

Social problems addressed through Loyola University program

When Shena Thomas came to teach fourth grade at Cardinal Shehan School in Northwood last fall, she noticed certain social trends.

“I just saw a lot of kids not getting along,” she admitted.

At the same time, she was told a group of psychology doctoral students from Loyola University Maryland were coming to work on a social skills program with her school’s students.

The Loyola program worked with middle school-aged students in Archdiocese of Baltimore schools during previous years, teaching bullying prevention techniques while providing tools for addressing stressful situations.

Thomas saw a need for coping skills instruction in her class. The partnership recently concluded after six weeks, and Thomas viewed it as a success.

“These kids love to sit down, share and talk,” Thomas said. “They apply a lot of the information the teachers brought to them.”

Mary Jo Coiro, Loyola’s director of psychology clinics, has organized the partnerships with schools with the goal of prevention. She said problems can get out of control if the students, families, teachers and administrators are not taught how to address issues. Coiro and her students also work with students in smaller groups at her clinic.

“The Catholic schools often don’t have the resources to provide their students with mental health services the way public schools do,” Coiro said. “Because of Loyola’s relationship with the archdiocese, we thought the Catholic schools offered a nice opportunity to offer some of those services to benefit those students. It’s also a good training opportunity for our students.”

School bullying has dominated national and local headlines recently. The Baltimore

Sun reported April 28, the same day as the final interaction between Loyola and Cardinal Shehan, that three students were suspended for bullying at Gilmor Elementary “after the mother of a third-grade student said her daughter attempted to kill herself because she was repeatedly verbally and physically attacked.”

The final Loyola-Cardinal Shehan session saw students break into small groups and act out scenes that happen every day on recess lots.

One girl hovered over another after pushing her to the ground. The victim pleaded for the violence to stop, but the bully persisted. Loyola student Liz Gravalles stopped the scene and asked students for solutions.

Eventually, the girl was advised by students to inform a teacher, and the bullying issue was resolved directly.

“They need to learn how to handle problems,” Thomas said. “A lot of times, kids react quickly. They need to stop, think and apply.”

The children had plenty of answers during the 40-minute session. They recognized social problems and contributed positive and negative reactions to the situations.

“It was really great when they gave us examples from their own lives,” Loyola’s Rachel Lawson, 22, said.

Taleakea Yates, a 9-year-old fourth-grader, said she has learned to manage her stress better thanks to the partnership. She said any student can benefit from such lessons.

“I think ... most of the whole world needs to understand that bullying can be very dangerous,” Yates said. “When I say it can be dangerous, I mean somebody can really get hurt.”

That’s positive re-enforcement for Loyola, which has not yet picked its next partner.

“I think they’ve gotten a lot out of it,” Loyola student Kristin Hogan said. “It’s been rewarding.”

The Loyola student teachers received their own education.

“I was surprised by how honest they were because they were fourth graders,” Loyola student Maggie Horne said. “They were so invested. It was motivating for us to come back because they always have things to say.”