

Kickin' it after school: State grant will keep Bonita Springs program alive

By LESLIE WILLIAMS HALE

Saturday, February 20, 2010

At the end of every school day, 30 to 50 students gather in the Bonita Springs Middle School cafeteria for an after-school program that has them exercising, painting and getting academic help for 2 1/2 hours.

Ask any of them what they used to do in the afternoons, or what they would be doing if they didn't have an after-school program, and the response is almost uniform: "Nothing. Watch TV."

For students in Bonita Springs, this bleak, bland, after-school life is getting a makeover thanks to a \$1.1 million grant to the Bonita Springs YMCA from the Florida 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

The grant has spawned after-school programs for students at Bonita Springs Elementary and Bonita Springs Middle schools and will help keep the Bonita Club Y After-School Program running for five years.

"It's supposed to be disguised learning," said Jimmy Underwood, executive director of the Bonita Springs YMCA. "It's an enrichment type of program. The population we're looking to serve isn't necessarily the kids that are academically need-based."

Students going home to an empty house, who don't have mental or physical stimulation or who might be getting into trouble, are the targets of the program. Teachers from both schools and from the YMCA engage students in exercise or in group activities that incorporate math or reading — but in a fun way, Underwood said.

"Some of our curriculum will be robotics," Underwood said. "It will cover science and a little bit of their math. It's not sitting down; it's not tutoring for an extra two hours."

Ed Marin, an eighth-grader at Bonita Springs Middle, said he used to avoid going home right

after school. His family doesn't have a television, and he got pretty bored at home by himself in the afternoons.

"Computer," he said. "That's all there is."

But Ed has been staying at the middle school in the afternoons, one of about 50 students who signed up for the program there. He gets to participate in arts and crafts, gets homework help and socializes with kids he doesn't see during the regular school day.

"Honestly, I didn't want to do it," said Ed, 14. "But when I heard about the YMCA membership, I was like, 'Let's do this.' "

For participating in the after-school program, Ed gets a free YMCA membership — something he has never had. Plus, he said, the after-school program actually turned out to be pretty fun.

The rules for the after-school program are relaxed. Students, who do not get to chew gum during the school day and must adhere to a dress code of collared shirts, are allowed to listen to their iPods, keep their cell phones on and, yes, chew gum and break the dress code.

Life skills teacher Wanda Norris, who directs some of the physical activities for the program, let her students run a relay race through the school halls one day last week. That was a lot of fun, say a group of boys who are stretching before they use the weight and cardio equipment in the school's small gym.

"Because we never get to run," Hernan Tovar said.

Hernan, 12, said he works out on the stationary bike at the gym where he lives. But here, he has a teacher teaching him to stretch properly, and showing him the right technique for lifting weights. And if he wasn't here, Hernan says, he would just be watching television.

"I really have nothing to do," said Hernan, a sixth grader. "That's why I signed up. In the after-school program, it's fun, but it also helps us with our health."

The physical component of the program has helped get students out of their usual comfort zones, Principal Ruthie Lohmeyer said.

Each afternoon, small groups of students break out into different activities, allowing intimate groups to create a craft project together, or participate in yoga.

"It's just a safe haven for the kids," Lohmeyer said. "We give them some more opportunities to learn about exercise, pilates, yoga. They're so embarrassed when they start."

Enrollment in the program at the middle school is slowly growing by word of mouth. About 50 students are participating, and there is room for another 50. The elementary school program, held at the Bonita YMCA, has capacity for 75 students.

“It is a great need in our community, and we can tell by the waiting list at the elementary school especially,” Underwood said. “We have 100 kids on the waiting list. Lee County (School District) is already asking us to expand it to other schools.”

Both sites are staffed by teachers and YMCA employees. The grant will fully fund the program for the first two years, and fund 80 percent of the program in the final three years. At that point, the YMCA will have to make up the rest of the funding itself.

In Lee County, the grant is the first of its kind. It is also the first free after-school program in Bonita Springs in anyone’s memory.

“We tried to have it before school,” Lohmeyer said. “We had a very small monetary requirement and it failed. No one showed up.”

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