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PW-S program keeps students coming back, this year 1,100 strong

The two-week break from classes is over for the more than 1,100 children who returned to school Monday.

TUESDAY WAS JUST another tough day in class for Ryan Umhoefer and the other students in the Port-Washington-Saukville School District summer school fishing class. After organizing their gear, the students went outside to practice casting. They planned to fish in the Port harbor Wednesday.

Photo by Sam Arendt

But this isn't school in the conventional sense. This is Port Washington-Saukville School District summer school, where more than half the students in the district flock to Thomas Jefferson Middle School and Lincoln Elementary School every morning with smiles on their faces and fishing poles and musical instruments in their hands.

"What a tremendous sight it is to see all these students coming to school with smiles on their faces," said Arlan Galarowicz, middle school principal and summer school coordinator. "Summer school is just a riot. I'd do it until I was 90 if they'd let me."

One of the largest programs of its type in the state, the five-week Port-Saukville summer school

is a massive undertaking that offers more than 80 courses ranging from classes that reinforce core subjects such as reading and math to enrichment offerings that range from fishing, gardening and band to knitting and cooking.

A staff of about 100 educators and helpers is hired to teach the courses, and a legion of older students are enlisted to guide children, some as young as 7, from class to class.

“We’ve been told we have one of the best summer programs in the country,” Galarowicz said. “I’d like to see one better.”

Nineteen years ago, Galarowicz inherited summer school from former middle school principal Joe Groh, whom he credits with laying the groundwork for the successful program. Since then, summer school has more than doubled in size in terms of both enrollment and class offerings.

It has become the thing for children to do in summer. Galarowicz calls it one part of an ideal summer schedule that gives kids a structured, productive start to their day and allows for plenty of free time in the afternoon. Classes run from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

“A lot of kids go to summer school, but what concerns me are the parents who say their kids don’t go because they sleep until noon,” Galarowicz said. “We can’t let our children sleep half their lives away, and what more powerful way to motivate kids than summer school.”

The courses may be varied, but they all are designed to teach, not merely to kill time. The benefits of extra help in subjects like math and reading are obvious, but even classes like fishing, gardening and knitting teach important life lessons, Galarowicz said.

Among some of the recently added classes are algebra readiness, card-making, Career Pathways, which teaches children about the education and training required for various jobs, Fitness and Healthy Eating, digital photography, Sewing and Design, weaving, engineering and Next Generation Math, a program that uses computer-based learning methods that Galarowicz hopes to use during the regular school year.

One of the recent success stories is gardening, a class that began with a relatively small number of students last year and was expanded this year because of its popularity. Administrators had to cut off enrollment at 100 students this summer.

Children in the class are in charge of planting and maintaining a large garden at the Harbor Campus senior living facility in Port Washington, then harvesting bushels of vegetables that they also learn how to cook.

“It teaches kids that food really doesn’t grow on the grocery store shelves,” Galarowicz said.

“Summer school classes prepare kids for the lives ahead of them in so many ways.”