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Stuart Twemlow, anti-violence expert
Photo courtesy of Stuart Twemlow

Peaceful Schools pulls no punches

BY SADIA LATIFI, Staff Writer

DURHAM - Bailey Horgan shows what to do when a bully approaches. He stands up straight, wiggles his toes, puffs out his cheeks, chews on his tongue and folds his arms.

And if all else fails, the fifth-grader said, "I'll yell."

Bailey was at the Central Park School for Children this week testing out lessons the rest of his classmates will soon learn when they head back to school Monday.

Teachers and staff at the charter elementary spent the week training for a new anti-bullying initiative called Peaceful Schools. With Gov. Beverly Perdue expected to sign an anti-bullying bill into law soon, many are now watching how school districts statewide adapt to the new policy.

Sponsors of the program hope the charter school, located on Foster Street in Durham's Central Park district, will serve as a model for future anti-bullying initiatives.

"We're interested in creating school environments that are safe and good places to be," said Renee Prillaman of the N.C. Psychoanalytic Foundation, the group funding the project. "This is an important project that will have far-reaching effects in the community in Durham at large."

The foundation brought in school anti-violence experts Stuart Twemlow, Stephen Twemlow and Frank Sacco this week to teach strategies for keeping the peace among youngsters. The three developed "Back Off Bully," an adaptable, psychology-based curriculum already used at schools from Ohio to New Zealand.

"Within our school, we really wanted a program that would teach character education and advance social development," school director John Heffernan said.

The program focuses on encouraging bystanders in bullying situations. A martial arts component, "Gentle Warriors," emphasizes confidence postures, blocking and relaxation. It's supposed to be taught during physical education classes.

Heffernan said the school planned two assemblies in its first week. Teachers will also plan activities like "peace" poster making and end-of-day discussions.

"It has to be something everybody wants," said sensei Stephen Twemlow, who is Stuart's son. "You've got to have a shift in language in everyone from the administration to the custodian."

About 40 teachers and staff work at Central Park, and they were all required to attend training, which included small group exercises to decide which parts of Back Off Bully the school would adopt.

"There's not any reason why another school couldn't do this," said fourth-grade teacher Cheryle Pope. "It's about creating an atmosphere where administrators and teachers care about teaching the whole child."

Central Park serves about 275 kindergarten through fifth-graders. Forty percent are from minority populations, and 17 percent have special needs. But the school is not facing serious bullying issues, students and staff said.

"Some excluding and some kids get picked on," said Bailey, who was selected to attend parts of the training. "But the school isn't a bully zone."

"Next time I see a younger kid get picked on, I'm going to be a helpful bystander," Bailey said. "I would talk to the bully and help him understand it's better not to be a bully."

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