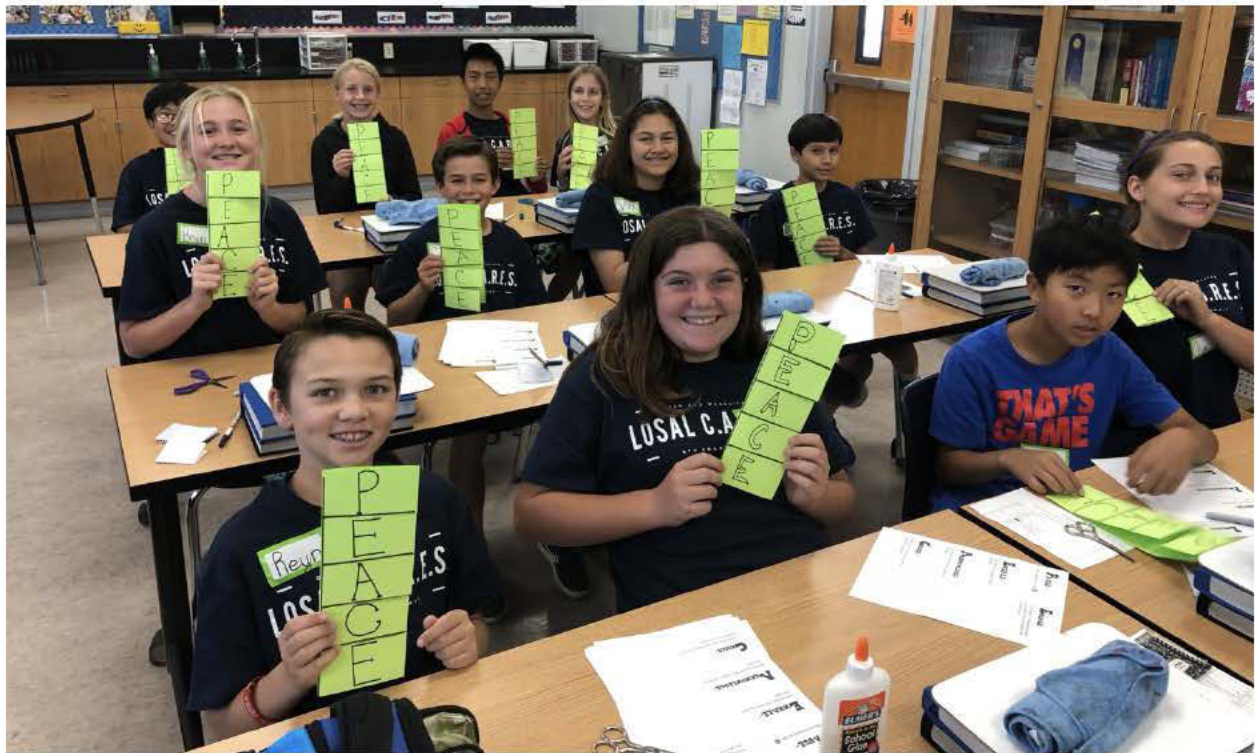
Milani Tuinei contributes her post-summit commitment to those of her fellow McAuliffe students.

McAuliffe sixth-grader Milani Tuinei said the summit “helped me be more mindful of other people and the way they see the world.” Her commitment when the day was over: “To make McAuliffe a better place, I will be more kind, respectful and helpful.”

Los Alamitos Unified plans to expand the program to all middle-schoolers so that students are even better prepared to integrate into the larger and more complex social world of high school.



McAuliffe students contribute human relations commitments to school wall.



McAuliffe students learn skills for PEACE—pause, exhale, acknowledge, choose, engage.



Oak teacher Juliet Gardner strikes a singing bowl to give sixth-graders a sound for focusing thoughts.



Oak campus supervisor Sicola Elliott celebrates in team building exercise.



Enthusiastic Oak Middle School sixth-graders students arrive for summit assembly.



Oak student Graham Reed shows off his summit shirt.