

Schools

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Birmingham schools offers two-day event on life of disabled

Shawn D. Lewis / The Detroit News

Bloomfield Hills -- Ian Kennedy struggled to pick up a book from the floor while grasping the sides of a walker.

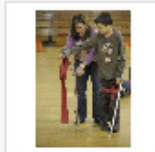
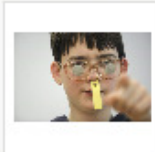
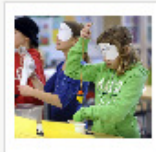
The youngster's movement was further restricted by a red cloth binding his jean-clad legs.

"I tried to get the book, but I fell over because my legs didn't work," he said. "I can see how hard it is for people who have to use this walker all the time."



Gwyneth Lietz, 10, left, and Claire Foxworth, 11, try to complete tasks while blindfolded during a workshop aimed at building awareness of challenges faced by the disabled. Fifth- and sixth-graders at Birmingham Covington School in Bloomfield Township also used canes and wheelchairs at Wednesday's event organized by the parent group "Friends of Different Learners." Story, 5A (Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)

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Ian, 11, a fifth-grader at Birmingham Covington School, was participating in a disability awareness workshop this week with classmates to help them understand how complex daily living can be for people with disabilities.

The workshop is sponsored by Friends of Different Learners, a district-wide independent organization of parents, students and staff, and the Birmingham Public Schools Special Education Dept. The two-day program included activities centered on physical disabilities, as well as speech, hearing, vision and learning impairments. Students were encouraged to try the wheelchair obstacle course, wear glasses that present vision impairments and experience several reading disabilities, including dyslexia.

Teacher Rick Joseph, who watched his fifth- and sixth-graders move from the wheelchair obstacle course to the fine motor skills station, knows first-hand about the difficulties of living with disabilities. Joseph has a 10-year-old son with bipolar disorder.

"It is important for children to build empathy and understanding, because it helps them build community," he said. "Instead of being afraid, they learn to understand, and ultimately they become agents of change and advocates for people with disabilities."

JoEllen Schwartz, past president of Friends of Different Learners, and current coordinator of the workshop, said it is geared toward students in grades four through six, rather than for those in younger grades, who may not yet understand its purpose.

"The concepts are easier to grasp when students reach fourth grade, because, in many cases, they have not yet formed prejudices," she said. "We want them to learn that people should be respected regardless of how they look, act, walk or talk, because we're all human beings."

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