

School helping to strengthen character

By Kim Jobe
News Editor

There's something infectious at West Corinth Elementary School.



It's not the latest childhood illness. But it is something that Principal Kate Butler hopes all the students catch.

The something? Character education.

When Butler took over the helm at West Corinth in 1999, she wanted to bring in a character education program with her. Since there wasn't too much curriculum for younger children, Butler and her staff created a program of their own.

The program became known as "Kindness is Contagious" and a slogan to go with it was soon formed: "Kindness is Contagious - Pass it On!"

Since 1999, that has been the mantra of sorts for the 300-plus children who enter the doors at West Corinth Elementary School each year.

The program, which reinforces what it taught at home, entails teachers instructing their students on basic character traits such as kindness, respect, cooperation and teamwork.

"We teach them to spread kindness," Butler explained. "It's a snowball effect - treating others the way you'd like to be treated."

Butler highly believes in the program.

"I think it's so very important. Without these values - such as respect, kindness, cooperation, teamwork - our academics would be lost," Butler said. "If you can't get along with people and be a contributing member of society, it won't matter how high you score on tests. If you teach them this, they'll act right and learn more.



West Principal Kate Butler (above) and Emily Steen, a CHS cheerleader, look on as a student introduces herself during a recent luncheon. Cheerleader Kate Mathis (below) talks with students as Butler passes out ice cream bars, the dessert treats at the luncheon.



"All children, no matter what level they're on, can buy into it," she added.

West Corinth's faculty and staff is committed to character education as well.

"Teachers have a responsibility to this as well as academics," Butler explained. "We insist, and have all agreed, to model these traits

ourselves. And that's the best teacher. So we try and I've seen it ... it's working."

The students are quickly catching on as well.

"There is not one of these children who leaves here who can't articulate what respect is, what kindness is, what it means to be a peacemaker," Butler said. "I rarely go out

into the hall that some child doesn't report to me about being kind."

At the first of the year, new students are taught the "Kindness Pledge" while students who have attended West before brush up on it. The pledge is recited after the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag

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each morning. They also repeat slogans, with a new one added each six weeks, which include: "Kindness is contagious, pass it on!" "If you mess up, clean up!" "Attitude is everything!" "R-E-S-P-E-C-T, West shows respect!"

Mastering these traits are celebrated fully at West Corinth Elementary School. Parades seem to be the most popular activity. Kindness parades, respect parades and patriotic parades give the students an opportunity to rejoice in what they've learned. Students are chose from each classroom to be kings and queens and march through the school hallways on a given day in celebration of a certain trait.

"All the children are proud of their classmates for being chosen," Butler said. "All want to be chosen, but the parades give them all a chance to be chosen. We've had to add a few parades cause they're so popular."

Luncheons are another way to mark the acquisition of the traits. Kindness luncheons have been held at McDonalds. Peacemaker parties, complete with ice cream, have been hosted at West. The schools Parent-Teacher Organization has become involved as well, providing ice cream and other goodies for the parties.

A recent addition to the luncheon lineup has been Integrity Luncheons. At these meals, well-known and recognizable individuals from the community visit West and sit down with the children during lunch. Guests have included Mayor Jerry Latch, Chief of Police Ned Cregeen, Corinth Junior High School students, some of the cast from the Corinth High School Academic and Performing Arts Center's production of "Oklahoma!" as well as seniors from the CHS cheerleading squad.

The older students, as well as adults, are asked to give advice to the younger ones and offer testimonials about how the acquired character traits are used in their own lives.

Realizing a need to take the character education to another level and become more intensive, West has recently acquired Corinth resident Sara Berry's character education curriculum called "Integrity Time!"

A great fit, Butler said "Integrity Time!" goes right into the same things "Kindness is Contagious" has been emphasizing.

"It ('Integrity Time!') will give us weekly lessons and breaks it down further," Butler explained. "It's nothing new. 'Integrity Time!' just gives us some direction and reinforces what we have been doing. It (the curriculum) being passed on is indicative that it really is contagious."

"Integrity Time!" will be funded at West thanks to a grant from the local Pierce Foundation, established by Corinne Pierce, through the CREATE Foundation, in honor of her late husband, Benjamin.

"The money was supposed to have an emphasis to help at-risk children," Butler said. "While this will help all children, it will certainly benefit those at risk."

Butler was quick to note the community con-



Staff photo by Kim Jobe

The West Corinth students got an opportunity to pose for photos with the CHS cheerleaders.

nection between Berry's curriculum and the Pierce Foundation funding.

"The fact that Sara Berry made it and Mrs. Pierce will provide funds to purchase it is just an example of how people can make a difference and pass it on," Butler said. "We should be proud our community has produced such people as these."

"Integrity Time!" has a motto which encourages children to "choose what is true and good and right."

"We have incorporated that into the school slogans already," Butler explained.

Like the previous program, "Integrity Time!" relies heavily on repetitive lessons.

"Sara said she liked that as a teacher," Butler explained "She knew all things they repeat will stay with them. An adult will get tired of hearing it and saying it, but children don't. They're so proud to say the pledge and the slogans."

The plan now is to ease out of "Kindness is Contagious" this school year while moving into "Integrity Time!" Within two years, "Integrity Time!" will be the only character education lessons taught at West Corinth.

Since East Corinth Elementary School and South Corinth School have their own forms of character education, students continue learning these skills throughout the next levels.

West's teachers are learning to use the skills in all areas of their classrooms, too. Since "Integrity Time!" places an emphasis on writing skills, some teachers use it in the writing centers in their classrooms. It also encourages them to use listening skills.

"No Child Left Behind" has been the big push in national education of late. With "Kindness is Contagious," Butler says her school was taking care of that before it became popular. "Integrity Time!" will continue that movement.

"We know every child here," Butler said. "We know their names and something about them. They're not lost and not falling through the cracks. It takes a big effort, but it's done."

Although the character education curriculum hasn't solved all the problems in education, Butler admits they are trying to hack away them in a positive way.

"They might not always use them, but they will know these," Butler said.