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A Lea County girl participates in this past summer's MyPower Quantum Leadership Camp at the Hobbs High Commons. As one of the key factors MyPower, Inc., has helped in reducing Lea County's overall teen birth rate by 70% in Lea County in 15-17 year olds since 2009. Below, four participants at the camp hold up a power stick during one of the program's sessions.

Empowering girls

MyPower continues to develop Lea County's young women

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NEWS-SUN

At one time Lea County had one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in New Mexico.

For the past 10 years the teen birth rate in Lea County has dropped 70% among 15-17 year olds and almost 55% among 15-19 year olds.

The Hobbs School Board recently received these statistics through a presentation from Danielle Hernandez, program director at MyPower, Inc.

"We are so proud at how far our community has come and we have done this all together," Hernandez said. "MyPower's mission is to empower young women to successfully navigate through their teenage years by making good choices, setting goals, succeeding academically and avoiding teen pregnancy."

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Since 2010, MyPower, Inc. has worked with more than 7,853 5th-9th grade girls in three programs the nonprofit provides: Elementary Mentoring Circles, Middle School Edition and its Quantum Leadership Camps used to empower girls.

Hernandez said that according to the New Mexico Department of Health, MyPower's work is leading the way in changing the culture. She told the board Lea County is reducing teen pregnancy rates quicker than any other county in the state.

"Our representative told us that what we are doing here is working and needs to be duplicated throughout New Mexico," Hernandez said. "While rates are down in Lea County, we still have a long way to go. And my heart is committed to the process to our community and to our youth."

The process includes continued work with the three programs.

MyPower's Mentoring circles work with girls in their last year of elementary school (5th grade) in eight elementary schools: Hobbs' Southern Heights, Jefferson, Will Rogers, Broadmoor, Edison, College Lane and Eunice's Mettie Jordan and Jal Elementary. These circles are held weekly after school for 12 weeks from Jan-

uary-April. Around 50 female volunteers make the program possible each year.

"We had 195 students participate and graduate this past year," Hernandez said. "In this program we teach our students to be proud of who they are and where they come from. The power to say no to peer pressure. How to break vicious and unhealthy cycles. We teach them how to set goals for both short-term and long-term success. We teach them about their anatomy and have two-way dialogue to answer health-related questions."

The Middle School Edition program is a six-session program that takes place over a six-month period at Heizer, Highland and Houston schools in Hobbs and Eunice's Caton Middle School. There are 1,118 students currently participating this school year.

"This program takes place in their home room period," Hernandez said. "We teach the girls how to speak with good purpose, commitment, ownership, integrity and how to be a good human with a good sense of civic duty."

The MyPower Leadership Camps are academic life-skills camps that take place in July. This past summer 282 girls between 6th and 9th grade participated in four simultaneous camps. There were approximately 400 parents and community members who attend-

ed the parent meeting and the program's graduation. It was the 10th year of the leadership camp program, and to date, it has had 2,409 participants from throughout Lea County.

"We hosted these programs at the Hobbs Freshman/Commons buildings and we are so grateful to have this partnership to be able to do these programs at your school," Hernandez told the school board. "We also teach the girls academic strategies like note-taking skills, memory and reading techniques. We teach them positive self-coaching, setting boundaries, the power to say no and how to self-advocate. These are academic and life-skills that will help in the middle school, high school, college and for the rest their lives."

Hernandez said MyPower, Inc., isn't just a teen pregnancy program.

"We are paying attention to the children in our community," she told the school board. "We are guiding, mentoring and caring for them. I am guessing you all had a mentor or adult that you looked up to. Every child just needs one adult they can depend on. We set them on this journey to be mentors and how to care for the kids in our community, but in return we are the one who are humbled and empathetic."

For more information about the MyPower, Inc., visit mypowerinc.org.