

# Local students learn about conflicts

By Judy Spalding

"I feel so strongly (about the program) I don't even take a salary," said Nancy Kaplan, a professional mediator who is the director of Conflict Resolution Unlimited (CRU Institute.) Kaplan, who has been a mediator for over 20 years, was the originator of CRU Institute, which last week sent trainers to teach a group of 4th, 5th and 6th grade children about mediation techniques.

The children who participated were from the three Othello grade schools, Lind and Washtucna. The children were selected by their teachers who thought they would do well as conflict managers. Other children volunteered for the project. The intensive training lasted two days and in that time the children were trained to be mediators on the playgrounds at their schools.

Part of the training included learning the differences between feelings and thoughts. "People are afraid to share feelings. As a conflict manager they may tell you their feelings," said Kari Dickerson, program director told the children.

"We have to respect people," said Kaplan. "This program is how people learn to respect each other."

Kaplan became a dispute mediator in 1978, and CRU is an outgrowth of her earlier work. Founded in 1992, CRU is a mediation skill-building program that helps young people learn and use alternative dispute resolution skills at school as well as in their daily lives. A major goal of CRU is to provide students with trainers to whom they can readily and comfortably relate.

CRU staff has so far been hired to make presentations in New York, Bellevue, Memphis, Bozeman, Atlanta, Michigan, Los Angeles and Singapore. They have sold their materials to 20 countries around the world.

Also part of the training is role playing where the students are given situations which they may see on the playground. Then they have to act their parts as conflict managers, and the practicing techniques they have learned.

According to the CRU Institute, students receive unexpected benefits from student mediation training including a therapeutic effect. The following are some true stories about students who have participated in mediation training. The names of the individuals have been

changed to protect their identities:

Darrel was a sensitive, insightful eighth-grader with multiple behavior problems. In fact, he was suspended from school during the course of the mediation training. However, Darrel was so intrigued by mediation that he came back to school to participate in the training, which was conducted after school. Darrel became one of the school's most effective mediators. At last report, he had significantly changed his behavior, gone on to high school and graduated in 1995.

Samuel was the most disruptive member of his elementary school mediation training class. CRU trainers were especially frustrated by Samuel's incessant kicking of a musical instrument that he brought to class. Two years later CRU trainers were conducting middle school training and to their dismay,

Samuel was again in the class. Amazingly, his behavior had changed dramatically. Samuel was now able to use his intelligence in a constructive manner, and he became a major contributor to the mediation training class.

Some students who benefit from mediation training are very shy and withdrawn. Diane was a high school student who hardly said a word during the mediation training. Two weeks after student training, CRU trainers returned to her school to conduct a faculty mini-training session. Diane was chosen to help CRU trainers by supervising faculty role plays. After observing Diane calmly and confidently instructing faculty on the process and techniques of mediation, the school counselor and CRU trainers could hardly believe the transformation.

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Practicing new ways to solve problems. These elementary students spent two days last week learning about conflict management. They will use their new skills on the playground, and help their peers solve problems different ways. Looking on is Jim Carlton, the counselor for Hiawatha and Lutacaga schools