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Charter school fights bullying

DURHAM -- The Central Park School for Children is like many elementary schools: Kids accidentally eat glue, love recess and perform all over the map on state exams.

But the school is doing something a little different this year: fighting school bullies.

The charter school is the test site for an anti-bullying initiative called Peaceful Schools that comes on the heels of a state anti-bullying law passed this past summer.

And it may be working, teachers and students say.

"Kids are now aware of the concept of bullying and becoming more active to stop it," said fifth-grade teacher Heather Cook.

The pilot program is funded by the N.C. Psychoanalytic Foundation, which will host an anti-bullying conference Saturday at UNC-Chapel Hill.

The School Violence Prevention Act requires that students, teachers and volunteers report incidents of bullying to school administrators. The law protects students from bullying for a host of reasons, including race, religion, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity. School districts are left to decide procedures and punishments.

Peaceful Schools was met with some skepticism at Central Park, on Foster Street in Durham's Central Park district. Teachers went through a mandatory two-day training over the summer led by school anti-violence experts.

"The buy-in from the teachers was hard," Cook said. "The program is good because it's not prescriptive but it was really conceptual. At the end of the day, we all wanted to know more about what we could actually do."

Teachers met again to exchange ideas. Cook's class is reading books that speak frankly about bullying, like Judy Blume's "Blubber." They've also participated in theater groups with older students to act out conflict resolution.

The school's all-grades recess -- where older students used to square off against younger ones -- is less contentious. Fifth-grade helpers observe the playground to make sure everyone is playing fair.

Amir Frazier, a fifth-grader and one of Cook's students, is researching bullying.

"I think kids get under pressure maybe at home and then feel like they need to be mean because it gets them attention and respect," said Amir, 9. "I've been bullied, and I have bullied, which I now feel bad about."

The school serves about 275 kindergarteners through fifth-graders.

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