

Putting a face on bullying



Hour photo / ERIK TRAUTMANN

Above, actors with the Random Farms Kids' Theater, Charlotte Cooper, Benjamin-Milan Polisar and Evan Rocco perform for students at Rowayton Elementary School Friday morning in "The New Kid," a play addressing the problems of bullying. Below, Seline Reyes and Hannah Nightingale watch the play.

Play uses fiction to point out hard truth

NORWALK

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Hour Staff Writer

Everyone's been the new kid once. On Friday, students at Rowayton Elementary School learned that kindness and self-confidence can transform that intimidating experience into a positive lesson.

To address the ever-present issue of bullying in the classroom, Rowayton hosted The Random Farms Kids' Theatre to perform a musical called "The New Kid," the story of a fictional geek at a new middle school who becomes ensnared in the treacherous hierarchy of social cliques. In the end, he must thwart a gang of bullies to defend himself and



his friends.

"It's very alarming today, to watch the news and see kids being bullied to death," said Suzanne Breyer, the enrichment coordinator for Rowayton Elementary School, who booked the performance. "We have to confront that sort

of behavior at this grade level so the students carry those lessons throughout their lives."

Students from the second, third, fourth and fifth grades filed into the gymnasium Friday morning to watch the performance, starring 14 boys and girls from Connecticut, New York and New Jersey.

One of the actresses, 13-year-old Shay Lynn LaRusso, is a Roton Middle School student who graduated from Rowayton and whose mother, Lisa, is a second-grade teacher there.

"When we host events like this, it's all about giving our students tools and confidence," Lisa LaRusso said. "We want them to feel empowered to stand up for

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Message through a play

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themselves."

In the musical, Zack, the protagonist, is forced through a series of hazing rituals to pass muster with a group of menacing — but popular — boys. When they ask him to beat up one of his friends, though, Zack realizes popularity isn't worth the price. Everyone should be treated with respect, he says, regardless of their social circle.

"The message was, 'Just be yourself,'" said 7-year-old Kyle Root, a student who has occasionally seen his friends get bullied or bothered. "You don't have to be mean."

Eight-year-old Nadia Torres said that even fictional bullies were scary and she wanted her classmates to realize the importance of being nice to one another.

"It's mean when you hurt someone," she said.

The reality, of course, is that bullying takes place, making one of the most valu-

able elements of the performance its emphasis on managing a negative situation, said second-grade teacher Victoria Sinnicki.

In the play, Zack confides in his friends, puts stock in his own judgment and speaks up for himself.

"Bullying is an issue they'll face throughout their education," Sinnicki said. "It's nice for them to see how to handle the situation properly."

"The New Kid" is a touring performance in its third season, said Company Manager Ellen Flaks. Her troupe has

visited 50 schools throughout the region.

Perhaps the most resounding lesson took place once the actors had taken their bows. Flaks took the microphone to field some questions, but first, she had a question of her own. Who in the crowd, she asked, including teachers, parents and administrators, had ever been the new kid?

Everyone raised their hands.

"These are messages," Lisa LaRusso said, "that even change the way we feel and act as adults."