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Law School Helps School Children Manage Conflict

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A class of junior high students were filling out surveys about their conflict management skills when two students started swinging at each other.

University of Dayton law students Ryan Beck and Megan Rehberg called it the ultimate teaching moment. They are among six UD law students in a partnership between Dayton Public Schools and the UD School of Law to teach conflict management skills.

Since the training began, things have changed for the better.

"We've been pleasantly surprised how the seventh- and eighth-graders have responded to the lessons. There has been a big change from when the students filled out the survey. They didn't want to listen. Now, they listen and take things to heart," Rehberg said. "Wogaman has even implemented a peer mediation program."

Students in grades five through eight at Wogaman, Van Cleve and Rosa Parks schools are part of the pilot program that debuted this year. Two UD law students work with each school.

Rosa Parks Principal Mitzi Sanders has seen suspension rates decrease at her school. Students are picking up classroom chores without being asked and encouraging others to stay on the straight-and-narrow.

"We're going to keep inspiring others to get involved. If you don't have everyone on board, you can't be successful," Sanders said. "Teachers are taking more responsibility, doing more detentions and being more involved."

The program incorporates 25 lessons developed by the Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management. The lessons work conflict management skills into lessons about Romeo and Juliet and historical events such as World War I.

The United Way of the Greater Dayton Area; Dayton law firm Porter, Wright, Morris and Arthur, NCR Corp., and the Dayton Foundation also are supporting the program.

Sonya Zumbiel, a classroom management trainer for the Ohio commission, said good discipline is proactive rather than reactive. Effective discipline is something teachers do with students and not to students. The critical element is teachers.

Time is another critical element for Van Cleve Principal Hindy Gruber. She calls it her single biggest hurdle. So far this year, she's had to battle a move to a new school, days off for a heat emergency to start the year and a limited staff.

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