

Kids keeping the flame lit

Special ed enrollment soars in Rochester summer school program

JUSTIN MURPHY @CITIZENMURPHY

Hundreds of Rochester students with disabilities who spent previous summers at home are now attending summer school, the result of a focused effort by the Rochester School District to make its programs more accommodating to them.

In 2013, about 1,700 students with disabilities attended summer school in the city. This year, the number is around 2,500. Most of the increase comes in students for whom summer school is not mandated but still crucial.

Some of them were at School 3 in the Corn Hill neighborhood last week learning about the water cycle and honing their long division.

Special education teacher Mary Ellen Mulhern helped second-graders with addition and subtraction on number lines. In previous years, she would pull the students with disabilities out of the classroom for extra help; now she team-teaches a mixed class of 21 students with another teacher.

"I'm there full time with them now," she said. "You get to do more; they get to learn more."

Summer school in the city is a booming enterprise for all students — 42 percent attended this summer, and the district hopes to hit 50 percent soon. The programs are not only traditional credit-recovery classes but also include a wide range of enrichment activities that poor children might otherwise lack.

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School 3 pupils Zahmir Gross, Jordan Blackman and Derek Wilson, who will be entering second grade, create shapes with color pieces during class in the city's summer school program, which has a mix of students with and without disabilities.

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School 3 pupil Sean Dunham reacts as paraprofessional Doris Osborne cuts out drawings of living things in the cycle of plants. Forty-two percent of city students attend summer school this year.

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“Other districts around the country would like to be able to do what Rochester is doing,” Superintendent Bolgen Vargas said, pointing to the district’s commitment to spend more on extending the school day and school year.

There are two sorts of students with disabilities in summer school. In Rochester, about 250 students have summer school written into the individualized education plans (IEPs) that govern their educational path.

Others, like their general education peers, can choose whether to attend summer school or not. The district hopes they will, because the effect of summer learning loss is particularly pronounced for students with disabilities.

In 2013, 18 percent of the summer school population was students with disabilities. This year it is about 22 percent, which is higher than the district’s special education classification rate of 18 percent.

“We believe addressing summer learning loss is crucial, and the most vulnerable population, the ones that need it the most, are our special ed students,” Vargas said.

The district spent an extra \$820,000 in the 201516 budget on more supports for students with disabilities in the summer: more teaching assistants and paraprofessionals, for instance. Older students have more opportunities for workforce training at the Edison Tech campus.

The summer is also an opportunity to ease some students into a less restrictive environment and see how well it works. For instance, many of the children with disabilities at School 3 spent the regular school year in self-contained classrooms, but are in mixed classes with general education students this summer.

There is some evidence the increased focus on special education is paying dividends. A study released last December showed, among other things, that students with disabilities matched or exceeded the growth of general education students in some areas. And their attendance rate this summer is several notches higher than the general education attendance rate.

JMURPHY@DemocratandChronicle.com



Kentrel Nixon, who's going into second grade, rests his head on the desk during a summer class at School 3.

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Virginia McPherson, who's going into second grade, reacts to spices while on lunch break at the School 3 cafeteria. The program is a mix of students with and without disabilities.

CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER **"Other districts ... would like to be able to do what Rochester is doing."**

BOLGEN VARGAS,

CITY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS