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GREATER SOUTHERN TIER BOCES

‘Learning’ to fly County-funded program offers opportunities to at-risk youth

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WOODHULL — A group of young scientists with the Summer Learning Experience put their tissue-paper hot air balloons to the test Wednesday morning.

Students conducted the experience as part of their exploration into the scientific method, creating hypotheses and testing their experiments out for their fellow Summer Learning Experience participants to see.

After their hot air balloons were launched, children returned to the Woodhull Youth Center to discuss their findings.

"I think our results are great today," Catherine Rohan, special education teacher at Hornell High School and Summer Learning Experience instructor, said. "Did anybody think their balloon wouldn't rise? Somebody said that earlier but they changed their hypothesis and that's OK."

Activities like these are a regular occurrence for Summer Learning Experience students.

The program is intended for children ages 8-16 who struggle with subject matter at school but are only accepted by referral via several criteria.

"These kids are deemed at-risk," Greg Longwell, science teacher at Dana Lyon Middle School in Bath and coordinator for the Woodhull Summer Learning Experience site, said. "They're kids that have mental health (issues), Social Services, probation, family court, (juvenile) court, things like that so the whole goal of the program is to teach them social skills, character, problem solving."

"The kids oftentimes aren't doing well at school. They fail at school, get in fights, get written up a lot so our program teaches them the skills to be successful during the school year. That's really the goal."

And in teaching those skills, the Summer Learning Experience hopes children will learn to defeat the obstacles that face them in everyday life.

"Overcoming fear is a big one," Longwell said. "Being socially accepted a lot of times is a big thing to do."

One path to overcoming fear and becoming socially accepted is through several activities kids in the program partake in during the summer.

For example, children participated in horseback riding and kayaking earlier this summer.

"The first time we went horseback riding a horse stepped on someone's toe," a girl in the program said.

"When you saw a horse up close, was it bigger or smaller than you thought?" Rohan asked. "It's way bigger, isn't it? And the kayak too, what are you afraid of in the kayak?"

"The water," the girl replied.

"You learned to overcome the fear of taking healthy risks," Rohan said. "Healthy risks are good to take."

Other children view the Summer Learning Experience as a way to connect with friends that they normally wouldn't see until the start of the new school year in September — if they saw those friends at all.

"Sometimes you can't see your friends," Hunter said. "Maybe your friends will become your enemies over the summer."

"It absolutely has opened up a bunch of new experiences for me," Sierra added. "Things I've never done before, things I've never wanted to do I've done because I came here."

Several children raised their hands when asked by program instructors if they learned how to swim or improved their swimming skills over the summer.

While children in the program do partake in fun activities, they also write in journals daily reflecting on their experiences.

"They talk about what they did the day before in their journal," Wendy Webb, Summer Learning Experience senior leader and counselor at Greater Southern Tier BOCES, said. "It's pretty much just to build their self-esteem and teach them skills for getting along."

The Summer Learning Experience hopes that creating positive self-esteem can translate into a positive attitude. Good behavior is rewarded with a trip to Roseland Waterpark in Canandaigua.

"We do a star chart, a behavior modification chart looking at how the kids do each day and based on the number of criteria they earn stars for really great behavior and basically everybody in this room right now because of their good behavior has earned a trip to Roseland Waterpark," Longwell said.

The Summer Learning Experience is funded through the Steuben County Department of Social Services as a grant provided to Greater Southern Tier BOCES, who operates the program.

The program also has sites in Avoca, Bath, Coopers Plains and Hornell. Longwell said that the Summer Learning Experience includes 200-300 students during a typical summer across all five sites.