



Teaching character through sports

■ New STAR program now being used to teach kids Character Education in local schools

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER, GILBERTOWN —It's all about sportsmanship, but it's much more than that.

This month, students in local elementary schools will be learning how to be a good sport. But they are not learning it in the gym or on the field. They are learning it in the computer lab.

Over the next two weeks, students at Choctaw County Elementary and Southern Choctaw Elementary will have the opportunity to take part in the STAR Sportsmanship program that teaches sportsmanship and character on and off the field through the use of a web-based role-playing computer program. It is the first of its kind in the nation.

Created by Learning Through Sports, STAR Sportsmanship began as a combined effort by the legislature, educational leaders, and the Alabama High School Athletic Association to combat the growing issue of poor sportsmanship and the use of steroids among student athletes. The state Department of Education first announced the use of the program in October of 2005, with schools in other parts of the state implementing it last year. Every Alabama public school received free access to the program, and many are already seeing positive results.

Southern Choctaw Elementary began its program last week, while Choctaw County Elementary is implementing the program this week.

Through online games and activities, the students are taught positive character traits that are related — but not limited to — the traits needed to exhibit good sportsmanship. Those traits are expected to carry over into other facets of the students' lives. Because of the draw of sports, proponents of the program believe that it will be an effective way to address character issues so that they will be able to apply them in a tangible way.

"It is being implemented in PE Department," Choctaw County Elementary principal Wayne Longmire told the Sun. "But all other teachers will also have information about it."

At SCES, students in grades 2-6 are utilizing the program during their Physical Education period. According to Noland, 225 students have already come through the two-week program at the school,



Choctaw Sun photos by Dee Ann Campbell
Courtney Jenkins, pictured in front, and Shontia Tate, both 6th graders at SCES, have been working with the STAR Sportsmanship program this week. The program is designed to teach sportsmanship and good character to young people.



Sixth-grader Jashima Hill works with the STAR Sportsmanship program in the computer lab at SCES.

and the remainder will do so over the coming days.

Through the program, students work through animated puzzles that provide opportunities for them to combat such negative character traits as bullying, bad attitudes, and other issues dealing with sports. The students take a pre-test prior to working through the lessons and a post-test following completion of the lessons.

The STAR program includes character education modules for elementary, middle and high school levels. While the STAR Sportsmanship program is geared toward helping students garner a better concept of good character, an extension of the program focuses on the character traits and role modeling of coaches and parents. The STAR

Coaching module of the program helps adults become better role models for students, both in sports and beyond.

Character education has been the focus of attention in the United States for several years and has prompted research studies on the subject. One study in particular deals specifically with character traits in relation to sports, and also addresses the issue of role modeling by adults who coach youth teams.

In a study conducted in 2006 by the CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition, researchers concluded that the overall values of young people are often influenced by the values conveyed to them through high school sports. The study revealed that many children and teens are confused about the meaning

of fair play and sportsmanship and have no concept of honorable competition. In many cases, the study showed, coaches and parents simply were not doing enough to provide positive role models of good sportsmanship.

The study showed that nearly 90% of high school athletes believe that most of their coaches set a good example of sportsmanship. But many of those who responded may not have known what the ethics of sportsmanship required. Large portions of the athletes stated that they agreed with questionable actions of coaches.

Fifty-one percent of high school boys and 30% of girls in the study said they saw no problem with coaches arguing with an official to influence their calls. Another 45% of boys and 22% of girls stated

Lying, cheating, and stealing among America's young people

According to the Character Counts 2006 survey:

- 82% of young people admit they lied to parent within the past 12 months about something significant—57% said they lied two or more times.

- 62% admit they lied to teacher within the past 12 months about something significant — 35% said they lied two or more times.

- 33% copied an internet document within the past 12 months — 18% did so two or more times.

- 60% cheated during a test at school within the past 12 months— 35% did so two or more times.

- 23% stole something from a parent or other relative within the past 12 months — 11% did so two or more times. In 2002, 28% admitted stealing from a parent or other relative.

- 19% stole something from a friend within the past 12 months — 7% did so two or more times.

- 28% stole something from a store within the past 12 months — 14% did so two or more times.

- 31% of males and 17% of females report that degrading hazing or initiation rituals are common at their school.

- 69% of the males and 50% of the females admit that they bullied, teased or taunted someone in the past year.

- 55% of the males and 29% of the females said they used racial slurs or insults.

that they did not see anything wrong when their coaches instructed players how to illegally without getting caught. For 39% of boys and 22% of girls, nothing was wrong with faking an injury to get needed extra time out during a game, and 38% of boys and 12% of girls stated that they saw no problem with coaches swearing at officials or using profanity to motivate players.

About 31% of males and 25% females believe their coach is more concerned with winning than in building character and life skills.

Off the playing field, young athletes tend to have equally wrong perceptions of what is right and wrong. Nearly half of male athletes in the Character Counts study revealed cynical attitudes about cheating outside of sports. About 30% of boys and 15% of girls stated that people who break the rules are more likely to succeed, and a frightening 56% of boys and nearly as many girls said that successful people do what they have to do to win even if others consider it cheating.

Male athletes, in particular, seem to have a skewed view of ethics in sports. More than one in three males agree that it's more important to win than be considered a good sport, while only 15% of females stated that they held that view. While 94% of the females say that playing the game fairly is more important than winning, only 20% of the males agree.

This and many other studies in recent years have added to the perception that character edu-

cation is needed in schools, especially when it comes to sports.

The state Department of Education has long seen the need for Character Education in the schools. In 1995, the Alabama legislature passed a bill that included mandates for such programs, grouping the importance of character education along with student academic achievement and assistance for those who fall behind academically.

The bill — H-466, Act 95-313 — mandates that the state

"provide for the development of a character education program by the state and local boards of education ..."

The measure was signed into law by then-Governor Fob James. The STARS program is funded under that law, but managed by the AHSAA.

In addition to building the desired positive character traits, the STAR Sportsmanship program has other rewards. As incentives for participation in the program, schools and students have received prizes such as cash and high-tech computerized games for reaching certain participation percentage levels.

Although the STARS program is only 2 weeks long, proponents expect to see long-term benefits, with a change in attitude and a rise in sportsmanship and character among students from elementary school through high school. If such benefits become evident statewide, Alabama's program could be implemented in other areas of the country.

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