



Scott Condon
scondon@aspentimes.com

July 30, 2015

750 students in Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood get Summer Advantage



Teacher Anne Muir, right, helps kids during an enrichment session Tuesday. She said she has witnessed how Summer Advantage has helped kids at Basalt Elementary School.



Students at the Summer Advantage program in Basalt Elementary School design gingerbread men Tuesday afternoon. The scholars work on math, reading and literacy during the morning, then attend special enrichment programs in the afternoon during a five-week Summer Advantage program.



Students in Basalt participate in the Summer Advantage program on Wednesday. Independent assessments show students in the program progress one to two months in math and reading during the five-week program.

TO LEARN MORE

Go online for specific information on Summit 54's efforts and to make a donation, <http://summit54.org>.

A summer program designed to give kids an academic and social learning advantage reaches nearly half of all elementary school children in Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood Springs.

Summer Advantage was created in 2012 in the downvalley school district and has steadily grown from 400 students to 750 each of the next two years. More than 800 children were enrolled this year, and at least 750 are expected to graduate Friday.

The concept is simple: Keep young scholars engaged during five weeks of summer so they don't forget what they learned the prior school year. The program aims to have every participant reading at grade level when they enter fourth grade.

It's not an objective to reach every elementary school child, said Terri Caine, a member of the board of directors of Summit 54, an Aspen nonprofit organization that started the program. It focuses on youth who don't have other options for some educational activity during the summer, she said. The children often have parents who are working and don't have the option of taking them to a museum, zoo or educational center. The families don't have the financial means to send their children to a summer camp, Caine said.

The limiting factor is income, not race, Caine said. That said, the vast majority of children in the program are Latino.

Summit 54 saw the need for a summer program for elementary school kids five years ago. It teams with the Roaring Fork School District and Summer Advantage USA, a national program, to establish the free five weeks of education in the downvalley towns.

Summer Advantage includes an independent assessment of the students enrolled. Children are tested at the beginning and end of the five-week period. The scholars progress about one to two months in both reading and math, Caine said, citing results. Without the summer program, national statistics show low-income children would forget two to three months of education in reading and math.

But it's different data that spurred Caine and her husband, Tony, to found Summit 54 and promote summer education.

Data shows that 88 percent of high school dropouts couldn't read at grade level when they finished third grade, Caine said. If children aren't reading at grade level in the third grade, they fall further behind.

In addition, low-income children don't retain as much of their knowledge over the summer compared to middle-income peers. This results in a 21/2-year gap by fifth grade.

Anne Muir, a literacy specialist for kindergarten through fourth grade at Basalt Elementary School, also is a teacher in Summer Advantage at Basalt. She said she's witnessed firsthand the benefits of the program among children. It goes beyond learning.

"I love the fact that every single child in my classroom has had breakfast," she said, noting that helps start the day right. Children in Summer Advantage are provided breakfast and lunch at no cost to their families. There is a sense of community by eating as a group, she said.

Basalt has two classes of children entering first grade, three entering second, three entering third and two entering fourth grade in Summer Advantage. The students are called "scholars" to add to the prestige.

After breakfast, the scholars study reading, literacy and math from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. Each teacher gets help throughout the day from an assistant, often an aspiring teacher.

"It's a fabulous opportunity to not lose" what they've learned over the school year, Muir said. "It keeps them reading. It keeps them with their friends, working on their social skills."

The children seem genuinely happy to be there, based on a visit to the classroom by a reporter. "They don't say, 'Oh my gosh, my mom's making me go to summer school,'" Muir said.

After lunch, the classes engage in "enrichment" sessions. Muir focuses on arts and crafts; other teachers focus on dance or other activities. One recent afternoon, the 18 children in her classroom drew and cut out a gingerbread man, the protagonist of a story they read. She works with children of all ages. Her group that day was heading into first grade.

The students also go on field trips most Fridays. Excited children in Muir's class recalled for a reporter that they went up in the Silver Queen Gondola to the summit of Aspen Mountain recently. "I was scared," said one little girl. She was spooked because the gondola cabins were so high off ground. "I wasn't scared," proclaimed a boy working next to her.

Muir said the five-week summer position pays well. "It's a generous salary. They did that on purpose," she said. The extra money helps make up for the high cost of living in the valley, she said. She still had two weeks before and after summer school started.

Caine said Basalt Elementary School has been successful hiring its own teachers for Summer Advantage. Recruitment out of the area was necessary to staff the program in Carbondale and Glenwood Springs. That's ended up benefiting the district. Several teachers and teachers' assistants have been hired full-time by the district after they started in Summer Advantage, according to Caine.

At least four teachers hired by Summer Advantage for leadership roles have gone back to college to obtain their master's degree in education. Two of them have become administrators with the district.

Caine said Summit 54 is pleased with the direction of Summer Advantage in the Roaring Fork Valley and wants to make it available to anyone who wants to participate. While scholars from low-income families are targeted, the program is open enrollment for kids in the Roaring Fork School District.

“I do think it’s making a difference in students’ lives,” Caine said.

scondon@aspentimes.com

©2005 - 2015 [Swift Communications, Inc.](#)