

Celebrating Character

Huntington Place Elementary School hosts character day event



Teachers and staff joined in on the fun, with themed clothing and games.

By Aaron Bonner
Gazette Staff

Students at Huntington Place Elementary School threw a celebration on February 19 for their hard work following the Wildcat Way.

Recognized as a State School of Character by Character.org, the school invited guest speakers for a celebration of student accomplishments. Michele Rogers, school counselor, said
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Students at Huntington Place Elementary School were part of a celebration honoring their recognition as a State School of Character.

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that while the school was selected as one of only 81 schools in the nation, the true honor goes to the students for being respectful and courteous.

"They're very proud and they love being a Wildcat and we're all just family," Rogers said.

Through the school's Wildcat Way, students are taught the five core values of honesty, kindness, respect, compassion and responsibility in the classroom. During the assembly, guest speakers such as Donny Jones, chief operating officer with the Tuscaloosa Chamber of Commerce, and Jodi Newton, executive director of the HOPE Institute, spoke to students about these core values.

During Jones' talk, he said that he had seen a "character deficit" in the community, with academically strong students that struggle to work together and be dependable, commending Huntington Place students for their work to be more responsible and respectful to others. Andrea Hamner, principal at Huntington Place, said that she felt that it was important to teach core values to children at a young age to help better prepare them for the workforce and a life after graduation.

"We have to teach our students to be responsible and responsibility transfers through everything that we're teaching them, from making sure they're turning in their work to being prepared for class," Hamner said. "... When we think about [being respectful], that's not just something that you need in a school setting, that's something that helps you in the community."

In the classroom, students learn ways to follow the Wildcat Way during their normal lessons, with teachers incorporating the values into questions posed to students. While reading during their English classes, students are asked about the values of the characters in books and how these characters are exhibiting various character traits.

"Teachers will also do that with historical fig-

ures, and ask 'What have these people done?' or maybe when they didn't show good character, 'How did they overcome that?'" Hamner said. "At times, we're going to do things that we shouldn't do, so we also work on restorative justice because we're trying to make sure, if we've made a mistake, how do we restore that relationship?"

Students have adapted the Wildcat Way throughout the school, with Rogers saying that she has often heard students hold their fellow classmates accountable for "not following the Wildcat Way" and helping each other do better. The two said that after adopting the Wildcat Way three years ago, the school has seen a reduction in disciplinary referrals and repeat offenders.

If a student is called into the principal's office for their behavior, they are given a disciplinary form to fill out, asking them to describe the situation and how they can reflect on the experience and work on their values, so the incident does not happen again. Parents have even told school staff that they've seen their children use the school's values at home to work through misunderstandings with siblings or help their parents with various tasks.

"We try to hold ourselves to the standards that we want our children to match, we just have to model that," Rogers said.

With both guest speakers and students, themselves being a part of the character celebration, the afternoon assembly worked to help students better themselves and be proud of their work. To help further their compassion, passion projects have been started at the school to help those in the community through donations and charitable actions.

For Rogers and Hamner, the two said they hope that the Wildcat Way can be more than a school initiative and make a real impact on children.

"From here, this is something that we are going to continue throughout," Rogers said. "When they go to Echols, they also have a character initiative, they have the Wildcat Way. Our goal, and our hope and dream, is that they'll carry it through high school, college and into the workforce."