

# D.A.R.E teaches Oxford kids to "just say no"

By Megan Daniel  
Special to The DM

Ten-year-old Claire eagerly raised her hand to answer the officer's question of what makes a good friend. She waited impatiently, trying her best not to squeal for him to point to her. When he finally did she said with confidence, "You can trust them."

Claire was one of 18 students in Dorothy Aldridge's fifth-grade class at Della Davidson Elementary who participated in the Drug Abuse Resis-

tance Education (D.A.R.E.) program this spring.

The national preventative drug and alcohol program just finished its first year of operation at the new Oxford fourth- and fifth-grade school.

Davidson has around 500 students walking its halls every day, and since the end of January, about half of them learned to "just say no" once a week through school resource officer Tony Webb.

Webb taught several of the fifth-grade classrooms of about 20 students each the 9-lesson program he believes helps them learn confidence when dealing with situations that might feel out of their control, like peer pressure

to use drugs and tobacco products.

"We just want to teach them the laws about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs," he said.

Webb started teaching D.A.R.E. nine years ago, but the program began



in 1983 under the Reagan administration in an effort to fight the war on drugs.

The 25-year-old program came under scrutiny when the U.S. Governmental Accountability Office released a controversial study in 2003. The study said there was no significant difference in students who had participated in the D.A.R.E. program

during their elementary years versus students who had not participated in it when comparing the ages of students trying drugs and alcohol.

After the study's release, the D.A.R.E. program began a new curriculum that also focuses on middle and high school students. The program also started a 5-year study through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to learn the long-term effects of preventative programs.

"D.A.R.E.'s taken a hit from there being no other long-term studies done on preventable programs," Webb said.

Davidson principle Martha McLarty praises the work done by Webb and other officers teaching D.A.R.E.

"If the kids don't hear it here, they might not hear it anywhere," McLarty said.

McLarty believes her students' parents are some of the best in the state, but she thinks that at-home reinforcement of what her students are learning will help them in the future.

"We need to be proactive and give the education to our kids so we can keep our community safe," she said.

Claire's teacher Dorothy Aldridge, who has taught in the Oxford School District for over 30 years, agrees with her principle about the need for the D.A.R.E. program.

"The D.A.R.E. program and Officer Webb give them ways to be themselves and be safe in situations that are harmful," Aldridge said.

Aldridge thinks her students will remember the D.A.R.E. program as they get older.

"His (Webb's) teaching style is very open and frank and he gives them real life situations in a non-threatening way," she said.

Aldridge's coworker, Toni Paolillo,

is a long-time advocate of the program and believes in its ability to reach students before they try alcohol and other drugs.

"I don't mind giving up an hour of instruction time because my students learn so much about drugs and their downfalls," she said.

McLarty, Aldridge and Paolillo all credit Webb for his ability to treat the students with respect and helping them to see a police officer as a friend.

"They all treat him like a sounding board, and they trust him," Paolillo said.

Webb said students seeing a police officer in a non-threatening environment is another benefit of D.A.R.E.

"They don't think I'm going to cart them off to jail every time they see me anymore," he said.

Although Webb was joking, he has had his share of disappointments during his nine years as a D.A.R.E. officer.

"It's tough when a kid gets in trouble in high school for fighting or drug possession, and you have them in your patrol car and you were their D.A.R.E. officer," he said.

He admits he cannot save all of the students he teaches, but he said there have only been a few disappointing incidents and many more success stories.

"I'm proud of what I do and the program I teach," Webb said.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's study on the D.A.R.E. program and its long-term effects on student participants will conclude next year.

In the meantime, Webb is confident that the results will show the positive impact he and the program have on children like Claire and other fifth-graders at Davidson Elementary.