

March 9, 2005 – Mankato Free Press

Council kicks off new curriculum

Diverse subject

By Ben Sandell

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MANKATO — If the world were a village, Asia would represent 61 people, Africa 13, and North America only five.



John Cross

Rochester Diversity Council facilitators WC Jordan (left) and Glenn VanLaningham, speak with students about prejudice and discrimination Tuesday at Central Middle School. Tuesday marked the kick off of the Greater Mankato Diversity Council's prejudice reduction curriculum.

"So why don't we know more about the world?" Glenn VanLaningham asked a group of seventh-graders at Central Middle School Tuesday.

"Cause we're only in Minnesota," a student answered.

VanLaningham and WC Jordan, two diversity curriculum facilitators from Rochester, had just 50 minutes to expand the kids' perspectives of the world.

It was the first prejudice reduction workshop of the Greater Mankato Diversity Council. Bringing prejudice reduction curriculum to Mankato schools is one of the first major initiatives of the council, a community organization created last summer to enhance the quality of living in the area by celebrating diversity.

In the second workshop Tuesday, the facilitators spoke to eighth-graders about prejudice and discrimination.

"Everyone should feel welcome in our community," VanLaningham told the kids before launching into discussion about first impressions, biases and labels.

At the back of the classroom sat four people hoping to be Mankato facilitators starting next year. About 60 people applied for the job and 26 started intensive training this month.

"I felt it was great curriculum," said Tracy Stokes-Hernandez, a Minnesota State University admissions officer who sat in on the first two workshops. "It seems like the kids are involved and learning a lot."

Laningham and Jordan taught the workshops with a combination of video, lecture and games. The lessons will become far more effective, they said, when the curriculum is implemented in all grades, giving kids a chance to build on their knowledge from the previous year.

To begin with, the curriculum only will be provided to students in grades seven and eight, and the hope is to eventually have one lesson per year for each grade, K-12.

Workshops Tuesday were presented to students at Central Middle School, Riverbend Academy, Day Treatment Therapeutic School and Fitzgerald Middle School.

Between now and March 16, members of the Rochester Diversity Council will visit 47 classrooms at area schools. Topics are "Global Awareness/World-Mindedness" for seventh-graders and "Vive La Difference" for eighth-graders.

The lessons last about 50 minutes - one per year for each class. The council's goal is to implement the curriculum in at least two more grades per year until it's embedded in all grades.

Next fall the sessions will expand to include grades six and nine.