

Most suburban schools curtail summer school but not in Multnomah County

by Betsy Hammond, The Oregonian
Tuesday July 21, 2009, 6:00 PM



Bruce Ely/The

Oregonian All 28 of Sherri Brown's about-to-be-fifth-graders squeezed into the classroom tent to listen to her read a scary story about a werewolf at summer camp. When she finished the chapter and closed the book, they let out a spontaneous cry of complaint, because they wanted her to keep reading. These students are in a summer program run by the Parkrose school district and Metropolitan Family Service.

In most Portland suburbs, summer school options have dried up like a parched lawn.

Tigard-Tualatin and North Clackamas both dropped high school summer school this year, Beaverton has cut back to three small elementary programs, and West Linn-Wilsonville discontinued summer academic programs for elementary and middle school students.

But in Portland and the rest of Multnomah County, summer school programs are flowering, mainly due to creative financing and new partnerships that marry nonprofit, county, city and federal dollars and staff to keep kids learning.

A typical example: At Shaver Elementary in the Parkrose district of Northeast Portland, two nonprofits and the school district crafted a full-day heavily academic program that serves up reading and math skills, art and recreation and two free meals each weekday.

It took six funding sources and a lot of juggling, but the result is 175 very happy kids and families. Steve Lien, whose 6-year-old son, Jason, attends the Shaver program, says summer school enables children to rev up their skills to enter the next grade.

"He's getting better at his letters, his numbers, his pronunciation," Lien says.

Students in the programs say they're happy to come to school during what would otherwise be lazy summer days because they believe it will pay off during the school year and because summer classes can be fun.

Arturo Munoz, who will be a senior at BizTech High in Portland this fall, has no complaints about getting to school by 8:30 a.m. to spend four hours learning core subjects on a computer. He wants to earn his diploma on time next spring and is grateful for a clear, self-paced way to master the missing pieces of geometry, biology and algebra.

"I need to graduate, so I need my credits -- I need a lot of them," Munoz says as he works his way through a computerized test on interior angles of geometric figures.

In the class for incoming fifth-graders at Shaver, the theme is camping. Yes, there are daily reading and math lessons. But there's also a big tent in the classroom where the students can sit to hear stories. After a vocabulary lesson, teacher Sherri Brown picks up her guitar and they all sing a camp song about skunks. They've visited Yellowstone National Park -- via video -- and on Friday, they made s'mores.

"My favorite part is the story that Mrs. B reads to us," says Maria Than, 10. "It's like you're at real camp."

Portland, David Douglas, Gresham-Barlow, Reynolds and Parkrose offer large "credit recovery" summer schools for high schoolers who need to catch up on credits at low or no cost for low-income students. Portland's is by far the biggest, with more than 1,500 students taking part. Outside Multnomah County, Hillsboro and West Linn-Wilsonville are the only large metro districts offering for-credit summer school this year. Lake Oswego has one for-credit course this summer -- geometry -- and families must pay the full cost of the class, \$665.

Advantages to summer classes

The emergence of a new generation of summer school programs in Multnomah County comes as research has crystallized about the importance of keeping children on pace with others their age. Students who have to repeat a grade or who fall behind on credits in high school are far more likely to drop out of school than those who get extra help to catch up.

But schools struggle to afford the extra hours of instruction, whether after school or in summer, that some students need to stay at grade level. And educators differ on which approach works best to boost the skills of students who are behind: better teaching during the school year; smaller classes; summer school; or extra reading or math classes during the year.

With school funding for the coming year frozen at roughly the same level as the past two years, districts say they've had to cut back on programs, and summer school has taken hits.

"We're offering very little (summer school), for obvious financial reasons," says Maureen Wheeler, communications director for Beaverton schools.

In North Clackamas, "there was a time when we did a lot of academic programming in the summer. Now we're doing little to nothing" because of budget cuts, spokesman Joe Krumm says.

North Clackamas leaders hope the hundreds of high school students who normally catch up on credits at their high school in the summer will do so at Clackamas Community College instead. The cost is roughly the same, about \$100 for a half-credit class.

"We do know that there are certain kids who are very well served by a good summer school program," Assistant Superintendent Aeylin Summers says.

Aid for low-income students

One federal program, funded as part of the No Child Left Behind act, centers on the notion that some students need extra hours of instruction outside the regular school day to succeed. The program, which delivers about \$8 million a year for Oregon schools, has helped fuel the increase in summer school programs in and near Portland.

Called 21st Century Community Learning Center grants, the program targets schools where at least half the children are low-income, which helps explain why Multnomah County schools have won more of that funding than the rest of the metro area combined. Schools must partner with community groups such as Metropolitan Family Service and the Boys & Girls Club to make summer or after-school learning fun.

Ferida Begonovic, who will be an eighth-grader at Portland's Clark @ Binnsmead school this fall, is delighted to spend five hours a day at school this summer, primarily to learn more math and English.

It took teamwork to pull off the program, which is held in Portland Public Schools, funded by Multnomah County's voter-approved Children Investment Fund, run by the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization and helped by volunteer student teachers from Marylhurst University.

Although the arrangements are complex, Ferida says the benefits are simple:

"In summer school, it's quieter, it's calm, it's nice, so I can concentrate. ... Eighth-grade is going to be hard, so I'm working really hard this summer to get better."