

1,000 at-risk students get a helping hand

City will offer summer activities to aid academics

By June Q. Wu, Globe Correspondent | June 18, 2010

Around 8 p.m. Tuesday, 521 Boston parents received calls from city officials about their children. The students were not in trouble — just in need of a meaningful summer activity.

For the first time, 10 low-performing Boston public schools will partner with the City of Boston to place 1,000 students at risk of struggling academically in a myriad of free or subsidized summer-enrichment programs, such as the YMCA or **Boys and Girls Club**.

“It’s an awesome experiment that I think is going to be good,” said Eliza Greenberg, who is coordinating the city’s effort. “It’s kind of campaign-style with relentless followup.”

Principals at the schools — Agassiz, Blackstone, John P. Holland, John F. Kennedy, and William Monroe Trotter elementary schools; Orchard Gardens K-8 school; Henry Dearborn and Harbor middle schools; and Jeremiah E. Burke and English high schools — submitted a list of students they believe would benefit from structured summer programs.

“We’ve been reaching out to try to make sure that we have students involved in a summer program, so we can keep them off the streets, keep them in the routine of school whether for enrichment or courses that they’re struggling with,” English High principal Sito Narcisse said.

Of the 104 families who picked up the phone Tuesday night, about three-quarters expressed interest in the city’s proposal, officials said.

Julio Salazar of Dorchester was one of them. His 10-year-old, Joshua, attends the Blackstone and loves to play sports. He was referred to Tenacity, a free program that combines tennis and reading instruction during the summer months.

“I can’t believe how well you take care of the children here,” Greenberg recalls Salazar saying.

The schools are also working with Boston After School and Beyond, a public-private partnership that focuses on after-school programming, to match students with city programs based on their interests and needs.

“Any child is at risk of losing learning during the summer months, so we are identifying kids who aren’t currently in a program,” said Chris Smith, the group’s executive director.

Dearborn principal Jose Duarte agreed, adding that underperforming students not enrolled in summer school probably do not have access to summer camps or activities.

“Research clearly shows whenever there’s a stop in learning, regression takes place,” Duarte said. “We just want to make sure that students don’t have too much of a gap.”

Duarte plans for the first time to enroll all 300 students at Dearborn in a free summer-enrichment program with courses tailored to individual needs, such as supplemental math or English material.

“We want you to take time off — I need to take time off,” Duarte said of summer vacation. “But we have to try to change the mindset of people to understand that summer should be for time off and learning as well.”

Like the Dearborn, English High will introduce a summer enrichment program for 120 of the school’s 800 students featuring classes ranging from music and dance to SAT preparation.

Another 300 students, Narcisse said, will enroll in summer school. The majority will be retaking courses they failed during the school year.

Parents of students not taking summer school were sent letters strongly encouraging them to sign up for enrichment classes or the city’s programs.

“We’re wasting our money if we’re not engaging the kids,” Narcisse said.

Search for programs by age, activity, and location at BostoNavigator.org. To determine eligibility for vouchers for subsidized programs, parents can call the EEC Metro Boston office at 617-472-2881. June Q. Wu can be reached at jwu@globe.com.