Middle school students practice conflict resolution
Conflict resolution training in middle schools expands to help prevent violence among teens
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Trinity Meeks, Tyler Wilson, Hunter Robertson and Victoria Frierson perform for Mayor Karl Dean, who was invited to Wright Middle School to see a demonstration of a conflict resolution class. / Larry McCormack / The Tennessean

A brewing confrontation over one guy moving in on another one’s territory dissolved into laughter during the role-playing exercise at Wright Middle School.

“Are you saying Charlie should be a little more trusting of his girl?” teacher Kristian Dennison asked the eighth-graders.

Wright Middle is one of 11 Metro Nashville public schools taking part in a conflict resolution training course — Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders. About 4,000 students are now participating since the program expanded from just one campus last year with the help of a $40,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
Besides the role-playing exercise involving a jealous Charlie, the session also included a discussion about whether violence depicted in movies and television actually reflected real life. Students concluded they should avoid making fictional depictions their reality. The session ended with affirmations and appreciations — a time for students to praise one another and thank one another for positive actions.

Mayor Karl Dean, who sat in on Friday morning’s session, said he believes the program will help curb youth violence.

“One of the motivations of starting the program was looking at the disparity by income and race where people are hurt by gun violence,” Dean said. “Anything we can do as a city or a school system that gets people to think of different ways of responding to conflicts that occur every day in life is a good thing. That’s why we are supportive of the program. It really teaches a fundamental, important skill that hopefully is going to prevent people from getting hurt.”

The program targets middle school students in urban areas where teens are at risk for violent injuries. The premise is to teach students conflict-resolution skills just before they reach the age when they are most likely to get hurt or killed.

Dr. Manish Sethi, a Vanderbilt University Medical Center surgeon tired of piecing gun-riddled teenagers back together, launched the initiative in Nashville last year at Cameron Preparatory.

“You guys are doing a great job and really, really trying to follow this program,” Sethi told the Wright students.

Two-thirds of the 1,268 gunshot assault victims treated at Vanderbilt over a six-year period were black, according to a study published last March in The Journal of Emergency Medicine. Most were between 14 and 25. Sethi was one of the authors of that study.

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