

Parents urged to keep kids learning during the summer break from school

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Michael Birdsall spent his first two weeks after school closed in June at Lincoln Middle School's Summer Engineering Gateway Academy.

The 12-year-old seventh grader said he had not planned to attend the two-week academy.

"My parents told me I was going," Michael said while painting a wooden rocket that he had made during the "Rock and Roll" session. "I wanted to stay home and play video games."

Robert Birdsall and Sandra Walker-Birdsall also sent their 10-year-old son, Derek, to the program, which gave students "real-world engineering experience" through hands-on projects.

"My boys are interested in building things and I just wanted them to see how an engineering career could be and the things they could do," said Walker-Birdsall. "I think the experience was good for them."

Educational experts urge parents to help their children find ways to continue learning over the summer whether through a school-sponsored program or a parent-initiated activity.

Research, dating as far back as 1906, has shown that students suffer "summer learning loss," said Susan Lambert, director of curriculum for National Heritage Academies, which operates Fortis Academy in Ypsilanti and South Arbor Charter Academy in York Township.

Students lose the skills learned during the past school year and in the fall, teachers spend four to six weeks teaching them over again.

"We know that it happens to all kids, especially in those areas of math, reading and writing and things that are skilled-based," Lambert said. "Parents need to be aware that this happens over the summer. But, there are ways to make summer learning fun."

For instance, a trip to the library or a museum and having kids write what they learned, or even playing board games, which require strategic logical thinking, can help the learning process, Lambert said.

Dagmar Ford wants her three children, who attend South Arbor Charter Academy, to enjoy themselves this summer. Still, Niklas, 8; Lukas, 10; and Rebecca, 12, are also spending time working at home on school-promoted activity books, which focus on reading, writing, math and language arts.

"The book is set up to be a review of the basic skills of that grade so they can keep practicing the skills they've learned," Ford said. "... I think this is incredibly important. It gets them off to a good start in the fall."

Another option for some families is traditional summer school offered by public school districts.

Ann Arbor Public Schools, for instance, has a summer program for students from kindergarten through high school.

Last month, the district offered intensive math classes for middle school students and is currently offering English, math and science for seventh- and eighth-graders.

Three summer programs are running at Pioneer, said Joyce Hunter, the district's administrator for middle and high school education.

One is for students already identified by their teacher and counselor who need individualized instruction in a certain area, Hunter said. There's also math and science enrichment classes for incoming ninth-graders and the traditional summer school where students can earn extra credits or make up credits.

Teachers take a "targeted" approach to teaching summer classes, said Michele Madden, Ann Arbor's K-8 math and science coordinator.

"It's intentional teaching, it's very targeted," Madden said. "We identify exactly what children are weaker in and explicitly teach to those targets."

At Lincoln, middle school teachers Dianna Hinderer, Cindi Adcock and Bruce Breilein were trained to teach the academy's pre-engineering sessions called "Slide and Glide" and "Rock and Roll." The program, designed by the Society of Manufacturing Engineers Education Foundation and Project Lead the Way, aims to make students aware of careers in science, technology, engineering and math.

While Michael Birdsall didn't say he was ready for an engineering career, he could explain in detail the steps for making a rocket and its parachute and the mechanics of making it fly. And he had to admit, it wasn't as bad as he thought it would be.

"It was fun," he said.

Summer Tips for Parents

Parents can take several steps to make sure their children continue to learn over the summer:

- Enroll your child in a summer program with an educational and enrichment focus.
- Schedule frequent trips to the library and make time to read every day.
- Schedule educational trips to such places as parks, museums, zoos and nature centers, which keep children's curiosity and interest in learning at high levels.
- Practice math daily. The largest summer learning loss occurs in math skills, so use everyday experiences to reinforce the skills children need. Measure items around the house or yard and track daily temperatures.
- Find a pen pal. Stronger writers are developed through consistent written communications.
- Enjoy the outdoors. Minimize how much television your children watch and video games they play. Encourage physical activity and exercise, which has positive effects on academic achievement.

Source: National Heritage Academies

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