

New high-tech summer learning program enhances student literacy skills



Summer learning program teacher Aimee Bellefleur, left, helps Lizzie with an iPad literacy learning game at the Catholic Education Centre classroom.

(Windsor, Ont.) – When Tara Steinhoff’s daughter Lizzie entered Grade 3 at St. John Catholic Elementary School last September, she witnessed first-hand the consequences of taking an entire summer off from the books.

“We noticed a big decline in her care and attention to her work when she came back to school in the fall,” said Steinhoff. “It was something we were really worried about, because she does struggle a little bit with literacy.”

This summer, she’s taken a different approach and has entered Lizzie in a brand new summer learning program that’s focused on reading and writing, emphasizing the use of the latest technology by relying heavily on iPad and Chrome Books literacy apps to meet very specific learning objectives.

More than 30 students are enrolled in the four-week program, mostly from core city schools, where there tends to be greater risk for “summer slide back,” according to Maggie Dorion, vice principal at Sacred Heart Catholic Elementary School, and the summer program’s administrator.

Students come to the WECDSB’s Catholic Education Centre, where the board room has been transformed into a classroom, and four teachers conduct lessons that focus on such literacy objectives as inferences, author’s messaging, voice, and word choices.

“We hope that when they come back into their schools in September they have more confidence, and have developed a love for reading and writing,” she said.

For Lizzie, that love already exists. During a break from her lessons, she says she likes to read *Hanna Montana* and *Monster High* books, and writing her own stories, many that focus on environmental issues like recycling.

“She’s very gifted,” says her mother, adding that her daughter has been diagnosed with ADHD. “She’s a very creative, imaginative child. So we’re very excited about this program. We’re really hoping it will enhance some of those skills she already has. And it’ll be very interesting to see how she does when she goes back to school in September.”

That’s something Dorion and other program administrators are interested in too. The board will analyze the program’s success by measuring student progress, teacher and parent feedback, and performance benchmark levels to understand how the learning experience for students can be improved.

Parent engagement is a critical part of the program’s success, Dorion added. Throughout the summer, parents will be invited in on several occasions to observe, with the hope they’ll learn the strategies teachers are employing and continue to use them on their own time at home. A blog has also been created to keep the parents up to date.

When students return to school in September, their new teachers will be provided with a wealth of information such as student work samples, anecdotal observations and pre and post-assessment results to help them get a better understanding of what that student needs in terms of their literacy skills.

But besides helping students, the program – which is funded through the Ministry of Education’s Council of Ontario Directors – enhances professional development for teachers, according to Emelda Byrne, the board superintendant who oversees it.

“It’s designed to provide teachers with a deeper understanding of precision learning,” she said. “Some of these teachers may not have experienced this particular demographic, so they’ll have to implement strategies to engage reluctant learners and focus on their individual learning needs. And they’ll have to be very explicit in explaining their strategies to the parents so that they can support their children at home.”

Of course the program isn't strictly devoted to the hard work of learning. Students get to have some fun too, and afternoons are reserved for trips to such area attractions as Rosebowl Lanes, the Mic Mac Splash Pad, Silver Tee Mini Golf and the swimming pool at the University of Windsor.

After only one day, Steinhoff said she's already seen a difference in Lizzie.

"She was really excited to tell us all about it when she came home," Steinhoff said. "And this morning I found her reading to her little brother and sister. That was very nice to see."