

After-school program keeps children on track

By Jeanna Ross
The Concordian

At Oak Grove Middle School, the end of the school day signals a new beginning.

From 3:30 to 6 p.m., Kim Engle and Cathy Cook coordinate an after-school program that serves up to 110 students each day. Seventy percent of them are recipients of the free and reduced lunch program.

The program emphasizes multiple skills areas. For one hour a day, Monday through Thursday, the students receive homework help. Several of the tutors are Oak Grove teachers, so the kids are tutored by those best in a position to help.

For the next half hour, students participate in a physical fitness activity designed to improve coordination and muscle tone. During the rest of the time, students alternate through vari-

ous life-skills classes, including computers, cooking and nutrition.

Finally, there are clubs, which students choose based on their interests. The gardening club is just wrapping up, to be followed by music and photo clubs. Additionally, students can participate in intramural sports programs and compete against three other middle schools. The soccer season is just ending, and football tryouts are around the corner.

The program is free to any student who wishes to participate. The program, and those like it at 15 other elementary and high schools in the area, is sponsored by the Mt. Diablo Collaborative for Academics, Recreation and Enrichment for Students (CARES). According to Concord program coordinator Matt Fragoso, CARES is run jointly by the city of Concord, Ambrose Recreation and Parks District, Bay Area



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CO-SITE COORDINATORS Cathy Cook and Kim Engle

Community Resources and the Mt. Diablo Unified School District.

Kim Holmes, who is a seventh-grade core teacher during the day, tutors eighth-graders three days a week in the after-school program. "At the beginning, they would groan. But a month later, they're all bringing something to do, something to work on."

She sees the daily classroom advantages of the program. "These kids need this help. They want and seek help."

Her relaxed, tutorial style emphasizes the kids' needs vs. a prescribed curriculum. It's often exactly what the students need to boost their success.

In addition to the daily homework help, the program also supports the ASPIRE intervention program that targets below-grade-level students with intensive tutoring. Within the daily operations of the program, Engle considers the academic enrichment to be the most crucial.

"These kids are getting help that they may not get anywhere else. Their scores are rising," she noted.

The atmosphere resembles a well-ordered summer camp. The activities center around a grassy quad, where one group might play a game involving hula hoops and rubber juggling sticks across from a cooking class making cheese paninis and chocolate milkshakes.

On one end of the space, several tidy gardens boast flowers, shrubs and student art projects. "We're hoping to expand to include herbs, fruits and

vegetables," Engle said.

On the other end, lunch tables host a scavenger hunt involving nutrition guides from boxed foods. In between, groups work intently at classroom computer stations and desks to finish their homework before they go home for the evening.

A plethora of community workers dressed in fluorescent yellow vests scatter the space, managing the student population. In addition to the two site coordinators and teachers, the program also employs academic coaches and staff from all walks of life.

"Mr. Steve," as the kids holler, works as a custodian at John Muir Medical Center during the day. "I do this for fun," he said. "I get to play like a kid."

Steve is a graduate of Oak Grove, as are his children. His involvement with the program allows him to be part of the positive transformation of the Monument Corridor.

CARES began in 1999 in schools that had more than 50 percent of the population receiving free and reduced lunch. "The original intent was to help boost test scores with academic support, increase recreation and provide exposure to new opportunities," said Fragoso. "We want to give kids a safe place to be until 6 p.m., which is usually when kids can get into trouble. We're hoping to teach them to be active and making better choices at home. This program allows us to serve their needs and serve the community's needs."

The program began with six schools but now serves 16 sites in the Mt. Diablo district – with enrollment of about 2,500 students. Future plans include service learning and youth advisory committees at each site to encourage community involvement. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control has given feedback on the fitness and nutrition curriculum, providing tools the programs can use to increase fight childhood diabetes and obesity.

For more information on CARES, visit www.mtidiablocares.org or call 691-0351.



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