District 4th graders celebrate diversity

A curriculum developed by the Peace Center taught students tolerance and empathy.

By Gary Weckselblatt

All fourth graders in the Quakertown Community School District have completed a program designed to develop tolerance and empathy among students while building a more inclusive classroom community.

The students took part in five, 45-minute sessions of the program titled “Celebrating Me, Celebrating You.” It was developed by the Peace Center, a social justice organization hired by the district’s administration and School Board.

The curriculum, which took place during a science/social studies period, was one of several initiatives taken by district officials following the Oct. 6 Cheltenham-Quakertown football game, after Strayer Middle School students shouted racial taunts at Cheltenham’s cheerleaders.

In addition, the district signed up for a system-wide diversity and inclusion initiative with the Pearl S. Buck Foundation. The organization will assess 400 employees as part of “The Welcome Workplace” program, in which professional trainers and staff will work with district leadership and stakeholders to build individual and group intercultural competency.

Kate Whitman, the Peace Center’s assistant director, said studies show that if children don’t learn of tolerance by the fourth grade, “it gets more difficult for them to see prejudice and know what to do” as they get older.

The organization’s work in QCSD, she said “was an exceptionally positive experience for us. All of the principals were in the classroom. That’s really rare. That sends such a powerful message to the kids.”

Whitman said much of the instruction is “to help students see differences as a positive. We want them to feel good about their identity, become interested in the differences of others, and to celebrate those differences.

“Some people call me four eyes because I wear glasses, and they think I’m weird,” one girl said. “But I’m cute, and I’m wild.”

The exercise, facilitated by Whitman, generated student conversation of how people may assume things about someone strictly from their appearance. And, oftentimes, that assumption can be hurtful and wrong.

Alison Kriner, a fourth-grade teacher at Richland Elementary School, said the Peace Center classes allowed students to ask questions while they were “in a safe space, and in an age appropriate way.”

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