



<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/local/bal-md.suspend03may03,0,6566333.story?coll=bal-local-headlines>

*From the Baltimore Sun*

## Program helps city kids learn to be good sports

### Conflict-resolution plan seen as factor in lowering suspensions

By Lynn Anderson  
Sun Reporter

May 3, 2006

A foul ball brought an intense playground game between Travis Robinson and Evelyn Sagastume, pupils at Medfield Heights Elementary School in Baltimore, to a sudden halt.

The incident last week could have resulted in a fight, but Travis, 10, and Evelyn, 9, channeled their emotions into a simple game -- paper, rock, scissors. Travis' "paper" lost to Evelyn's "scissors," and the dispute was settled. There were no tantrums, injuries or visits to the principal's office.

The fourth-graders learned to peacefully resolve their problem through Sports4Kids, which teaches pupils at Medfield Heights and five other city schools to use conflict-resolution techniques to deal with stressful situations.

City school officials have been chipping away at the suspension rate in recent years, in part because of new requirements under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Under the act, schools can be labeled "persistently dangerous" if they have high suspension rates for violent offenses.

Officials say programs such as Sports4Kids have helped. Last year, there were 16,641 suspensions in city schools, compared with 26,324 in the 2003-2004 school year, according to the Maryland State Department of Education.

In hopes of continuing the downward trend, school officials have teamed up with the Open Society Institute-Baltimore to expand programs such as Sports4Kids to other schools. Their hope is to create a network of conflict-resolution and suspension-reduction programs -- a new education sub-industry.

"We want to keep kids on track to a positive future," said M. Jane Sundius, director of education and youth development program for OSI, which is offering one-year grants worth \$40,000 to \$100,000 to conflict-resolution programs that want to work with the city school system.

Sports4Kids, which is based in Oakland, Calif., is one of a handful of fledgling programs that are expected to apply for a grant. Paul McAndrew, Sports4Kids northeast regional director, said the group is working in six schools in Baltimore and hopes to triple that number over the next two years.

He said principals at schools where the program is in place have told him that they have seen positive results.

At Medfield Heights, young adults who serve as "coaches" pass on problem resolution techniques through positive recess play and organized sports. One of their goals is to keep pupils from getting suspended for fighting or misbehaving.

"We had some students who were very explosive. But they have calmed down. I've seen the difference," said Medfield Heights Principal Debbie D. Thomas.

But there is more to be done. According to experts who monitor attendance at the city's high schools, one-third to one-half of students are absent on any given day for a variety of reasons, including suspensions and expulsions, which in some cases are meted out by teachers and administrators who believe they have no alternative.

More and more, school officials are looking for other ways to deal with unruly students. The system's zero-tolerance attitude toward disruptive students and fighting has also relaxed somewhat in an effort to keep students connected to schoolwork and adult mentors.

"In order to be successful and to achieve, you have to be in school," said Maryanne Ralls, the city school system's interim student support services officer. "The bottom line is, getting suspended keeps you out of school."

In recent years, the school system has used a disciplinary approach called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports to reduce suspension rates, which had been on the rise. Statewide, 20 percent of schools are using the program, including 30 schools in the city.

The PBIS program encourages the use of student courts, mediation sessions and in-school suspensions rather than other punishment models. Ralls said that preliminary data show that schools that have used such alternatives have "drastically reduced" suspensions.

"It doesn't mean that there's not consequences for actions, but the consequences are not automatically removing a child from school," Ralls said. "The more you remove them, the less chance they have of learning and being successful."

Sundius, of OSI-Baltimore, said there are several conflict-resolution programs operating in one or two schools that could easily expand given the right financial and organizational support.

"Lots of alternatives probably exist out there, and we need to be looking at them," Ralls said of the school system.

---

[lynn.anderson@baltsun.com](mailto:lynn.anderson@baltsun.com)

*Sun reporter Sara Neufeld contributed to this article.*

Copyright © 2006, [The Baltimore Sun](#) / [Get Sun home delivery](#)

> [Get news on your mobile device at www.baltimoresun.com](http://www.baltimoresun.com)