

Wiggly squiggly: Fifty parents volunteered their time for the three-day campout. Amber Paris is "grossed out" by dad's (Ed) volunteering to place a worm on a hook.



Principal's nature is teaching outdoors

By LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

The nature of being a principal calls for dealing with children, but to see children take in nature is bliss for a headmaster.

Al Lanigan has seen the wonderment in children's eyes, catching their first fish or seeing an owl.

Every year, Lanigan takes a group of fourth graders to Froud Lake Recreation Center in Wixom. The latest overnight excursion took place May 8-10.

Rain dampened the festivities, but perhaps not as much as

knowing this was the last trip led by the principal who is retiring.

"I'll miss this a lot," said Lanigan, 64, wearing a baseball cap and a rain jacket.

Lanigan, as always, taught children how to fish. A steady downpour the first day curtailed the angling lessons. Children watched a BBC-TV production on reptiles instead.

Children examined plant life, watched for birds and identified wildflowers and trees. For some kids, it's the first time away from home.

"They're enjoying it so much, they don't realize they are learning," Larkshire teacher Arlene Scheiber said. "It's experiencing what they are learning. They can feel it, touch it..."

And when coming in contact with skunk cabbage, smell it. The outdoor education program has grown into a family affair.

Many parents attended as children. It's not uncommon for some mothers and fathers to still have rock collections contained in egg cartons from their trips as children, Scheiber said.

Former Larkshire students who are now in high school volunteer to go along as counselors. Retired teachers present topics.

Food servers Sheila and Eric Puller have been regulars at the outdoor education program for more than 20 years. This may be their last year, too.

The question remains whether the program will continue after Lanigan retires.

"He's been holding it all together," Scheiber said. "The people will come out because he is the one asking them."



He ain't heavy: Danny Babcock rides piggy-back on Kevin Barbieri during a free time.

Chat and chow: Larkshire principal Al Lanigan takes a minute from his meal with his kids to talk with a youngster.



PHOTO BY SELAH LINDEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Pole takers: Farmington High juniors Andrea Lankin, left, and Cynthia Giannamore help Scott Janowicz bring in his fishing line.

Lanigan

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Instead, Lanigan built a community as well as a school. For some students, Larkshire became more than a place to learn how to read, write and do arithmetic.

When some students started complaining of stomach aches, Lanigan and his staff asked them if they ate breakfast. Many didn't.

So Lanigan and staff bought cereal, milk and fruit and started a breakfast club. The breakfast program continues to prosper 20 years later.

If a student didn't have adequate clothing, Lanigan and his staff thought nothing of taking them shopping. Along with chalk and a blackboard, teachers used hairbrushes and combs to teach children about hygiene.

Those tasks came with the student population. Larkshire was designated as a Chapter One school, meaning 25-percent of the kids came from low-income homes.

"If you just dealt with education ... That wouldn't fly at all," Lanigan said.

Academically, Larkshire students haven't fared badly either. Larkshire was the first elementary school in the Farmington district - and second statewide - to receive North Central Accreditation. The school was one of the first in Farmington to embark on a school improvement process - well before it became a districtwide edict, another elementary principal noted.

Under Lanigan, a math academy was started last summer.

Subsequently, 93.1 percent of Larkshire fourth graders scored satisfactory on the math portion of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program test - second to only Highmeadow Common Campus' 97.4 percent.



Up in arms: Sarah Houchins, Brittany Dennis, and Rachel Hilverding pose for the camera.



Tree time: A huge tree in the middle of a play area served as a rest spot.

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