



Mathews County Public Schools

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To Whom It May Concern:

Mathews County is a small rural community located in eastern Virginia situated on the Chesapeake Bay. It is a close-knit community where the schools are the hub of local activity. Mathews County Public Schools has three schools serving approximately 1,175 students: Lee-Jackson Elementary (PK-4), Thomas Hunter Middle (5-8), and Mathews High (9-12).

As with any school division, we are faced with growing concerns of adolescent self-harming behaviors and general self-esteem. These concerns include sexting, substance abuse, bullying, mental health, suicide prevention and self-respect, specifically, in our middle and high schools. When our school division was faced with a significant increase in negative behaviors that involved local law enforcement, it became apparent that a third party would be needed to work with our students, parents, staff and community as a whole.

A local law enforcement investigator conducted a nation-wide search for a program that would "fit" our local values and core beliefs. The investigator approached the local School Board to ask for support in bringing Jeff Yalden to our schools to work with the student population. The response from the School Board and the community was overwhelming.

Jeff mingled with our students in grades 7-12, throughout the day, beginning with an assembly-style interactive appearance followed by small group and individual conversations. Within five minutes of Jeff beginning the conversations, you could have heard a pin drop. The usual adolescent banter and chatter completely ceased. Every student, teacher, staff member and administrator (including myself) was glued to Jeff's message: Value yourself and the people in it. Do the work and be grateful for the little things. Choose a positive behavior and the attitude to go with it. Make positive choices.

As the day progressed, Jeff partnered with our guidance department to lend support to small groups and individual students. Some of these students were not on our 'concern radar', but came forward because of Jeff's message: Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. It's OK to have crazy emotions and feelings AND it's OK to go talk to a trusted adult.

It is without reservation that I recommend schools, youth organizations, school boards, anyone who has a vested interest in youth to engage Jeff Yalden in your community. He has a natural ability to capture their attention and engage in difficult conversations for the betterment of their lives.

Sincerely,

Nancy B. Welch, Ed.S.
Division Superintendent