



October 20, 2008

## Piscataway students learn peaceful problem-solving in anti-violence program

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When students at Dwight D. Eisenhower Elementary end up in Principal Mylo Wright's office, the first question Wright asks is always the same.

"Even if it's just a minor issue that brings them to me," Wright said, "my first question is, 'Did you use the I messages?'"

"I messages" are statements expressing feelings, part of a system taught at the school to de-escalate confrontations. When a conflict arises, students are instructed to first calm down by counting to 10 or taking deep breaths. Then the students are taught to explain their own feelings instead of lashing out.

"When you are angry, you will probably say something like 'You're such a moron, you're a jerk,'" said Ildiko Henni-Jones, the school counselor at Eisenhower.

A possible "I message" would be "I feel angry because you pushed me," Henni-Jones said. The "I feel..." format is the basis for the term "I messages."

"I messages" are just one facet of a counseling curriculum taught in grades K-12 at the 7,000-student public school district. This week, the district is marking School Violence Awareness Week with a series of lessons, seminars and art projects at schools across the district.

At Eisenhower, which is home to 550 students in grades K-3, the week started off with an assembly themed "What Peace Means to Me."

"We've learned that all people are different and there's all different kinds of people, and peace is helping out people," said third-grader Alexandra Franchi.

Jessica Scott, another third-grader, said she has learned to talk things out.

"We've learned that using our words inside of problems solves the problems peacefully," she said.

The district's counseling curriculum for lower-elementary includes lessons on responsibility, self-awareness, diversity and manners, among other topics. Wright said those skills are incorporated in a set of expectations students are taught from the beginning of the schooling.

"At this age, they're only starting their school experience," Wright said. "So we like to set the foundation in terms of acceptable behavior in school, how to make friends, how to get along with all different types of people."

Crystal Silas, a kindergarten pupil, said she has learned to be kind, to share, and to be loving. She said when she gets angry, she likes to "walk around" to calm herself down.

Jessica Pepe, a second-grader, said she's learned how to stop herself from becoming angry.

"If a person tells you that you're not good enough, you just take it down peacefully," she said.

Henni-Jones said violence is not common among the young students she counsels, but she said the skills the students learn can help prevent violence as the students grow up.

"These are the skills that you need in high school," she said. "...These skills are very, very essential."

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