



# GOOSE CREEK

## CONSOLIDATED INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT



Austin Havard (left) 5th grade student at Highlands Elementary School, spends some time outside with his PAL Dakota Joseph from Goose Creek Memorial High School.



Ross S. Sterling High School PAL De'Jah Hawthorne has lunch with 3rd grade De Zavala Elementary student Keaonte Jones.

## Peer Assistance and Leadership Students Make a Difference

They come in all shapes and sizes. They're from different backgrounds and have varied interests. Some are athletes, while others are technology gurus. Many of them already have a plan for life after high school, while some are still struggling with making those decisions. But they all have one thing in common—they are making a difference in the lives of others. They are PALs.

Each week, the 145 total students in the Peer Assistance and Leadership (PAL) classes at Goose Creek Memorial, Robert E. Lee and Ross S. Sterling high schools mentor students throughout Goose Creek CISD, providing support, encouragement and, oftentimes, tutoring. Counselors or administrators at elementary and junior schools match the high school students with some of their own students, hoping to create special friendships that will benefit both the PALs and the students they mentor, called PALees.

The PAL program began in 1980 as a peer helping group in one school in the Austin area. Now, more than 1,000 schools in 15 states are documented by Workers Assistance Program to have Peer Assistance and Leadership groups. PAL is a curriculum-based program, accredited by the Texas Education Agency as an elective course, and a National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP) recognized program. The mission of the PAL program is to enable young people to use their potential to make a difference in their lives, schools and communities.

PAL students learn to adapt the power of peer pressure to influence others positively. While the PAL program is about utilizing positive peer influence as a central strategy for addressing issues such as bullying, low achievement, at-risk youth, drop-out prevention, substance abuse prevention, teen pregnancy, suicide, absenteeism, behavior problems and other community issues, many times PALees just need a friend who is a good role model. Each PAL program is somewhat unique, but the curriculum stresses giving students the opportunity to participate in community service projects, teaching them the value of giving back to their community.

Goose Creek Memorial PAL sponsor/teacher Nancy Jacobs has led her PAL group since GCM opened its doors six years ago. Along with mentoring students at Hopper Primary, Victoria Walker Elementary and Highlands Elementary, her 50 PALs work with Life Skills classes, donate time and money to Relay for Life, and invite their PALees to visit the high school to attend class with them.

"My high school students tell me they are so touched by the children they are assigned," said Jacobs. "A lot of the relationships are slow to develop at first due to lack of trust, but at the end of the semester, the attachment is there, and it is a bittersweet ending. Some of my PALs stay in touch with their little PALees, so that in itself is an affirmation of the positive things that go on in the

Veronica Phillips has sponsored PALs at Lee High School for the past five years. Her 36 PALs mentor at Travis, Carver and Ashbel Smith elementaries as well as at Baytown and Horace Mann junior schools. Several students also visit St. Joseph's Catholic School. Their community service activities include the Exxon Day of Caring, Reach Out to Drop Outs, and work with the Houston Food Bank. They also take a senior trip and make a college visit. This is the fifth year Lee PALs have attended the PAL Conference in Austin to network with other PAL groups.

"As PALs, we are afforded many opportunities to better ourselves, our community and the people around us," said Phillips. "Community service helps us value and appreciate our lives while helping people who are less fortunate or are facing difficult circumstances."

Luis Espinoza, second-year PAL from REL, is grateful for his PAL experience and has learned numerous lessons.

"One of the most important lessons that I now try to live by is that you never know when you are being an influence to someone, so always try to be your best self," said Espinoza. "Remember always to have a purpose. It really makes my week when I show up to my PALees' schools and they come to me with big smiles on their faces. That's my purpose, and it makes everything worth it."

Sterling High School PAL sponsor Kelley Start is new at teaching the PAL group, but the program is in its 19th year at Sterling. Start's 59 PALs work with students at Alamo, De Zavala, Crockett, Gentry, Bowie, Travis and Austin elementaries as well as with Life Skills students on campus. She enjoys watching the strong positive effect her students have on the students they mentor.

"I have been amazed at the difference the students are making at each campus," said Start. "They are welcomed by the teachers, principals, counselors and students. I have had PALees in tears because their PAL was absent that day. It just shows how a strong positive role model can make a difference." Sterling PALs also create spirit signs for events, such as sports, Red Ribbon Week, College Week and Homecoming. They take charge of the Thanksgiving Food Drive, passing out boxes of food to more than 250 families. PALs also work with the vendors at the Sterling Bazaar, which is a Christmas craft fair.

"Being a PAL has given me the opportunity to be a positive role model for my peers as well as younger kids in our community," said Keller Thomas, RSS senior and two-year PAL member. "The ability to make an impact in their lives is truly a humbling experience."

The PALs will graduate and go out into the world, but they will leave a little bit of themselves behind with their PALees to help them succeed - some words of encouragement, the courage to stand up for themselves and the belief that they can accomplish their

...and the commitment to the program.

"It's a feeling that can't be described to know that you have made a difference in their lives despite the size of the gesture," said Corney Pierre, GCM senior.

dreams. And the PALs will take with them the many rewards they have gained from this experience.

As Garret Soileau, GCM senior PAL, summed it up, "We are there to change their lives, but they change ours."

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