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Life

Atwood welcomes anti-bullying puppeteer

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By Nicole Tuttle
Voice Reporter

Words like "victim" and "bully" are labels that can be just as harmful to students as any other, according to anti-bullying school assembly presenter Richard Paul.

"We are trying to educate students, teachers and parents why it is wrong to label someone a bully," Paul said. "In most cases it is a student that has made some wrong choices and labeling them a bully can make things worse."

Paul said that through presentations such as the ones he will offer at Atwood Elementary School in Macomb Township on April 24, he explains why it is important to remove the word "victim" of bullying and instead use words such as "target."

Paul will offer separate anti-bullying presentations for Atwood students in lower elementary grades and upper elementary grades, according to Atwood principal Angela Szczepanski. He will also offer a 6:30 p.m. presentation at the school for parents.

"He focuses a lot on the difference between true bullying and normal child-to-child conflict," Szczepanski said. "He gives parents strategies of what to do if their child is bullied and what to do if their child is a bully."

To prepare students for Paul's visit, Szczepanski said that Atwood's Green Team offered a contest in which students were asked to create a bag using recycled materials, and add an anti-bullying slogan to their creation. Students had the opportunity to vote on their favorite creation, and the top three winners received prizes, according to Szczepanski.

Szczepanski said that Paul's visit is sponsored by the school's Atwood Parent Advisory Committee, which develops fundraisers throughout the school year for things like presenters.

Students have been offered incentives such as popsicles and an extra recess for the classroom with the highest parent attendance at Paul's evening event, so that students will encourage their parents to attend, according to Szczepanski.

Szczepanski said that she learned about Paul's presentations through the Macomb Intermediate School District (MISD).

Paul has more than 25 years of experience as a school speaker, bully prevention specialist and curriculum author. He receives ongoing training from several sources, including the MISD.



Presenter Richard Paul uses puppets in many of his anti-bullying presentations. Paul will visit Atwood Elementary School on April 24. (Submitted Photo)

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"I attend three sessions a year," Paul said. "I also look for bullying conferences throughout the USA and Canada that are offering up new ideas I can share with the kids and the parents. I am excited to be attending a conference in Maine where only 25 professionals are selected to attend."

Paul has authored a bully prevention curriculum and activities book and has co-authored the children's book "Bullying Ben." Paul said that the curriculum includes seven lessons and draws from his assemblies, so that schools that purchase it can carry on from where he has begun and match it to their own programs.

"MISD, Bully Free Schools and my Duck Sense Bully Prevention programs are working hard to eliminate the labels and offer up the 'how to,'" Paul said. "An example is how to report bullying. How to stand up and speak up against bullying. How to be a good friend to someone who is a target of a bully. How to stop being aggressive and instead understand and practice your positive behavior skills."

Parents who attend the evening presentation at Atwood will learn how situations between children can sometimes escalate into bullying, according to Paul.

"There is so much confusion between conflict and bullying ... They will learn how a conflict can easily turn into a bullying situation," Paul said. "Both parents and students will be given examples, stories and simple explanations of what defines bullying and what defines conflict."

Parents will not only receive information to help their child if they are a target, but will also receive information to help if their child is perpetrating bullying behavior, Paul said. A chart can be a tool to teach the difference between positive and negative actions, according to Paul.

"This will be a simple explanation of how they can sit down with their kids to put together a simple discipline policy at home," Paul said. "When a child has expressed aggressive behavior toward a sibling or parent, they will learn there is no warning. If they did something wrong they will be disciplined and the child will be able to go to the chart they created to see what they did wrong and the consequences for their actions."

Paul said that on April 24 he will not discuss cyber-bullying with Atwood students, but will bring it up during the parent presentation to inform parents of the importance of teaching their children about the dangers of cyber-bullying early. Paul said he explains to parents that they can be held liable for their children's actions in some cases, and that Internet information never really gets erased.

"I will offer up examples that will help the parents discover it is up to them to police their child on the computer or on the smart phone, to be aware of what they are sending out and commenting on," Paul said. "They will learn how they can share with their child what is right and what is wrong."

Parents will also learn what they can do to support a child who is a target of bullying.

"The basic advice is to get involved," Paul said. "The worst thing you can do is not get involved. I explain why it is important to take away the word victim and instead understand that they are a target. Someone has targeted their child and as a parent you need to remind them it is not their fault and do what you can to help your child."

Parents will also have the opportunity to participate in group discussions and game show activities, Paul said.

During student presentations, Paul uses puppets and ventriloquism as well as skits to reinforce the importance of reporting bullying behavior.

"It is a humorous skit where a few teachers play the kids and the kids play the principal, school police officer and the nice lady in the community," Paul said. "They laugh and learn why it is so important to report it, stand up and speak up against bullying behavior."

Paul said that during student presentations, he discusses what bystanders can do when they witness a bullying situation.

"I remind the students to tell someone. No one is a mind reader, you must seek help. If you are a student and you see a friend being bullied, pull your friend away from the situation, go with them to report it," Paul said. "If you are afraid you will be targeted too, then at least go over to your friend's house and tell them why you were afraid to speak up and remind your friend that they are awesome and why. Children have commented on many surveys how a friend coming over, calling or just reminding them why they are great has helped a target work through and get over a bullying situation."

Students will learn the importance of recording incidents if they become a bully's target, according to Paul.

"I will share with them why it is important to keep the emotions at the door and stick to the facts," Paul said. "They will also learn how to keep a record and why it will help the principal see the pattern of bullying behavior, who is involved and where it is taking place."

Nicole Tuttle is a freelance reporter. She can be contacted at ntuttle.reporter@sbcglobal.net.

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