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Holmdel Schools Champion Student Empowerment Through Growing Peer Leadership Program

Holmdel School District is fostering a culture of empathy, respect, and student-led problem-solving through its innovative Peer Leadership Program for students in grades 4-6. This initiative empowers older elementary students to become positive role models and mentors, creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for the entire school community.

The core philosophy behind the Peer Leadership Program is to cultivate leadership skills in 6th-grade students while providing invaluable support to their younger peers at both Indian Hill and Village Schools. "At its core, the program focuses on empowering student leaders to support younger peers in handling everyday challenges with respect and empathy," explains the program advisors. These young leaders are trained to navigate common social situations, from playground disagreements and sportsmanship issues to the early signs of cyberbullying, by modeling positive behavior, active listening, and constructive problem-solving. Their presence helps cultivate a school culture where students feel supported, understood, and confident in their ability to resolve conflicts, ultimately shaping a more inclusive and respectful school environment.

Selection for the program is a rigorous process, emphasizing kindness, responsibility, and a willingness to step outside one's comfort zone. Prospective peer leaders complete an application and participate in a formal interview with teachers and administrators, often their first such experience, which underscores the significant responsibility of the role. Once selected, peer leaders engage in regular training sessions focused on communication, problem-solving, and conflict mediation.

A prime example of the program's success was when peer leaders developed and delivered an interactive lesson on conflict resolution to all 4th and 5th grade classrooms. These lessons incorporated open discussions and role-playing activities, enabling younger students to identify conflict types and learn de-escalation strategies. Additionally, peer leaders played a vital role in school-based activities like the 4th Grade Student Orientation. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with teachers noting high student engagement and younger students finding the advice more relatable when delivered by their peers.

The effectiveness of the program is measured through a multi-faceted approach, including self-evaluations from peer leaders after classroom visits and teacher reflections on mediation sessions. These tools guide follow-up conversations and help identify training needs. A more formal post-session reflection for mediators is also being developed to encourage critical

thinking about their communication and leadership. The program collaborates with principals to identify common conflict trends, which then inform peer leaders' classroom presentations. The enthusiastic participation during peer-led classroom visits and consistent positive feedback from teachers are clear indicators of the program's success.

Looking ahead, the Holmdel School District has ambitious aspirations for the Peer Leadership Program. Goals include expanding the peer leaders' roles beyond conflict resolution to encompass mentoring new students, supporting classroom community-building, and assisting with various school events. Building on the success of visits to Village School this year, the district aims to organize more such trips. Furthermore, plans are underway to survey teachers to identify current classroom issues, allowing peer leaders to tailor their lessons to real student needs. A reflection rubric for both peer leaders and students is also being developed to evaluate impact and foster continued growth.

Excitingly, the program is exploring the introduction of 5th graders as "peer leaders-in-training" to work alongside 6th graders, gradually building their leadership skills. The ultimate goal remains to provide students with meaningful opportunities to lead, learn, and make a lasting positive difference in their school community.

