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Building peace at St. Agnes

New program promotes positive actions

BY AMANDA ROBERT

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Too many people overlook the word peace, says Audrey Lanzotti, an eighth-grader and president of the student council at St. Agnes School in Springfield.

"Everyone talks about kindness, but no one really talks about peace," Lanzotti says. "But when we brought peace into our school, everything changed."

Since October, 440 students in preschool through eighth grade at St. Agnes have participated in **PeaceBuilders** — a violence prevention and character education program that addresses such youth problems as bullying and drug and alcohol use. The local grade school is the first in central Illinois to implement the program, which is approved for the federally funded Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act.

Sr. M. Joan Sorge, O.P., the principal of St. Agnes, says the school board and staff agreed to introduce **PeaceBuilders** "to see the good in one another more than to focus on the negative."

"Even though we're a Catholic school, we have moments when we have to work together," she adds.

The **PeaceBuilders** program promotes a positive environment by teaching students six principles: praise people, give up put-downs, seek wise people, notice hurts, right wrongs and help others. These principles are displayed in every classroom, and students recite them at the beginning of every school day.

During recent parent-teacher conferences, the student council, which is facilitating the program, asked parents to join in by signing a contract to promote peace every day. Parents also receive program information in school newsletters and through the Web site, Sorge says.

Students focus on one principle each month, recently finishing the first in November. As part of the "praise people" lesson, students receive "praise notes" from their teachers and fellow students for positive actions like helping in class and being friendly in the hallways. At the end of the day, these are read to the entire school over the public-announcement system.

Members of the student council leadership team have noticed that students are making an effort to follow the **PeaceBuilders**' principles. They've become more welcoming and accepting of each other, they say.

"We didn't really notice bullying or even little things like when a pen dropped," Megan O'Brien says. "You'd just walk by. But when you praise people, you notice that every little thing counts to someone."

"Every time I look around, I see people who are helping others," Nolan Brennan agrees. "They're encouraging them. They're complimenting them. Everybody is always walking in with a positive attitude and smiling to their teachers and staff."

Sorge and the student council members hope that students will learn positive, peace-building skills early and continue using them in high school and throughout their lives.

"I think the whole **PeaceBuilders** program gives us a positive outlook, not just at school, but on the whole world," Andrew Koehler explains. "Not on how bad the economy is or on war, but it makes us see how people are trying to do good things."

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