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How First Coast schools handled death of bin Laden — or chose not to

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By Mary Kelli Palka, Topher Sanders

History books were pushed aside in some classrooms throughout Northeast Florida on Monday as students heard details about the death of Osama bin Laden.

While some schools took up the issue in history or religion classes, others, including Wayman Academy of the Arts K-5, chose to allow parents to answer questions about bin Laden.

Victoria Hummer, a social and behavior researcher at the University of South Florida, agreed that could be best in some situations.

"They know things about their children's sensitivity and the extra comfort the children might need," Hummer said.

She suggested parents talk to school-age children about the news before their children come up with their own interpretation from media accounts.

The details of those conversations should be developmentally and age appropriate. For children who want to understand why people are celebrating a person's death, Hummer suggested explaining about the importance of justice and that people are relieved after years of being fearful.

News accounts of possible future terrorist attacks may also cause some anxiety. Hummer said parents can try to assure children that we're learning new ways to protect ourselves all the time.

In some schools, however, teachers tried to answer questions about the still-unfolding story about what happened to bin Laden and asked students for their thoughts. Many of those students had some memories of the Sept. 11 attacks, and all knew about bin Laden and what he had done.

Kristina Booker was 8 years old when the Sept. 11 attacks occurred. Now a senior at Nease High School, she said she had grown to hate bin Laden.

"It was kind of like a movie and it was like he was a villain," Booker said. "When I was little, that's how we described it."

Still, bin Laden's death was less something to celebrate than a relief for some students.

"I feel like it's a breath of fresh air," Episcopal student Joe Steilberg, 15, said.

Teachers discussed issues from the significance of bin Laden's death to information about his background. And they answered questions about everything from why bin Laden's body was buried at sea to if there may be future attacks against America in retaliation.

The Rev. Hopie Jernagan, the middle school chaplain at Episcopal, talked to her seventh-grade religion class about why people were celebrating the news. She encouraged students to consider that real change starts with each person and they should consider how to live in peace with others.

"We are not celebrating a death of one of God's children," Jernagan said. "We are celebrating that we may be a step closer to peace."

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