

Pay It Forward nomination **Team**

Transitioning to high school can be a difficult time, as being a teenager and adjusting to a new school can be challenging.

That's why Addison Trail High School offers an event called Pay It Forward, where incoming freshmen spend the day with Addison Trail students and staff, learning what it means to be an Addison Trail Blazer. The day includes a Freshmen Orientation component, various leadership workshops, speakers, team building exercises and activities to help students understand what it means to "Pay It Forward" in high school and in life. The event concludes with a reflection period and a dance, where students are able to celebrate their work.

For more than 15 years, this event has provided eighth-graders with an opportunity to build a foundation at Addison Trail. And it truly takes a team to make the day a success. About 100 volunteers – comprised of Addison Trail staff members; staff from Indian Trail Junior High School (an elementary school that feeds into Addison Trail); parents/guardians; and community members – help ensure everything runs smoothly. The planning team, which includes a CORE team of about 75 high school student leaders, meets for several months to coordinate the details through about 20 training sessions. Those CORE team members also travel to the local elementary school districts to chat with eighth-graders about Pay It Forward and promote the event.

Addison Trail senior Bianca Piscopo is a CORE team Director and said she fell in love with Pay It Forward as an incoming freshman and has helped run the event ever since.

"Pay It Forward is an important event because it teaches kids how to become more aware of other people's lives and struggles, how to become a stronger leader and how to handle stress," Piscopo said. "It also is an important way for the kids to meet new people. Some kids come from a class size of 25 or even 200, but when they transition to high school, they're going to be surrounded by thousands of people, and Pay It Forward makes that transition easier. Not only do they create friendships with other eighth-graders they meet, but they also make connections with upperclassmen, who can show them around and give them advice."

About 300 incoming freshmen attend the event annually, and each year features a different theme. Co-sponsor Jorge de Leon said Pay It Forward has two main goals:

1. To familiarize students with the school culture at Addison Trail.
2. To remind students of the importance of relating to their peers.

"In today's society, we're bombarded with technology, and it can be easy to forget about our humanity," de Leon said. "This event allows students to give back and develop relationships with eighth-graders to help them get on the right path to have a successful high school experience."

He added one of the activities during the day is for participants to write a letter describing where they are now in life. The students are then shown those letters during their senior year.

Co-sponsor Jack Andrews, an Addison Trail alumnus (class of 2011), participated in Pay It Forward when he was in eighth grade. He said the event had such a positive impact on him, he then served as a student leader and has continued to help plan the event every year since he graduated.

“One of the highlights of Pay It Forward is it’s another way to align Addison Trail with its feeder elementary schools,” Andrews said. “This event allows students to form connections and helps create a welcoming environment. High school is about more than academics – it’s about finding yourself. And Pay It Forward helps provide that holistic high school experience.”

Andrews and de Leon served as co-sponsors this year, along with Lauren Ross, RJ Budler and Lindsay Bugajsky.