Harrison's peer mediators nip conflicts before it starts

By LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

United Nations peacekeepers have their sky-blue helmets. At Harrison High the 30 or so conflict resolution specialists are identified by lime green name tags.

Peer mediators are being put into action this week as part of the district's new conflict resolution program. North Farmington and Farmington high schools are expected to follow suit.

Harrison High kicked off its peer mediation program with an awards breakfast Monday, Jan. 29. Some 33 students received certificates after taking part in three-day training.

Peer mediation is designed to nip conflicts before they escalate.

Students or staff can make referrals for a peer mediation session, where two peer mediators sit down with the students and try to work out a solution.

Peer mediation is not an end-all to violent confrontations. Threats of physical harm, fights and sexual harassment cases will still be handled directly by the administration.

Students who are suspended for fighting, though, will have to complete peer mediation before being reinstated.

■ 'This is not a last resort; It's a first resort.'
Joette Morden, teacher

"This is not a last resort; It's a first resort," said Harrison Life Management teacher Joette Morden, explaining peer mediation to a group of students Monday afternoon.

Other schools, such as Warren Mott High, report that fighting incidents have declined since introducing peer mediation.

"We've had a lot of success," said Warren Consolidated Schools assistant superintendent Mary Barry-Cybulski.

Students are taught to resolve disputes by listening, making eye to eye contact and understanding the consequences of their actions.

Harrison students who went through the training say peer mediation works. Several spoke at a Farmington Board of Education in October.

Junior Jim Middlemiss has put mediation methods into action dealing in spats with his brother.

"I found that I cared more about what he said instead of trying to think of what I was going to say next," Middlemiss said.

Added Chris Dean, who said its helped with his parents: "I really didn't know how to deal with (conflict). I did what most people did: yell. Now I am trying to listen to what they have to say."

Middlemiss and Dean will work with fellow students next. Peer mediators were introduced along with the process to classes on Monday and Tuesday.

Gossip, name-calling or threats can prompt a peer mediation referral. Students were given green forms that they can fill out.

A referral can take place as soon as the next day. Information is kept confidential unless there are threats involved, Morden said.

"When you're angry, you get thrown off base," Morden said to students. "It turns up your stomach acid . . . You can't concentrate."

Test

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attended, said Assessment Coordinator Carolyn Mahalak.

Another presentation on the High School Proficiency Test will take place at the Farmington Board of Education meeting Feb. 6.

For the first part of the writing portion, students will bring two writing samples from class assignments from the current or previous school year, and critique them. Only one writing sample can be taken from an English class.

Students will be asked to respond in writing as to what strategies they used, and why certain ideas and words worked. They'll have 30 minutes to complete the part one.

In part two, students have to pick a topic and then write about it for 20 minutes. Then they join in teams of three to refine the topic and before discussing the subject further in a larger group.

After narrowing the topic further, students spend a hour and 50 minutes writing an indepth essay. The third part of the test takes place the following day.

All three parts will be graded on a rubric scale of one to four. In order to receive a four, the student's work has to be original, well organized, compelling and use effective sentence structure.

The subjective nature of writing will make the test more difficult to grade than the multiple choice variety, officials said.

The writing test is graded by two different readers from a pool of teachers statewide and an out-state company. If there is a wide disparity in the two scores, a third reader is brought in.

"If it's a one or two, they will call it 1.5," said district Assessment Coordinator Carolyn Mahalak. "If it's a one and a four, they'll bring in a third reader."

Reading and science portions also tap students' writing skills.

Reading test has students going over three selections and then answering multiple choice questions. In the second part, they have to write a one to two-page response to a focus question.

Students are given a brief scenario related to the focus question and asked to take a position in their written response.

In science, independent items can be answered in a sentence, short paragraph or multiple choice.

Math test features 40 multiple choice questions and six of the open-ended variety where there might be more than one answer. Multiple choice questions cover algebra, geometry, data analysis and problem solving.

Students can use calculators and reference tables and measurement tools are provided. Tests are taken in two 50-minute blocks.

"I don't think it's asking us to do things we're not already doing," said math coordinator Richard Strauss. "As for for some of the open ended questions . . . it may allow me as an instructor to push students more in that direction.

"I think it has the potential of being something positive.'

Some wonder if the new proficiency will stick around in its current form, citing the extra costs involved with grading it. Changes are already occurring regularly.

"I just received a letter today saying the rubric has been changed again," Nyberg said. "They are shifting as we're approaching the test."

Focus

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tion may be obtained by calling Sears Hardware at 615-3083.

Patterson to speak

Guest speaker at the annual Dinner Meeting of The Farmington Area Republican Club 6-9 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 14, at the Botsford Inn on Grand River will be L. Brooks Patterson, Oakland County Executive.

Cost for the dinner — roast beef or breast of chicken, potato, vegetables, dessert and beverage — will be $19 per person. Call Bob Wyatt at 488-1111 for more information.

Memory Lane

Memory Lane has moved! Farmington-area news from the past now may be found on the Observer's Editorial Page each Thursday.

Items for Farmington Focus may be mailed to the Farmington Observer, 33411 Grand River, Farmington 48335; faxed to 477-9722; or dropped off at the newspaper office. For the computer literate, the Internet E-mail address is: packy@oeonline.com.

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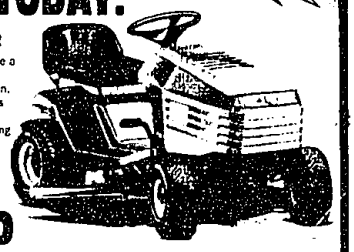

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