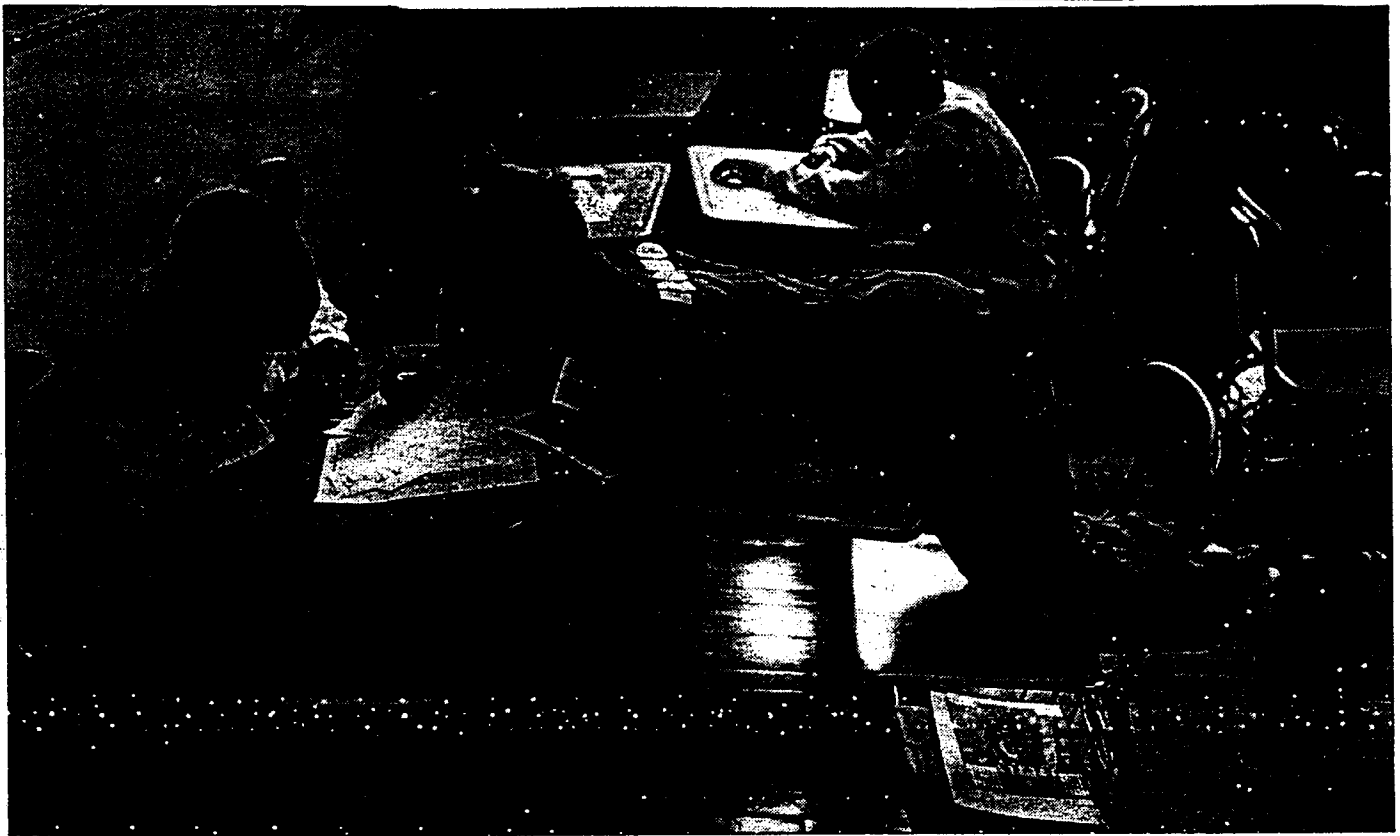


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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DAVID L. RYAN

Seventh-grader Allen Bolden (left) gets some help last week from classmate Charles Campbell in the Program for Young Negotiators, a nine-week course on dispute resolution at Brighton's Taft School.

These classes cut violence

Boston middle-schoolers learn art of negotiation, compromise

By Jordana Hart
GLOBE STAFF

Charles Campbell knew it was no ordinary school day as soon as the two adults introducing themselves to his seventh-grade class started to argue and then shout at each other, their arms flailing angrily as the students looked on in bewilderment.

Boston Schools: WHAT WORKS

Campbell also noticed that his teacher, Sy Clark, didn't immediately try to stop the dispute.

"I was getting scared," said Campbell, a 12-year-old from the Mission Hill section of Roxbury, who attends the William Howard Taft School in Brighton. "Who knows what

would have happened if they got angry enough?"

For the 17 youngsters, the 'fight' was a heated, albeit staged introduction to the Program for Young Negotiators, a nine-week pilot course being offered this fall in eight classrooms in three Boston middle schools.

The program's goal is to teach students in grades 6, 7, and 8 skills that law and business school graduates nationwide are in-

creasingly seeking out: the art of negotiation and compromise — or How To Get What You Want Without Fighting.

"We want to make students feel more confident in achieving their goals through nonviolent means," said founder and director Jared Curhan, a 23-year-old freshman proctor at Harvard University. His program, which he says is unique, is a part of the Consensus Building Institute Inc. in Cambridge.

Although Young Negotiators is in only a few schools — a total of five or six middle schools will teach it next spring — Curhan said he hopes by next fall to be able to provide schools nationwide with a training video, student workbooks, games and other materials to launch the course.

He noted that although the course can be implemented in high school, his research suggested that it is too complex for elementary schoolchildren. However, he hopes to develop programs that are appropriate for kindergarten through grade 12.

The staged dispute last week in the Taft classroom between Alyssa Levy and Duane Claussen, program volunteer teachers working with Clark, gave students the opportunity to witness the ugly escalation of a disagreement and a chance to discuss ways the argument could have been channeled differently.

Curhan, who took his first negotiation course while in college, was a teaching assistant for a negotiation course at Har-

Pupils learn negotiation, compromise

■ SCHOOL

Continued from Page 17

vard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and became intrigued with the case study method, as well as role-playing and games, used to

teach graduate students.

"Why wasn't this being applied to kids, when they need it even more than lawyers and businessmen?" said Curhan, who has adapted cases and games - arm-wrestling and a card game - for middle school use.

"You see a lot more explicit conflict going on in a middle or high school. Graduates have identified this course as crucial."

Curhan sets his negotiation program apart from traditional violence prevention programs, such as mediation, in that he is offering training to all students in a class and not simply a select group who seek to become peer counselors.

Aside from avoiding violence, he noted, students can use the skills for many situations that have nothing to do with violence: persuading a parent to let a friend eat over or trying to trade CDs with a schoolmate.

Last year, more than 50 seventh-graders at the Clarence R. Edwards School in Charlestown took the course, sponsored by the school's business partner, Keane Inc. Schools are not paying for the course because it is so new and untested. Schools will have to purchase the training packet in the fall.

Last Tuesday, Curhan and his team trained 16 volunteer teaching assistants and eight Boston public school teachers from the Taft, Edwards and Martin Luther King Jr. School in Dorchester. The course began the next day.

Clark, a science teacher, said he likes the course not only for its content, but also because it seems to fit well with his own teaching philosophy, namely, that students gain more from experimenting and thinking critically than from lectures.

"I like to put them into situations where they have to investigate and discover," Clark said. "The way we will teach this program allows that to happen."

Some of Clark's students said it is often difficult to get away from a dispute without fighting. They agreed it would be useful to have other skills. "If I have to fight, I have to fight. I have to defend myself," said 12-year-old David Murphy of Brighton. "I want to learn other ways, but so far that is all I know."

This is the first report in a series to appear biweekly this school year.