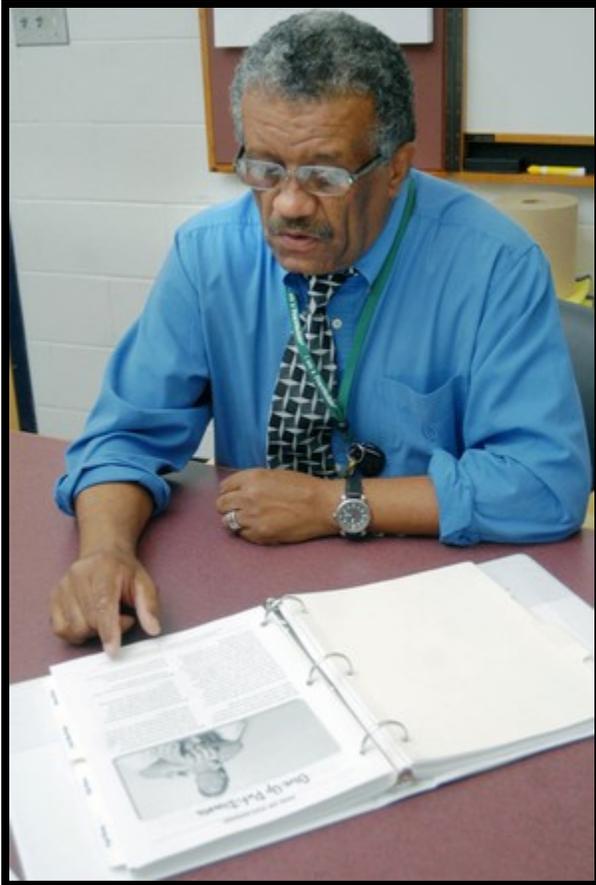


Giving Peace a chance



Caption: Nelson Gilbert, an assistant principal at Floyd T. Binns Middle School, looks through a **PeaceBuilders** guidebook in the Binns conference room Thursday. Binns is the only school in the Culpeper public school system participating in the program.

By [RHONDA SIMMONS](#)

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Last year, administrators and teachers at Floyd T. Binns Middle School issued 959 referrals — just over five a day, on average — to students for incidents involving defiance, disrespect, fights, bullying, inappropriate language and disorderly behavior.

And the list goes on.

To deter negative and violent behavior — sequentially reducing the amount of referrals — Principal Sherri Harkness introduced the **PeaceBuilders** curriculum this fall. Binns is the only school in Culpeper County participating in the program, which includes a “Peace Pledge” each morning over the school’s intercom system.

PeaceBuilders is a violence-prevention and character-education youth program that promotes positive behavior. It is federally funded through the United States Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 2001.

PeaceBuilders’ website describes it as “a comprehensive community-based program that shifts the entire organizational climate to a peaceful, productive and safe place for children, parents and the community.”

Donning green lanyards with the words “I am a **PeaceBuilder**” on them, Harkness and assistant principal Nelson Gilbert explained Thursday the significance of taking the initiative against negative and violent behavior.

“I know what it feels like as a parent and how hard you have to work with your child to keep them on the right track,” Harkness said. “This is a tool where we can help all children so that they are not out there on their own.”

A veteran administrator, Gilbert said he’s already noticed changes in his students’ behavior.

“I can see where some of the students are beginning to speak the language with each other. They may even joke with each other saying, ‘Well that’s not being a **PeaceBuilder**,’” Gilbert said. “I see it as being a super positive program to help prevent the negativity in general.”

Gilbert, who oversees sixth- and seventh-graders, said the program makes people think before they say something.

“Kids this age can be so fragile,” he said, “and a lot of times what one will say you never know the impact that it has on that kid.”

Gilbert added that this is the first year no referrals were written during the first week of school.

In contrast, Gilbert said more than 20 referrals — slips complimenting a students' behavior — have been handed out.

"Before they'd come to my office for something negative. Now they come to my office for something positive," Gilbert said proudly. "That's good for me too because I get to see more positive than negative. And I just hope this continues."

After Gilbert signs the referral slip, he also takes a photo with a student and posts it on the "Wall of Fame" near the main stairwell.

How it got started

Harkness said her school was one of three in the county participating in a school improvement process.

One of the assignments was to conduct a school climate assessment, which was taken in May by students, teachers and parents.

"Most of the indicators were very positive," Harkness said, "but there were indicators where the students were feeling bullied. I really wanted to find a way to focus on that."

Looking for a way to make a difference at her school, Harkness started researching professional development websites and read a comment referencing [PeaceBuilders.com](https://www.peacebuilders.com).

"I really got excited immediately," said Harkness, who shared the new information with her staff. "Anyone I asked to look at it, they were like, 'Wow, let's try this.'"

Binns administrators, teachers, instructional assistants, secretaries, bus drivers, custodians and food service workers participated in a training session Aug. 17.

"Everybody was there," Harkness said. "Because with [PeaceBuilders](https://www.peacebuilders.com) it's all about the common language, and we have to use it throughout the day with the kids. We are the role models."

Harkness added that some people have to work harder than others on becoming a [PeaceBuilder](https://www.peacebuilders.com).

"Including myself, I can be sarcastic, and you're not suppose to come off that way as a [PeaceBuilder](https://www.peacebuilders.com), so I have to work at that," she added. "We're all working together on this."

George Dasher, Culpeper County School Board chairman, said the board recently revised a portion of the division's improvement plan to include the following strategy: Develop a plan to address student struggles with bullying, suicide, peer pressure and other social challenges.

"The board particularly wanted the word 'bullying' included to send a message that we recognize bullying as a problem and expect schools to take action to address this very difficult issue," Dasher told the Star-Exponent.

About the program

Superintendent Bobbi Johnson explained that [PeaceBuilders](https://www.peacebuilders.com) is part of the school's character education, required by the state for all public schools.

The Virginia Department of Education also allows schools to determine how they will address the character education mandate, Johnson added.

Students participate in peace-building activities on the first day of the week during enrichment class.

They create peace puzzles, perform skits and engage in confidence-building activities.

For a one-time \$7,000 fee, Binns received two trainers for the entire staff, the entire curriculum on a CD and in binders, staff and leadership manuals, workbooks and a lifetime license and PeaceBuilders support. Gilbert is applying for grants to help reimburse the cost. Each of the 10 schools in Culpeper is given an allotment of money for certain initiatives.

Teacher reaction

Nathan Bopp, an eighth-grade pre-algebra teacher at Binns, instructed his students to create a peace quilt.

“Everyone came up with their own drawing or saying, and the idea was there’s more than one type of peace for one type of person,” Bopp explained. “We talked about how they connect and why it’s important to respect other people’s idea of peace and what we can do to make sure we’re fostering that in class.”

Maggie Calabrese, an eighth-grade civics teacher at Binns, said she likes the “power words” because “they really make the students think.”

The PeaceBuilder power words are: Please, thank you, excuse me, I apologize for, and May I help you?

“It’s really laying that foundation of things I personally take for granted,” Calabrese said. “To me, it’s a habit when you bump into someone you say, ‘I’m sorry.’ To them, it’s a really important development stage.”

For Bopp, the PeaceBuilders program is not only a teaching point, it’s also becoming a lesson for him as well. “They are embracing it and calling me on it,” he said.

The students’ view

Eighth-grader Paige Hockman likes the positive behaviors she has witnessed recently in class, the cafeteria and in the hallways.

“I like that it makes people realize that they should make everybody feel comfortable at school,” Paige said. “And that nobody should feel alone.”

Classmate Gabriel Soley said he enjoys not having to worry about negative conduct that occurs “because people aren’t going to put you down.”

Parents’ perspective

Each morning, Binns students stand and recite two pledges: the Peace Pledge and the Pledge of Allegiance, in that order.

But some parents have complained, disagreeing with the sequence of pledges.

In a letter to the Star-Exponent Aug. 27, Michael Pyle said he and his wife found out about the Peace Pledge when his signature was required on a form for his children to participate.

"It was with reservation that my wife and I signed the peace pledge," Pyle wrote; "however, in the spirit of participation and cooperation, we did. We followed up by discussing our philosophy with our children and that we want them to stand up for themselves and fight for what they believe. It was with disgust, however, that we have learned this 'peace pledge' took precedent over the Pledge of Allegiance."

Pyle added that if this practice continues, his children will be opting out.

Superintendent Johnson said there's no clear guidance on where the Pledge of Allegiance falls when doing multiple pledges.

"But one piece of advice was to put the Pledge of Allegiance last as a position of honor," Johnson explained. "It was very important to (Harkness) that she follow protocol; however, some disagree with the position."

Jennifer Barbee, who pursued a seat on the Culpeper County School Board last year, likes the Peace Pledge regardless.

"I think it's a great idea," said Barbee, who has an eighth-grader at Binns. "It teaches the kids to respect one another, and it also teaches them to care about each other. With what's going on in the community with our young people, it really makes them more accountable for one another."

Students in the Moline School District No. 40 in Coal Valley, Ill. started reciting the Peace Pledge six years ago.

"Only one of our 18 elementary schools uses the program," MSD Superintendent Cal Lee told the Star-Exponent. "It is an important (part) of the program and sets the tone for the day."

At a glance

Referalls for infractions during the 2009-10 school year at Floyd T. Binns Middle School ...

Alcohol, 2	Inappropriate language, 48
Altercation/confrontation, 5	Incitement, 5
Attendance, 3	Insubordination, 4
Bullying, 7	Minor insubordination, 7
Bus safety violation, 42	Sexting, 5
Cell phone violation, 14	Skipping, 24
Class disruption, 18	Tardies, 28
Code of conduct violation, 87	Theft, 1
Defiance: 104	Threatening student, 1
Disorderly Behavior, 215	Unprepared in class 2
Disrespect: 60	Vandalism, 3
Disruptive behavior, 140	Violation of strict probation, 25
Fighting, 24	Sexual conduct, 1
Firecracker at school, 1	Weapon, 1
Gang activity, 1	Internet use violation, 1
Horse playing, 3	Assault, 2
Inappropriate behavior, 65	Total, 959
Inappropriate comments, 9	Source: Culpeper County Public Schools
Inappropriate conduct, 1	

The PeaceBuilders Pledge states:

"I am a PeaceBuilder. I Pledge to praise people, to give up put-downs, to seek wise people, to notice and speak up about hurts I have caused, to right wrongs, to help others. I will build peace at home, at school, and in my community each day."

PeaceBuilder power words

Please, thank you, excuse me, May I help you?, and I apologize for ...