

School will revive lost art of talking

By Stephen Sacco

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From left, Port Jervis eighth-graders Marissa Carlton, Dan Bloom, Joseph Mannion, Brianna Tempelmeyer, Courtney Dorritie and Lindsay Buccelli next year will study how to make small talk. Times Herald-Record/JOHN DeSANTO

PORT JERVIS — Two out of six Port Jervis Middle School eighth-graders say that they couldn't go a week without cellphone texting or instant messaging — that's sending a text message on a cell phone or an instant message on a computer.

These are the results of a mad unscientific survey conducted by the Times Herald-Record of six Port Jervis Middle School eighth-graders.

But talking to somebody face to face — all six agree — can be "awkward."

common text and instant message abbreviations

B4N Bye for now

BTW By the way

G2G Got to go

GR8 Great

L8R Later

LOL Laughing out loud

POS Parents over shoulder

THX Thanks

TTYL Talk to you later

VBG Very Big Grin

To see more text abbreviations, visit www.netlingo.com.

It's a brave new world, and educators across the country are finding that some of the "soft skills" that in the past were taken for granted may have to be taught. Case in point: Recent college and high school graduates have a hard time making small talk, says Sharon McPherson, head of Port Jervis High School's business department.

"You can have the greatest idea in the world," McPherson said, "but if you can't communicate it, you aren't going anywhere."

Port Jervis is developing a curriculum for an essential skills class that will be required starting with the class of 2012, who will be entering high school this September.

Students will learn how to make small talk, among other skills.

Technology has turned the art of conversation into thumb-friendly shorthand. The phrase "too busy for you cutie" has become "2BZ4UQT." Lindsay Buccelli, 13, said she taught her mother her texting language.

The students say texting and IM'ing is often done while doing homework and is a great way to relieve boredom. But talking to an adult or a group is different.

"When you can see the person and how they are reacting, it can make you nervous," Buccelli said.

In the intensely test-driven school day, students have little chance to take elective courses and teachers have little opportunity to deviate from the curriculum, says Kate Oldham, guidance coordinator for the high school. McPherson says the business department is trying to fill in those gaps.

Port Jervis isn't alone in emphasizing communication. Berkeley College has instituted "no e-mail Fridays" in order to get its employees to talk to each other face to face.

Other school districts in the area have also incorporated communication skills into their curriculum.

Most importantly, McPherson says communication skills are transferable to many situations.

"Students today can not only expect to have more than five jobs in their lifetime — but five careers," she said.

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