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Redmond school is based on pledge of nonviolence

By Rachel Tuinstra
Seattle Times Eastside bureau

The day starts at Redmond Elementary School with students taking the Pledge of Allegiance, and then the PeaceBuilders Pledge, a promise that the children will build peace in school, at home and in the community.

That pledge sets the tone for the day — on the playground, in the classroom, in the cafeteria.

The PeaceBuilders program, which employs techniques and activities to promote nonviolence and prevent bullying, is built around a simple tenet, that students, teachers and staff members will be good to one another, won't hurt each other and will tell someone they trust when they have conflict with one another.

On Friday, the school has invited the community to see how the program works. The event is from 9 to 11 a.m., with the public welcome to attend a presentation, take tours of the school and go to the playground during recess to see how students use the program, Principal Janice Heid said.

The event will highlight Redmond Elementary as one of three schools nationally that the PeaceBuilders program is showcasing as a model for how the program works.

"The school has adopted this as a way of life; it's an undercurrent in everything going on there; it's infused in their daily lessons," said Donna Burcher, communication director for the California-based PeacePartners, which facilitates putting the program in schools and other youth groups or agencies.

Unlike other anti-bullying programs, this isn't a curriculum schools add to their classroom agenda. Rather, the principles of the program are blended into what is being taught, Burcher said.

Teachers will give students Praise Notes when they've done something good, and if students are fighting, they may be asked to come up with a "peace treaty" and agree to end their conflict.

It works, Heid said.

Students are taught that every action they take either increases peace or decreases peace in the school, Heid said.

"It empowers kids, and makes them feel part of a community," Heid said. "It changes their mind-set. We spend less time on behavior problems, so teachers have more time to spend on academics."

Nationally, the PeaceBuilders program has been used in more than 600 schools and youth-based organizations, Burcher said, and on the Eastside, it's used in 13 Lake Washington School District schools, and one in Bellevue.

"I think this makes a big difference to all kids, but especially those kids who haven't had stability in their lives," Heid said.

Redmond Elementary, 16800 N.E. 80th St., is near Redmond's downtown. The school often enrolls children from two local shelters, and 40 percent of its students are on free or reduced lunch.

The school pays PeacePartners \$250 annually to maintain the program.

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Signs in school hallways remind students, teachers and staff members of the six guidelines of the program: praise people; give up putting others down; seek wise people when there is a conflict; notice and speak up when you have hurt others; right wrongs; and help others.

"It makes a difference in how the school runs. It runs on a positive note, with kids showing kindness and caring," said Leslie Fields, counselor at Redmond Elementary. "It's a very friendly, warm, family and community feeling at the school."

Making students feel happy and safe at school is an important part of the program, Fields said.

"With the world such a crazy place, they need to know school is a safe place, that we care about each other," she said. "It sets a tone for how people should be treated, that this is how we behave here."

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