

DAILY PILOT

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Nothing 'whack' about this award

Newport Harbor honored for its campaign against hateful language and for tolerance.

By Britney Barnes, britney.barnes@latimes.com

COSTA MESA — Newport Harbor High School was to be honored Thursday night for trying to create a campus where hateful language is eliminated. The school was to be recognized with a Distinguished School Award from the OC Human Relations 40th anniversary awards celebration at the City National Grove of Anaheim.

"I was really thrilled that my students were going to be honored because they've worked so hard," said Newport Harbor English teacher Deborah Pogue, who advises the campus' BRIDGES Club. The club has a campaign called "That's W.H.A.C.K.," which stands for "Words Hurt and Can Kill," to stop the use of racist, sexist and homophobic language on campus and show their effect.

The campaign helps create tolerance and a school climate where everyone feels safe, said Rusty Kennedy, the executive director of the OC Human Relations. The commission is a county agency tasked with eliminating prejudice and tolerance to create an Orange County where all people are included, valued and respected.

"Tonight, we're honoring Newport Harbor High School because we're holding them up as a model for creating a safe and inclusive high school environment," Kennedy said

The club's students surveyed the campus before starting to see how often they hear "toxic language" used and were surprised at the results, Pogue said. "Almost every single day students heard toxic language and bullying," she said.

Words can not only hurt but have a more powerful effect on people than physical violence, said Maricela Jauregui, a senior human relations specialist. The students have put on a number of events like a seminar on the power of words and a pledge to stop using toxic words and, Pogue said, already she has seen students stop mid-sentence and change their word choice.

"I think that being a high school campus, any changes will be slow, but I have seen a difference," she said. "They made an effort. It's not perfect yet, and I don't know how long that will take, but the students stop and correct themselves."