

"Summer Prep School: Academic Intervention that Works"

Peter Pappas

For the last two summers, Pittsford has offered a program designed to assist our academically at-risk middle school students. This group includes academically-challenged students with (and without) behavioral issues, and academically-able students with poor work habits and negative attitudes about school, identified as being at-risk of not meeting new Regents' graduation requirements. The goal of our program is to meet the needs of this diverse group of students with a challenging and successful adjunct to their middle school experience. Summer Prep School is designed to improve academic skills and performance, to engage students in their learning, and improve their attitudes toward school. We're quite pleased that the program will become one of the major components of our new Academic Intervention Plan, but what's more important is what one parent said about her daughter's experience at Pittsford Central Summer Prep School:

"My daughter really enjoyed her time at Prep School and plans to use what she has learned to better organize and prepare herself this year. You all did such a great job! As a parent I am very happy the school was able to offer such a valuable program to enhance and prepare the kids for a new school year. It really gave her a sense of how important organizational skills are going to affect her, for the rest of her life. It is

a terrific concept and greatly appreciated by my daughter and myself. Please pass along our sincere appreciation to all the people involved in the Summer Prep School Program."

Our first classes were offered in the summer of 1998 and included students exiting grades seven and eight who were invited into the program at the recommendation of their middle school teams. In 1999, we expanded the program to include students exiting the fifth grade. We are currently at work preparing to add fifth graders into Summer Prep 2000.

By both subjective and objective measures, it's working. We tracked our students from the 1998 session and found that 46% improved their final average in 3 or 4 core courses during the school year following the summer program. It's too early to get grade results from the 1999 students, but our parent comments point to the program's impact.

"The Summer Prep School experience was a positive one for our daughter. The director and staff designed a terrific program and coupled it to truly exceptional execution. There was no doubt in the minds of the students or parents that the entire staff really cared! ... Our daughter looked forward to attending every session, and came away with some new skills, a more positive attitude about school, and most importantly

a positive attitude about herself."

The Summer Prep School was the best thing that could have happened to my daughter this summer. She struggled throughout the school year - and with the frustration of struggling, she lost confidence and enthusiasm for school in general. However, this excellent program spurred in her a renewed interest in learning. Every day as I picked her up, she had a fun and exciting anecdote to tell me about. I would like to thank you for your extreme enthusiasm and support of our daughter at a very difficult personal as well as scholastic juncture in her life. I'm very glad to have been part of Summer Prep '99 - thank you all for a job well done."

Summer Prep School is based on the premise that parents, teachers and student peers can become an effective team to support the academic and personal growth of our at-risk students. This past summer 45 middle school students spent a month making new friends and improving their academic skills. A dozen middle and high school teachers delivered a specially designed curriculum tailored to their needs. Eight high school interns assisted in the program, serving as positive role models and establishing friendships that extend into the regular school year. We held small classes of about 15 students (by grade level) in English, math, technology and study

skills. Two teachers, assisted by specially trained student interns, teach each 40-minute class. Our classes met Monday – Thursday from 8 AM – 11 AM. Students were required to attend all four classes.

Teacher recruitment and training for the program began in the spring. We saw Summer Prep School as an opportunity for imbedded staff development, with participating teachers receiving training to work with our at-risk students. Our curriculum was tailored for each grade level with special attention paid to both reinforcing the skills that should have been mastered in the previous year, and also giving students a head start on what they could expect in the fall. We also focused on the appropriate SED standards and assessments. Our technology class included both computer technology and the problem-solving found in the new Math-Science-Technology standards. Our skills class helped student construct a "toolbox of skills" to adapt themselves to new learning situations and to new learning needs. We also focused on the cognitive processes of organization, reflection, and the discovery of individual learning styles. This focus ties into our analysis of multiple intelligences and meta-cognition, examined in the first week of Prep School. Students also learned an array of specific note-taking methods. They were encouraged to adopt those which best fit their personal learning style.

The program also gave our teachers a chance to develop and pilot new techniques and curricula. For example, our students studied geometry using a new software program called "The Geometer's Sketchpad." Our focus for the first two weeks of the program was on quadrilaterals

and their individual properties. Beyond the obvious advantage of electronic practice, this software program increased the options for presentation of new material and independent student investigations. The ability to create and manipulate geometric figures on the computer screen enabled students to quickly produce many examples, examine properties of the figures, look for patterns, and make predictions. These steps are essential for students to truly understand the basics of geometry. As one teacher noted, "I'd never have time in the regular class year to use this software with my students. Summer Prep is really helping these kids, but it's also a great opportunity for me as a teacher."

Our focus on skill development was only one component of our intervention. We also wanted to improve student motivation and used a variety of activities to give the students a chance to have fun while seeing how focus, analysis, technique and teamwork are tested outside the academic environment. Each Friday was reserved as an activity day. This year's activities included: a juggler's workshop, indoor wall climbing, high ropes, obstacle training, and a kayak trip down the Genesee River at Letchworth State park. We also trained each of our teachers and student interns to work with our students in a regular small group advisor/advisee "Breakfast Club." These sessions enabled students to form a stronger bond with a base teacher, interns, and a core of fellow students.

At Summer Prep School we believe that the cooperation and teamwork of parent, student and teacher is essential to success. A series of Parent's

Workshops were offered to support and inform the parents with practical activities and techniques in communications, discipline, academic support and problem solving. The workshops were led by Dr. Gil Gockley and Tanja Gockley, authors of *Loving is Natural, Parenting is Not*. The success of these sessions can be summarized by one parent's observation. "Over the last four weeks, my relationship with my daughter has grown by leaps and bounds...Concrete boundaries and expectations have been established...Thank you for offering your expertise."

Effective communications with the program stakeholders was a key to the program success. Parent and prospective students were invited to an informational program in March to give them an opportunity to find out about our program and make appropriate plans for the summer. Last year, about 130 students were recommended for the program by their middle school teams. A second orientation was held for the 45 students who enrolled in the program. Both students and parents were asked to sign a performance contract as a prerequisite for entrance into the program. Once the program was in session, teachers were required to submit a weekly report on class activities and curriculum. These were edited into a weekly newsletter for parents. In addition the updates became part of a school website that was updated daily. The website also included samples of student projects and photographs of our many activities. Parents indicated that the website was an important part of keeping them informed about the program and enabled them to share in their children's accomplishments. In addition, we used on-line assess-

ments of student skills to help design program and measure student progress. *MultiMedia Schools Magazine* (May 1999) documented this project in an article entitled "Take a Skills Snapshot: Employing Online Self-Assessments." The article can be accessed from our school website.

Throughout the program students compiled portfolios of their work to showcase at the concluding family Open House. Over 80 family members celebrated the achievements of our students over a pizza dinner. The portfolios included samples of their work in math, skills, English, their personal websites, and their technology problem solving projects. Our final program activity was held the next day. Students, interns and faculty headed to Letchworth Park for a final activity day whitewater kayaking in the Genesee River gorge.

The instructional program was supported by district funds and offered

free to the students. A \$75 activity fee covered the cost of student admission to Friday off-campus activities. Students who qualify were able to apply to the District Opportunity Fund for financial assistance.

Readers are invited to browse the school website at: <http://pittsford.monroe.edu/ss99/prep/> There you will find a more detailed guide to the program, course offerings and activities. You can find details of the weekly instructional strategies for each course. Student projects and Friday Activity days are well-documented on the site. We also include a program guide with school schedule, parent's guide, student contracts and an overview of our evening Parenting Workshops. The site also includes a link to survey responses from parents and student surveys.

As our district stakeholders go through the process of designing our Academic Intervention Plan, we find that our experience with Summer

Prep School has proven invaluable because it effectively incorporates identification and intervention with our target students. The Summer Prep Program is congruent with state learning standards and effectively incorporates teachers, parents and students in a well-rounded program designed to support student's academic, social, and emotional growth.

Credit: Peter Pappas has served as a teacher and coordinator at Pittsford Central for over 28 years. He is the director of the Summer Prep School and the district's K-12 Coordinator for Social Studies Standards. He has been the recipient of state and national fellowships and contributed to a variety of texts and teachers resource material. His article "Building K-12 Teams / Building District Standards in Social Studies" appeared in SAANYS Journal (Winter 1998). He can be reached at peterpappas@email.msn.com. His Internet projects can be accessed at: <http://pittsford.monroe.edu/ss99/pappas/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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