

How Camp Achieve helped students beat COVID slide

By Kelcie Grega
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The Beaverton School District's summer learning program came through when remote learning kept students indoors.

Like a lot of Oregon parents of school-age children, Chanel Sheragy found remote learning during the first part of the pandemic a tough thing to navigate.

Not only did she face uncertainty in her professional life as the shutdown impacted her hospitality job, Sheragy also struggled to be mentally there for her daughter, Violet, who had only been in kindergarten at Rock Creek Elementary School for six months before she was forced to stay home and learn things like reading, writing and phonics through a computer screen.



"It was really hard to keep her engaged and excited about Zooming in," Sheragy said. "We just all did the best we could to support her and continue her education, and try to stay successful and keep on learning, but also keep her love of education and being in the classroom, in this new format online."

When summer 2020 approached, Sheragy wrestled with how to help her daughter beat the "summer slide," a phenomenon where students regress in their academic abilities while school is not in session. Educators and experts say that effect is even more pronounced with students who have struggled with distance learning, causing some to be well behind entering the new school year. But then her daughter's teacher told her about a Beaverton Education Foundation-funded program called Camp Achieve, which was created eight years ago specifically to address students' regression in reading, math and emotional development.

The main idea behind the program is to add in the proverbial "spoonful of sugar" to the unpleasant aspects of summer school, to make it something kids will actually enjoy.

"It came from great ideas from staff and administrators at the district to sort of drive how we meet the needs of our students, how we need to meet the needs of kids who are experiencing barriers, and how we keep our kids engaged in general," said the foundation's executive director, Kristine Baggett.



The pandemic proved that these pre-existing programs could help fill many of the educational gaps left during remote learning.

"We were able to just stay on top of the learning and other formats, and stay on top of our reading by having a book goal," Sheragy said.

While Camp Achieve's 2020 remote session proved beneficial for Sheragy's daughter, it was this past summer's in-person session that was the real game-changer, Sheragy said.

"This summer was amazing with the support it provided families, while also bringing back the kids into the classroom and seeing the magic return for their love of being in school," Sheragy said.

Sheragy's daughter would come home from camp, excited to tell her parents how her day went.

"They had African drummers come in, and the drummers were teaching the students about Africa and their culture," Sheragy said. "When my daughter came home that night, she wanted to tell me all about Kenya, all about African drummers, and all about what they ate. She wanted to see if we had any red beans and if we could plant any red beans. She was sponging and soaking everything up, and the fact that she could then teach her parents what she learned that day was incredible."

Best of all, Sheragy said her daughter was even more prepared to not only return to school, but be in a classroom again.

"She was more prepared. She remembered what the school day looked like, what the expectations were, the guidelines of everything," she said. "And then she was also excited about being able to do that within a pandemic. None of it was a surprise, because she was so excited to be there for the full day."

This past summer, Camp Achieve received funding from the CARES Act, Baggett said. That federal assistance helped not only expand the program to more elementary schools within the Beaverton School District, but also to keep the program free for families.

Around 80% of last summer's 1,921 Camp Achieve students were English-language learners or immigrants, while 21% were disabled, according to the Beaverton Education Foundation and school district officials. The program was hosted at 20 different school sites but all 34 of the district's elementary schools were eligible to participate, said district spokesperson Shellie Bailey-Shah.

BSD learning specialist Jeremy Birch was part of the coordination process for this year's Camp Achieve program. He told school board members during a Monday, Sept. 27 meeting that for some students, Camp Achieve was their first time they stepped inside a school building since March 2020.

"We had students who returned home and say it was their best day of school ever," he said.

Baggett expects the heightened profile of Camp Achieve, especially during COVID-19, will further increase demand for the program.

"How our community works to fund that is my next challenge," Baggett said.

For anyone who wants to enroll their child in Camp Achieve in 2022, Sheragy said it's best to keep in touch with their child's teacher. Parents can also visit the Beaverton School District's summer programs page to check in when 2022 applications are open.

"I think one thing I've learned during the pandemic is we are our kids' number-one advocate," Sheragy said. "And so, as much as we can do as parents to support within the classroom, that's what makes all of our children successful."

The best way to support programs like Camp Achieve is to support the Beaverton Education Foundation, Baggett said. The nonprofit works to mobilize community resources and fund classroom activities within the Beaverton School District.