

Youth Frontiers: Building Cultures of Respect in Schools

"There are these kids at school who make fun of me every day. Can you do anything to stop them?"

That courageous question from Diane, a 10th grader in Montana, launched Youth Frontiers (YF) in 1987 when Founder & CEO Joe Cavanaugh took her question seriously. Over the last two decades, Cavanaugh built an organization on the idea of fostering safe, positive school communities where students and educators can thrive emotionally, socially and, therefore, academically. Says Cavanaugh, "We are not succeeding as a society if our children receive an 'A' in Math... and an 'F' in life."

Joe started YF to help the "Dianes" of the world – the 2.7 million students who face bullying at school every day. Thus far, the organization has served more than one million youth across the country, with the vision to change the way young people treat each other in every hallway, lunch line and classroom of every school in America so that today's young people can make tomorrow's world better.

To accomplish this, Youth Frontiers offers retreat programs for students from kindergarten through 12th grade. These interactive programs are designed to have the greatest possible impact and function as a catalyst for getting students to care about character. The retreats are developmentally appropriate for each age group and take into account what stressors and issues kids may be facing at school.

The programs can be described as MTV-meets-Aristotle days, featuring loud music, team-building activities, small-group dialogues, powerful presentations and large-group sharing times. Led by professional actors, musicians and youth workers, YF knows how to "speak kid" in a way that students understand, and challenges students to think deeply about their character and behavior.

An independent study by the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement shows that Youth Frontiers' programs help develop social-emotional learning (SEL) skills in students. Research continues to demonstrate that social-emotional development impacts not only the emotional well-being of individuals but also their academic achievement. YF retreats support the primary academic mission of schools by providing instruction in SEL competencies like self-confidence, empathy and connectedness.

The retreats are one piece of a network of support Youth Frontiers offers to schools. Comprehensive follow-up materials are customized for each age level to remind students of the themes they learned on their retreat, while challenging them to continue to stand up for respect in their schools. YF knows it takes more than curriculum to get kids to care about issues of character. YF also acknowledges that it takes more than one day of each year to truly change a school's culture. Yet, YF retreats are a critical piece to the puzzle of building healthy and safe schools, and each retreat and its follow-up curriculum contribute to shaping the way students treat each other every day.



www.youthfrontiers.org

