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A summer boost for kids

Free camp hosted by charter school parents aims to help disadvantaged youth escape the 'summer slide'

by Kevin Forestieri

Fighting off the summer brain drain can be tough for families that can't afford expensive summer camps, but two parents from Bullis Charter School are looking to turn that around with a free summer camp for at-risk elementary school kids in the community.

Bullis Boosters Summer Bridge Camp is a free, week-long day camp for disadvantaged youth in the Mountain View and Los Altos communities. Hosted at the Bullis Charter School campus, it runs through the week of July 28 and has 50 campers going into second, third and fourth grades this year -- nearly double last year's number -- including kids from free and reduced lunch programs and families that rely on food assistance from the Community Services Agency.

On Tuesday, dozens of kids donning yellow camp T-shirts crowded around tables full of brown sugar, carrots and eggs for a muffin-making activity.

"This is the first time cooking for some of these kids," said Martha McClatchie, one of the two camp directors.

Before the campers make muffins, they have an indoor lesson about how to measure ingredients, and the difference between teaspoons, tablespoons and cups. Parents take home the batter and bake the muffins overnight, and kids can see their results the next day. Depending on how things go, kids might get their muffins back a little deflated, or the carrots might be too chunky, but McClatchie said kids are proud to bring their muffins home to show off to their families.

The camp has a broad curriculum that goes well beyond muffin-making, covering math, science and literature. On Monday, volunteers from Explorabox, a nonprofit science education group, came in to teach kids about electricity in a program called "Watt's up with electricity?" In one activity, the campers rub balloons against a carpeted surface and hold them above their head to watch how static electricity pulls their hair skyward.

The kids were also taught about motors, solar energy, and mechanisms like the Van de Graaff generator -- not a light curriculum. McClatchie said her hope is that through these lessons, some of the information will stick.

"They might hear about the Van de Graaff generator and say, 'Hey, I know what that is,'" she said.

McClatchie, along with Grace Yang, started the camp last year to provide a summer camp option for disadvantaged youth -- specifically English language learners -- in the community. McClatchie said kids learning English lose a lot of progress during the summer months, especially in homes where English is not commonly spoken. Camp counselors read out loud to groups of students, which McClatchie said helps avoid what she calls the "summer slide" for those students.

She said they coordinated with Craig Goldman, superintendent of the Mountain View Whisman School District, to reach out to at-risk children who could use the free summer camp the most. She said a number of kids were referred to them from Beyond the Bell -- an after-school program that provides help with homework and academic activities. About 70 percent of the campers are from Mountain View.

Teachers from Castro Elementary School and Bullis Charter School donate their time to teach classes at the camp, along with 16 counselors from nearby middle and high schools, according to Yang. The camp also has a number of Spanish translators on-site, specifically when kids are being picked up or dropped off so they can communicate with parents, family members and caregivers.

Local food vendors also donate free lunch and snacks for the camp, including Whole Foods, The Counter, Spot Pizza, ChoiceLunch and Smitten Ice Cream. On Tuesday, the camp took a field trip to Smitten to learn how ice cream can be made very cold using liquid nitrogen.

Along with food vendors, a number of other groups have supported the program through whatever services they can provide. Educacy, a nonprofit education advocacy group, has been a fiscal sponsor and KidzJet, a transportation company, provided the camp with a good deal on vans to transport the campers.

McClatchie said all these groups have come together to help make the camp a fun and meaningful experience for kids who wouldn't normally have access to summer camps.

"There's a lot of people who understand that this is an important thing to do,"