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## Public school officials hope **PeaceBuilders** can improve behavior among youngsters

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*John A. Bone/Times-News* From left: Mount Savage Elementary School Counselor Stephanie Howell, Allegany County Board of Education Supervisor of Health and Family Life Lorelee Farrell, and Beall Elementary Counselor Kandi Ashby make a poster depicting their combined vision of a peaceful school. Representatives from the county's schools attended a **PeaceBuilders** training class Wednesday at Allegany College of Maryland.

**John A. Bone/Times-News /**

**CUMBERLAND** — Allegany County public school officials are taking steps to try to curb a surge in bad behavior over the last several years, particularly at elementary and middle schools.

A new character education/violence prevention program called **PeaceBuilders** boils down to a few simple rules for teachers and students alike.

Praise people.  
Give up put-downs.  
Right wrongs.  
Help others.

"What are some things you can do in 30 seconds to help others?" asked Sheila Carter, a trainer for the California-based **PeacePartners Inc.** who visited Allegany County on Wednesday. "Open a door. Say hello. Smile. A smile is so simple to do, but sometimes that's all a child needs."

About 40 guidance counselors, teachers and administrators gathered at Allegany College of Maryland for a several-hour workshop to learn the principles of **PeaceBuilders**. The program, purchased with federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act funds, is to be implemented this spring at elementary and middle schools across the county, said Lorelee Farrell, supervisor of Health and Family Life.

"Our suspensions for classroom disruption and disrespect have very gradually been climbing over the last several years," said Farrell, adding that school districts are required by law to address such issues.

According to statistics from the Maryland State Department of Education, the number of Allegany County students being suspended for disrespect, insubordination and classroom disruptions has more than doubled in the last six years.

During the 2002-2003 school year, 353 students were suspended for those offenses; last year, the number was 716 students, an increase of 103 percent.

Statewide, the number of suspensions for those offenses decreased slightly, from 46,696 in 2002-2003 to 44,323 last year.

"At our school, (office) referrals are really up," said Earlene Mason, guidance counselor at Washington Middle School.

"Kids are fighting a lot this year. I would like to see what this program can do to change that. And to get kids in eighth grade who have an 'I-don't-care' attitude — which comes from put-downs and not wanting to help others — to see if that can change before we ship them off to high school."

**PeaceBuilders** uses simple exercises to help students focus on the basics of good behavior. At Wednesday's workshop, for example, Carter introduced Bluey, a 3-foot-tall person cut from poster board, then asked participants to hurl insults at him.

"We don't like blue people here," one counselor said, ripping off a piece of Bluey's arm.

"You look like a Smurf," said another, ripping off another piece. Before long, Bluey had one leg, no arms and part of a head.

Then each participant was asked to make a positive comment about Bluey and tape back his body part.

"Put-downs leave scars that may never heal," said Carter, holding up the battered Bluey. "Think about when you were a child, did you receive a put-down that you remember to this day? Think about how words can hurt."

At the middle-school level, students are asked to make a **PeaceBuilders** Pledge, which touches on the six major points of the program.

"We look for the good in others and praise them," the pledge states. "We show respect when faced with disrespect. We seek wise people as advisers and friends. We speak up about hurts we have caused. We create a positive plan for making amends. We picture the good that can be and act to bring it about."

The concepts aren't new for teachers and counselors, said Paula Smith, fifth-grade teacher at Flintstone Elementary School. Most Allegany County schools have character education programs in place, including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

**PeaceBuilders** will enhance what's already being done to address behavioral issues, Smith said.

"This isn't really reinventing the wheel," said Smith. "It's just really simple things that don't take a rocket scientist to figure out that gives these kids a positive focus. ... It's not an overnight turnaround, but it does make a difference."

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