



Virtues focus of teachers' seminars

## Ventriloquist Val Hilliker talks to teachers during a teachers convention conference held at St. Gabriel School on Tuesday.

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## Virtues focus of teachers' seminars

By LAUREN CUTLER

Today staff

Teachers for Fort McMurray Catholic schools were in class Tuesday, taking part in day-long seminars on the Virtues Project.

The Virtues Project, which focuses on shaping the character of students, is a regular part of the curriculum in the local Catholic schools, but it didn't start here. In fact, it started in 1991 as an attempt to curb violence among youth and in families. It was created by three people: psychotherapist Linda

Kavelin-Popov, her husband, pediatric psychologist Dan Popov, and her brother, John Kavelin, an art director with Disney, according to Lindsay Turner, a spokeswoman for the Catholic Board.

The program is also being used in businesses and other schools across Canada, and in more than 90 countries worldwide. In Fort McMurray, each of the Catholic schools highlights a new virtue every month,

All staff were divided up into four schools Tuesday: St. Martha School, St. Gabriel School, Father Patrick Mercredi Community High School and Father Beauregard School. There were activities at each location to give staff new strategies for implementing the Virtues Project in their schools.

At St. Gabriel, three principals were on site for the day, and all had rave reviews of the program.

The program includes just over 50 virtues, or gifts of character — such as assertiveness, humility, and respect — and works by using five strategies: speaking the language of the virtues, recognizing teachable moments, setting clear boundaries, honouring the spirit and offering spiritual companionship.

The positive language of the virtues, all three principals agreed, has been a valuable tool in praising students and in disciplining them in a meaningful and appropriate way.

“It’s not a punitive approach,” said Trudy Dwyer, principal of Sister Mary Phillips School, discussing how the language of the program can be used to discipline students. “And it’s fabulous at building relationships because now they’re not afraid to come to our office.”

In a booklet given out during Tuesday’s meeting there are examples of how to speak the “language of virtues” to correct students. For instance, instead of asking, “How could you be so mean?” an administrator could tell a student, “You forgot to be kind.”

Natasha MacArthur-Poole, principal of St. Gabriel, said the virtues are also “self-esteem builders” for students, highlighting in common terms attributes that are special and valuable in each child.

“I find it develops a greater empathy for each other,” said Nicole Hudson, principal of St. Paul School. “We see it in the language, we see it in the spirit and we’ve heard it from parents.”

Speaking the language in schools also helps students and staff better articulate their thoughts in a way that everyone understands.

“I really think it creates a cohesive group with our teachers because we’re all developing together,” Hudson said.

MacArthur-Poole added it’s also nice that the program is district-wide, so that if students transfer from one school to another, they are still able to use the language of virtues.

“It’s great when you have a student come in and they say, ‘Bobby wasn’t showing me kindness when he pushed me.’ ... When they use the language, you know you’ve reached them.