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Hundreds of high school students yesterday tackled some of the most pressing issues facing their lives: Violence-related rumors, prejudice, anger and sexual harassment among other topics.

Through skits, stories, and brainstorming, 650 teen-agers shared peaceful strategies for solving disputes at the eighth annual B.A.S.I.S. Superintendent's Conflict Resolution Conference, held at the College of Staten Island. B.A.S.I.S. is the division of the Board of Education that oversees 24 high schools here and in parts of Brooklyn.

"Across the country, they're saying we really have to empower kids," said Susan Collins, B.A.S.I.S. student support services coordinator. "When you empower young people they become the change agents. They make the school safe with the help of adults."

Tottenville High School students assembled a program with a theme especially relevant to the school's 4,000 pupils — violence-related threats.

Within the same week of the March 5 Santee, Calif. school shooting that left two students dead and 13 others wounded, a rumor started on the Internet and circulated within Tottenville. A boy supposedly invited his gun-carrying friends into the South Shore school. An anonymous tipster informed the principal who called the police. Cops visited the boy's home but found no weapons. Although it turned out to be a hoax, the incident stimulated discussion.

"Every day individuals receive, or are trusted with confidential in-

formation leading them to the difficult choice — to tell or not to tell," said Amanda Demane, a Tottenville sophomore who led the workshop with senior Jamie Russo.

Tottenville students in peer mediation, negotiation and leadership classes staged a skit. In it, a clique of "cool" kids pick on a male student and view him suspiciously because he carries a large bag. The actors asked their peers what advice they might offer to students in similar situations.

Some suggested confronting the suspicious student and asking him about the bag and his problems. Other students debated whether or not metal detectors might have prevented the scenario.

"Do metal detectors make you feel safe?" asked Amanda.

"No, I feel like I'm in court," answered Terrell Littman, a sophomore at Curtis High School.

Fredo Myrtil, a senior at Lafayette High School in Brooklyn, disagreed, saying eventually metal detectors could be accepted.

Still, other students weighed the pros and cons of taking suspicions to authorities.

"It's really hard because no one wants to be rejected," said Carla Campbell, a senior at William E. Grady High School in Brooklyn. But ultimately, students have to at least consider the option, she said. "It all boils down to whether you're just living for yourself or whether you're living for other people too."

But not every student feels they can trust a teacher or even a guidance counselor.

Ashley Wilkes, president of the

junior class at Port Richmond High School, recalled an instance where she offered a piece of gum to a classmate. Another student who overheard the conversation thought she said, "gun" instead of "gum." Ashley was promptly questioned.

"Sometimes teachers go overboard. They freak out and make you talk to a school psychologist," she said.

The dilemma surrounding when to act on rumors is difficult for high school students, said observers. "We have to figure out a better way to handle it," said Elaine Siegel, whose daughter, Debra, is a senior at Tottenville. Mrs. Siegel, who works as a guidance counselor at Barnes Intermediate School in Great Kills, said she understands the importance of protocol but also recognizes why students might be reluctant to come forth.

In addition to students at Tottenville, pupils at Curtis, Wagner and Staten Island Technical high schools also presented workshops. Curtis students in mediation, negotiation and leadership classes correlated anger with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Wagner conflict resolution and leadership students presented their video, "Finding Your Voice." Produced by students, the film was designed to be a tool for peer mediators in other B.A.S.I.S. schools.

And Staten Island Technical High School students told personal stories of how they fought bias and hate. Jocelyn Rodriguez, who is of Puerto Rican descent, recalled how as a fifth-grade monitor for a first-grade class she witnessed prejudice. A Caucasian boy was picking on a Hispanic girl.

"He said she was dumb because she was Hispanic and because she

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## THE ISLAND

# Teens tackle tough issues at conflict resolution conference

was a girl she wasn't capable of doing anything a boy could do," recalled the junior. "I couldn't believe I was watching this from two young children who would be responsible for my future and everyone else's future."

In the end, Jocelyn spoke to them about stereotypes and the boy wound up cheering the girl on in a kickball game. The conversations were precisely what B.A.S.I.S. conference coordinators had in mind.

In an introductory ceremony, Verna Lauria, told students, "Your work will not only break all stereotypes in your school, but also in the community and the world."

Ms. Lauria is the executive assistant of pupil personnel services.

Sharing the spotlight with the students were two special honorees, recently retired Assistant Chief Eugene Devlin, former borough commander of the New York City Police Department, and Senior Superintendent Rose Albanese-DePinto, former B.A.S.I.S. superintendent.

Devlin was awarded a Conflict Resolution Award for opening up a police training observation program to high school students.

Mrs. DePinto received the Leadership Award for her long-standing commitment to education. After less than a year and a half as

head of B.A.S.I.S., Mrs. DePinto was promoted to senior superintendent of all city high schools.

Staten Island representative to the Board of Education Jerry Cammarata delivered a keynote address, encouraging students to collaborate with school administrators to create a democracy within each school.

Among the other dignitaries who addressed the students were: Dr. Marlene Springer, president of the College of Staten Island and Reyes Irizarry, B.A.S.I.S. superintendent. Tottenville High School parent Phyllis Eisenberg sang rousing versions of the national anthem and "The Greatest Love of All," by Whitney Houston.