Students learn to resolve conflict without fists, weapons

Peace Education’s Navigators Program is teaching Wheatley Elementary 5th grader Dione Bibb how to understand his feelings.

The program is led by retired JCPS family resource and youth services coordinator Durk Davidson. Durk is working hard to reconnect after so much separation and heightened violence in our community.

“My favorite part about the program is the way that he teaches us, he lets us have our fun and lets us learn at the same time,” Dione said.

Durk’s connections give encouragement and life lessons to elementary and middle-school boys through the Navigators Program, teaching them to solve disagreements without fists and weapons.

Right now, Navigators is working with about 130 kids within nine local schools, all which Durk says have different dynamics. Navigators is a strong community within Peace Education Program’s effort to teach youth how to deal with conflict.

“Some of them in their neighborhoods and their surroundings, that's all they see is conflict and negativity,” said Durk.

He helps students navigate the difficult and even violent situations they encounter during weekly sessions. And Durk has seen that it works. He tells of running into past program members who are eager to see him and tell him about their lives.

The program is growing -- another Navigator leader, Justin DeLorenzo, has started leading the groups, and under the leadership of Durk and Carrie Christensen, program manager, they have developed a new manual with a student guide so that the program can continue to grow. Durk’s dream is to multiply this program to include six to seven men being positive role models for these young students.

Sometimes students come into the program hesitant, but that feeling quickly dissipates. “They form a bond with each other, and a lot of times they've seen me in the building,” he says. By the completion of the 10 to 20-week program, Durk says he and school staff were able to check various data points, including attendance rates, suspensions, referrals, and grades, to see if participants were having real benefits from the program (and they were!).

“It has been the most powerful thing I’ve been a part of,” Durk says. “It has been so rewarding.”
It will take years for us to understand just how deeply students’ lives have been impacted by COVID. While testing may give us an inkling into what the academic impact has been, these tests cannot gauge the toll of ongoing COVID for students’ mental health and their ability to thrive. While we may not have hard data yet, the anecdotal evidence from teachers and those who work with children in the schools is that students are struggling with chronic anxiety.

Peace Ed staff have been back in schools since the fall of 2021 working to help teachers and students navigate the “new” normal of education during COVID. Durk Davidson facilitates Navigators groups at nine schools, while Carrie Christensen and Brenda Moorman have been visiting kindergarten through seventh grade classes to teach conflict resolution workshops. They have also done some professional development for teachers and administrators.

"We've done a lot of work on strategies to get yourself calm."

Teachers and students are, by and large, exhausted. With COVID being on their minds and in the news constantly since March 2020, it is the allostatic load on their lives, which is the cumulative burden of stress on the mind and body. Peace Ed staff has always spent time chatting with teachers to figure out how best to help students, but Carrie Christensen says, “There’s a lot more time checking in with teachers [now], but I feel less able to figure out how to support them.”

Students lost school time to non-traditional instruction (NTI), some for longer periods than others, but COVID has changed the way they participate in school with peers or do extracurricular activities and this has had an impact on their emotional and social development. “Eighth graders are having a hard time this year, having two years of middle school disrupted. The kids are developmentally not where they normally would be,” Carrie says.

Peace Ed workshops with students and teachers have been essential to giving all involved an opportunity to talk about how they are feeling. “The kids have been very hungry for conflict resolution conversations, especially the emotional piece,” Carrie says. “I don’t know that we’re giving kids enough time to process what’s going on.” Teachers, themselves, have been more involved in classroom workshop conversations which Carrie has found interesting and definitely not the norm from previous years. “They need that conversation, too,” she says.

Carrie talks about the Anger Thermometer in emotional conflict with students and has noticed how much anxiety and fear are part of the conversation now. “That’s new. Every class has mentioned being worried, even kindergarteners. And as we know, anxiety still shows up as anger in a lot of kids,” she says. “We’ve done a lot of work on strategies to get yourself calm."

Games have always been a part of the work Peace Ed does, but Carrie has had to switch from doing games at the end of her programming to starting her workshops with them. “I realized I had to figure out a way to get students’ attention and get them back in their bodies,” she says. She had anticipated that kids would be full of energy and bouncing off the walls with enthusiasm once they were all back in school, but what she has found instead is a sense of dullness. Some of this may be due to masks, but some of it may be due to the chronic stress everyone in the community has been under even though we have returned to something like normal.
Each year, the Peace Ed Golf Scramble is a way for some of our best donors to show their support for our mission and enjoy a day of golfing together at the Shawnee Golf Course. The net proceeds from the Scramble — which exceeded $30,000 last year — go to support all Peace Ed programs to build social emotional skills in preschoolers through young adults that prevent violence and reinjury, create positive school and community environments where educational and behavioral outcomes improve, and develop youth leaders to confront prejudice and prevent violent conflicts.

For more information about the 2022 Peace Ed Golf for the Greater Good golf scramble, visit our website: peaceeducationprogram.org/golf-scramble-2022. There you will find links to sign up as an individual, register a team, or become a sponsor of the event!
With support from the Jewish Heritage Fund for Excellence (JHFE), the Pivot to Peace Program at Peace Ed started hosting a support group in early 2022 at a local JCPS high school. The request came from the school’s certified social worker. Peace Ed’s funding partner, JHFE, was willing to use part of its grant funding to support this program.

The purpose of the support group is to provide a safe space for students to talk about the trauma they are experiencing. This group is facilitated by a Pivot to Peace project manager and two full-time caseworkers.

As students speak openly about what they are dealing with, the program leaders are there to facilitate aspects of Peace Ed’s conflict resolution and mediation programs. Before the students are released to their next class or lunch period, they play a cooperative game or participate in a closing/appreciation to assist in de-escalating any emotions experienced during the session and prepare students for the rest of their day. Students are also invited to remain after the meeting to privately speak with the Pivot staff. The program will continue through the remainder of the school year.

“When we had a need - a serious need - in our school community, Pivot to Peace was there. We had several incidents of gun violence, and children being shot at or harmed. We were at our wit's end and trying to provide services. One call to Peace Education and they were in our school within weeks, we couldn’t have done this without them.” – JCPS Social Worker
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CORRECTION Please note: In the last Peace Talks, Ken Grant and Marie Yannaco-Grant should have been listed as major donors to Peace Education Program for April 1, 2020, through March 31, 2021.

We have made every effort to recognize gifts appropriately, but if you see a mistake or an omission, please send an email to development@peaceeducationprogram.org and we will update our records.
A noted Buddhist philosopher, Daisaku Ikeda, writes "We must build a society guided first and foremost by the principle of respect for the dignity of life." This principle is also in accordance with the Peace Education Program, Inc. mission statement.

It is with tremendous gratitude and appreciation that I say thank you to the founders, past and present board members, staff, and a special thank you to the past and present supporters of the Peace Education Program for several decades. It could not exist without you.

The past two years have been full of transition. Through it all, Pivot to Peace continued to support individuals affected by violence and trauma. Our programs continued to provide conflict resolution education on limited basis throughout the pandemic shutdown. Conflict resolution in-person training increased at the end of 2021 due to the sporadic opening of schools. Since that reopening, 21 schools have been visited, educating several hundred students in conflict resolution ranging from kindergarten through high school.

A single pebble thrust into water creates a wave flowing outward.

I am excited about what the future brings with the Peace Education Program. Here are goals for the next year:
• Increasing the programming staff to multiply services to the schools and the community
• Look at ways to increase the capacity of services within Pivot to Peace
• Upgrading Peace Education technology
• Continuing to seek professional learning opportunities for staff
• Continuing to further engage the community as partners

These efforts will be done through further development of a strategic plan that involves all stakeholders in a collaboratively format.

In conclusion, please join us in a collective prayer for a most peaceful community, and the wisdom to take the best steps forward in educating youth, and adults in fostering sustaining relationships of integrity and mutual respect - what better time than spring for rejuvenation!

Rose M. Livingston,
Interim Executive Director
Peace Education Program, Inc.