

Students learn in experiment

BY CASEY HANS
STAFF WRITER



"Peace" is the theme students in the year-round program at Gill Elementary hope to carry through their new, extended school year.

But things in the year-round classes at the elementary school in southwest Farmington Hills are anything but peaceful.

Here, an educational experiment is taking place for the Farmington school district.

In Sue Barch's first grade class, 23 students receive traditional school lessons. But they also get the benefit of team teaching, working regularly with students in other grades and field trips with students of all ages.

Barch, who also has taught fourth graders at Gill, calls the new program and her return to the first grade "a nice change of pace."

Barch is one of three Gill teachers who chose to enter the year-round program. Third grade teacher Elisa Maher and fourth grade teacher Dennis Place joined her, as did Forest Elementary teacher Ed Wolf who now teaches second graders at Gill. New to the district and the program is kindergarten teacher Liz Walsh.

Place, who has taught all elementary grades in his career, has a class this year with only 15 students. He said the year-round program offered a new challenge. "It was something that was appealing to me," he said. "I consider myself a progressive teacher and this is something that's good for the children."

Place said he noticed that because many of the year-round teachers and students of different grades spend time together, students of all ages know him by

name. Also, he said the cross-grade "base groups" used in the program give children a chance to learn better communication, and to get to know and help each other.

"If you give a child an opportunity to be in a position of responsibility, they will rally," he said. "Give them a chance to be good, and they are good."

Year-round students also work together within their grades. Barch divided her first graders into teams which worked together on a lesson in sorting. Some students had a better team experience than others.

But that's all part of learning. "There are a few bumps," Place said. "Children have different learning styles. I tell the children I want them to learn what it's like to work with other people."

The staff meets regularly to discuss the year-round program, where it is going and how they can help each other. "I feel the program is going to be a success," Place added. "It's going to expand not only here, but into other communities. It gives parents another choice."

Parents have responded well to the program so far, said Carol Hansen, an administrative intern hired this year to help launch the year-round program. "They're very possessive of it, committed to it and want it to work," Hansen said. "The parents I've polled like it."

Top level administrators in the Farmington district, including Superintendent Michael Flanagan, have openly supported the year-round concept, but also have learned from the mistakes of districts like Plymouth-Canton, which made their program mandatory. Farmington's pilot program is a voluntary one, a policy which would likely remain in effect if the program is expanded in future years.



STAFF PHOTOS BY SHARON LEMIRE

Assembly time: Parent Pam Tunli (left) observes students working together during an outdoor assembly. Students are (clockwise from parent) Sarah Bennett, Johnene Tunli, Darci Vaughn, Matt Glenn, Allison Lopes and Paul White.

Program from page 1A

In the case of the year-round program, students get three, 2-week "intercessions" or breaks and remain in school through mid-July. Proponents for year-round schooling believe more breaks throughout the year and a shorter summer vacation allow learning to flow more easily than with a traditional, agrarian school calendar.

Year-round students will get their first two-week recess beginning Oct. 26 and also get breaks in February and May. These are in addition to the holiday breaks they share with traditional students.

During the year-round breaks, the school district will offer tuition-based enrichment classes and activities for those who want to participate.

Administrative intern Carol Hansen said the program began "without a hitch."

"Things started off rather smoothly," said Hansen, who was hired this year to help coordinate the year-round program. "The kids don't realize there's a difference (in programs) yet." She called the year-round program "unique, but part of the school."

Most of the students, with the exception of kindergartners, are housed in a westerly hallway at Gill. The various grade levels take field trips together and the staff does cross-grade teaching projects.

Students also participate in weekly "base groups" which include a student from each grade level and which Hansen likened to a "school family."

A total of 104 students are enrolled in the Gill program in grades kindergarten through four. No fifth graders enrolled this year, which is understandable because they would return to a traditional program in middle school next year. Most of the students enrolling live in the Gill attendance area, and about 20 came from other schools.

Gill students and their siblings are given a preference in enrolling in the year-round program, principal Michael Duff said.

Evaluation for the year-round program is being designed. The school plans to test and score the year-round students separately on the Michigan Educational Assessment, or MEAP, state skill test as one measure, Hansen added.



Peacefully: Gill Elementary students (from left) Sarah Bowles, Scott Andrews, Jessica Kalgren, Shanna Barkume, Tom Peszek and Greg Peszek tell what peace means to them. They're all in the year-round program.

Winds of change roll into schools

Throughout this school year, the Observer will profile several new programs in the Farmington Public Schools through the eyes of students, their families, and educators who are piloting the change.

Today, first grader Johnene Tunli is profiled in a piece about the year-round, school-within-a-school program at Gill Elementary. The program started this fall as a one-year pilot

program for the Farmington district and includes about 100 youngsters in grades kindergarten through four.

In the coming weeks, the Observer will look at Mario Corsetti, a junior at North Farmington High School and his decision to enroll in the "zero hour" program there. The piece also will focus on scheduling changes throughout the school and their impact.

Also profiled will be student Heather Samson who attends the Farmington Alternative Academy, a non-traditional high school program started in 1991-92, which takes a unique approach to education. The program is done under the auspices of the adult education department.

The Observer will look in on these students throughout the year to see how they, and the new programs, are progressing.

Quick oil change helps increase drug awareness

Get your oil changed at Valvoline and help fund Farmington Families in Action's October Drug Awareness Month at the same time.

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in Farmington.

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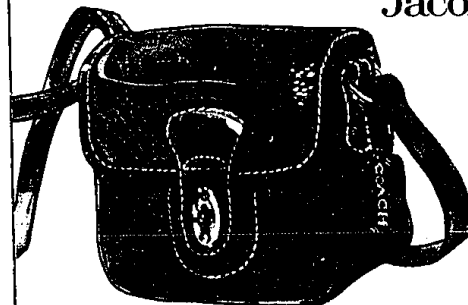
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