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PROGRESS EDITION: Ready for 'battle' / Hill Field Elementary students, teachers face challenges when parents are in the military

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CLEARFIELD — Hill Field Elementary School, named for the base it sits next to, was the first school in the state to embrace the **PeaceBuilders** program.

"We have that culture of the warrior among our students," said Principal Paul Bryner. "If there's a problem, they'll stand up and fight. "

"We're teaching them there are different ways to handle problems."

The **PeaceBuilders** program is a violence-prevention and character education youth program that is approved for the federally funded Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act, according to its Web site.

The program focuses on creating a safe environment for students to learn and to seek other options than fighting to solve problems.

The 46-year-old school does not have one of the largest student enrollments, but one of the more transient. It also has a strong volunteer core of parents and military personnel from Hill Air Force Base.

Although a small neighborhood northwest of the school is included in the school's boundaries, about 98 percent of the students have at least one parent serving in the Air Force and live on Hill Air Force Base.

It is common to see a parent dressed in fatigues arrive at the school to either check in or check out a student or do some volunteer work.

At any other school, a parent dressed in military uniform reading with a student might cause other students to stare, Bryner said.

He has been at the school for the past six years after retiring from Weber School District, where he worked for 36 years.

Bryner also began Marvin and Jessie, a monthly reader's theater that includes two characters discussing an important life-skill quality.

The latest was friendship — and it's more than just being nice, Bryner said.

Students learned a good friend shares, listens, is respectful and helps others.

The school is also a Title 1 school, which means a large percentage of students are from low-income households, and the turnover rate for teachers places the school at No. 9 in the district with the newest teachers.

At least five teachers have been with the school for at least six years. Of the remaining 19 teachers, 10 have a been at the school for less than three years, Bryner said.

The downside of a student body that changes so much is that Bryner is not sure if he will need more or fewer teachers for the next year.

He has persuaded the school district not to take away any teachers because of low enrollment counts at the end of the year, because more students always move into the area over the summer.

Sixth-grade teacher Debbie Samples is in her second year teaching at the school. She is a seasoned teacher who retired from Weber School District before venturing to Davis.

The group she taught at the end of the year was not the same group she started with in August, when she had 26 students. By the time April rolled around, she had 22 students.

Eleven students had moved out, but six students moved in. Among her 22 students, she had seven girls.

"It's really hard," Samples said.

Only four of her students have been at the school since first grade.

Part of the difficulty comes during test time. It's up to Samples to make sure her students, whether they have been there all nine months or just nine days, are up to speed with the rest of the students.

"There is a lot of reteaching," Samples said.

Some students just move off the base into a new home in Davis County, but the majority move to another base in the country or overseas, Bryner said.

First-grade teacher Kathleen Dickinson has taught at the school for the past 23 years.

Even though her class has had a turnover this year, it's been average compared with several years ago, when a majority of her students at the first of the year moved out.

Dickinson said each state has its own set of core curriculum that is taught. Most of it is similar to what is taught in Utah schools, but it may be on a different time table.

She also has to be aware of when her 6-year-old students are facing huge problems, like a parent being deployed.

"If they are having an out-of-sorts day, they can't learn academically," Dickinson said.

And being young also means their emotions are rawer than older students' and they have a more difficult time understanding why they are feeling out of sorts, she said.

Bryner said the school is lucky because so many parents and Air Force personnel volunteer at the school.

The base brings programs, like Child Abuse Awareness, to the school. It recently also hosted its annual Kids Deployment Day so students could learn firsthand what their parents go through when being deployed.

Bryner also put together an after-school program during his third year as principal. Parents pay a nominal fee for their students to participate. The kids get a snack and help with homework, play games, participate in activities and socialize.

What the students bring to the school is priceless, Bryner said.

Each month, selected students are chosen to eat lunch with Mayor Don Wood. As Bryner drives them to the luncheon, he likes to ask them where and how many places they have lived.

"It's common for students to pipe up and say, 'I've lived in four places,' or six places, then list places like Germany, Italy, Japan or Georgia."