

PUPIL PEACEKEEPERS PREPARED TO MEDIATE MIDDLE SCHOOL TIFFS

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Adolescent school children argue about all sorts of things.

It's not unusual to hear them squabbling over pencils, lunch tickets, money, girlfriends, boyfriends, he-said-this and she-said-that, says Roderyck Bullock, a seventh-grader at East End Middle School in Richmond.

If those tiffs get out of hand, they quickly can lead to bigger trouble -- fights, injuries, trips to the principal, suspensions or expulsions.

But Roderyck and 15 of his classmates think they can help head off trouble. That's why they've become conflict managers -- pupil mediators who, starting today, are available each day at school to help their peers talk out, rather than fight out, their differences.

It's all part of an unusual conflict management program -- the first of its kind in Richmond -- sponsored by the Richmond Peace Education Center. The program kicked off yesterday with a schoolwide assembly.

"You the students will be working to lower the level of violence," Wendy B. Northup, Peace Education Center coordinator, told the 560 pupils gathered in the school auditorium. "It will help you feel better about yourselves and East End Middle School."

The keys to making the program work are the 16 conflict managers, hand-picked seventh-graders who've undergone several hours of training in listening and mediation skills.

Their job is to coax peaceful, mutually agreeable solutions from pupils caught up in an argument.

The process has been used in more than 200 schools across the nation to reduce fighting, name-calling and boyfriend-girlfriend disputes by more than 50 percent, according to the Peace Education Center.

A similar program soon will begin in Richmond's Robert E. Lee Elementary School.

Two conflict managers are on duty daily during activity or lunch periods to listen to pupil disputes. They won't get involved in serious incidents, however; physical fighting and run-ins with teachers will continue to be handled by school officials.

When an argument arises, the conflict managers ask those involved whether they want the disagreement settled through mediation. If all are willing, they must agree to ground rules -- no name calling, interrupting, lying or fighting.

The conflict managers then invite the disputants, one at a time, to describe what happened and how each feels about the incident. The conflict managers have been taught to repeat what they've heard to demonstrate they've listened accurately and impartially.

They then ask each party how he or she thinks the problem can be solved. That's a key step, because it allows the disagreeing parties to come up with their own solution, the goal of non-violent conflict resolution. The conflict managers never are to impose a solution.

"I'm excited" about being a conflict manager, Roderyck said after he was introduced yesterday during the assembly. "I feel a little like a psychiatrist, letting people express themselves and get their feelings out."

Charles Hartridge, another conflict manager, agreed and said he's confident the program will work.

"I think (pupils) will go along," he said. "They're easy to get along with."

East End Principal William H. Joyner, who presented each conflict manager with a T-shirt yesterday, urged his pupils to get involved in the program.

"You need to make more choices," he told the assembled schoolchildren. "Let's take it seriously. . . . We're the future of the East End community and we're responsible for it."

- Caption: PHOTO
- Memo: (lko)

