

Students gather to hear about building character

By Yvonne Samuel
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For four hours, 100 plus wide-eyed high school students listened intently as Paul Vitale, a professional speaker, engaged and excited the attendees while driving home his points at the 12th Annual Character Education Conference.

"We must lead by example," Vitale told his young congregants. "We work hard on building our reputation, but we can do one thing and that's in jeopardy."

"There are times we do things that are not so smart. When we open our mouths and say things about people, once you say it, you can't take it back."

Vitale, one of 30 presenters at the conference, gave a multimedia presentation on how to reap positive outcomes in life. He is author of the book, "Are You Puzzled by the Puzzle of Life?" and founder of Vital Communications in Little Rock, Ark.

Students and teachers from 41 school districts in Missouri and Illinois participated in a host of

seminars and training groups at the convention, held at the Hyatt Regency Union Station. Topics ranged from bullying to ethics for school administrators.

The convention was sponsored by CHARACTER*plus*, an initiative of the Cooperating School Districts. The organization provides training, resources and leadership to help parents and schools accomplish one of their most important jobs—character development of the next generation.

According to CHARACTER*plus*, good character means understanding, caring about and acting upon core ethical values such as honesty, respect and responsibility. The organization encourages schools to establish their own character committees.

Hope DeClue, a language arts teacher at LaSalle Springs Middle School in the Rockwood School District, hoped to learn more about how to improve and expand her



school's character committee. "Character is extremely important," she said.

During his presentation, Vitale used his charming smile, winning mannerisms and enthusiasm to enthrall the audience. He said four concepts play a major role in positive outcomes in every situation encountered. They are:

- The power of choice.
- All you have is your name.
- Perception is reality.
- You only live once.

Vitale encouraged the youngsters to dream courageously. "To dream means to envision what may become," he told them.

Vitale also urged the students to establish a course of action,

empower others to imagine, find a common bond with their team and be resilient.

While character is a necessity in schools, Becky Baldwin, director of the Northwest Regional Professional Development Center, says it's equally important in the workplace.

"It's realizing we are all in this together," she said. "It's families, businesses, communities and it's schools doing it everyday."

"Good character skills and respect affect the workplace positively and produce more productive workers," she said.

In the fall of 2002, CHARACTER*plus* received two grants from the U.S. Department of Education to conduct studies. The two studies will help gauge the effectiveness of character education and how it affects school climate, a student's sense of belonging and test scores. The results of the studies will be released in September.