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COMMENTARY

It's a small investment to help kids see what unifies them

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What price change?

Try \$3,200.

That's how much Ocoee Middle School needs to restore Challenge Day, a successful national anti-violence and unity-building program.

With state schools just shy of panhandling to teach the three R's after another deep swing of the budget ax, extras are luxuries. And with the economy in the dumper, PTAs won't find the hat brimming when it's passed. Which means schools such as Ocoee could lose out on real change.

Holly Torroija found herself weary from all the youth crime making headlines: Teens videotaping classmate beat-downs for clicks and giggles on YouTube. Bullies using text messages to threaten classmates. Fed-up kids making deadly choices.

So rather than skip to the funnies, she decided to make her own headlines by jumping into the fray after seeing the Challenge Day program profiled on Oprah.

"It just hit me in the gut," says Torroija, 38, of Altamonte Springs.

She rolled up her sleeves and last year rolled out Central Florida Circle of Change, an incubator for nurturing Challenge Day and its principles locally.

It works like this: Two facilitators from the California-based Challenge Day headquarters lead 100 or so kids in a 6 1/2 -hour workshop of games, discussions and exercises, such as "If you really knew me," that force students to reconsider snap judgments and confront their stances on issues such as cliques, bullying, stereotypes, racism and isolation.

But Challenge Day summons its power with the "cross the line" exercise. Students stand at one end of the room and cross a line if any of a series of questions applies to them. Questions such as: Have you ever been teased because of your looks? Has someone close to

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you died? Do you know anyone in jail?

In that moment, as students see cool kids and geeks, poor and rich, cheerleaders and plain Janes, jocks and nerds cross the line together, the veneer of difference dissolves. And they learn the program's greatest lesson: We're all passengers in the same boat. Going forward, the newly transformed are encouraged to "be the change" in their schools.

Rachel Belcher remembers stepping over the line last fall at West Orange High again, and again.

"You could see all the bad things happening to people who come to school with a smile on their faces. [But] you don't see behind the smile," says Rachel, 16. Now the cheerleader dines with new kids at lunch and smiles at people "wherever I go now, because you don't know what's happening with them."

The experience last year also transformed Ocoee Middle School student Kyle Piveral. The 13-year-old went "from just not looking at people in the hallway, to kind of smiling at people, or maybe waving at them -- and it passes it on. Now they might smile one more time in that day and make someone feel good."

Sure, it's more than a bit "Kumbaya"-ish. But you can't argue with change -- for example, the dip in disciplinary problems last year at Ocoee High after Challenge Day.

Torroija is a true believer -- but she's no Pollyanna.

"The lasting change that occurs is that bridges start to be built," she says. "It's not a quick fix at all. It's something that needs to be done every year to slowly change the culture of the school."

But change isn't free. The \$3,200 fee covers pre-event coaching, the daylong workshop, two program facilitators, phone consultation, themed banners promoting Challenge Day tenets, and post-event follow-up. Two schools with meager war chests already have canceled.

What price change?

We can pony up now for programs that make a difference. Or we can go on shaking our heads at the headlines.

If you want to help bring Challenge Day to Ocoee Middle or other schools, visit The Central Florida Circle of Change Web site at cflcoc.org. Darryl E. Owens can be reached at dowens@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5095.

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