

# Portland students beautify vulnerable spaces: School bathrooms

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Students at King Middle School in Portland recently completed four murals around the question of “How do kids feel safe in school.” The murals were created to be installed in the school bathrooms, the location chosen by the students because they are a place where bullying can happen and fights have taken place in the past. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

When students at King Middle School in Portland were asked last year where they feel least safe at school, they quickly identified the school bathrooms as a place where students are vulnerable.

“Last year there were a lot of fights and arguments that happened in the bathroom,” said Morgan Deveau, an eighth-grader. “We were noticing that people were getting upset about that.”

Based off the feedback from the students, the school embarked on a monthslong project to beautify the school bathrooms and transform them into safe, welcoming spaces.

Working with the group Side x Side, which aims to integrate art into local schools, teams of seventh-graders spent last winter and spring researching public art and how to create safe spaces. Teaching artists came into their classrooms to lead them through the process of designing murals.

The students kept visual journals and came up with sketches for what might make the bathrooms feel more welcoming and safe.

They thought about color palettes, words and visuals to change the space and shared them with a local artist, Abigail Gray Swartz, who ultimately designed the murals based off the student feedback and painted them over the summer.

Peter Hill, a teaching strategist at the school, said staff last year wanted to do something to empower students and improve the school community.

“In terms of a place where there’s not a lot of adult supervision and where kids can really be empowered to be their best selves, why not use the bathrooms?” Hill said. “I can stand in the stairwell and be preventative, but the bathrooms are where kids are vulnerable. They’re by themselves and feeling the most exposed.”

School bathrooms are also a place where students go if they need an escape or to regroup, which added to the appeal of the location, students said.

“Some people just go into the bathroom and do their business, but some people need hope in their day,” said Jean-David Bisimwa, an eighth-grader who worked on the project last year. “Looking at the murals kind of makes them feel better.”

In addition to working with artists on the design of the murals, the students were also involved in applying for and securing a \$460 grant from the group Painting for a Purpose. The \$10,000 project was also funded with community donations, school funds and the help of Side x Side.

“It was sort of a fun challenge,” said Gray Swartz. “Growing up I was bullied in high school and the bathroom was like my safe space, a place to take a moment and cry a little if you need to. I have a best friend with a similar story. I think every adult sort of has a bathroom story of going and needing to take that break and have a bathroom moment.”



Morgan Deveau, an eighth-grade student at King Middle School, talks about the four murals she and other students created around the question of “How do kids feel safe in school.” *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

Hill said the project also helped students feel empowered by providing them a space to celebrate diversity.

“At King, which looks very different from other middle schools in Maine, I think some of our students are often presented with inspirational classroom posters and things like that that don’t really look like them and don’t resonate with them,” he said.

Forty-five percent of the student population at King was white in 2018-2019, compared to 88 percent of students statewide. The murals reflect that diversity by featuring students of all races with the messages to “Be yourself” and “Be confident.”



Jean-David Bisimwa, an eighth-grade student at King Middle School, talks about the four murals he and other students created around the question of “How do kids feel safe in school.”

*Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

“To see a student walk by the mural and say, ‘That’s me,’ it was super powerful,” Hill said.

This year the students said there have been fewer fights and arguments in the bathrooms.

“Now when you enter the bathroom you mostly think about, ‘Look at that mural. It’s so pretty,’ instead of the conflict that’s happening,” Deveau said.

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