Sydney Wojdula (left) and Emily Howell operate two of the puppets Feb. 20 at Stambaugh Elementary School during a production of The Kids on the Block. The troupe of educational puppets teaches students about issues that face children who are different.

IRON RIVER—A Dickinson-Iron Intermediate School District program uses a cast of puppets to teach elementary school children respect and compassion for people who are different from themselves. __PUBLIC__

“Children are incredibly insightful,” DIISD social worker Sharon Davis said. “When they see someone who is different than themselves, they instinctively have questions. We are trying to answer those questions.”

With high school students operating them, the cast of 10 puppets portrays a variety of social scenarios. Topics as new as autism or attention deficit disorder are explained as well as age-old challenges, including deafness, blindness and even weight control issues.

Each interaction is carefully scripted to educate the audience of fourth and fifth grade students about a specific issue. The play is followed by a question and answer period.

“Our point is to build tolerance and understanding for a student who has a disability,” Davis said.

The Kids on the Block began in 1977 as a response to federal legislation mandating that children with disabilities be educated in the “least restrictive environment” possible. For many children, that meant being included in classrooms with non-handicapped peers. The Dickinson Iron ISD has brought The Kids on the Block to Iron County schools for eight years.