

Mayport school helps students deal with tragedy

By Derek L. Kinner
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It was Sunday, normally a day off for school personnel, but Ellen Bullard had a job to do.

Word was filtering in that the Mayport-based USS Stark had been struck by at least one missile in the Persian Gulf and there were casualties. For Mrs. Bullard, guidance counselor at Joseph Finegan Elementary School in Mayport, the news brought with it the possibility that some of the children there could have lost their father.

She called other faculty members and began searching school records.

Finegan Elementary caters to the children of May-

port Naval Station personnel. Principal David Paulk said "99.9 percent" of the students have parents stationed at Mayport. The others are children of teachers.

The school's rear boundary is the chain link fence surrounding the base.

The school keeps detailed records showing where the enlisted parents work. So by Monday morning, Mrs. Bullard had determined that 11 of the school's 730 students had fathers aboard the guided-missile frigate Stark. When all the dead and missing were listed, one student had lost a father.

For Mrs. Bullard and other teachers, it was time to call on some of the training they had received in helping students deal with grief and other emotions associ-

ated with death.

But in addition to the 11 children whose fathers were aboard the Stark, there were other students in need of help. Many of the students' fathers worked on ships and often were gone for long periods. Many had fathers who sailed Wednesday on the aircraft carrier Forrestal.

"The Forrestal will only be out for six days, but it usually goes out for six months," Mrs. Bullard said. "The younger children sometimes don't seem to understand the difference between a week and six months. I've had several in here. They said, 'There goes my daddy.' They wanted to know if the same thing was go-

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ing to happen to their daddies."

Other students Mrs. Bullard is concerned about are those in class with the student, a girl, who lost her father. The girl has not returned to school and most likely her family will leave Mayport, she said.

When something bad happens to a child, Mrs. Bullard said, she tries to talk to the child's friends because they often harbor guilt feelings. While they might have gotten along well with the girl, they also could have had a fight the last time they saw her.

"It might not have been the best of circumstances the last time they spoke with her," she said. "They might have these feelings of guilt."

To deal with the guilt, she has encouraged the children to write cards to their friend and do other things to help her feel better.

Other children have gone with their families to deliver food and condolences to the widows of men who died on the Stark, she said.

Since Sunday, Mrs. Bullard, whose husband is a retired Navy man, and other school officials have given priority to helping the children deal with their emotions. Teachers have received instructions explaining ways to help the children through their grief and anxiety.

Mrs. Bullard said she has had private talks with some of the students exhibiting emotional difficulties. The school has been in touch with the base's Family Service Center, and the two groups have offered each other help. And wives who had husbands on the ship and children in school have been told if they need anything, the school is willing to help.

Paulk said that, overall, Finegan Elementary has gone on with business as usual. However, an underlying melancholy exists.

"Our children are always very well behaved. But this week, the teachers have commented that they're too quiet. They're subdued; they're thinking; they're reflecting," he said.

Paulk, who has been principal for four years, said the biggest difference between the primarily Navy-related school and other public schools is the sense of family among the students. They have a common denominator: Most have parents in the Navy, he said.

As Paulk took a visitor on a brief walk through the school, four children passed by in the hall. All stopped, cast large, toothy - or sometimes toothless - smiles, and said, "Hello, Mr. Paulk."