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Educators at UMaine Institute Lend Expertise for National Campaign on Young Adolescents

ORONO, Maine -- Executive from the nation's cable television industry tapped the expertise of teachers attending a University of Maine summer institute to help develop programming for a major initiative focusing on young adolescents.

Participants in the Middle Level Education Institute on July 9 heard Richard H. Beahrs, chief operating officer, Courtroom Television Network, outline the national programming proposal that will launch the Month of the Young Adolescent public awareness campaign this fall, in partnership with the National Middle School Association and an array of other youth advocacy organizations.

Beahrs, as well as other officials from Court TV, TCI Communications, Inc., and Cable in the Classroom publications, spent the day meeting with the more than 200 teachers and consultants participating in the annual institute.

The Month of the Young Adolescent, a collaborative initiative spearheaded by the National Middle School Association (NMSA), will be observed in October. The goal is to increase public understanding of the unique developmental needs and characteristics of 10 to 15 year olds, who are undergoing the most extensive physical, mental, social, moral and emotional changes of the life span.

These are crucially formative years that largely determine future behavior, yet there is a general lack of understanding of youth in this transition period between childhood and full adolescence, says Susan Swaim, executive director of the NMSA. The campaign is generating growing support from organizations and agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education, The College Board, the National 4-H Council, the American Bar Association, the National Drop-out Prevention Institute and the American Counseling Association.

The cable network participation provides the opportunity to reach and involve a huge audience, Swaim noted.

It's awareness of the tremendous issues these youngsters are dealing with and of their great potential that the cable partners wants to promote, Beahrs told the teachers in a general session this morning. "Everyone I have talked with agrees that these are the toughest times a kid experiences, and it's also an awfully tough time for parents."

The Month of the Young Adolescent will be launched Oct. 7 with a national kick-off show on Court TV's "Your Turn" program. It will be followed by a series of community forum programming that will explore the challenges and joys of becoming of age in the
1990's through the theme of Choices and Consequences. That programming will include locally produced community response programs in which middle level and high school students will play an active role. In addition to live television, nationwide broadcasts to middle schools and regional satellite feeds, a heavy on-line component will be used to help distribute information.

The focus of the multi-year initiative will be on creating two-way dialogues and generating community involvement and response to issues that have local impact, according to Beahrs. "It's the local people who know what's happening and who have the best solutions to issues in their own communities," he said. "We want to promote networking and discussion between citizens at the local level."

In addition to the televised programming, the collaborative public awareness campaign is considering the development of resource guides for parents, educators and students, curriculum study guides to highlight the messages of the initiative, and an emphasis on the importance of mentoring - one-on-one relationships with a caring adult for this age level.

The teachers at the UMaine institute are a valuable source of knowledge about young adolescents and of ideas for the direction the programming should take, Beahrs said. "We have exceptional resources, but we don't think we know the answers. That's why we go to the experts," he said. "We care about what you're doing and we need your help."

The teachers met with the cable representations in feedback sessions and completed a questionnaire seeking their input on the aspects of young adolescents' lives that are most important for the public to be aware of and understand, about myths, stereotypes and misperceptions about young adolescents, about the choices they face on a daily basis, and their options.

The initiative is a great opportunity to focus on an area of education that hasn't been given its due, according to Carl Lusby, principal of the Herbert Jewett and Walter Gardner schools in Bucksport, and an institute participant. The middle level child tends to be forgotten in the emphasis on early childhood and high school education, both of which are important, he said. "But the middle level years are the most critical period in a person's life in terms of direction."

The Middle Level Education Institute was founded in 1984 by Edward Brazee, UMaine associate professor of middle level education, and over the years had hosted nearly 2,500 educators from Maine, states around the country, Canada, Indonesia and the Virgin Islands. A long-term staff development effort, the goals of the institute are to provide information and resources on the latest research, best practices and needs of 10-15 year olds, as well as to help with the process of planning, implementing and assessing programs unique to each school's participating team.

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