

## Some Students Get a Leg Up In Summer School

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Michael Polonsky, a high school junior in this northern Virginia suburb, could have spent his summer vacation doing what he did last year—sleeping late, fiddling on his home computer, and just doing nothing. All things considered, though, he'd rather be in school.

So Mr. Polonsky has forfeited long, lazy weeks to take six hours a day of instruction in computer science here at Westfield High School.

"I want to take Advanced Placement computer science next year, and this will help me," he said during class one day last month. "And, here, you're surrounded by people."

Surrounded is the right word. Once considered a last-chance boot camp for struggling learners, summer school is becoming many things to many different kinds of students. And plenty, like Mr. Polonsky, are coming because they want to—not because they have to in order to keep up.

He is one of the lucky ones, though. In a summer when states and school districts nationwide are grappling with budget cuts, summer school programs are suffering in many localities. Such programs have been eliminated or scaled back this year in California, Florida, Maryland, New York, and South Carolina, among other states.

Karl L. Alexander, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, says the retrenchment that he is seeing in summer schools is troubling, because studies show that students' academic achievement suffers over those idle months.

His own research with urban elementary school pupils shows that, on average in mathematics, they lose the grade-level equivalent of 2.6 months of learning over the summer break. The losses are particularly acute for the poorest students, whose families cannot afford summer camps, books, and museum trips to offset the "summer slide."

For their part, school leaders in many fiscally strapped districts have tried to make cuts with surgical precision. In Florida's 366,000-student Miami-Dade County schools, Rhoda Shirley, the director of the district's office of performance improvement, said administrators concentrated on retaining summer programs for struggling students in grades targeted for state-mandated testing. At the high school level, summer school courses were also kept open for students who failed a course or had low grade point averages.

At roughly 35,000, though, Miami-Dade's summer school enrollment this year was just a quarter of what it was last year.

### Varied Reasons

The cuts come after years of steadily rising summer school enrollment. The proportion of 16- to 19-year-olds enrolled in summer school more than doubled from 14.5 percent in July 1989 to 33.3 percent last year, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Experts say the growth probably stems from many factors, including tougher academic requirements for students and increases in the number of working parents.

Anecdotally, educators believe a sizable—and possibly growing—share of the increase is due to students, such as Mr. Polonsky, who are taking classes to get ahead, to expand their educational horizons, or just to free up their regular school schedules for more elective classes.

Westfield is one of five high schools offering summer academic classes here in Fairfax County, an ethnically diverse, 166,000-student district in the suburbs south of Washington. Westfield High officials estimate that 30 percent to 40 percent of the 1,221 students enrolled this summer are taking new classes, as opposed to repeating a course.

"Probably the biggest group are former English-as-a-second-language kids who want to jump ahead in mathematics," said Rob Yarborough, the lead guidance counselor for Westfield's summer program.

Among Michael Polonsky's computer science classmates, the reasons for spending summer in school were almost as numerous as the students in the class.

Kelly Sachs, a rising sophomore who enrolled in the class along with her older sister, believes the extra mathematics credit will look good on her college application one day.

Erin Ruben, who is entering 12th grade, said her aim is to fit an extra elective into her schedule in the coming school year. That way, she won't have to sacrifice the Japanese and band classes that she normally takes.

Another classmate, Dana Moreno, figured taking computer science in the summer would be easier than taking it during the regular school year.

"I took physics [in summer school] last year, and it was easy for me," said the incoming senior. "My friends had a harder time with it during the academic year than I did."

On the other hand, Christopher Yook, who is also entering 12th grade, just wants to raise his grade point average, already a 3.77 on a 4-point scale.

### **Boosting Grades**

Improving grades was also a driving incentive for summer enrollment this year at Bloomfield Hills High School, in an affluent suburb 25 miles northeast of Detroit.

Michael Palermo, the principal of the summer program, said 138 of the 431 students taking classes at his school this summer are there to boost a grade. Only 69 students were repeating a failed course.

"They have to have a 3.85 or better to get into the University of Michigan or any of the Ivy League schools," said Mr. Palermo, who surveyed his students last month.

Another 138 students wanted to free up their regular academic schedules, he found, while 86 were aiming to prepare for Advanced Placement, honors, or other classes they planned to take in the fall.

Mr. Palermo said the high school also saw an upward blip in summer attendance several years ago when some of the district's high schools switched from a traditional math curriculum to a more controversial, integrated approach. Until the new classes were discontinued a year or two later, some parents sought the summer school classes because they were taught using traditional methods.

Likewise, Fairfax County saw summer-enrollment increases in the late 1990s, when Virginia began phasing in plans to require students to pass new exams to graduate, according to Pamela R. Ward, who oversees the district's summer programs.

This year, though, overall enrollment has dipped from 30,000 to around 26,000, she said. School officials hope the decrease reflects the district's improved scores on state tests.

"Maybe we're seeing the fruits of our labor," Ms. Ward said.

Students who take classes to get ahead academically still make up a small fraction of those taking part in summer school in Fairfax County. Summer programs have become a regular institution here, encompassing everything from reading assistance for elementary pupils who are falling behind to a popular Institute for the Arts.

Mr. Alexander of Johns Hopkins wonders whether efforts to close the achievement gap that generally separates poor and minority students from their better-off, white peers could be thwarted when so many students look to summer school as a way to get a leg up.

"I think it could be the all-too-typical experience of the rich getting richer," he said.