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Picture your first day of high school, can you remember what it was like being the freshman? Can you remember what you wore? What about what happened that day? Are you the same person you were then as you are now? I have changed a lot since my first day of high school. I have evolved into a much better person thanks to getting involved with my school and the Peers in Action program.

When I was in junior high I didn't think anything I did or said hurt anyone.

I didn't bully anyone and I tried to say only nice things. I had no idea that using the "R" word had so much effect on people until I got into high school. On the first day of my freshman year we had a school wide assembly and Ms. Baumgardner gave everyone two options: Be a part of the solution or be a part of the problem. We all signed pieces of a puzzle to form the solution to stop using the "R" word. Just by her giving us those two options opened my eyes and I realized I truly wanted to be part of the solution. That's when I decided to never use the "R" word again and to join the Peers in Action program. It was hard and scary at first. It was hard because I used to use the "R" word so much and it was scary because I didn't really know what I was doing. But once you get into the classroom, once you get to know the kids, it's not hard or scary anymore. The kids become friends you will have for the rest of your life, you realize how much the "R" word affects them and makes it a lot easier not to use the word because you would never want to hurt their feelings. The Peers in Action program isn't just about Spreading the Word to End the Word We do a wide variety of things, some that have to do with the whole state of Illinois and some our school just does. Our school gets involved in Project Unify, and we have even sent students to play for the Special Olympics. Getting involved is how you're going to make a difference. This past February I went to a Youth Activation Summit, which is basically groups of young people coming together to make a difference with the Special Olympics. There I met a girl named

Kylie who reminded me a lot of myself. She is a junior, she loves to dance, she's always smiling and she likes cute boys. The only difference between me and Kylie is the fact that she has Down syndrome, but if I would have judged her just from that I might not have found out how much alike we really are. I would never want someone to bring her down in any way, especially if they referred to her as the "R" word. Using that word not only affects her but the ones who care about her. One step at a time Peers in Action is taking time to make a difference for our community. We started with the Spread the Word to End the Word videos, "I'm Eric" and "You Abuse the Word", we also organized the friendship walk in Honor of Sammy Sartoris, and we take the Life Skills kids to the high school games, hold an annual hay rack ride, we carve pumpkins, and even organize games where the Life Skills kids can play during half time. These are just some of things to show how much we are all alike.

Everything that Ms. Baumgardner and all the other Life Skills teachers do has not only opened my eyes but a lot of other students as well. Our whole school has changed. You will never hear about anyone bullying our Life Skills students and almost everyone does not say the "R" word. I am very impressed with how much respect our students and teachers have toward the subject. Because respect truly is the key, so ask yourself; are you going to make a difference today or are you going to let someone else do it tomorrow.