Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: How do kids build friendships and navigate bullying in schools? Dr. Leslie Echols, Missouri State University associate professor of psychology, is trying to find out with her latest research project. Echols and her co-researcher, Dr. Sandra Graham from University of California-Los Angeles, received a grant of about half a million dollars from the National Science Foundation. It will be used to create and implement an anti-bullying program in selected middle schools in both Missouri and California. I'm Emily Yeap.

Echols joins me today to share more about her research focus and the new project.

Leslie Echols: I'm a peer relations researcher. I look at how students in school are doing socially. That involves how well they're able to make friends, and it also includes bullying and victimization. Right now, I'm conducting a study, it's actually an intervention project, and I'm working with both the bullies and the victims. So I want to help reduce bullying, but I also want to give victims the tools to cope with the bullying if it happens to them.

Emily Yeap: Powering Up is the name of the program created through the grant.

Leslie Echols: We have three components of the program. One is called Peer Power, and we are working with a group of students to help change the social norms about how people are treated in school. These students are called Peer Builders, and they're part of a curriculum. They send positive messages, and then they share all of the information that they have learned with the rest of the school. Their role is really to help shape a positive peer culture in their school. So they're sending messages to their peers. They make announcements. They make posters based on the curriculum that they're a part of. And it's been really, really exciting to see what a positive impact that has had.

The next source of power, we're calling Why Power. And the group of students in this part of the program are called Why Finders. And their primary responsibility is to help understand the reasons why bullying occurs in middle school, and they can use that information to help peers out who are being bullied, but they also can use that information to help understand their own experiences with bullying and victimization.

What we're trying to do in this part of the program is help students understand that bullying in middle school is so prevalent that most of the time, it's going to happen in various forms to a lot of different students. And so when it happens to you, we don't want you to blame yourself, but we want you to see it in kind of a larger picture of, this is something that happens a lot in middle school; these are the reasons why. And so we try to remove that self-blame from the equation.

The third component of the program is called Friend Power. For this part of the program, we bring the Peer Builders and the Why Finders together. We teach them about the importance of making friendships. They're able to participate in activities where they get to know each other and build friendships with each other, but then also learn those same skills that they can share with people in their school … just to be building a lot of positive relationships among the peers, because that's one of the best ways to reduce bullying in a school.

Emily Yeap: The program's pilot phase began last year in a local middle school. Although COVID-19 caused some challenges, the program is moving along.

Leslie Echols: The really neat thing about the program is that we give the curriculum to the students who are participating, but then they really are doing so much of the work to spread that curriculum throughout the school. We're hoping that we can deliver the content virtually, but then they're still going to be in the school doing the activities that they were doing before and some other things to finish out the program.

Emily Yeap: The plan moving forward is to get the program into more area schools in the upcoming school year.

Leslie Echols: At that point, we'll be collecting pre and post-program data to look at changes in rates of bullying and victimization. And most importantly, changes in mental health adjustment among the victims.

Emily Yeap: That was Dr. Leslie Echols, associate professor of psychology at MSU. Tune in next Tuesday for the second in a two-part series about this research effort.

I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.