



# SARALAND Board of Education

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Saraland Schools Project Outreach - Building Relationships and Encouraging Acceptance**

SARALAND, AL (May 3, 2016) -- Saraland schools' Project Outreach was organized last fall from elementary to high school and has already seen positive changes on each campus regarding the way students with exceptionalities are treated.

Project Outreach provides a support system for students with disabilities and those without to start developing relationships, according to Erin Pugh, special education teacher at Saraland Middle School. These relationships are good for all students and can provide inclusion and acceptance for students with disabilities as well as someone to advocate for them as they transition into other schools.

“Our goal for any Project Outreach activity is to foster positive relationships, awareness, and understanding of individuals with disabilities in the community,” Pugh said. “I want people without disabilities to spend time with people with exceptionalities in order to see their special talents and to appreciate how awesome and wonderful they are.”

At each school, club members are involved in events and activities that allow students a chance to communicate, collaborate, and build new relationships. Across all three campuses they have held Christmas parties, a Valentine's Day social, field trips, and participated in the Special Olympics. The Project Outreach groups at all three schools work to raise funds for various causes, such as the Syringomyelia Foundation, along with events that raise awareness for causes such as autism, the International Day of Acceptance, and more.

“In the short amount of time that this club has been a part of Saraland High School, we've seen new relationships form and social barriers broken,” said Lauren Cunningham, teacher and high school Project Outreach sponsor. “It is a beautiful thing to see students, with and without disabilities, who are notorious for being shy, open up to one another and build relationships.”

Lacy Prater, with the elementary school Project Outreach, has been pleased with the level of interaction from her young students and how eager they are to participate, bring ideas, and make new friends.

“I can only imagine the bonds that will grow if the students begin at the elementary level and continue to be a part of this club until they are in high school,” Prater said. “Hopefully they will make lifelong friendships, and perhaps these experiences will even impact their future career choices.”

Pugh started the Project Outreach program at Saraland Middle School after seeing other schools create similar clubs. By joining Project Outreach Gulf Coast, Saraland schools were provided a starter kit and everything they needed to establish the club. After just a few months, the elementary school has 41 members, the middle school 55, and the high school 42.

“It is my belief that one of the greatest indicators of a quality education is witnessing students cherish diversity and accept those students who might have challenges not faced by the typical student,” said Dr. Aaron Milner, Superintendent of Saraland City School System. “I am extremely proud of these students, and the success of Project Outreach is another example that every student regardless of ability level is cherished in the Saraland City School System.”

Attitudes at Saraland schools are changing and more and more students are seeing the benefits of relationships with students who might be different from them. Club officials are hoping this idea will spread into the local community as well.