

Speaker focuses on diversity

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'Mr. Peace' Kevin Szawala speaks to Hulsing Elementary School students about diversity during an assembly Wednesday.

When Kevin Szawala asked the Hulsing Elementary School Students gathered Wednesday how many of them would like a nice, clean \$20 bill, hands shot up all over the room. After sneezing on it, dropping it and stomping on it, Szawala picked it up and asked again how many would want it. Hands remained raised.

It's just one of many demonstrations used by Szawala, 27, a motivational speaker, author, poet and radio show host who made the first of six monthly appearances at Hulsing to help students further learn about the six "pillars" of the district's Character Counts initiative. Wednesday's assembly focused on diversity, getting children to accept each other regardless of race, ethnic origin or other differences between them.

"The point is, sometimes if people aren't as talented as us in a sport, or they don't dress the same way, we choose to separate from them," said Szawala, who also goes by "Mr. Peace." "We don't think they're worth as much. But when it's something like money, everyone is still right there." Szawala hopes to help students learn to appreciate others for their individual characteristics, be they race, clothing or ethnic. "There's diversity, as well, within ourselves," said Szawala, founder of Being Who I Want 2 Be, LLC. "It comes down to seeing somebody's heart first. Then you accept them from there."

Szawala has done his program in the district before, and Hulsing Elementary principal Jim Johnson was happy to have him come back, and to schedule him for the next five months, as well. Johnson pointed out Szawala emphasizes the same components, or pillars, of the Character Counts program, then elaborates on them. "It's a terrific thing," Johnson said. "He uses a lot of good visuals to make his points. He does a terrific job of connecting with the kids."

The school's Building Equity Leadership Team (BELT) will now continue discussions with students about what they learned in the assembly, holding mini-discussions with each grade level to see what students got out of the assembly. "We don't want it to be like they just went to assembly and then didn't do anything with it," Johnson said. "We're making a solid attempt to extend that and do something with it."

Szawala returns Jan. 14 with his "Doing Your Best," program, which parallels the district's "Responsibility" pillar.

Subsequent programs (with their pillars in parentheses) include Truthfulness (Fairness), Feb. 11, Kindness and Empathy (Caring) March 11, Can I Trust You? (Trustworthiness) April 15 and Anti-Bullying (Respect) May 13.

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