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Renton High School senior Toyia Taylor does role-playing during training session Monday.

Valley Daily News photo by GARY KISSEL

Students learn to settle scuffles

By LYLE PRICE
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RENTON - The next time a "jock" and a "nerd" get into a shoving or shouting match at Renton High School, a student dispute-resolution team will be ready to settle the problem.

Thirty teenage mediators have been trained to step in and administer student-level justice before feelings harden and someone winds up with a black eye or in the principal's office.

"It will keep the physical fighting down and there will be a lot less people getting in trouble, or having something put on their record," predicted Jelani Quinn, a sophomore mediator.

Student mediators will field problems ranging from racial disputes to boy-girl hassles - or, more likely, they say, girls fighting over boys and boys fighting over girls.

This week, the mediators were winding up their formal training under the tutelage of Nancy Kaplan and Jay Finkelstein of Bellevue-based Conflict Resolution Unlimited. Also assisting were Renton counselor Alice Tanaka and teachers Jeri Lester, Bill Rosindin and Nancy Osborn.

The student mediators will deal with problems referred to them by adult staff members or by students. However, school administrators will still handle cases that come to their attention involving drugs and weapons.

In practice this week, Quinn and fellow mediator Colt Winkie, a freshman, played the parts of the quarreling "nerd" and "jock" as

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sophomore Ebony Ellington and senior Toyia Taylor tried to find a solution.

The two girls quickly learned that the jock tripped the nerd, who broke his glasses and had a history outline ruined in a mud puddle. The jock's defense was that the nerd liked to hang around the jock's girlfriend. The jock said the nerd was too clumsy to avoid his protruding legs.

Neither would admit wrongdoing, but the girl mediators used a "what if" mediation technique. What if, the girls asked, the jock paid for the glasses and wrote the nerd's history outline? In return, what if the nerd agreed to stop hanging out?

The jock went halfway, to pay 50 percent of the cost for new glasses, and to do the outline; the nerd agreed to get lost when the jock and girlfriend were around.

"I think this program will help," said Taylor, one of the few seniors in the program. "I think students are more likely to tell things to their peers than they are to an adult."

The mediators will keep their information in

confidence, even to the point of destroying the notes they take during a mediation session. The student mediators also will meet in private with their fellow students, although counselor Tanaka will have overall supervision of the mediators.

"It's an incentive to come to a student mediator instead of going to an administrator and getting suspended," said Winkie.

Principal Kay Hermann said for several years, she had been thinking about starting such a program. She said a similar program has been successful in other schools, including at Lindbergh High School in Renton.

"The staff is very supportive of this," the principal said. "We see this as important because we've been doing a lot of mediating. We think that kids don't really want to get into fights, they'd like to get things resolved without getting into a battle."

The students and administrators said they expect the mediators to be successful because they are already school leaders, who other students respect and look up to.