

Narrowing the achievement gap with summer school

La Casa Charter School leaders say program key to combating 'summer slide'

By Lauren Anderson
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WAUKESHA — For students at La Casa de Esperanza Charter School, the break from school was ever so brief before returning to their classrooms this summer.

As of last week, school is back in session for six weeks of summer school — an opportunity La Casa's leaders say is at the core of their mission to close the achievement gap.

The "summer slide" of learning loss is a well-documented trend, with students often scoring lower on standardized tests at the end of summer compared to the beginning.

Research indicates students will lose about two months of math computational skills over the summer and that teachers typically spend between four and six weeks re-teaching material that students have forgotten over the summer. The trend disproportionately affects socioeconomically disadvantaged students, who don't have access to the same educational resources at home as their more affluent peers.

About 65 of La Casa's students — well over half of the school's total enrollment — are participating in the summer program, which is optional and offered free to families. Students meet Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. with breakfast offered to all at the start of the day.

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Alynah Barrientos, a kindergartner at La Casa Charter School, uses Gummy Bears to make charts during a summer school class.

School

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Though optional, school leaders say the program's importance is stressed to families.

"They know that this is the expectation," Executive Vice President of Institutional Advancement Larry Pesch said. "It's a commitment they make to us and we make to them ... It's an important piece of our overall academic program ... It's a proven piece of a successful model."

Individualized instruction

On Thursday morning, about 15 students sat cross-legged for storytime while another group down the hallway sang a bilingual song in music class. Principal Kristy Casey said the school maintains its focus on the core areas of reading, math and writing during the summer months with the added fun of having a daily curricular

theme — like Thursday's theme of camping. Soon, they will have a Waukesha Police Department representative visit for "Detectives Day."

The school tracks Measures of Academic Progress data closely and each student has individual goals in reading and math related to their math scores that teachers are to focus on during the summer.

"The teachers are taking the students' MAP scores ... and are developing one reading and math goal that they are going to work on with each child so we're really looking at individualizing learning for each child during the summer," Casey said.

MAP scores are one of the accountability measures used by its authorizer, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, which has established a goal of 110 percent growth rate in MAP scores from fall to spring among students who are most affected by the achievement gap.

"We have to close the gap and we're committed to that," Casey said.

About 64 percent of the students are Hispanic, 16 percent are black and 11 percent white. Just five percent of the school families speak Spanish only at home.

The school emphasizes its English-only instruction, and students will begin learning Spanish as a second language starting in first grade.

Parental engagement

Pam Mantanona, parent coordinator for the school and mother of a rising La Casa first-grader, said the school's success relies in part on parents being engaged in the school and their child's education.

Mantanona has seen firsthand the change in her daughter Victoria, both behaviorally and academically, since Mantanona has increased her involvement at the school. She's had fewer behavioral issues at

school and saw a 41-point jump in her Math MAP score and a 27-point hike in her reading scores between fall and spring. Typical gains are about 13 points.

Mantanona said she was convinced of the importance of summer school when she saw the statistics about learning loss over the summer.

"It took her all year to get her where she (Victoria) is — and then you're going to lose it? No," Mantanona said. "...That's crazy."

Mantanona said she's been touting the benefits of summer school to La Casa parents to make sure they bring their children.

"They don't have to bring their kids — it's not mandatory, but they are bringing them and these kids are all going to be ready academically when they get back," she said. "So I think it's great that we have this many kids that are here voluntarily."

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