

W07; Education writing

October 10, 2019

“Parents protest bullying at middle school”

Donald Lambert

FRONT ROYAL — Warren County parents met in front of Skyline Middle School on Wednesday morning to protest bullying.

Jamie Oliver, one of the organizers of the protest, said that her son was bullied at the school and she is tired of it.

“I just want accountability,” she said. “They promised “someone within arm’s reach” would help my child. How is there another physical incident if there’s someone within arm’s reach? How does he still come home with bruises that are unexplained? I just want to advocate for [the children who are bullied.]”

Oliver’s husband Justin said that it is time to seriously address the bullying issue.

“It’s time to fully embrace the zero-tolerance policy,” he said. “No more ‘boys will be boys’ or ‘kids will be kids.’ Call it for what it is — bullying. If the system is falling short, maybe it’s time for a new system.”

Justin Oliver said that over 50 signatures were gathered from students at Skyline Middle School who had been bullied or are standing against bullying.

“The common consensus from other parents is that a lot of other children have issues of bullying and what’s being said is they are ‘attention-seeking,’” he said. “It’s the same phrase that was regurgitated to [Jamie].”

Jamie Oliver recognized the law enforcement officials whom she has been in contact with during these incidents but feels that the school may be “tying their hands.”

“I’m tired of the secrecy,” she said. “I want to be informed. I want others to be informed. We need to hold our schools accountable. They need to protect our kids as we would. We should expect [our kids] back the same way we put them on the bus. I don’t want to sit here and cry and worry.”

Another protester, Jessica Haugen, whose child has been a victim of bullying in the past, said that bullying has become a growing issue in Warren County Public Schools.

“I think it’s a terrible issue and the schools say there’s zero-tolerance, but they don’t do anything about it,” she said. “They rather blame the victim rather than deal with it. They just want to sweep it under the rug.”

Other bullying incidents have been reported, including one at Skyline High School last week. Virginia State Police are investigating the incident — an alleged assault of a student by at least

two other students — at the recommendation of the Warren County Commonwealth's Attorney's office.

When asked why state police were asked to investigate this incident when it normally would fall to the Warren County Sheriff's Office, Commonwealth's Attorney Bryan Layton said that state police were asked to investigate it to "avoid any potential aspects or improprieties by the Commonwealth's Attorney's office and local police."

Lt. Jennifer Laney-Kirkland, of the Warren County Sheriff's Department, didn't offer any comment on the incident but said that the department does investigate all cases of bullying that are reported. Michael Smith, principal of Skyline High School, had no comment on the incident.

Jamie Oliver said that she pressed charges against the students who harmed her child at Skyline Middle School, but she said that it was more to teach them a lesson rather than to punish them.

"I don't want to see kids punished," she said. "I want them to be held accountable. I want counseling [for them] or have them be a buddy. I want to turn this around. Giving punishments out isn't going to solve the problem all the time. We need to work with them."

She added: "Ultimately, if you don't hold anyone accountable, it doesn't matter how many policies you have. Zero tolerance is zero tolerance, yet multiple people are having the same issues."

Tom Sayre, a member of the Warren County Board of Supervisors, attended the protest on Tuesday.

"There is zero tolerance for bullying," he said. "No child deserves something like that to happen to them. Typically, people who bully like this at this age have had some bullying that have been done to them earlier in their life and this is how they take out their aggression. This can be a complex problem."

Alan Fox, director of secondary education for Warren County Public Schools, was also in attendance for the protest.

"We stand with the parents," he said. "We want our kids to be safe and we want them to feel safe. We don't like bullies either. We want kids to come to school and get a great education."

Skyline Middle School principal Bobby Johnston released a statement on Tuesday responding to the bullying instances at the school.

"We believe that all students have the right to live and be educated in a safe, caring and supportive environment with mutual respect and courtesy. Bullying is anti-social behavior that threatens the values, standards, and peace of our school and community," Johnston said.

Johnston said that Skyline Middle School offers multiple programs that prevent and address bullying that students can take part in.

“We are here to help support and grow engaged, healthy children into engaged, healthy young adults who are ready for the academic challenges of high school,” Johnston said. “We welcome a partnership with the parents of our students in order to form a strong community connection.”

Johnston said they can contact him at 540-636-0909 or via email at bjohnnton@wcps.k12.va.us if there are any questions or if they would like further information on the programs Skyline Middle School offers.

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February 11, 2019

“New school club helps turn boys into gentlemen”

Donald Lambert

FRONT ROYAL — E. Wilson Morrison Elementary School has started a unique club.

The Boys Into Gentlemen club (BIG) introduces fourth and fifth-grade boys to opportunities for leadership, mentoring, and community involvement by learning about different personal and social skills, including group dynamics, etiquette, and career exploration through lessons, guest speakers, and hands-on activities.

Rodney Brown, a special education teacher at E. Wilson Morrison Elementary, said that the idea for BIG came about last year.

“Last year, I noticed that there wasn’t a program for young men,” Brown said. “There was a program for girls called Girls on the Run, but there was nothing for the males. I drafted an idea. It started as a page and it ended up four or five pages that were kind of giving [the boys] different roles and responsibilities.”

Brown said that the program gained steam when Shane Goodwin, who serves as an assistant principal at E. Wilson Morrison, came along.

“Even though I’m new here, we both have the same passion and recognized that in each other once we had a conversation about what we wanted to see with the boys,” Goodwin said. “We really wanted to involve the community and we really wanted to involve kids who had real leadership potential.”

Goodwin said that he and Brown presented the idea to the Warren County Education Endowment in hopes of getting funding for the club.

“We started with that group and they were really excited about the idea,” Goodwin said.

Goodwin said that the 10 boys in the club were selected by their teachers.

“We basically said to fourth and fifth-grade teachers to submit any name of any boy you think that shows leadership potential and can benefit from a program like this,” he said. “We asked the teachers to whittle the list down and then work with parents, grandparents and whoever the kids lived with to get permission and kind of kicked it off from there.”

The club focuses on a theme each month to help develop their social and personal skills. Brown said that February’s theme focuses on the individual and ties in their lessons each Thursday with the theme.

“Our overall theme is influence and what does it mean to be influential,” Goodwin said.

“Everyone shows influence, but sometimes it’s negative. We want our kids to have the opportunity to be exposed to positive people who have influence in a positive way. Our hope is

our boys grow up, go to middle and high school, go to college and get whatever career they want and come back to this community and be influential people in a positive manner.”

Goodwin said that the creation of BIG has influenced other schools in the area to adopt a version of the program.

“They would ask about how to start the process and what criteria we used,” he said. “We’d be glad to share our ideas that we have started. We can certainly learn from others and they can benefit from where we began. It’s a program that can really connect schools with communities.”

Even though the club only started in January, the boys of BIG feel they have already improved.

“I wanted to learn to be etiquette and be a gentleman,” said Joey Pendleton, a fourth-grader at E. Wilson Morrison.

“I’ve really wanted to be a gentleman, and I feel like I’ve improved,” said Adrian Craig, a fifth-grader at the elementary school.

The boys have really enjoyed meeting members of the community and doing activities like learning how to make a table setting. As far as growing the program, Pendleton recommended a contest to make a better BIG logo. Fourth-grader Mekkai Steadman recommended doing more crafts and meeting more influential people.

“I don’t think this will happen, but I would like Lebron James to come,” Steadman said.

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“Project Positive spreads positive messages in Warren schools”

Donald Lambert

FRONT ROYAL – Warren County students have a new way of spreading positive thoughts and attitudes in their schools through a program called Project Positive, which was started by Tina Culbreath, co-founder of the I'm Just Me Movement.

Project Positive is a product of the I'm Just Me Movement, a nonprofit organization Culbreath started with her husband Rodney in Winchester to help develop student readiness to work in teams, live together, interact and develop leadership skills, and its relationship with the My Opportunity for Reinforcement and Enrichment (MORE) program – an initiative involving the Warren Coalition and Warren County schools to promote healthy interaction between students.

Culbreath said she launched Project Positive earlier in the 2018-2019 school year to offer students an opportunity to “be a catalyst for inclusion and more diversity in schools and to be more accepting of others.”

The students participating in MORE came up with the idea for Project Positive, Culbreath said.

“[I'm Just Me Movement] provides mentorship to the individuals in the MORE program and the students decided they wanted to come up with a project that could make someone's day and could spread positive messages throughout the school,” Culbreath said.

She said Project Positive, which has 36 students in the program, aims to curb bullying that has plagued middle school students.

“It's important because of bullying that they can bring inclusive and positive messages to the school, and they realized they could do that through their voices, and they weren't quite sure how they wanted to do that,” she said.

Culbreath said that Project Positive also focuses on the topic of suicide. She said suicide is the second leading cause of death among middle and high school students in the U.S.

“It is quite concerning to see the second-leading cause of deaths among kids their ages is suicide,” she said. “Some of it is because they want to be accepted; some of it is because they can't really be who they are. I think we have a whole dynamic when you add social media, and that's made it more problematic.”

Joyce Jenkins-Wimmer, program coordinator for MORE and the former college access network coordinator for Warren County public schools, said that Culbreath's Project Positive program was referred to her because of the work Culbreath was doing with I'm Just Me Because.

“She told us about their program about mentoring and promoting positive interaction,” Wimmer said. “Nowhere do we feel that's needed more than at the middle school because it's a really

challenging time for students and it's an opportunity for them to get positive messages from adults to interact positively with adults and one another."

Wimmer said that Culbreath's programs offer opportunities for kids to work together and talk about positive things happening.

"It's to help these kids to know that what they're getting is not just important, but, as ambassadors in their school and ambassadors of change, they can create an opportunity for other kids to feel more positive and to act in positive ways," she said.

While Project Positive just started this school year, Wimmer said that she has seen progress due to the program.

"One of the things that's been interesting is that, as part of Project Positive, the kids start the day with meditation," she said. "We've learned that centering yourself and calming your inner self is a strategy to be more positive and to act in more positive ways."

Culbreath said that she hopes to add more to Project Positive in the future to help spread its message.

"I personally think we should do more assembly-style presentations in schools," she said. "I think once every year, schools should really have a mandatory way of having messages of inclusion and diversity throughout the schools."

For more information on the I'm Just Me Movement, visit <http://www.imjustmemovement.org>.