

PUT KIDS FIRST.org

High Schoolers Take Restorative Justice from Courts to Classrooms
The Province, Elaine O'Connor
June 27, 2006

Jessica Faddegon has two occupations: student and ad-hoc probation officer.

The 17-year-old is one of a dozen restorative-justice mediators who adjudicate cases at Langley Secondary, working with peers involved in fights or bullying in a novel, and effective, way.

"People are much more open with us than with a counsellor," says the Grade 12 student. "I don't think they feel as judged by us as with adults. There's that 'you don't understand' attitude with kids. But we're able to relate."

Students sign a behaviour contract, and Faddegon says in her cases no one involved in a fight has started another.

Principal Dave Coutu sees value in moving from justice models where principals are police, judge and jury, and punishment is meted out from above. This program gets youth to take responsibility for peers -- using positive peer pressure to modify behaviour.

"It's empowering for kids to be seen as having the ability to solve conflicts without adult intervention," says Coutu.

"There are very significant issues around student safety, harassment and bullying. If people aren't aware they have a method of addressing them, it can become very dangerous. I don't think there's much in the school that can't be settled with restorative action."

The program, now in its second year, was founded by Langley's Fraser Region Community Justice Initiatives Association. "Conversation Peace" began as a partnership in 2000 to find new techniques for school discipline, allowing restorative action teams to handle bullying, vandalism and mischief cases.

The program's active in several Langley schools, including Aldergrove, D.W. Poppy and R.E. Mountain.

"It's a really good healing process," says the CJI's Dan Basham. "Instead

of it being taken out of their hands and put into an administrator's hands, they actually see the harm that they caused."

But Langley Secondary is taking it one step further. The CJI's Catherine Borgen and the district's Debra Hale created a credit course, Restorative Justice in Action, that trustees approved in April. The course will launch this fall as a pilot; other schools are also interested.

Ultimately, the aim is to foster citizenship in teens in a way that will affect behaviour in and out of school.

"What we're trying to do," says Coutu, "is develop more of a sense of community."