

Troopers help Erie-area kids stay out of trouble



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Rabir Rogers-Banks, 10, works during a learning session of "Character, Be About It" on Tuesday at At Jefferson Elementary School in Erie. Pennsylvania State Police Cpl. Brian Hamilton, left, leads the session, including Landon Meyner, 10, right. [GREG WOHLFORD/ERIE TIMES-NEWS]

'Character: Be About It' program is putting off-duty state troopers in more classrooms to teach kids positive personality traits.

By Valerie Myers

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Matt Harris had been a state trooper more than 18 years when he was approached by former Erie School District administrator Bob Oliver to teach students character.

Harris jumped at the chance.

"For almost 20 years I had been in reactionary mode. I reacted to something that had happened when it was too late to prevent it," Harris said.

Harris developed the "Character: Be About It" program that puts specially trained, off-duty state troopers in classrooms to teach kids kindness, self-control, optimism, fairness and other character traits that help them resolve conflicts peacefully and respect themselves and others.

"This is about prevention," said Harris, a married father of three. "It's about helping kids stay in school and stay out of trouble. They learn that it feels good to hold a door open for someone, and that there are better ways than violence to resolve conflicts. With the right role model, they learn character just as they learn their ABCs or learn to dislike police."

The program is working.

Launched in Erie's Wayne and Wilson middle schools, Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary School and the Charter School of Excellence Maritime Center in 2012, the program has since been expanded to other city schools and to Meadville Area Middle School and Neason Hill Elementary School in Meadville, Maplewood Junior-Senior High School in Guys Mills, and Titusville schools.

Harris, 48, now coordinates the program full time with funding from foundations, businesses and schools and is working to introduce the program in Fort LeBoeuf, Girard, Conneaut Area, Forest Area and Pittsburgh public schools.

"We're going to go from hundreds of kids that we're reaching to thousands," Harris said. "It's exciting."

Also exciting are results measured by Penn State Behrend Community Outreach Research Evaluation, or C.O.R.E.

"Students receiving the 'Character: Be About It' curriculum last year had many more positive responses than those who did not receive the curriculum," according to a C.O.R.E. survey summary in fall 2016.

"This was especially noticeable on questions about police perception."

Troopers spend one day a week in schools, mostly with elementary and middle school students, through the school year.

"You go to school for six hours, go to lunch with the kids and go to classes with them. You basically adopt a school for 34 weeks a year. And the kids just gravitate to you," Harris said.

State police Cpl. Brian Hamilton teaches the program to third- and fourth-graders at Erie's Jefferson Elementary School. Children look forward to his days in school, often drawing pictures for him.

"I just enjoy interacting with the kids," Hamilton said. "Some kids relate to me more than others. But since I started with these same kids last year, they're all kind of more comfortable around me, and I've gotten to know them pretty well."

Those relationships help children learn that police are not their enemies and can help with problems outside school, Harris said.

"If we can flood schools with this program, the perception of law enforcement will change," he said.

The program is attracting attention from schools and police forces in New York and Ohio; from Laura Lomax, program director for Pearl S. Buck International, a foundation based in Perkaspie; and from Erie native Steve Scully, senior executive producer and political editor for C-Span in Washington, D.C., and previously a Big Brothers Big Sisters volunteer in Erie.

"Having been a Big Brother, I saw firsthand the need to mentor young boys and girls from broken homes and from single-parent homes," Scully said. "It's part of the problem Matt saw and is trying to correct. He's giving kids a sense of what their values and morals should be, and that they are valued individuals."

Lomax serves on the character program's board of directors.

"My whole thing at Pearl S. Buck International is cultural competencies, and that we shouldn't be biased one way or the other — toward law enforcement, toward different ethnic groups, toward people who are different from us," Lomax said. "What's so nice about this (character) program is seeing young people interacting with law enforcement with great ease and comfort."

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Jefferson Elementary School fourth-grader Roman Derevyanchuk, 9, answers a question during a "Character, Be About It" session. [GREG WOHLFORD/ERIE TIMES-NEWS]