

Peace by peace

Students learn team building and respect through projects, peers

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LONGMONT — Through schoolwide philosophies, peer modeling and projects, students are addressing the concept of peace — what it means to them and how they can achieve it.

“Peace is not just some cool word,” said Michele Bourgeois, a counselor for Lyons and Hygiene elementary schools. “It means nonviolence, and violence is not just war...it’s hitting and words and using your power to manipulate through blame, judgment and insults.”

At Lyons Elementary, students have a Peace Path, a kind of outdoor labyrinth the children can use if they are struggling with conflict, be it internal or with others, Bourgeois said.

At Hygiene Elementary, students have a Peace Place on the playground, where they can sit on benches etched with peacemaking tips, such as “cool down,” “use humor” and “get adults to help.”

Also, for the past 10 years, Hygiene fifth-graders have been trained as Peace PALS, or mediators for their peers, Bourgeois said. They wear special vests and work on the playground to resolve conflicts, such as not sharing or name-calling, and visit classrooms to talk to younger students.

Fifth-grader Trevor Bane, 11, said he had wanted to be a Peace PAL because it was a chance “to make my school and community a better place.”

“The kids can relate to you and look up to you,” he said.

Nick Olson, 10, also a fifth-grader, said being a Peace PAL allows students to choose a peer as a neutral party to mediate a problem on their behalf.

“It’s much more effective than adults just telling them what to do,” Bourgeois said. “They must solve their own problems and this way they know that they have the answers.”

Last month, St. John the Baptist Catholic School held a Peace Day Project, where parent volunteers and seventh- and eighth-graders held team-building and peacemaking exercises in each classroom, kindergarten through sixth grade.

They discussed what it means to take a stance on issues, such as “Would you live in a foreign country?” or “Is it ever OK for children to question their parents?” or “Will the world be a better place in 25 years?”

Nancy Mahoney, a parent of three St. John’s students and coordinator of Peace Day at the school, said students learned not only how to voice their opinions, but also how to listen to different viewpoints.

“We all have different opinions, but we need to respect that, and that, in and of itself, will bring peace,” she said.

The Peace Project also included the Cube of Love program; this paper cube has messages from the Gospel, such as “Be the first to love” and “Love your enemy.”

“The idea is,” said Mahoney, “that the kids roll the cube and then try to live out that message that week, and then they share their experiences at the end.”

She said teachers have noticed the cube’s effect on students.

“The kids decide the atmosphere and culture they want at their school and take ownership of it,” she said.

Students at Longs Peak Middle School on Friday, which was International World Peace Day, served as peacemakers through a global art installation project called “Pinwheels for Peace,” in which children around the world created and displayed pinwheels with messages for a better world.

Last year, participants planted 1 million pinwheels in more than 2,500 locations, according to the project’s Web site.

Longs Peak students placed nearly 400 pinwheels along Francis Street on Friday morning; the artworks stood on the lawn through the day for passers-by to see.

Longs Peak seventh-grader Sienna Hawk said the pinwheels represented ways to have peace, love and respect for others.

Peace, she said, means taking care of the Earth and caring for everyone, “especially the sixth-graders.”

Art teacher Heather Brubaker said this was the first time Longs Peak participated in the event, which began in 2005.

“This fits in with our positive behavioral support, a discipline which teaches them ... to focus on the positive and not the negative,” she said. “This gives them a good understanding that they are a part of something bigger than themselves.”

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