

By Erich Thurow, Chairman D200 Education Foundation

Many residents remember Clay Street School, the smallest building in District 200, as the city elementary in the shadow of the Woodstock Square. Today Clay Academy is a “therapeutic day school offering a structured, safe and caring setting.” It is a building where about 70 pre-kindergarten through high school students achieve academic and behavioral success. Each student has an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) with goals and objectives based on his or her individual needs.

One of the nearly 70 projects that the D200 Education Foundation funded this year was the Staley Da Bear program for Clay. Staley, the Chicago Bear's mascot visits schools and brings messages about respect and the dangers of bullying behaviors. A grant from the Foundation made it possible for Staley to visit with Clay Academy students in November.

According to Travis Mohr, a teacher at Clay, “Our students are taught to respect themselves and others in a variety of ways on a daily basis. If bullying or teasing occurs in the classroom, a teacher may stop the activity and help students talk about the incident and how it may have impacted a classmate.” Mohr added, “This gets to the root cause of the problem by asking why the behavior is happening and how students and staff can keep it from happening again.”

The November assembly led to classroom discussions and has resulted in increased empathy for peers at the school. Mr. Mohr told us, “Following the assembly, we’ve seen older students correcting challenging behaviors they observe in younger students.” He added, “We see students stick up for each other and work together to resolve conflicts in respectful ways.

According to Staley Da Bear, “There are many different types of bullies including the big mouth bully, hands on bully, but-out bully, cyber bully and the all-around bully.” Mr. Mohr told us “Staley helped the students at Clay Academy identify each type of bully and use strategies to deal with them in a positive, non-threatening manner.” The strategies were taught using comedy, dancing, and a student and staff trivia challenge. Staley gave each student a prize and introduced himself as he left.

One of Staley Da Bear's main messages was about how students can “Bear Down” on bullying. The assembly was a link to district’s “Choose Respect” program that teaches and mentors students on building healthy relationships, preventing dating violence, and engaging our youth in leadership opportunities to help prevent violence in our schools and community.

The students and staff will continue to develop and foster a positive and bully free learning environment at Clay Academy using what they learned from the “Bear Down” on Bullies assembly. Clay also received a “Bear Down” on Bullies banner to display in the school.

As I write this, we are putting the finishing touches on our annual Education Foundation Dinner/Auction. We aim to bring in \$25,000 each year from this event to fund the grants for the following year. Next month I’ll report on the success of the 2015 event. Thank you to all the people and businesses that contributed to the event and who attended and supported us with bidding and donations.