Peer mediators find work on the school playground

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DONALDSONVILLE — Ramon Rodrigue and Keandra Schonberg were having a — ahem — disagreement one Friday on the playground of Donaldsonville Elementary.

That’s nothing unusual for two second-graders.

What happened next, though, was.

Fourth-graders Nester Rodrigues and Harold Butler, both 10 years old, approached 8-year-old Ramon and 7-year-old Keandra to mediate the dispute.

Dressed in orange “peer mediator” vests and armed with clipboards and questionnaires, Nester and Harold spoke with and listened to the two disputants, effectively stopping what could have become a playground fight.

The peer mediation program is part of a $5,000 grant program through Serve America for the kindergarten through fifth grades at Donaldsonville and West Ascension elementary schools, and the sixth through eighth grades at Lowery Middle.

All are westbank public schools in Ascension Parish.

Teachers, administrators and counselors chose 24 fourth- and fifth-graders as peer mediators at Donaldson-
ville Elementary.

“I felt it was going to be fun,” said 12-year-old April Francis, a fifth-grader.

“To me, it’s a career,” said Tywanna Dupard, a 12-year-old fourth-grader.

The students underwent training in February and began their peer mediating duties on March 14.

“We did not want just the straight-A students,” said Fran Aucoin, peer mediator program coordinator at Donaldsonville Elementary.

A few “class clowns” made the squad, marking a difference not only in the behavior of their classmates but their own as well, Aucoin said.

“At first, everyone was teasing them, calling them ‘meat eaters’ and staging fights,” Aucoin said.

The peer mediators soon earned the respect of their schoolmates.

The students perform the duty three times a day — before school, at recess and after school.

Marvela Humphrey, a 12-year-old fourth-grader, enjoys the attention she receives from her schoolmates while mediating disputes.

“When you’re mediating, they come around and want to hear what you’re saying,” she said.

The peer mediators read from a questionnaire that begins with all parties agreeing to the mediation. The disputants do not have to undergo mediation.

The next step is for all parties to agree not to call each other names.

After listening to the stories, the mediators encourage a compromise.

“We can’t tell them what to do,” April said.

Fights were once commonplace at Donaldsonville Elementary, Aucoin admitted.

“Before, it was every single minute of every single day, it seemed like,” Aucoin said. “The children were being sent home and missing school.”

Since the program began, the school office has noted a significant drop in the number of cases referred to it, Aucoin said.

The mediators give confidential written reports of their cases to Aucoin.

Most of the fights concern marbles and “things that go on in the classroom,” said peer mediator Ashley Parker, a 10-year-old fourth-grader.

Ramon and Keandra declined to tell a news reporter why they were arguing, but they did end their mediation with a handshake.