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The Boston Globe

Summer fun incorporates academics

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Juarner Dient learned to work with younger kids through Project Coach. (Jim Davis/Globe Staff)

By [Karen Sackowitz](#)
Globe Correspondent / October 28, 2010

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Jonathan Paschal, 12, and his brother Jordan, 6, were dropped off each day over the summer at the Children's Center in Methuen, but that wasn't always where they stayed.

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"They took trips to the beach, to lakes, to Canobie Lake Park," says their mother, Tracey Anderson. "Jordan loves the water. Jonathan was more a fan of Laser Craze."

The boys covered a lot of ground during the Children's Center's summer program, thanks in part to grants provided by the Greater Lawrence Summer Fund, a collaborative donor effort administered by the Essex County Community Foundation.

"We do two to three field trips a week, plus an array of classes and workshops," says Erica Kennedy-Cruz, the center's director. "Everything from a Fenway Park tour to a live show at the Palace Theater in Manchester, N.H., to cooking classes and beach days."

There's an academic element to all that fun as well, Kennedy-Cruz says.

"The kids have to write a mini-report after each activity. They answer questions like what did they like about it, what was the biggest surprise, things like that."

In addition, the children put in reading time each day, usually focused around the

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summer reading lists supplied by their schools. The center also works in conjunction with the Lawrence and Methuen public schools to find out what they want emphasized over the summer, including math and science.

It's this combination of culture and education that exemplifies the goal of the Greater Lawrence Summer Fund program, according to Clare Gunther, assistant manager for Grants and Services at the Essex County Community Foundation.

"The Summer Fund began in 1990 when it was created by the Stevens Foundation," Gunther says. "At the time, the idea was that low-income kids deserved access to enjoyable summer programs, too."

The foundation took over the program in 2001. Today, more than 40 organizations in Greater Lawrence support the effort to offer a fun learning experience.

"It's phenomenal. There are over 5,000 children involved," says Dick Purinton, a foundation board member who sits on the Summer Fund committee.

"The majority of the programs are educational, or have strong educational content."

It's that emphasis that addresses a hot topic in education: summer learning loss.

According to a study by Duke University professor Harris Cooper, all children lose some math skills while they're away from school in the summer.

But while middle-class students hold their own in reading skills over the break, their low-income peers lose both reading and spelling skills, slipping as many as three months behind in reading comprehension.

Cooper determined that by ninth grade, summer learning loss could be blamed for almost 60 percent of the achievement gap between the income groups.

Last summer, the Essex County Community Foundation raised \$228,000 for the Greater Lawrence Summer Fund, with a \$38,500 matching gift from the Amelia Peabody Foundation, a grant provider focused on positive learning experiences for children in Massachusetts.

All of the programs and organizations that benefited featured some element to address summer learning loss.

One was the Greater Lawrence Community Boating program, which runs rowing, sailing, canoeing, and kayaking lessons out of the Abe Bashara boathouse on the Merrimack River.

While membership for the program runs \$50 per summer, between 600 and 1,000 children participate for free, supported in part by the Essex foundation.

In addition, 2010 marked the first year community boating used Summer Fund grant money to introduce the Project Coach program, a curriculum developed at Smith College to use sports to engage and empower teenagers by training them to become coaches in their communities.

According to Ellen Minzner, executive director of the Community Boating program, the 50 Lawrence High School students who took the six-week program last summer learned leadership skills while being physically active.

"Project Coach trains them in leadership. They did role-playing exercises and videotaped their sessions to learn different coaching styles," she says.

“Then they got to practice coaching when the rec kids would come in each day.”

No easy feat, given that Lawrence Recreation brings between 200 and 300 children per day to the boathouse for summer programs.

In addition to their training sessions, Project Coach students had to commit to daily Kaplan academic sessions.

Today, graduates of the Project Coach program use the skills they learned to coach middle school students on indoor rowing equipment, teaching basic fitness exercises in addition to on-water techniques that can be used next summer.

“The carryover has been fantastic,” says Minzner. “The kids are really engaged; they remember so much and work really well together. This is where we see the rewards of the program.”

Carlos Taveras, 17, says the best part of going through Project Coach was interacting with the Smith College coaches.

“We learned about what kind of attitude we need to have, and how to keep your cool working with kids,” he says. “They taught us so much. You learn how to set goals, and you want to meet those goals.”

When asked if his experience has translated into the classroom now that he is back in school, Taveras says one skill in particular has come in handy.

“The public speaking part. As a coach, you have to be the voice of the team,” he says.

“I am no longer afraid to raise my hand and say what I have to say.” ■

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