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A summer school less ordinary in D.M.

REGISTER STAFF WRITER

Early in the morning, 40 or more east-side kids in Des Moines tumble out of their summer slumber and hop on the bus or travel otherwise to Harding Middle School.

They sleepily wander in for breakfast around 8 a.m. and stay until about noon most days.

For most, attending school in July is their choice, they explain happily, not Mom's or Dad's or a teacher's. But this is no ordinary summer school.

Harding is one of only two schools in the Des Moines district with grants that make them "full service community schools."

That means Harding's summer program, in its fourth year, incorporates a couple of hours of classes, recreation such as dodgeball games or arts and crafts, and field trips to places such as Camp Dodge and the historic Salisbury House. The classes are small - between five and 12 students per teacher - and open to incoming sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders. Site director Cliff Kessler even calls families at home each week to remind students to attend.

"You get to hang out with your friends, and it gives me a head start on schoolwork," said Elizabeth Hernandez, 11. "I need to work on actually focusing. Here, they make everything fun so you can focus on having fun and working at the same time."

Elizabeth said she woke up at 6 a.m. Tuesday and was at her bus stop around 7:30. The Des Moines Metropolitan Transit Authority provides free tokens for the children to use.

She said the program, which also runs after school during the academic year, has helped her grades. She and other students chose the classes they want on the first day of the three-week session, and attend math, reading, science and other electives such as one that combines art and chemistry.

"The concept is like at college," Kessler said. "We have a discussion of appropriate behavior, how we treat each other, and the schedule is up to them. Middle-schoolers like choices."

Grades up; money uncertain

A national analysis of the program shows the students who use it are improving their attendance and achievement during the school year.

In math, for example, students attending the program improved their marks a third of a grade more than their peers who didn't attend.

They also attended 1.6 more days of school than their nonparticipating peers, data from the 2004-05 school year show.

Most of the students face numerous challenges.

Most are minorities, many of whose first language is not English. Some students are grade levels behind in their classes. Some come from war-torn countries, rough parts of town or have been in trouble with the law, and need structure.

The program is in danger of losing its funding, though.

It was originally earmarked by Congress to the Eisenhower Foundation, which worked with local Urban Dreams officials to set up the programs at Harding and Moulton Elementary School.

Whether a grant will be renewed for next year is unknown.

'I didn't want to come'

Resource teacher Shannon Moser is teaching the summer enrichment program for her third year, focusing most of her time on reading. She said that the program is key to student success and that it helps them stay connected to school.

“It gets them feeling more comfortable coming to school,” she said. “It also helps them get settled into class a little quicker in the fall.”

Some students need more prodding than others, like 12-year-old Shaundrea Jacques, who said her father signed her up. But she said she likes the program more each day.

“At first I didn't want to come, but now it's like, 'Oh, this is OK,' “ she said.

On Tuesday, Moser played word games with one group of students in a room, challenging them to brainstorm words that start and end with given letters.

She joked with them and offered prizes - everybody won.

At the other end of the room, teacher Andrea Bagby got students moving during a

rotating game with math flashcards.

Down the hall, students cut out pictures from National Geographic magazines to make science posters.

Rod Hoegh, a veteran science teacher, helped students sort through photos and figure out what they were so they could label animals, plants, and even volcanos.

He explained that the experiential learning aspect is what makes a difference for students.

“Whether directly through field trips or indirectly like in here, they're learning how to connect experiences they maybe didn't have before,” Hoegh said. “And at some point, a teacher will say something and it will trigger something (they relate to).”

Hoegh paused to explain a couple of photographs to Jesus Soto, 14.

One was the first bungee jumpers, diving from a stick and vine tower. The other was from Mount St. Helens when it erupted.

“That's from the volcano,” Hoegh said. “All that ash is from when it erupted, and there's so much it looks like snow.”

Jesus looked in awe and began shuffling through pages. He said the best part of the program has been field trips, especially to the leadership courses at Camp Dodge, which Kessler said is very beneficial to some of the students who need to work on behavior or leadership.

Techniques used as model

The program's practices are held up as a model. In fact, the district's Jump Start programs, which are this year at all middle and high school, were created with the program in mind, said Cyndy Erickson, the district's New Horizons coordinator.

Harding's program goes on throughout the year.

There are soccer games, which require students to first spend an hour or so studying.

There are groups for young men or Latina teens. And as a full-service community school, it offers dental and medical services for families.

“It's not just academic,” Kessler said. “We try to get all the services we can in here.”

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