

## Groups engage in Meeting of the Minds

### Young mediators like to resolve problems

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They called it a "Meeting of the Minds."

Fifty-three middle-school students from Olmsted Academy North and Olmsted Academy South joined adults at the Louisville Bar Association center last week to exchange information and ideas about peer mediation, which involves students helping one another resolve conflicts peacefully.

Peer-mediation programs are gaining popularity in the Louisville area, said Eileen Blanton, director of Louisville's Peace Education Program and program director for Meeting of the Minds.

"We're helping them create a culture in their schools where it's the norm to resolve conflict," she said. "About 155 schools in Kentucky and Southern Indiana have some form of conflict-resolution program in place."

The Olmsted academies were selected because "in the past they have had a high percentage of



Claudia Fuentes and attorney Tony Belak were paired up in an icebreaker exercise where they had to exchange information such as where in the world they would like to visit.

disciplinary action and disruptive behaviors," said Scott Furkin, executive director of the Louisville Bar Association.

"These schools already have successful peer-mediation programs in place," said Cindy Robinson, public service coordinator for the bar association. "All these students have already been trained. This is sort of a culmination and celebration of their success."

Each student received a certificate and a T-shirt with the slogan "Mediate Don't Agitate."

Jamellen Thompson, an eighth-grader at Olmsted South, an all-girls school, is a trained mediator.

"It's fun," she said. "I like solving people's problems and keeping conflicts from escalating into violence. Of course, some people come just to have somebody to talk to."

Tori Smith, a seventh-grader at Olmsted South, was trained this year. "We practiced mediation role-playing and conflict-solving," Tori said. "I use it when I argue with my brother."

About 25 adults involved in the program told students how they use mediation in their careers. The group included several attorneys and law students, a banker, minister, engineer, retired postmaster and retired judge.

Young people "have issues just like we do," said Denise Payne Wade, chairwoman of the bar association's Alternative Dispute Resolution/Mediation Section. "We need to nurture them to become better listeners and to work through their problems. This really matters as much as reading, writing and arithmetic."

Ben Langley, youth services coordinator at Olmsted South, which is

housed in the former Iroquois Middle School, said discipline issues have decreased since he started doing peer mediation three years ago. "Attendance has even gone up," he said.

Durk Davidson, Langley's counterpart at Olmsted North, the all-boys campus, trains his eighth-graders to mediate.

"We've found that the kids think it's cool not to fight," he said. "There is a demand to become a mentor when they hit eighth grade."



Eileen Blanton, director of Louisville's Peace Education Program, led the program last week for youth and adult mediators.