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Principal defends hugging crackdown

'Extreme' embraces clog halls, she says

By Alexa Aguilar

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Victoria Sharts likes hugs. In fact, the principal of Julian Middle School in Oak Park said she could have used one herself Monday.

Her announcement last week asking students to refrain from extreme hugging in hallways sparked a media response that caught her off guard, she said. Over the weekend, she had to issue an emergency parent response to dispel rumors of an outright ban on hugging anywhere in the school.

Regardless of what parents have heard or read, the directive to the school's roughly 800 students is to quit clasping one another in the hallways, because group hugs are creating logjams that make it difficult to get to class, she said.

"We appreciate hugs," Sharts said. "We know there are times that hugs are needed and welcomed, but every 40 minutes in the hallway, with large groups of students -- then it's not."

The hugging also makes crowd control difficult, she said. There is also a concern by school officials that the hugs can be unwanted or become inappropriate when the embrace goes on a bit too long.

Most of the extreme hugs are from girls, who greet each other several times throughout the school day with a squeeze, she said.

A group of friends can all give each other a hug between class, meaning more than a dozen hugs can occur just during a trip to the lockers.

Students would be punished for hugging only if they refuse to disentangle once asked to stop by a teacher, she said.

The hugging pronouncement is a small part of the larger school initiative that encourages students to act civilly and with respect, she said. Last week, students watched a video about bullying and will continue learning about bullying throughout the year.



"The intent was never to create a sterile environment," Sharts said.

Julian Middle isn't the only school where hugging has become a hot topic.

Over the last two years, schools from Des Moines to Cornwall, England, have asked students to cut back on the excessive hugging that seems to have become a universal greeting among young people.

The reason: The endless embraces are also leaving their halls congested.

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