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Teaching nonviolence to the young

Southbridge school wins national PeacePartners honor

By Rushmie Kalke TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

SOUTHBRIDGE— It seems basic enough: Praise others instead of putting them down, seek out good mentors, right a wrong and help others. But getting children to practice these principles is a daily act of dedication and reinforcement by staff at the Charlton Street School.

The school proudly displayed its successes Friday, as one of nine Showcase Schools designated by PeacePartners Inc., a Long Beach, Calif., organization that has implemented its PeaceBuilders program in 600 schools nationwide.

At a presentation given by PeacePartners representatives, students performed a skit and there was a tour of the classrooms.

Principal Bryant C. Montigny said the PeaceBuilders program has been part of the school's culture since 1998. Four teachers attended a training session in Tucson, Ariz., and now the terminology is part of everyday learning for children, he said.

To demonstrate, seven students — each citizens of the month — recited a peace pledge that is said every morning. They wore white T-shirts that said "I'm a PeaceBuilder" in blue letters.

The children spoke of what they were proud of. Anissa Gagnon, 8, a third-grader, said she was happy to be earning A's, B's and sometimes C's on her report card. Luis Ortiz, 9, a third-grader, said he helped someone stand up after they had fallen.

The program is based on research that shows giving children consistent expectations, a positive environment, and tools to behave in nonviolent ways will decrease aggression and negative behaviors. A study by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1994 found the program decreased disciplinary action by 49 percent and serious violent episodes by 59 percent.

School violence is a primary concern for officials across the country. Recently, just days after the seven-year anniversary of the Columbine High School slayings on April 20, 1999, authorities broke up alleged plans for other school killings. One was in Washington state, involving a 16-year-old student. And North Pole, Alaska, six middle school students allegedly were planning a campus massacre.

"Bullying is becoming a national issue," said Jessica Beaumont, PeacePartners' assistant director of business development. More schools around the country are seeing problems they want to address, she said. "This works as a good preventative program, not only for violence. It provides strong character education."

The program has age-appropriate activities for older students and can cost a school between \$90 and \$250 per staff member for training and implementation support, Ms. Beaumont said.

The second- and third-graders at Charlton Street School give each other notes of appreciation. They are taught to notice when they have hurt another person, apologize and figure out how they will modify their behavior for next time.

In one class, students sing songs about peace, which helps "to leave a bad day or something that happened at home behind you," said a student. Another class practices reading skills with a story about reasons not to

be mean. Each room has a bulletin board that is filled with art, posters, or pictures about acceptance and peace.

The challenge is getting new teachers and students acclimated to the program. "It's hard if you don't know the concept. You need to have the parameters of what works and what doesn't," he said. The school provides training for newcomers, and students usually learn by watching their classmates.

After a week, a new student who was skeptical had a change of heart.

"He came up to me, gave me a pat on the back and said, 'I am in the program,' " Mr. Montigny said.