

Belief in oneself fuels program



SEATTLE, Wash. (AP) — On a fall morning, 14 students sit in Room 227 studying civics. The lesson are citizenship and leadership. The issue is chewing gum. Students are about to vote on whether they should be allowed to chew and pop gum in class.

Anywhere else, gum-chewing students would have been ordered to spit out the rubbery mass and that would have been the end of it. But a democracy, even in a classroom, helps instill respect in many kids who have never experienced it.

This is the philosophy that fuels the Belief Academy at Rainier Beach High School. At the academy, 26 students diagnosed with learning or behavioral disabilities are taught using various techniques from integrating math and English to rowing in the middle of Lake Washington. The students enter in seventh grade and remain in the academy until they graduate from high school.

It's all in an effort to keep them in school.

On average, 40 to 50 percent of such students in the district drop out — twice the overall district dropout rate, according to a 10-year study by Eugene Edgar, a University of Washington special-education professor and a founder of the Belief Academy.

"It is a research project where we have taken a single cadre of kids to see if we can keep them in school longer than students with learning disabilities in regular district programs," said Frosyne Mensendick, Seattle School District's director of student services.

Of the civics class, teacher Joe Thaler said: "These students need constant but positive reinforcement because a lot of them have never had guidance."

To be sure, Belief Academy is about more than feel-good classroom teaching.

Charles Gilbert, 15, lives with his 23-year-old sister and two nieces. His mother is dead and he doesn't know where his father is.

Charles has been at the academy since seventh grade when he arrived from Denny Middle School with numerous school suspensions and a fierce attitude.

Last year, he polished off trigonometry and this year professes to actually like homework.

It's all about belief in yourself. "The concept of Belief is that (teachers) come in believing in the

students, the students begin believing in the teachers and only then can they believe in themselves," said Ernest Johnson, a supervisor of the 4-year-old program.

"Try to think of an example where one could be successful without believing in themselves."

In 1989, Seattle was one of three cities given a \$1 million five-year federal grant to raise the academic achievement of special education students and stem their burgeoning dropout rate.

The school district matched the federal grant with another \$1.5 million in teachers and supplies over five years.

Of the district's 4,100 special-education students, most have specific learning disabilities and a few, roughly 10 percent, are labeled seriously behaviorally disordered.

The program at Rainier Beach is broken into two components, one centering on careers and apprenticeships and the other on academics.

The students in the academic track are dispersed in regular classrooms throughout the district. They take study skills classes and attend school on Saturdays at the University of Washington.

There also are 20 seventh-graders enrolled in Project Belief at Denny Middle School.

While it is too soon to measure the program's effectiveness there are some early indicators. The students' absentee rates have gone down and their California Achievement Test scores, while not going up, have not decreased either.

"We have some early indicators of success with regards to parent satisfaction and students' willingness to attend school," Mensendick said.

Three hundred yards out on Lake Washington where the bright sun bounces off the water, academy students are learning to row.

Abel Alefaio, 14, is the coxswain. He is a leader but he used to be a runaway and gang member.

"I had some bad friends who always wanted me to make bad decisions but now I'm turning 'em down. I tell them I have to get my grades up," Abel said.

At the end of the 1994-95 school year, the program's money will run out. Supporters hope the district will pick up the cost.

Whatever happens, in Room 227, a cozy classroom full of books and computers, sit 14 students who believe in themselves.

Bombarding rocks scare neighborhood

SPOKANE (AP) — For nearly four months, residents of seven homes in the same neighborhood have been bombarded day and night by rocks that have broken windows, chipped chimneys and hurt two people.

Police say they know who's responsible for the aerial barrage in the West Central neighborhood.

But some 600 hours of investigative work, including nighttime stakeouts and use of special night vision equipment, have failed to turn up evidence needed to bring the culprits to justice.

"I've done everything I can do," says Detective Terry Morehouse. "I have no place to go. It's nuts."

The projectiles have ranged from small stones to rocks as big as grapefruit. Some days, just a few rocks are seen or heard slamming into houses and yards, while on others the number tops 100.

Police say two people, including a child, have been hit and injured. A flower pot was shattered out of a woman's hands, a dog was hit and windows and vehicle windshields have been broken with regularity.

Last weekend, a rock broke the windshield of a patrol officer's police car.

While physical damage is estimated in the thousands of dollars, there's also been a human price.

Brian Parks called off a backyard birthday party for his son on Saturday when the rock onslaught began.

"When it gets quiet for a while, all you can do is go hysterical waiting for more rocks to fall," said a resident who gave her name only as Francine.

Police believe the projectiles are fired from sophisticated slingshots and large launchers that use surgical tubing. The rocks are shot from outdoor hiding places, dark windows and an alley near the targets.

Morehouse believes the offenders have nothing better to do than terrorize their neighbors.

Before an arrest can be made, police must catch the culprits in the act, prosecutors advised.

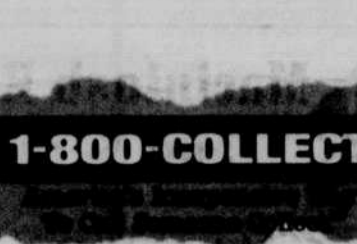
Officers have hidden in bushes and used as many as six video cameras at a time. Probable witnesses have not cooperated, and a \$500 reward offered for information in the case has gone unclaimed, police say.

"They know they can't get caught," patrol officer Sue Mann said.

what's out



what's in



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