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Program boosts girls' health -- and esteem



Left to right, Montiah Tumbleson, Dajiah Lucas, Tiffany Maier and Alexis Taylor stretch after finishing their run.

Staff Photo by John Rottet

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By KINEA WHITE EPPS, Staff Writer

A group of girls at Wilburn Elementary School started running and chanting, "Everywhere we go, people want to know, who we are, so we tell them."

With excitement and determination in their voices, they lapped their way around an athletic field behind the school.

The fourth- and fifth-graders are part of Girls on the Run of the Triangle, the local chapter of the national organization, Girls on the Run,

Using running as a catalyst, the nonprofit organization aims to develop self-respect and healthy lifestyles in girls ages 8 to 13.

Twice a week at Wilburn, the girls meet after school for an hour and discuss a topic before they run. The topic is then tied in with their laps around the field.

The program focuses on making adolescent girls comfortable with themselves physically, emotionally and socially, according to the Web site, www.girlsontherun.org. At the end of the 12 weeks, the hope is that the girls have developed the ability to talk about their emotions, make healthy decisions and have a strong self confidence, said Kelly Hurter, executive director of the Triangle chapter.

This is the first year the program has been offered at Wilburn. Root and Wilburn elementary schools are the only two schools in Wake County using the program.

Fourteen girls participate in the program at Wilburn.

Tuesday, the girls dealt with emotions. Third-grade teacher Tiffany Boyle asked them to describe emotions that made them comfortable and uncomfortable.

"Happy" and "frustrated," were two of the emotions the girls called out.

"Emotions really escalate in the fourth and fifth grade and not knowing how to react to certain things could turn into behavioral problems," said Dawn Miller, another third-grade teacher who works with the program.

Each week, Boyle said, the girls increase their running time by five minutes, building up to a three-mile run in November.

Kristy McLean, communities in schools' coordinator at Wilburn, worked with Girls on the Run to get the program at the school.

Many of programs are operated out of YMCAs with a \$175 registration fee per girl. But with fund-raisers and community support, the organization was able to offset the cost of the program at

Wilburn.

McLean said the program provides an outlet for some of the girls at the school, which has the highest percentage of students in northern Wake whose family income makes them eligible for free and reduced lunches.

"A lot of our girls are not in after-school programs," she said. "This builds self-esteem and character."

Hurter said the program is especially important to elementary school girls.

"We hope that when they get to middle school and they experience different things they feel confident in standing up for themselves," she said.

Fourth-graders Jacqueline Ray and Tiffany Maier said they liked being a part of the program.

"I learned that it's good to show emotions," Maier said.

Ray agreed.

"It helps us find who we are," she said.

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