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David Trevaskis addresses Swarthmore-Rutledge eighth graders on the day's topic: shoplifting.

Students get lesson in good and evil

Wallingford-Swarthmore teaching civic duty

By Reid Kanaley
Inquirer Staff Writer

In the store, 14-year-old Mike Brendler noticed that an eighth-grade classmate was stuffing merchandise under his coat. Mike did the "right" thing. He told the manager, who called the police.

But that incident was just make-believe. The students were role playing yesterday in Freema Nichols' social studies class at the Swarthmore-Rutledge School in Swarthmore. What would Mike do in real life?

"I wouldn't want to rat on a friend," he told the class in a discussion afterward.

"I'd leave, or make him put it back," said another student, Sean Thompson.

"The right thing to do would be to tell the manager," added Brett Mucklow, "but I would just leave."

Still, the 220 eighth graders in the Wallingford-Swarthmore School District appear to be giving civic duty a second thought as a result of a program designed to teach them how the law relates to them.

Social studies department chairman John Preg said the suburban district began looking for a way to teach students about crime, the law and personal responsibility about five years ago when Wallingford-Swarthmore students scored poorly, an average 13 percent, on the part of the state's Educational Quality Assessment test designed to measure "societal responsibility."

The test asked what students would do if, say, they found cash in a shopping center parking lot. "For the most part, our kids said, 'Buy something with it,'" Preg said.

The low scores, he said, matched those of other districts and indicated that youngsters "will do what's right not because it's right but because they might get caught. It's kind of a sign of the times."

The program, based on a textbook, *Teens, Crime and the Community*, published by the National Crime Prevention Council and the National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law, makes students study the law and their own actions on subjects ranging from shoplifting to drunken driving and acquaintance rape.

It was introduced to social studies classes at 20 middle and junior high schools in Philadelphia in the 1987-88 school year, and has been used in more than 150 secondary schools nationwide, according to the sponsoring organizations.

Wallingford-Swarthmore is the second Pennsylvania district to try the

program, and Catherine Meikle, youth programs director for the Washington-based National Crime Prevention Council, was in the district yesterday to see how it was being used.

She commended the students in Nichols' class for a "level of participation [that] couldn't have been higher." In addition to role playing and discussion, student projects have included making videotapes and posters and inviting community leaders to talk to classes.

One group of students videotaped interviews with Swarthmore shopkeepers, who were asked about the effects of shoplifting on their businesses. Other students toured the county juvenile detention center. "They just looked like normal kids, really," one girl said of the youths they encountered at the facility in Lima. Mike Brendler said he had

proposed organizing a group to clean up graffiti.

Such "teen empowerment" is the goal of the program, said David Trevaskis, a lawyer and education director of the Law, Education and Participation program at Temple University's School of Law, which is encouraging use of the *Teens, Crime, and the Community* text.

"We think of teenagers as the problem," said Trevaskis, who also visited the Swarthmore school yesterday. But, he said, "if you let teenagers get involved in a positive way, they say, 'Yeah, we can buy into the system.'"

"I don't know what I'd do," student Daniel Bahar said of Brendler's dilemma with the shoplifter. But, he said, just talking about it made him feel better prepared to deal with such a situation, should it arise, and helped him realize, "It's not just mischief. It matters."