

Educational programs look to make big jumps

Summer Leap initiative aims to curtail learning loss during the summer

By MATE DOUGHERTY

In an auxiliary classroom on the Monroe Community College campus in Brighton, a group of 20 students from the Rochester City School District is counting bugs.

The rising first-graders have been spending the summer imagining what it would be like to live at the zoo, mixing visits to the zoo with academic exercises to sharpen their math and reading skills.

The Horizons at Monroe Community College program is part of the Summer Leap initiative, an effort to bring students from low-income families in the city to summer instructional sessions. Administered by the non-profit Greater Rochester Summer Learning Association, the programs are on the campuses of six local institutions with plans for continued growth.

The aim of the program is to avoid the learning loss that many students in low-income homes suffer during the summer. These students often live in dangerous areas and less-than-stable homes, said Conger Gabel, CEO of the association. During the summer the students can lose up to two months of instructional gains made in the past year.

As a result, the students arrive at school in the fall behind their peers, struggling to catch up. Over time, this gap can continue to grow, leading many disenfranchised students to drop out, Gabel said.

So far the programs are serving about

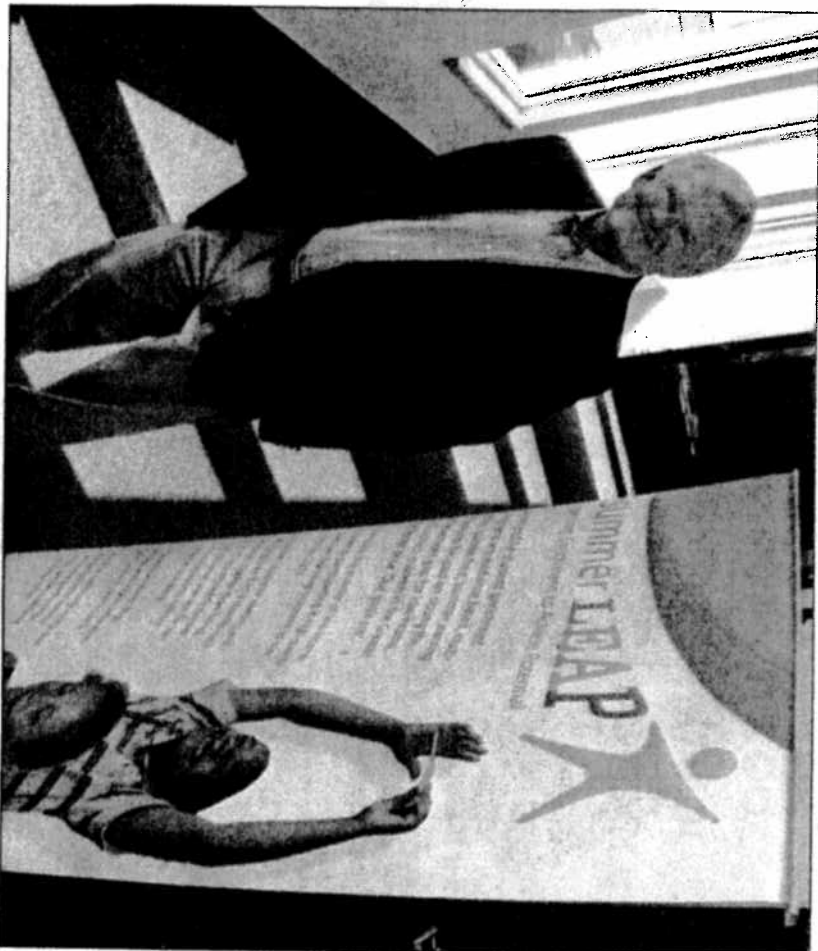


Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

Conger Gabel, CEO of the Greater Rochester Summer Learning Association that administers Summer Leap, is confident that once the success of the program gets out, the funding will follow.

590 students, up from 423 last year. Gabel has plans for it to continue growing, reaching 1,000 students in 2016 and more than 1,200 by 2017.

To keep the students engaged during the summer, Horizons at MCC delivers a healthy mix of instructional time and typical summer-camp activities, Gabel said. A reading specialist from the Fairport Central School District works to create a cur-

riculum that merges physical activity with reading exercises, and each student is given an individual reading goal.

"To give the teachers the power to come up with their own curriculum, instead of just teaching for a test, is very empowering," Gabel said. "They get to be creative and teach the way they were always taught to do it."

There is a physical education compo-

nent to the Summer Leap program, as all students are taught how to swim.

"For many of them, learning to swim is a big boost to their confidence," Gabel said. "It allows them to see that they can accomplish something."

At the MCC program, there are close to 60 students, from those entering first grade to those entering fourth. Each classroom has a different theme for the summer; for example, fourth-graders learn about space travel and third-graders imagine what it would be like to travel around the world.

The program has yielded results. Officials within MCC's program said nearly all students reach their goals, and even those facing severe emotional or developmental issues are able to maintain their learning level until the next school year.

The Horizons at Harley program, which first implemented the summer learning method in 1995, has been able to show more long-term results. Students in the program graduate from high school at a rate of 90 percent, with 75 percent of those going on to higher education.

Anne Kress, MCC president, was invited to visit the Horizons program at the Harley School and saw firsthand how effective it was. After the visit, Kress viewed the program as a great opportunity for MCC and for students in the program.

"It was amazing, their ability to stave off summer learning loss, but from our perspective as a college that sees how many students make it through high school without being college-ready, it seemed like a great fit," Kress said. "So when I saw the opportunity to partner and do something a little different than what Harley was do-

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