

# 'CONVERSATION TOWARD A BRIGHTER FUTURE': Alton Middle School's Circle of Trust

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*The following article is presented as part of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities' "Conversations Toward A Brighter Future" discussion series.*

*The articles are prepared by the participants of the discussion in their own words.*



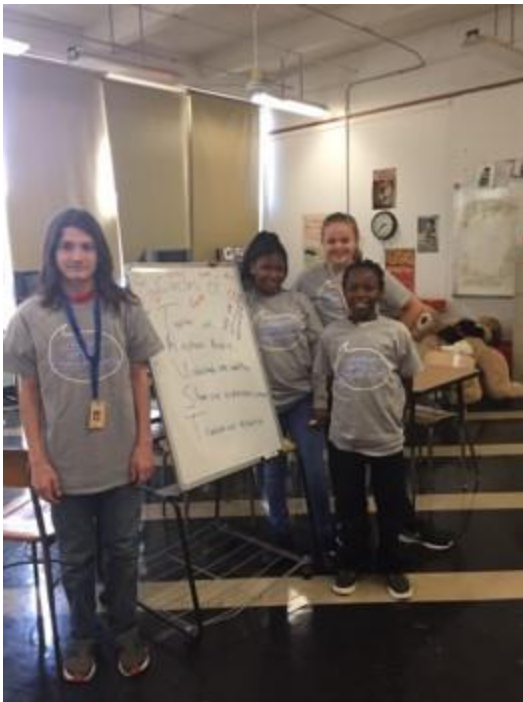
ALTON - The Alton Middle School project “Circles of Trust”, is in its second year, and is off to a positive start with 24 student leaders and hundreds of students schoolwide joining the effort. The goal of “Circles of Trust” is to enhance tolerance and acceptance throughout the school community.

Our focus is to address bullying, defiance, disrespect, and to support special needs students as they attempt to integrate into the regular school setting. The Alton Middle School (AMS) Leadership Team has begun to raise the awareness of the importance of

tolerance and acceptance by encouraging dialogue among students and staff. Increased awareness is occurring via classroom discussions, hall posters and flyers and social media.

The leadership team has worked with faculty to develop “Circles of Trust” guidelines and expectations for classroom conversations across all grades. “Circles of Trust” will also be facilitated by students during ISS (in-school suspension) twice a week. This will provide opportunities for perpetrators and victims to embrace dignity and forgiveness.

Another critical component of “Circles of Trust” is restorative justice, where students are empowered to resolve conflicts on their own. Students are brought together in peer-mediated small groups to talk, ask questions, and air their grievances.



According to data collected for fiscal years 2015 and 2016, Alton Middle School’s number of office disciplinary referrals increased from 1117 to 1263, with a large portion of those referrals received for disrespect, defiance, and/or bullying.

AMS students were asked to identify issues and/or concerns taking place at the middle school, a large portion of individuals alluded to instances of bullying and/or teasing, as well as defiance and disrespect. Using data collected from electronic referrals, in and out of school suspensions, and other data focusing on school climate; Circles of Trust leaders will evaluate the program and advance interventions to best meet the needs of all students at Alton Middle School.

One of our Alton Middle School classroom teachers stated “Because of our class circles, students are accepting more responsibility for their role in both creating and solving problems. It is much easier to encourage students to solve their problems themselves. I have gained more confidence that students have the skills to do so, but also in part because of how the project has shifted the way I communicate with my students.”



### Goals of Alton Middle School's Circle of Trust

- Enhance tolerance and acceptance by creating a constructive dialogue through “Circles of Trust.”
- Raise awareness of the importance of respect for others and acceptance via positive posters, flyers, and student engagement.
- Encourage students and staff across all grades to engage in classroom discussions around the four pillars of respect, dignity, understanding, and forgiveness.