

Adventure In Adventure Out.

In the winter of 2014, Amherst Regional Middle School (ARMS) and Adventure In/Adventure Out (AIO) partnered to offer our 240 8th graders a program we called “You Belong.” The experience our students had with each other as Ben, James and Pandora led them through their day, was, for many, transformative. The experience that I had as we collaborated with AIO was outstanding, and I look forward to ARMS working with AIO next year and the years beyond. And the impact that the day had on our students and their behavior toward one another was nothing short of dramatic.

Anecdotally, students report being significantly impacted by what they experienced with AIO. One student who was a reluctant participant praised his group-mates for “being real” and “sayin’ real important stuff” that allowed him to “share things I’ve never talked about before.” Another student used the heroic action taught in You Belong to report to a trusted adult what she’d known for some time about a classmate. Help was delivered and that heroic student, who’d been stuck in negative feedback loops with others for over a year found her way to taking positive action. Her parents noticed a clear, positive difference in her after You Belong. Finally, I’ll make a mild negative into a positive. Students who went on day 1 heard from students who went on day 2 and day 3 that transformative things had happened. Day 1 students complained to me that they “missed out,” some wanted to “go again.” Positive student buzz that makes students want to do something school-related is a rare thing indeed.

The most powerful quantitative evidence of the success of You Belong was in our discipline referrals. Typically, there is a significant spike in negative behavior in the spring, with both 7th and 8th grade classes during the 2012-2013 school year and the 7th grade this year (2013-2014) showing a doubling of their discipline referrals from January to March and April – typically from around 2 per day to around 4 per day. The only class that did not have this trend is this year’s 8th grade. Their discipline referrals were cut in half from January to February, from nearly 4 to 2.4, and have stayed at 2.5 per day since. So that means that as 7th graders, their negative behavior doubled starting in February, and this year, after You Belong, their negative behavior was cut nearly in half. Again, last year’s 8th grade saw the same spike in negative behavior. This year’s 8th grade is an anomaly, a good one, and the variable is work with AIO. AIO’s work created immediate positive buzz and significant medium term positive impact on behavior.

It’s clear where that positive buzz has its origin – in the skillfulness, experience, flexibility, compassion and passion that AIO facilitators Ben, James and Pandora bring to the planning and delivery of their programs. Ben worked for months to plan, share, market and adjust the curricula for the program. His commitment and skillfulness were essential to the success of the program. Having Ben as a partner at staff, community and student roll-outs put a charismatic face on the effort, helped inspire our fundraising and gave staff confidence that the program fit our mission. On You Belong days, Ben, James and Pandora led our 80 students and 10 staff through 6.5 intense, fun and unique hours of bonding, exploring, learning and growth. As the demands and needs of each group became apparent, and as several unexpected events occurred, the AIO team showed incredible flexibility and receptivity to

formative feedback. Their ability to pivot as needed, and still move toward meaningful and challenging goals was constantly impressive.

We will be working with AIAO again next year. In fact, parents of rising 8th graders have already pledged significant resources to make sure that their students have a chance to spend time together with AIAO facilitating their fun, learning and growth. AIAO is a special resource in Western Mass, and we're thrilled to be able to have our students work with them.

Mike Malone

Assistant Principal

Amherst Regional Middle School