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Memorial Junior High School students, (from left), Rashad Mateen, Miles Raynor, Shanaz Abdul-Hagg and Nakeesha Anderson discuss the skit in which they played members of a jury yesterday as part of the New Jersey Peer to Peer program at the Kennedy Center in Willingboro. BCT staff photo/DENNIS MCDONALD

## 'Peers' learn anti-drug message

By Josh Bernstein  
BCT staff writer

WILLINGBORO — More than 200 middle-school students from across the state learned about the dangers of tobacco, alcohol, drugs and chemical inhalants during a workshop at the former John F. Kennedy High School yesterday.

Memorial Junior High School in Willingboro was the lone Burlington County school participating in the New Jersey Peer to Peer "Marches On" event, a daylong chance for youngsters to exchange ideas about substance-abuse prevention and peer leadership.

"It's a regional event where the kids come together and showcase their knowledge of substance-abuse prevention," said Pam Taylor, one of the program's coordinators.

Founded in 1997, New Jersey Peer to Peer is a school-based program designed to reduce the use of tobacco, marijuana, alcohol and other dangerous substances among students in seventh- and eighth-grades. The program is sponsored by the state Department of Health and Senior Ser-

vices and is coordinated by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training.

"More people know someone, either in your family or in your neighborhood ... who has had a problem with drugs and alcohol," Barry Johnson, head of the New Jersey Association of County Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors, told the students.

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**Pam Taylor**  
program coordinator

The students from Memorial and 10 other middle schools in Cherry Hill, Pennsauken, Great Meadows, Port Elizabeth, Sewell, Pleasantville, Monroeville and Woodbine sang and performed three- to five-minute pieces about different aspects of substance abuse.

For example, students from Upper Pittsgrove School in Monroeville performed a skit about the dangers of inhaling glue, hairspray, paint, nail polish, markers and gasoline. Pupils from Carusi Middle School in Cherry Hill dealt with girls being tempted to smoke marijuana in order to "be cool."

The lessons learned at yesterday's event will help the Peer to Peer children teach others how to deal with certain situations, Peer to Peer director Margo Ross said.



Ashante Norman (from left), Rashad Mateen and Miles Raynor, eighth graders at Memorial Junior High School in Willingboro, talk yesterday about the skit they just performed at the township's Kennedy Center.

"You're changing the culture of the school," Ross said. Through the peers, "it becomes more favorable not to use. It's really positive peer pressure."

In their skit, the Willingboro students, who began their peer leadership training last year, put tobacco on trial for damaging a person's internal organs. One of the skit's characters, Tina Tobacco, was found guilty of attempted murder.

Eighth-grader Ashaunte Norman played Tina Tobacco's de-

fense attorney.

"We provide outreach around our school so everyone will understand about drugs and how they will have an influence on your life," Norman said after the skit.

Donna Dennis, coordinator of substance-abuse prevention at Memorial, said the program's 22 students meet twice a week.

Dennis said efforts to reduce substance abuse by schoolchildren make "more of an impact on the kids if they hear it from their peers."