



S.T.A.R. repaints police image in Penn Hills

Students at Washington Elementary School listen to Penn Hills police Officer Dennis Lynch when he is in their school. The Penn Hills School District now wants them to know Lynch listens back.

In an effort to encourage students to report crime or bullying to police or another adult, the school district kicked off its S.T.A.R. Project -- Stand Together! Act Responsibly! -- last week in Washington Elementary. The program, co-sponsored by the Penn Hills Police and District Attorney Stephen Zappala, was developed by Safety Kids, a Penn Hills nonprofit.

Penn Hills is the first district in the nation to use the full program, which was piloted and refined in other states, said Diane Brown, director of Safety Kids. Police will work to cultivate relationships with students, conducting assemblies on the importance of reporting illegal behavior.

"A lot of the younger ones come to school with a lot of issues and withhold information because they don't know what to do," said Tom Iaquina, Washington Elementary principal. "They're afraid of the ramifications of telling on things."

In a culture where shirts blazoned with "Stop Snitchin' " had to be banned in the high school, encouraging children to speak up can be a tough order. Penn Hills police Chief Howard Burton thinks Lynch is the right person for the job.

"The youngsters at this age realize the police officer is your friend because of this guy," Burton said of Lynch, the department's crime prevention officer. "I want these kids to know that the police are more than the people who come into the house and arrest your brother.



"They should be able to relate to the police officer as their friend, and they can do that with Officer Lynch."

Zappala agreed with Burton's assessment. S.T.A.R., which involves schools, parents, businesses and police, works to overcome stereotypes that might keep children quiet.

"It takes a community to raise a child," Zappala said. "We're experiencing more and more trouble at home for these kids, and we need to show them they can turn to the police for help."

The program focuses prominently on education and assuring children it's OK to report illegal behavior. Zappala said all 42 suburban schools are interested in the program, the results of which are being monitored by Tammy Hughes, an education professor at Duquesne University.

Brown said she hopes Hughes' feedback will help make the program stronger.

"The point is to keep violence from happening on our communities," Brown said. "If enough people come together for this program, we can make that happen."