

## Summer Academy offered host of programs for D161 families

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Don't think summer camp. This wasn't day care. Flossmoor School District 161's Summer Academy provided students with a full day of curriculum-based instruction taught by the district's own teachers.

"It's really an extension of the school year. We call it our pop-up school," said Summer Academy principal Evita McNeil.

Summer Academy opened June 3 and was a free six-week program offered free of charge to district students, even those who are in private school or are home schooled.

Beginning in 2021, students had the option to attend Summer Academy for the whole day, instead of a half-day. McNeil said many of the more than 700 families enrolled chose the full-day option.

"I think we have so many scholars in our program this summer because parents really want to immerse their students in the academic experience, after they missed a lot during the pandemic," McNeil said. "This is a community that really believes in education as a value and that's why the families are here."

When the regular school year ended on May 25, the classrooms at Parker Junior High started being converted to suit students of all sizes. Custodial workers brought small desks, tables and chairs from the district's elementary schools.

Teachers received two days of professional development to begin familiarizing themselves with Summer Academy structure and the special curriculum. Then they set to work decorating and preparing their classrooms for students.

This year the academy had two kinder-prep classes in the morning and one in the afternoon, along with four sections of each grade level from kindergarten through eighth. Students went through a test assessment, and then were grouped together into sections based on their similar needs.

Summer Academy assistant principal Pam Panozzo said it was easy to recruit teachers for the program this year.

"They heard that the success last year

was amazing, and teachers who worked last year spread the word that they really enjoyed it," Panozzo said. "Plus, they raised the pay for Summer Academy teachers this year" from \$25 to \$40 per hour.

The board also increased the pay stipends for the principal and assistant principal positions from \$6,000 to \$7,500; and \$4,000 to \$6,300, respectively.

During the regular school year, McNeil works as dean of students at Parker and Panozzo is the teacher of accelerated students at Western Avenue Elementary. They said working together over the summer mixes staff members from all the district's schools together, to learn from one another and even more fully engage in student achievement.

"This is what we want to see, kids succeeding. Being a part of that is energizing," Panozzo said. "Knowing that these students will be grade-level ready when they start in the fall — there's nothing more that we can hope for."

Summer students enjoyed a full complement of "specials" classes, including music, art, physical education and STEM instruction. They received breakfast and lunch, and had access to social workers and counselors just like during the regular academic year.

SHIELD testing was conducted at the start of each week to screen students and staff for COVID, and a nurse worked in the building to assist with health needs.

In addition to a full curriculum, McNeil said Summer Academy provided students with social connection during the academic off-season. Social emotional instruction and interaction with peers helped deepen their communication skills.

For fifth graders leveling up, Summer Academy offered a sneak peek into life as a junior high student, McNeil said. Instead of having culture shock on the first day of sixth grade, learning to navigate the building and use their locker, they familiarized themselves with the space.

"I think this summer experience was a great opportunity for them to get comfortable with the building and get comfortable interacting with junior high teachers," McNeil said.



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