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Getting back on track; Kids catch up on social skills in summer school

At Parkview Middle School in Ashwaubenon, the sound of kids shouting "kiaï" in their martial arts class can be heard down the hallway while the smell of freshly baked chocolate chip muffins wafts from the home economics classroom.

Students build their own businesses and chose special wizarding names as they read the Harry Potter series. All of this was lost during online learning and along with it, play time with peers.

As districts throughout the Green Bay area focus their summer school programs on providing students with opportunities to build social skills, summer school takes on a new meaning.

The goal isn't for kids to continue the school year throughout the summer. It's for them to explore new topics and hobbies, all while practicing math and reading, to help them develop and build social skills they couldn't during online learning.

The coronavirus pandemic forced students to do online learning for nearly a year. As a result, many fell behind in coursework whether that was because they got sick, a family member did or they didn't have reliable access to a computer or the internet.

Last year, districts such as Green Bay and Ashwaubenon saw large upticks in students attending summer school because they needed extra practice with reading, writing or math.

This year, enrollment in courses to help students who need help academically have mostly returned to pre-pandemic levels, possibly indicating students are getting back on track.

But students lagged behind on more than just coursework during online school.

They also lost the chance to learn how to be in a classroom environment, make friends and work in teams.

School isn't only about teaching kids the basics of literacy, math and science. It's also about learning what educators call social emotional learning, and being in-person is critical to building those social skills, according to experts.

Melissa Gibson, an education professor at Marquette University, describes it as learning skills around emotional health and how to socialize in communities - both of which are paramount for a successful learning environment and life.

"(School) is the first place where students are thrust into a diverse community outside of their families and where they have to learn how to navigate and negotiate what we would talk about as public relationships," she said. "That requires skills, that requires learning about negotiation and compromise ... but also with that comes understanding our own feelings and reactions."

Those who suffered the most during virtual learning were younger kids, particularly kindergarteners through second graders. Not having the first years of school in-person meant lots of early elementary students had no idea how to be in school.

Learning how to learn

Green Bay mom Sarah Smith enrolled her two sons - Donovan, 11, and Wesley, 8 - in summer school last year so they could practice being in a classroom after doing virtual school for over a year.

Wesley's first year of school was interrupted by the pandemic, keeping him out of the classroom for most of kindergarten and all of first grade.

"Learning how to sit in a classroom - which sounds like the dumbest thing and the easiest thing ever. But it's not to a young child that just spent the last year and a half with free access to the bathroom (and) free access to the fridge," she said.

All of the area's summer school programs incorporate enrichment with academics, meaning students are trying new activities like baking, acting, computer coding and sports. In the Green Bay, Ashwaubenon, Howard-Suamico and De Pere districts, all the summer programs are free.

Through these activities, kids work in groups, play and learn how to socialize outside of the traditional classroom experience.

One of the courses Donovan is taking mimics the show Survivor and kids complete various tasks to move onto the next level.

"It really builds skills, and the team building skills. When you're online, you're kind of independent. You're not having to count on others, to do things together," Smith said. "Being in-person, there's no hiding behind that computer screen. You've got to show up and treat people kindly and show respect to others."

For most districts, last school year was the first full-year of in-person learning since spring 2020.

Andrew Bake, the Ashwaubenon School District's director of curriculum and instruction and one of its summer school principals, said he's noticed younger children coming into school less prepared to be in a classroom setting.

"The whole going to the park and playing with kids or going to daycare, or going to some of those types of things, has just been less common for the last few years," he said. "I think because of that, they aren't always as prepared to come to school and interact with an adult that they don't know or with other kids."

Ashwaubenon offers summer classes that prepare students with larger academic transitions like going from kindergarten to first grade or moving from elementary school to middle school. Bake said these courses have been huge for getting kids ready for the next steps in their educations.

The Green Bay School District splits its elementary program with math and literacy courses in the morning and activities in the afternoon. Its middle school level is focused largely on enrichment-based classes, while high schoolers work on academic credit recovery as well as activities.

The district partnered with the Greater Green Bay YMCA which got grant funding to offer more afternoon enrichment courses for elementary students like swimming and field trips around the community. This additional programming is offered for a fee, but families are charged on a sliding scale according to their ability to pay.

Each week has a different theme with corresponding activities. On pirate week, kids will be taking a River Tyme boat tour on the Fox River to be pirates.

The YMCA's programming is geared towards having kids play and learn in both small and large groups.

"They can't be successful academically, until they can be successful socially and emotionally," Kathleen McKee, the vice president of programs and innovation for the Greater Green Bay YMCA, said.

In De Pere, the summer school program is also enrichment-based with offerings like show choir and biking. Enrollment in courses that give students extra academic support has remained steady throughout the pandemic. But enrollment in the activity courses increased this summer.

"I feel like a lot of the classes that we have allow kids to play and be kids and work together," Ivy Jeskie, the district's summer school coordinator, said.

Their design and build class puts students in small groups where they have to plan, organize and work as a team - something that was lost during online learning Jeskie said.

Jacqlynn Schmidt has two children in the Howard-Suamico School District's summer school program: Her daughter Aubrianna, 8, and her son Maxwell, 6.

Aubrianna is taking courses like American Sign Language, intro to cooking and coding. Her brother Maxwell is participating in the learning program for some extra academic help.

Schmidt and her family moved to the Green Bay area from Illinois in August. Maxwell spent the 2020-2021 school year in Illinois in a pre-kindergarten program that had strict in-person COVID-19 guidelines, she said.

"His biggest complaint (that) year was how do I make friends and how do I play with them if we're not allowed to touch each other?" she said.

During the school year, the goal is for students to get good grades and complete classwork, so it's important for them to engage with each other outside of that setting, according to Gibson.

"It creates more authentic opportunities to practice relationships, community building and to do so across shared interests," she said.

Having spent last school year in-person with fewer restrictions, Jacqlynn said her son's confidence has completely turned around. By participating in summer school, Maxwell is capitalizing on the social skills he developed during the school year to make friends in a new setting without the pressure to perform.

"So he seems definitely more confident to be able to now communicate and socialize more because he's always been my introverted kid," Schmidt said.

Online learning made it clear to families and educators that school is much more than academics, Gibson said. She hopes that lesson sticks for educators and school districts as they get back to normalcy.

"And that's what it got boiled down to during virtual school, and we could see how that harms kids," she said. "I hope that we're able to hold on to this understanding that we like know in our bones now about how much schooling is more than just academics."

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