



Archdiocese
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The Record

Students are learning to be 'PeaceBuilders'

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When bullies were getting too much power at St. Gregory School in Samuels, Ky., a couple of years ago, concerned and frustrated students went to the faculty to seek a solution. And the school turned to PeaceBuilders, a program that gives students and teachers tools to interact and solve conflicts with peaceful means.

The peace pledge —that PeaceBuilders schools recite each day — calls on students to: praise people, give up put-downs, seek wise people, notice hurts, right wrongs and help others.

At St. Gregory School, the program has solved the bullying problem by changing the atmosphere at the school, said principal Paula Cecil.

"The kids are aware of what bullying is now," she said. "They know it's a serious thing. That's been a large part of stopping it.

"I have seen kids work out their own problems," she added. "It has made an impact."

Cecil was one of more than a dozen educators and counselors who visited St. Edward School last week for a PeaceBuilders information meeting. Representatives of Catholic and public schools attended the meeting to see how the program has worked at St. Edward and St. Gregory, which were selected to showcase the program's success.

St. Edward piloted the PeaceBuilders program when it first came to Louisville about six years ago. The program is administered by PeacePartners, Inc., based in California. Now 16 schools in the Archdiocese of Louisville use the program.

St. Edward students start each day with prayer. Next they recite the pledge of allegiance, and then they say the PeaceBuilder's pledge, principal Susan Jones said during the meeting.

Before the school adopted PeaceBuilders, "we were spending recess time handling problems on the playground," she said. "Now, if there's a problem on the playground, the students 'seek a wise person' before they get into trouble. Or if they do forget to do that, you can say to them, 'Are you being a PeaceBuilder? What can you do to right this wrong?' And they know what to do.

"Our students learn to apologize. And to say, 'I accept your apology,' when they are ready."

St. Edward eighth-grader Kristen Schorch said the program changed the social atmosphere at her school.

"People are more willing to help. They're friendly," she said. "I didn't have a lot of friends (before the program started)," she said. "But it's gotten a whole lot better. I have a whole lot of friends now."

And when a new student comes to the school, she said, "I try to be friendly and to become friends. PeaceBuilders says, 'Be friendly to everyone.'"

Heather Helmkamp, a fourth-grade teacher at St. Edward, said that the PeaceBuilders program makes her job "extremely easy as a teacher."

The program can be integrated into every lesson, so it doesn't add to the teacher's workload, she said.

She also noted, "I've gone through some things in my personal life, and the kids were right there for me. I'm very proud of the fourth grade."

One of her students, Holly Hildebrand, noted that the program "has helped me be a better friend." And, she said, no one gets left out.

For bullying and other violence to decrease at a school, students have to see that rules are enforced, said Dr. Tom Robbins, director of counseling and safe and drug-free schools for the Archdiocese of Louisville. And then the school must cultivate respect — to be modeled by the adults in the school, he said.

"PeaceBuilders adds to the climate of respect," he said. "We find that in schools that really are committed to the program, it really does curb school violence."

Robbins said he has seen firsthand the good effects the program has had on local schools. And his findings have been confirmed by independent research conducted in the University of Louisville's college of education. Surveys administered by the university's department of educational and counseling psychology have shown that the PeaceBuilders program decreases bullying, he said.