

## Montgomery HS forum to address drug awareness, bullying Monday

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Photo: Meagan Ellsworth



Florida-based Be Strong Executive Director Ashleigh Cromer, Montgomery County homeschooled student Theresa DeMayo, and her mother Dede DeMayo stood before the Montgomery school board in March to discuss the student-led bullying prevention program.

The Montgomery ISD administration, police chief, county attorney, district attorney and drug counselors will give presentations addressing drug awareness and bullying/cyberbullying during a parent forum starting at 6:30 p.m. Monday in the Montgomery High School auditorium.

Recently, Montgomery resident Brandie Joy, Florida-based Be Strong Executive Director Ashleigh Cromer, Montgomery County home-schooled student Theresa DeMayo and DeMayo's mother Dede DeMayo stood before the Montgomery ISD school board with a plea for student safety.

Joy shared the story of when her child was bullied and even asked the school district to consider plastic backpacks. Cromer, who stood on the ground at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School the day of the deadly shooting, was at Theresa DeMayo's side as the student told the board about her experience with bullies at another area school district. "We elevate the voice of the children," Cromer said.

Now home-schooled, DeMayo, 16, is on a mission as the Be Strong Texas student state representative to get the bullying prevention program in every Texas school. She informed the board she has a 11-year-old niece who attends Montgomery ISD, has faced bullying and asked her questions that were difficult to answer.

"She asks me all the time, 'Theresa, why don't people help us and why do adults let other kids act horribly to one another'," Theresa DeMayo said. "I have to respond with 'I'm sorry, I don't know.' Because I don't. I don't know why adults would let kids hurt or come to school afraid when they have the power to change things. Putting Be Strong in schools would change things. It would create a team within the students and also create an all-inclusive environment

so that kids don't feel alone or afraid to come to school. It teaches kids how to face and eliminate bullying; it teaches them resilience and is not only for the victims but for the bullies as well."

Be Strong, she said, positively creates change and makes a good point not to bring up religion and politics so that it can be used in all schools without bringing up personal beliefs so there will not be any conflicts. She said the program is about students empowering students, with certain student leaders chosen to teach their peers. The program is free, except for the cost of textbooks; but Be Strong finds global sponsors to help schools with the cost, according to Theresa DeMayo. "I know we all want to see change, we all want to see the students, staff and parents happy," DeMayo told the Montgomery school board.

Board President Ken Thomet told The Courier following the meeting that board members value and appreciate hearing from students, teachers, parents and taxpayers during the public participation portion of every regular meeting. However, due to the Open Meetings Act, board members are not able to take action on items presented in the public participation portion of the meeting because they are technically not on the agenda. However, he said it is customary for the board to direct the administration to provide additional information, follow-up and direction to ensure our patrons concerns are addressed."

"Student and staff safety are our highest priority," Thomet stated in an email to The Courier. "The MISD Board understands the responsibility parents have given us to protect their children, and we are committed to making the Montgomery ISD schools safe places for kids to learn and grow."

Superintendent Dr. Beau Rees, who recently issued a letter following the Florida shooting that addressed campus security, said Montgomery ISD's goal is to work as true partners with parents to constantly improve the district's community response to the ever-changing and complex needs of students.

"We are so lucky to be in a school district that has parents like Brandie Joy, who go above and beyond to help and partner with us to make our schools safe havens for kids and world-class learning institutions," Rees said. "Theresa and Dede were so gracious in relaying their experiences. Any time you have the opportunity to provide students an authentic voice in solving problems like bullying or harassment, the results are phenomenal."

According to MISD Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources Sonja Lopez, the district has the following practices in place to build partnerships between families, students and schools and provide opportunities of awareness and two-way communication about such issues as school safety, substance abuse, appropriate peer relations, social media use and more:

- \* Anonymous helpline reporting at each and every campus where administration receives immediate notifications once a report is made of any type and responses are provided to each and every phone call, e-mail, or text.
- \* Student leadership groups on every campus where topics such as bullying, social media use, (and so much more) are discussed and ways to improve are provided to campus advisory committees.
- \* Annual MISD Safety/Security Appraisal, which collects input from Campus Advisory Committees and District Advisory Committee through a parent/community survey and student stakeholder meetings on ways to improve safety and security measures in MISD. Results will be presented to the board at the May or June meeting. MISD will consider adding the Be Strong Organization.