

750 Roaring Fork Valley elementary school students receive academic boost

Nearly 750 elementary school-age kids in Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood Springs traded some of their freedom this summer for an advantage in education.

The kids attended a five-week program called Summer Advantage. It's designed to prevent the students from forgetting what they learned the prior school year and to provide a boost for when they return to school.

The program is a cooperative venture between Summer Advantage USA, Aspen-based nonprofit Summit 54 and the Roaring Fork RE-1 School District.

Rae Christian, a second-grade teacher who has taught at Basalt Elementary School for 24 years and at Aspen before that, said the program doesn't fit the mold of a dreaded summer school.

"I haven't had any kid not want to be there," she said after teaching Tuesday.

The program is doused in a positive, nurturing atmosphere. It's called Summer Advantage rather than summer school. Attendees are scholars rather than students. Each teacher has a teacher's assistant.

Christian has talked to her 22 scholars extensively about how she wanted to be a teacher since she was 8 years old so she could be like her grandma. She told them how she had to go to college to pursue her dream. Her class adopted her alma mater, Western State College in Gunnison, as a place to emulate in their studies, she said. The college provides notebooks, pencils and decals for the youngsters. Other classes have adopted their teachers' or teachers' assistants' colleges.

The downvalley school district used to offer the summer classes, but budget cuts eliminated the program during the recession, according to Christian. Summit 54, founded by Tony and Terri Caine, stepped in to help resume the studies after securing a grant from the Mile High United Way Social Innovation Fund three years ago.

Summer Advantage started with 400 students in Basalt and Glenwood Springs in 2012. It expanded to 750 students last year after adding Carbondale and fourth-graders in Glenwood Springs. Enrollment hit 750 again this summer.

"It's really transforming their lives," said Terri Caine, a trustee on Summit 54's board of directors.

The idea is to improve the students' performance and help move them forward for the school year. That helps their classroom as a whole move ahead, Caine said.

Mile High's grant is "research-driven" and requires extensive study of whether the downvalley school program achieved gains in students' academic performance, Caine said. An independent research firm will perform the assessment over a five-year period.

"They look at cold, hard data," Caine said.

But Summer Advantage USA works with the local teachers to make sure they can gauge their students' needs each summer. Students are assessed on the third day of the five-week program. Their teachers have results within 24 hours so they can plot students' needs.

Students will be tested again this week, at the end of the five-week program, so teachers can see how much they absorbed over the summer. Christian and Caine are eagerly awaiting the results.

The young scholars spend two hours on literacy and one hour on math each morning, Monday through Thursday. Summer Advantage isn't all academics. Enrichment classes in the afternoon rotate among physics tricks; learning Spanish through music; art; cooking nutritional foods; and computer programming.

Field trips are held every Friday. Adventures have included trips to the top of Aspen Mountain and visits to the Basalt Library to get a card and tap into the resources there.

Christian said the Friday field trips give many of the Latino students a chance to do things that Anglo students are already undertaking with their families.

Summit 54, named by the Caines for Tony's climbing of all peaks higher than 14,000 feet in Colorado as a fundraiser for the then-fledgling nonprofit, committed as a grant recipient to provide breakfast and lunch for its scholars. Breakfast also has been turned into a learning experience in the Summer Advantage model. Instead of gathering in the school cafeteria, the scholars eat in their classroom with their teacher and the teacher's assistant. The time is used to building relationships with one another and for character development.

A significant number of the students come from families beneath an economic threshold so they are eligible during the school year for free or reduced-price lunches, Caine said. Many people in the Aspen area don't realize that a high level of need exists in the lower valley, she said.

Caine said Summit 54 aims to keep meeting the criteria needed to acquire an annual renewal of its grant from Mile High. The Aspen nonprofit also needs to raise funds for its contribution for the Summer Advantage program.

To learn more about Summit 54's efforts and to make a donation, visit <http://summit54.org>.

