



DO THE WRITE THING TEXAS CHALLENGE

The victimization of young people and juvenile delinquency are public safety, health, educational, family and community problems in our state and nationally. Its harmful effects can be life-altering and enduring for individuals and have lasting consequences on society.

The Do the Write Thing Texas Challenge is a multi-faceted youth anti-violence program focusing on the most vulnerable age group – 6th, 7th and 8th grade students. They are entering adolescence, a period of bewildering physical and emotional changes. In addition, science shows that their brains are being re-wired and the region of the brain essential to self-control is the last to be developed (early twenties).

Self-destructive behavior, violent acting out, alienation from the community, truancy and academic failure are predictors of a dysfunctional adulthood.

Violence is contagious--is the conclusion of a scientific study that included neuroscience, behavioral science and epidemiology research.

The Institute of Medicine 2013 report, "The Contagion of Violence" states that violent behavior is transmitted by individuals as a learned behavior, some examples are: exposure to domestic and child abuse, school and neighborhood violence. Additionally, whether one is a victim or witness to violence, it is traumatic and can have serious mental health consequences—it can lead to many of those affected to engage in anti-social conduct.

This is especially true for middle-school children. Teens tend to become less empathetic from early to mid-adolescence because conflict makes them less sensitive, according to Caspar Van Lissa, researcher, Utrecht University. He defines empathy as the ability to connect and relate to others.

Social behaviors teens develop in adolescence have a formative impact on brain development and may become lifelong patterns for good or ill, per researchers at University College of London, England and the National Institute of Health, Bethesda, Maryland. Empathy has been described as the building block of morality.

Our data is unsettling: Too many middle school/junior high children, regardless of economic status, are anxiety ridden; fear is a pall that cloaks their lives, at home, at school, everywhere. They are constantly apprehensive, dreading to be hurt whether by malicious words, physical assault or deadly conduct. They are enticed or threatened to join gangs; drugs are thrust upon them; Internet pedophiles stalk them; bullying is pervasive and many are abused children or live in chaotic environments.

The goal is to protect our young from violence, illicit drugs and other anti-social influences by equipping them with the relational tools to avoid and resist engaging in risky activities, thereby reducing delinquency and enhancing the learning environment. The ultimate result is to inspire them to be constructive, civic-minded citizens in building and sustaining a robust civil society.

The Challenge is administered through public, private and parochial schools in urban, suburban and rural areas. Title I schools and districts are emphasized. It is an academic program that is presented in Language Arts, Social Studies, Health or Physical Education classes. Students examine the causes of youth violence, analyze the impact on their lives and propose solutions. Specifically, the students address three questions:

**How has violence affected my life?
What are the causes of violence?
What can I do about violence?**

The Challenge is an on-going, enormous effort involving educators, civic leaders, the community, government and public safety officials, health professionals, bar associations, parents and students. Our educational advisors annually update the materials to meet Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, (TEKS) objectives, STAAR expository writing requirements and prepare realistic scenarios for the lesson plan.

Teachers present the program, there is classroom discussion, students research the project, there is further discussion of issues and debate, and then they write. This is a cognitive process in which the students develop critical thinking skills. It involves conceptualizing; gathering information, analyzing and evaluating it; they reason, reflect and observe and incorporate their own experiences; and they compose. They are enthused because they are working on a subject they know, their opinions are solicited and they feel valued and empowered. In many schools, the DtWT project is yearlong with student poster drawing, newsletters and other student lead initiatives. Even a cursory review of the essays shows their commitment to taking personal responsibility, to be a role model and their optimism that they can make a difference.

Every student who writes is given a certificate. For some this is the only positive tangible recognition they have received in their school career. Every paper is read by Community Readers who select a boy and girl finalist for each school. A Distinguished Readers panel then reviews the finalist papers and selects a girl and boy national finalist to be ambassadors from each DtWT site. These sites also publish the school and national finalist papers and conduct a recognition event. The Texas ambassadors, their teachers, and a parent or guardian, join the national finalists from other Do the Write Thing sites around the country in being honored with ceremonies and events in Washington D.C. hosted by the National Campaign to Stop Violence. The NCSV prints a book of the national finalist papers which is placed in the Library of Congress.

The *Do the Write Thing* Texas Challenge program sites are in Austin, Beaumont/Southeast Texas, Brownsville/Cameron County, Corpus Christi/Coastal Bend, Dallas, El Paso, Houston/Harris County, Laredo and San Antonio.

In the 2020 Challenge, over 63,000 students in 212 schools across Texas participated in classroom discussion as a result of the Do the Write Thing Texas Challenge, with over 34,000 of those students writing and submitting essays. This is a massive year round project and evolving process that continues to address contemporary challenges facing our young people.