

'CONVERSATION TOWARD A BRIGHTER FUTURE': East Alton Middle School's 'New Students with a New Start'

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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.

The East Alton Middle School project "New Students with a New Start", is in its second year, and is off to a positive start with 64 student ambassadors. Our goal is for new

students to feel accepted by their new peers. We plan to interact with our new students as they enroll at school and to make them feel comfortable. The success of our program will be monitored by student and parent surveys. These surveys are given to the new student when they move in and then to the new student, their parent and random grade level peers six weeks later.

At East Alton Middle School, we are a low-income school district with a high transient population. This school year started off with 18% of the student population being new or re-enrolling. Student ambassadors will be trained on positive ways to address new and returning students and to assist them with the transition. These ambassadors will ensure that our new students have their questions and concerns addressed promptly. There is always the same concern, “I don’t want to leave my old friends? How am I going to make new friends? What are these new people going to be like? Will I fit in?” These are all extremely important questions for new students.

We will place emphasis on making our regular students understand the stress and concerns that new students have and stress to them that our school will be judged and evaluated according to how we extend our “**Welcome**”. Students decide quickly if they are going to be friends or not with new students. They determine if they are preppy, athletic, nerdy, etc. They also judge them on their physical appearance. All of these things happen before any student has even talked to this person.

We will know we are successful when the survey results state that 100% of new students are making a smooth transition into East Alton Middle School. Their transition plan includes feeling comfortable in their new school, making friends and connections, and not encountering bullying or isolation. When parents of new students feel comfortable with their decision to enroll their student at EAMS, we will feel confident in our program. Until then, we will continually be looking for ways to improve the “New Start” for these students, and eliminate snap judgment bullying that so many new students face when starting at a new school.

Activities that ensure success for new students:

1. New Students will be assigned to our **New Start Advisory Committee** (made up of students). The new student will be assigned to an ambassador to assist with all aspects of transition. The Student Ambassadors will meet the new student upon arrival for their STAR testing and upon finishing their entry test, there will be a “Get to Know You” session, take a building tour, and have lunch. The goal is to find out more about the new student and give them an opportunity to find out more about the Student Ambassadors. During this time, they will also share contact information, including social media.

2. We will focus on the following core values:

- *Respect:* Now that the Student Ambassadors have had a chance to learn about the new student, they will contact them and invite them to activities they would be interested in. They will post positive things about them on social media and encourage friends to do the same as they meet the new student.
- *Dignity:* The Student Ambassadors will be wearing special bracelets to make them identifiable the first week that the new student is here. This will allow them to quickly find someone they know and ask a question to.
- *Understanding:* As Student Ambassadors, one of their responsibilities will be to stand up for the new student when assumptions are being made about them. Student Ambassadors will be responsible for utilizing the skills taught in Bash Out Bullying to break the silence and point out the new student's positive characteristics.
- *Forgiveness:* When the new students are having problems with a situation or another person, the Student Ambassadors will be the ones they can go to for advice. They can also work as a mediator to help fix the situation, or bring them to Mrs. Smith to discuss the problem and work towards a resolution.



After a month transition period, the student will be asked to complete a survey about their feelings towards their new start at East Alton Middle School. Their parent /guardian will also be given the opportunity to complete a survey about how their student handled the transition. A third survey will be given to random students at the specific grade level about how the new student was treated and welcomed into our

school. The feedback from these surveys will be analyzed by the New Students with a New Start advisory committee. They will then determine if changes to the program need to be made, or if a difference and a brighter future is begin achieved at East Alton Middle School.

Our goal for *New Students with a New Start* is that students will move to East Alton Middle School and feel accepted by their new peers.

The student ambassadors stand up to bullying such as actions or words that are directed towards new students.

They are to be a support system for the new students when they have questions or concerns.

Mrs. Smith was amazed at the number of students willing to help out new people and help make EAMS a better place to become a new student member!