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Actors lead JHS 8 students in a warmup exercise for their play about their school's problems to be performed this week.

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For School, Catharsis on Stage

Troubled junior high finds release in play

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When drama therapist Diane Feldman attended a District 28 school board meeting on the future of JHS 8 in South Jamaica last spring, she was stunned when nearly fifty parents suddenly left the meeting, frustrated over their inability to talk about their concerns.

Feldman, the founder of the Educational Network of Artists in Creative Theatre (ENACT), was attending the night meeting because her group had been working with eighth graders at the school, using interactive drama therapy to teach students about conflict resolution.

"I saw such anger and rage and upset, and then a total lack of communication" at the meeting, said Feldman, a songwriter and performing artist who founded ENACT 10 years ago. "It made me sad that people had such problems. I realized that we had to do what we do in the classroom, but on a bigger scale."

So Feldman wrote an original play, entitled "Messages: a play about a school under water." The script is based on interviews Feldman conducted with stu-

dents, parents, school officials and board members, and is scheduled to be performed by some of the students at JHS 8 at 9 a.m. on Wednesday, and for the general public at the Black Spectrum Theatre at the Roy Wilkins Park at 7:30 p.m. the same day.

Parents, school officials and elected officials have been invited to view the play and to participate in the discussion after the evening performance.

For seven years, JHS 8 has languished on the state's list of Schools Under Registration Review because of its low math and reading scores. Over the years, the school has drawn up countless reorganization plans and sent in teams to improve student performance. Yet little has changed. On May 12, the school was finally taken over by schools Chancellor Rudy Crew.

During her interviews, Feldman said she realized that there was an enormous amount of frustration over the issues facing the school, ranging from disciplinary problems to flooding. Parents, teachers, administrators and school officials — all were blaming each other, as well as the media, for creating a poor image of the school.

"Everyone is blaming everyone else and not listening to each other," Feldman said. "Everyone's point is right and legitimate, but what are they going to do about it?"

Jennifer Banta, ENACT program director who has been working in the school, said the school's poor public image hurts the students. "It makes them really angry," she said. "It gives them a reputation. It leads to the kids consciously and unconsciously acting out."

Students were not available to talk about the play because of school policy concerning media access.

In writing the script, Feldman said she developed scenes to reflect reality, but also exaggerated them to make them bigger than life. Throughout the script, she uses humor to offer a different perspective and emotional distance to the school's problems.

The school's sagging infrastructure, for example, is reflected in the subtitle, "a play about a school under water." For eight years, the school's basement periodically floods due to an infiltration of ground water.

As the play opens, a PA announcement goes off: "Attention, please! The water level is rising from the sub-basement to the basement. All students who have classes in the basement, please remember to wear your boots starting tomorrow." Throughout the play, the water level rises until it reaches the third floor.

"The humor gives them safety," Feldman said. "We also use ourselves as performers. The drama helps to create empathy. It allows the audience to process their feelings."

ENACT has worked in nearly all of the city school districts. The program combines elements of psychotherapy, drama therapy, physical therapy and the performing arts to help participants better understand their feelings and to resolve their problems.

In recent weeks, ENACT actor-instructors who work at the school, such as Robert McIntosh and Andre Daniel, have been performing the scenes with the students, getting their input to fine-tune the script. About nine students will perform in the play.

Feldman said she hoped that the play would help to reopen communications lines that have shut down. "Underneath all the problems, there's a real caring and love," Feldman said. "Each character will have that. I really got that from the interviews. If we can focus on that, there's a lot for the future."

But Shirley Huntley, a District 28 school board member, said she didn't think the play would get the attention it deserved. "I think the school officials will ignore it," she said. "I don't expect all the board members to show up. I'll go."

Huntley's prophecy seemed to be coming true Thursday when students at the school learned that the chancellor's office was not planning to send a representative to the play because of a scheduling conflict. Feldman said the eighth graders had initiated a letter-writing campaign to change his mind.