



DIPTI VAIDYA | DISPATCH

The Heyl Elementary School step team, performing in the school's gymnasium, is part of the SAVESNet program, which promotes alternatives to violence. The 16-member group won a step-team competition in May. Heyl is the only elementary school in the program, which is in place at three Columbus schools.

# 'Stepping' up, taking action

Rhythmic dance part of program that teaches violence prevention to children

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

In the Heyl Elementary School gymnasium, 16 students stood silently in a straight line.

Seconds after one of the students shouted, members of the Heyl Avenue step team erupted into spirited dance moves, stomping their feet, clapping their hands behind their backs and slapping their

thighs in unison.

"Here comes the train, y'all. Here comes the train, y'all. Now break it down, y'all," they chanted.

The elementary-school students were stepping, a foot-stomping dance style that blends military cadence with drill-team and hip-hop moves.

Stepping, made popular by black fraternities and sororities, is uncommon at elementary schools.

But Heyl Elementary School officials are using the energy and the excitement it generates to teach youth violence-prevention and life lessons.

The students are a part of the Strategies Against Violence Everywhere Student Network, or SAVESNet, a local program at three Columbus schools designed to prevent violence and teach healthy lifestyles.

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## STEPPING

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Heyl, the only elementary school with the program, has had SAVESNet for three years. About 85 third-, fourth- and fifth-graders participate as peer mediators, lunch-crew leaders or members of the step team.

Team members practice after school once a week and attend study table four days a week.

"We want the kids to excel on the step team and even more in the classroom," said Deacon Hooper, the SAVESNet coordinator and team instructor.

Last year the students stepped at West High School, at

community clubs and at the South Side Community Festival. They also won a state step-team competition in May at Germain Amphitheater.

The team will perform at Columbus schools in December and has performances scheduled from February through the end of the school year.

Hooper, a Denison University graduate and a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, said many of the steps the team performs are from college step shows.

He said team members learn the importance of unity, pride and leadership when they step.

Hooper also said they spread a message with chants such as "We're peaceful. What it is right

now. We're positive. What it is right now."

"It's more than just stepping," Hooper said. "It helps to change the attitude of violence and strives for academic excellence."

"It keeps young people engaged and it's exciting."

Janee Qualls, 10, said she wanted to be a part of the step team because she enjoys dancing.

She also has learned how to stay safe, avoid violence and prevent conflicts from escalating.

"It's fun, and sometimes you get to meet famous people," Janee said.

"I've learned not to instigate, how to step and how to be a

better person."

Janee and other members of her step team, including Wesley Smoot, Adorea Rhodes and Shana Collins, all 10, said stepping gives them confidence. It also teaches discipline and ways to resolve conflicts.

"We learn not to fight, cause fights and not to instigate," Shana said.

Michelle Anderson, 30, has a daughter on the step team and said she thinks the program will change the community.

"We have problems with violence around the school and have drug dealers on the corner," Anderson said. "This keeps them out of the streets and keeps them occupied."

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