

The Middle School Challenge Project

2023-24

Report to the Community



The Martin Luther King Diversity Committee

*A Collaboration between the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce,
the Jackson County Intermediate School District
and other Community Members*

MLK Middle School Challenge Project – 2023-24

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The Martin Luther King Diversity Committee (MLKDC or Committee)¹ is a collaboration involving the Jackson Chamber of Commerce, the Jackson County Intermediate School District and additional community members. Its mission is *“to encourage community collaboration to reflect Dr. King’s dream and to motivate youth for service and excellence.”* One of the ways the Committee actualizes its mission is to offer the Jackson community the Middle School Challenge Project.

The Middle School Challenge Project empowers middle school students to make a change in their community and to help them reduce the bullying, violence, and alienation they face from their peers. All Jackson County middle schools are invited to participate in the project. 2007 was the first year of the project, and it has been offered each year (although the project was canceled and not rescheduled on two occasions due to conditions outside the schools’ control). The county public schools adopted the Middle School Challenge Project as one of the strategies they use to comply with the staff and student training requirements of Matt’s Safe School Law (MCL 380.1310b). Other community health and education support initiatives² have identified the Middle School Challenge Project as one of the recommended strategies to assist middle school students in becoming socially and emotionally prepared to be successful in high school and capable of post-secondary success.

During November 2023, five county middle schools³ participated in at least one Challenge Day⁴, each bringing between 42 and 110 students. A total of 366 students participated in one of the four Challenge Days offered, and a total of 110 school staff and adult facilitators from the community volunteered for a Challenge Day.

The project includes all of the following elements:

- **Challenge Day:** The core of the Middle School Challenge Project’s core is participation in a Challenge Day. This one-day event gives participants a safe means for emotional expression and teaches understanding and acceptance of peers, conflict resolution, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. These initial tools provide a springboard to empower students to positively

¹ The MLKDC is a collaborative started by the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce and the Jackson Human Relations Commission (“HRC”) to commemorate the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and to provide an opportunity for the business community to demonstrate its support of the ideals he represented. The Jackson Branch of the NAACP was also an early partner in this collaboration. In 2012, the Jackson County Intermediate School District joined the Chamber and the HRC in this collaboration. The Committee also includes a cross section of business, education, non-profit and government representatives, along with some community volunteers. Each year the Committee also plans a community breakfast to honor Dr. King; some of the MLKD Breakfast proceeds support the Middle School Challenge Project.

² Community initiatives that validated the project were the Jackson Health Improvement Organization’s behavioral health team, and the Middle School Action Team of the Jackson Cradle to Career collaboration.

³ 2023 participating schools included Concord, Jackson Preparatory and Early College, Northwest Kidder, Springport and Vandercook Lake. Challenge Days were held on November 6-9 at three sites: Jackson College, Springport School District and Spring Arbor University.

⁴ Challenge Day © is an educational program designed to help students improve the social climate in their schools. Specifically, it gives them the tools to help them transform their schools into places where everyone feels safe, loved and celebrated. For more information on the program, please see www.challengeday.org.

impact other students' behaviors through additional activities facilitate by their school's Challenge Day liaison. *The goal for this portion of the project is to reduce bullying, violence, and alienation, to increase students' comfort levels, to increase self-esteem, and to inspire students to be agents of positive change.*



- **Student-Driven After Care:** Following the Challenge Day event, the students are challenged to return to their schools and turn them into the “schools of their dreams” and to “be the change they wish to see.” To support that goal, each year every participating middle school is asked to form a team of students who participated in Challenge Day, or use an existing school leadership group, to develop and implement follow-up activities. The committees are encouraged to use the following formula in developing and implementing their projects: NOTICE something in their community that they want to change, CHOOSE a way in which they can make that change, and ACT on that idea to achieve the change.

Each participating school designated a counselor or teacher to coordinate the pre- and post-Challenge Day activities, and to act as the school’s liaison with the MLKDC. The MLKDC shared resources and ideas to assist each middle school Challenge Day liaison and student committee in planning and implementing post-Challenge Day activities. This allowed students to practice the tools learned during Challenge Day in real-life school scenarios. Then, the MLKDC asked each school to implement at least three different projects, allowing for further engagement and reinforcement of the lessons learned during the Challenge Day event. Since the school is also required to implement anti-bullying programs and activities pursuant to state statute, the MLKDC hopes they can combine the Challenge Day reinforcement projects with

the anti-bullying requirements in a manner that satisfies both, while still ensuring that Challenge Day participants and their peers will continue to experience the impact of their November Challenge Day through the balance of the school year. The students have created amazing ideas to ensure that new students are welcomed, that their peers feel accepted and that their schools reflect the goals of Challenge Day. *Although the goal for this component of the Project is to reinforce lessons learned, we have consistently seen the students on the various committees develop, as an additional outcome, an enthusiasm to serve.*

Some examples of projects that the students have planned and implemented have included morning announcements from students related to kindness; intermittent lunch periods designed to build connections between students who don't normally associate with each other; creation of posters encouraging understanding; and thank you notes written by students to other students and/or staff who have been kind or who help their school culture.

- **Professional After Care:** Students participating in a Challenge Day occasionally reveal information indicating a need for professional social work intervention. If a “mandatory report” issue arises, the information is provided to the school counselor so that the necessary referral(s) can be initiated. In less severe circumstances, the school counselor might be asked to do a casual “check in” with the student to see how they are following their Challenge Day experience or to make extra efforts to observe the student and follow up on what they observe at school.

Although not accessed in 2023, the Committee also offers schools:

- **Teacher Training:** MLKDC members offer an optional workshop for middle school staff. The workshops are designed to give school staff members an understanding of what the Challenge Day program will be like for their students and to *give staff the tools to reinforce the lessons learned at Challenge Day*. Typically, the training is provided during a school's first year of participation in the project, but it is also appropriate when there has been significant staff turnover.



Throughout the seventeen years of this project, the Committee gathered documentation.⁵ Surveys of participating students have been conducted every year. In December 2023, participating middle school students were surveyed using an online instrument about a month after participating in Challenge Day. They were asked to tell whether certain statements were true about themselves, their peers and their schools, both: (1) before they participated in Challenge Day and (2) after Challenge Day. The survey responses indicate that the participating students believe they significantly changed, their peers significantly changed, and their school environments significantly changed because of their participation in Challenge Day. The most powerful survey responses were the significant increase in students who indicated they take action to improve their schools, help their peers and stand up for themselves. A description of the surveys and a summary of the students' responses are included in this report, beginning on page 7.



The Committee intends is to continue refining this Middle School Challenge Project to the point that it meets all the Committee's goals and is valued within our community. The Committee's goal is to "hand off" the project to the local school districts or to a consortium of local districts and funding agencies as soon as a long-term funding strategy is developed. The MLKDC also wants to ensure that every Jackson County middle school student (approximately 1700 students, rather than the 400 students invited this year) will be able to participate in a Challenge Day and the student-driven after-care activities that reinforce the lessons learned in this process. By expanding the number of students served, the Committee believes school cultures will be improved for the balance of the students' middle and high school careers. The program will invite 750 students to participate during 2024-25.

⁵ During the first years, school staff was surveyed prior to Challenge Day about student and staff behavior and student needs. In every case, the staff surveys indicated a significant level of poor behavior and self-esteem issues. Inasmuch as the Jackson County schools' Coordinated School Health Teams confirmed the need for anti-bullying interventions in middle schools, and state law recognizes bullying in schools as a significant problem and requires schools to offer anti-bullying education to students and staff, the Committee discontinued collecting data verifying the need for the Challenge Day program in area middle schools.

Funding and Support

The Committee could not provide any of these services to students without the significant help of many organizations and individuals. Funding agencies, organizations, and individuals for the 2023 Challenge Days included Culver's Restaurant donation boxes, the Kiwanis Club of Jackson, the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce, and an individual United Way donor designation. The Chamber's contribution was made from the proceeds from the 2023 MLK Diversity Breakfast, including a \$500 donation from AARP as part of its MLK Breakfast title sponsorship. \$32,779 was raised for the 2023 project, including carryover from the prior year's project savings.

In kind contributions, including such things as meeting facilities, food and water for Challenge Days, assumption of the cost for copying and mailing, staff support, maintenance of the www.JacksonMiddleSchoolChallenge.com website, and other professional services were provided by Challenge Day, Jackson College, Springport School District, Spring Arbor University, Jackson County Chamber of Commerce, Jackson County Intermediate School District, and the many additional volunteers. Our videographer, Luke Schumaker, a Spring Arbor University Communication and Media program student, provided us with a short documentary worth far more than the stipend received. This year, special mention needs to be made this year of the "in kind" donation by Jackson College of a site for two Challenge Days plus the lunches for participants on those days, which amounted to more than \$2,000 savings for the project budget. Springport School District also donated a site and provided lunches for participants at that location, resulting in another \$1000 in savings. Spring Arbor University also supported the program by providing us with a free site for a Challenge Day.

Additionally, most local school districts forgo the Committee's offer to subsidize the cost of transporting students to Challenge Day; \$100 has been budgeted for each school to assist with student-led projects to reinforce the lessons learned during Challenge Day (which have not been requested as the date of this report). As a result of these in kind donations, the 2023-24 Jackson County Middle School Challenge Project expenses incurred to date were just \$19,877, for an average cost per student attending Challenge Day of only \$54.30. The excess funds raised will be carried forward to fund the 2024-25 program.

Moving Forward

The Committee has completed seventeen years of Middle School Challenge projects with Jackson County middle schools. The project has grown from serving about 150 students to potentially 750 students annually. We are planning and seeking funding for an eighteenth Middle School Challenge for 750 students in 2024-25. Committee members are attempting to secure grant funding for a multi-year project beginning with 2025-26 that increases the number of Jackson County seventh-grade students in the Middle School Challenge Project each year by about 250 additional students. Based on the feedback from students and staff at participating schools, committee members are convinced that the Middle School Challenge Day Project is helping to reduce negative inter-student behaviors, students involved in the program are applying lessons learned at Challenge Day in their homes and neighborhoods, and they are making positive changes in the world around them. We are especially grateful that local schools coordinate this project with their comprehensive anti-bullying strategies and programming. We will continue to *challenge* the Jackson community to give our youth the experiences and tools to feel good about themselves and their peers, and to accept responsibility for making our community a better place.



Community members and organizations interested in learning more about the Middle School Challenge Project are encouraged to contact a member of the Committee. Your comments, participation, and other support are also welcome. During 2023-24, Committee members included:

Tim Booth, Jackson Co. Chamber of Commerce
Cathy Brechtelsbauer, Community representative
Elizabeth Gayle, Jackson County ISD
Jon Hart, disAbility Connections
Kira Hurley, Culver's
Angela Machnik, AM Corporate Events Consulting
Karen Richard, Blue Roof Hospitality, Inc./Culver's
Ryan, Tarrant, Jackson Co. Chamber of Commerce
Angela Watkins, Michigan Works SE

Lezlie Bowles, Baker College
Tom Davis, Spring Arbor Univ/Home.FM
Marcus Gill, Jackson County ISD
Keith Hurley, American 1 Credit Union
Nina Knight, Jackson College
Daveda Quinn, Community representative
Shana Rhoades, Jackson County ISD
Ariana Truman, Jackson Co. Health Dept.
Renell Weathers, Advocacy and public policy consultant

2023: Before-/After-Challenge Day Survey Results Impression of School, Self, Peers

Self-reported student impressions before and after Challenge Day

About one month after Challenge Day (CD), students read the statements below and reported whether each statement was true for them: “Never,” “Some of the time,” or “Most of the time.” They responded to the statements twice, once referring to conditions in their school before Challenge Day and once referring to conditions in their school after Challenge Day. The percentage of people who responded that the statement is true for them **most of the time** is indicated in the “Before CD” and “After CD” columns. The direction and amount of change is indicated in the “Change” column. For example, a change from 42% to 64% is an increase of 22% (+22). The results below are based on surveys completed by 530 students from all 17 participating middle schools.

<u>Statements</u>	Percentage of Students Choosing “Most of the time”		
	% Before CD (N = 255)	% After CD (N = 255)	Change In %
I feel safe and supported at school.	60	57	- 3
I feel proud of myself.	38	54	+16
People describe me as helpful and friendly.	48	56	+ 8
I confront peers who are making hurtful comments or choices.	27	44	+17
I help others at school.	48	59	+11
I get along with my teachers.	62	71	+ 9
Teachers notice when I do a good job.	48	55	+ 7
I like school.	25	34	+ 9
I get along with people from different cultural and social groups.	70	64	- 6
I stand up for myself.	70	55	- 15
I stop gossip when I hear it.	21	32	+11
I share my feelings and concerns with someone I trust.	35	42	+ 7
I stand up for others.	44	51	+ 7
I feel accepted by my peers at school.	38	47	+ 9
I ask questions when I need help.	40	53	+13
I love my life.	49	54	+ 5
I treat all people with equal love and respect.	55	60	+ 5
I eat lunch with new people.	22	27	+ 5
My school is free of violence and physical fights.	20	24	+ 4
I do things at school that make a difference.	24	29	+ 5
I try to do my best at school.	68	71	+ 3
I am treated kindly by students at school.	33	39	+ 6
I am treated kindly by adults at school.	70	69	- 1
Students treat each other kindly at school.	19	26	+ 7
I have chances to talk with a teacher one-on-one at school.	41	49	+ 8
My school is a place where everyone feels safe, loved & celebrated.	25	32	+ 7

Students’ reports of behaviors witnessed before and after Challenge Day

In the same survey, taken about one month after Challenge Day (CD), students reported how many times they had witnessed the following behaviors in a one-month period. The choices were “0-1 times,” “2-3 times,” or “4 or more times.” They responded twice, once referring to the one-month period before and once referring to the one-month period after Challenge Day. The percentage of people who reported witnessing the behavior **4 or more times** is indicated in the “Before CD” and “After CD” columns. The direction and amount of change is indicated in the “Change” column. For example, a change from 50% to 33% is a decrease of 17% (-17).

In the month [before/after] Challenge Day, how often [did you witness/have you witnessed] each of the following behaviors?

<u>Behavior</u>	<u>Percentage of students choosing “4 or more times”</u>		
	<i>Before CD</i> (N = 255)	<i>After CD</i> (N =255)	<i>Change</i>
Heard rumors or lies being spread	54	35	-19
Heard students threaten to hurt other students	35	28	- 7
Name calling or put downs	59	41	-18
Excluding someone from a group	35	26	- 9
Pushing, punching, tripping, etc. (in a mean way)	35	26	- 9
Hurtful texting or online posting (e.g., social media)	33	25	- 8

All of the frequently observed negative behaviors decreased following Challenge Day.

Students’ Self-reported Commitments for Change After Challenge Day

The final, optional question on the survey asked students, “*During Challenge Day, did you make a commitment for change? If so, what are you doing?*” The majority of students who answered this question said they did make a commitment to change, and they identified very specific ways they are going to help others and/or think more positively about themselves. The students’ responses are summarized within general themes of the responses below.

Written Responses Indicating the Student has made a commitment to:

Take action against bullying	5
Reach out to fellow students/make new friends	17
Be kind/be nice/be more respectful of others/try to make others happy	46
Help others/stand up for others/be more aware so I can help make a change	28
Be careful with words	3
Stop judging others/look at others differently/improve own reactions and understandings	12
Respect myself	8
Do my best	8
Stop rumors	0
Set a good example/spread the lessons learned	1

Improve family relations	2
Be myself/be more open	7
Stop hurting others/apologize	6
Forgive others/start fresh to give others a chance to be friendly	0
Ask for help/tell an adult about what is happening	4
Learned a lot/changed my perspective/still thinking about making changes/still working on my emotional wellbeing	3
Take better care of myself-physically/emotionally/spiritually	4
Stay off social media	1
Appreciate my life more/like school more	
Students who replied that Challenge Day made things worse and/or increased concerns	0

NOTE: Funders and school districts wishing to see all student responses are encouraged to write cmcbrech@gmail.com for that information.

Conclusions

Student responses show that the students perceive an encouraging trend comparing the month before and after Challenge Day participation; they reported incidents of good behaviors between students increased and negative behaviors decreased. Keeping in mind that the Challenge Day participants represent approximately 42-110 7th-grade students at the participating schools (only Springport sent their entire 7th-grade class), the students’ perception of change is remarkable, and supports both the continuation and expansion of this program in our Jackson County middle schools.

Looking at the positive statements that address **self-perception** (highlighted in **red** in the first table, page 8), it appears that less than half of the students (on average) had positive self-image “most of the time” before Challenge Day, and afterward positive self-image responses increased an average of **9.4%** for the group. The positive statements highlighted in **blue** on page 8 reflect the students’ **perceptions of their school climate** before and after Challenge Day. While there is a great deal of variance in those responses, there is a theme: on average, the majority of students felt adults treated them kindly most of the time before Challenge Day, and even more so afterward; most of them did not feel students (including themselves) were well treated by their peers, but those numbers moved higher in the month following Challenge Day. These responses related to student perceptions of their school should be studied by individual schools to focus action plans for improvement, but overall students’ perceptions of school climate improved an average of **9%** following Challenge Day participation. Finally, the positive statements that address specific behaviors of the students and positive actions they take (statements highlighted in **green** on page 8) indicate Challenge Day participation significantly increased the students’ **perceptions of what they themselves do** “most of the time” to make school a better place for themselves and their classmates. On average, **5%** more of the students say they are taking these various positive actions “most of the time” following Challenge Day.

Participating students also perceive significantly less negative behavior in their schools following Challenge Day. On average, 13% fewer of them observed various hurtful and threatening behaviors four or more times in the month following Challenge Day, than they did during the month prior. The data, again, should be studied by schools to see which areas to focus on to improve individual school climates.

As a final note, please find below some representative student responses to the question asked about their commitment to change following Challenge Day. Please imagine the impact on our schools if every seventh-grade student in every Jackson County middle school made a similar commitment!

I stop myself when I notice I'm judging someone and consider other reasons why they did the thing they that.

I try to not put myself down as often as I used to.

To not let people be mean and spread rumors about others. So when I heard it, I told them to stop and they did.

My goal was to be more helpful and be there for people, and I think I have accomplished it pretty well. I think that now that I know about people and what they go through, I'm more empathetic.

I made new friends and I will be friends with them for a while.

I am trying to be more understanding and reaching out to others more than I have in the past.

Looking to my future, whether it is my career or taking care of myself, mentally and physically.

I stopped bullying people.

These survey results and school staff anecdotal observations indicate more needs to be done to reduce incidents of teasing, bullying, physical violence and similar negative behaviors, as well as to prepare our young people emotionally for high school. However, most students and staff think the Challenge Day experience was valuable and effective in addressing these types of issues.

The data supports the MLKDC *goal* of providing the full Middle School Challenge Project experience to every seventh- grade student in Jackson County every year. We encourage everyone who reads this report to check out the www.jacksonmiddleschoolchallenge.com and www.ChallengeDay.org websites, consider volunteering for a Challenge Day next November, provide financial support for the project, or show a young person that they are valued and that they have the power to make his/her community better.

We firmly believe it is up to us to reflect Dr. King's dream, to motivate our youth to a life of excellence, and to follow Mahatma Gandhi's legacy by being the change we wish to see in the world.

Check out our 2018 Middle School Challenge Day documentary video and get information about becoming involved in the program at www.jacksonmiddleschoolchallenge.com.