

MIND THE GAP: JEFFCO SUMMER OF EARLY LEARNING



Jeffco Public Schools has a unique When you're young and curious, there's no better way to spend a beautiful morning than outside in the company of some cute, furry animals, courtesy of Jeffco 4H. This was no simple diversion; it was a very deliberate part of the Jeffco Summer of Early Learning (JSEL) program at Parr Elementary in Arvada.

"We're doing an immersion into non-fiction. The kids are reading a lot about different kinds of animals," explained

Parr Principal Scott Thompson. "We wanted to make a connection more real-world, so they get to see and touch, as well as read."

"It's wonderful to see this adventure for these children that do not always get to see these types of animals and then to take it back to the classroom," added JSEL Principal Tracy Krug.

Parr is one of more than half-a-dozen JSEL sites in Jeffco, serving 900 children identified as at-risk for significant reading deficiencies. JSEL is a way to mind that gap.

"It's six additional weeks of school. It's not summer camp. It's summer school," said Kim Ballantyne, assistant director of early literacy.

By design, the learning is fun and interactive. JSEL is a proven success, giving a boost to kids who might not be at grade-level once they finish their regular school year. A bonus: it can put a stop to the summer slide.

"Summer slide's a real thing. This helps the kids hit the ground in the fall instead of having to make up what they lost over summer. [It] gives them a chance to start right at their grade level and move forward," explained Instructional Coach Kim Levine.

There wouldn't be JSEL without the Jeffco Schools Foundation, which started the program as a pilot effort several years ago.

"Back in that time, there wasn't extra funding for summer school for those students who needed those services," explained Denise Delgado, executive director of the Foundation. "It simply wasn't there. The Foundation was able to play a unique role by bringing in some of our donors who were interested in literacy."

The Foundation foots the bill for a JSEL coordinator, JSEL materials, and a wide range of extras to keep JSEL students and their families involved.

"Each school got a large treasure box full of prizes to help motivate kids," explained Ballantyne. "They also provided Rockies tickets for us as incentives for perfect attendance. [There was] also a participation play at the Arvada Center where the kids got to be the actors."

"Food for parents. Really keeping the families close and engaged. Those are the type of activities that the Foundation fundraises for because we know they are components of the program that work," added Delgado.

Not only does JSEL help struggling readers, but also the educators doing the teaching. The Foundation provides professional development money for educators involved in JSEL work.

"We can take them off-site, to great places where they can relax and learn together as a community, providing new curriculum; just paying for enrichment activities," said Delgado.

"It gives us a chance to reflect on the meaning of our work," added Levine.

Additionally, teachers are allowed to keep the materials after the program concludes.

"They don't go on some shelf and gather dust during the whole school year. These wonderful resources that we utilize in the summer are now going out into the classroom yearlong," said Ballantyne.

Another plus: JSEL can often be a child's first introduction to school.

"A lot of the students we see coming to JSEL may or may not have had preschool. It jumpstarts their education," explained Thompson.

"It helps with readiness. It helps with the ability to engage in the learning," said Krug. "They are just so motivated to continue to learn and want to learn. Hopefully, it's going home, too."

It's also a lot of fun.

"Summer school's a happy kid place, and they seem to be jumping at the opportunity to come to school every day," said Thompson.

"This connects joy to learning in the summer. It's just a wonderful program," added Levine.

And it works.

"When you see that year after year after year, it's now become the culture – it's just something we do now. We sometimes can't fund things at that price tag forever, but when you see the data, and you see the results, other partners come in," explained Delgado. "At Jeffco Schools Foundation, we want to be there for as long as we need to be, and it's our commitment to fundraise for that."

