

## Kent County middle schoolers head off to COLLEGE

Most Horizons middle schoolers don't dare dream of college. Until now, perhaps. In a programming first, nearly two dozen students attended classes last summer at Washington College – an experience that introduced them to lecture halls, a computer research lab and best of all, they would tell you, the food court.

"It turned the maturity up a notch. They got into it," observes fifth-grade teacher Matt Cowan. "Just sitting in a college classroom amazed them. It's a great motivator. And after seeing all that food, they're all going to want to go to college."

For two afternoons on campus each week, student teams researched an energy topic. They Googled. They engaged in critical thinking. (If uranium is a non-renewable resource that is two times as heavy as lead, how does that impact the environment?) And, on occasion, they tangled.

"In real life, you have to work with people you may not know or like," sixth-grade teacher Susan Smith told one student who objected to being paired with his research partner. "No one's perfect. We're all different. And that's okay."

The overarching goal: to work cooperatively.

Seventh-grade teacher Jesse Speth graduated from Washington College in May with a major in English and a minor in secondary education. His charges? Four back-talking teenage boys with both challenges – and dreams. One of the kids has 28 siblings or half siblings and lives in a house with 11 other people. Another, in his handwritten personal biography, indulged in some wishful thinking: "There once was a guy named Kyante, He just met Beyonce – his future fiancée." Kyante wants to be an NBA star or a choreographer.

The four boys all love math and during breaks at the college, Speth used knock-out, a basketball game, to reinforce their math skills. "Sneaky teaching," he calls it.

"I know about their home lives and some are better than others. They are all in positions that are tough for a 13-year-old boy to be in," says Speth. "At the end of the day, you are a teacher and this classroom is a safe haven for these kids. Instead of traditional lessons, what I've tried to do is provoke their thinking. It's about stopping and talking a lot. I ask a lot of questions and then steer them in a direction and teach to their strengths."

Academic Director Connie Schroth says the experience on campus provided Horizons' oldest children with programming that made them feel distinct from the younger kids.

"The quantitative stuff is important but what I see as just as important is the soft stuff: kids gaining confidence, social skills, problem-solving skills, self-control, internalizing rules," she added. "The learning environment at the college heightens all that."



Brad Willson

Sixth-grade teaching assistant Jiordan Carter, far right, leads middle schoolers into a college lecture hall.

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## Q & A with learning expert KARL ALEXANDER

Johns Hopkins University professor Karl Alexander may not be a household name but in the arena of summer learning, he's a superstar. It was Alexander who coined the term "summer slide" to describe the academic decline that many low-income kids experience when the school year is over.

"Almost all of the achievement gap traces back to summer learning. The circumstances of the lives and families of these students hold them back," says Alexander, John Dewey Professor of Sociology. "If you can't read well when you leave elementary school, everything becomes challenging."

Alexander should know. For 25 years, he and a colleague tracked the life progress of 800 kids who started first grade in 1982 in 20 Baltimore City public schools. The mission: to better understand why some children have successful launches in education while others do not.

As Malcolm Gladwell, referring to Alexander's work in the book "Outliers," frames it: "Virtually all of the advantage that wealthy students have over poor students is the result of differences in the way privileged kids learn when they are not in school.... America doesn't have a school problem. It has a summer vacation problem...."

Alexander recently spoke with Horizons Today about the summer slide.

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# Teacher spotlight on MATT COWAN

Peek into fifth-grade teacher Matt Cowan's classroom and it's clear from the start that there is something different about the learning environment.

Kids are helping kids learn. There's joy in the room – and laughter. During “brain breaks,” the nine fifth graders might practice a chant about an energy topic or create a conga line in the hallway.

“The younger you are, the less you can sit and listen to someone yammer on. They'll tune out,” says Cowan, 23. “Brain breaks or even simple stretching allows you to release energy in a positive way. Afterward, you tune in ready to learn.”

Cowan is a practitioner of Whole Brain Teaching, a highly interactive form of instruction that delivers information in short chunks. Kids then teach what they have learned to their peers, using hand gestures to reinforce specific vocabulary. While students teach each other, Cowan surveys the room to discover who understands the lesson and who needs more instruction.

“When we started, we had nine kids who were not motivated to learn or to be at school in the summertime. We had nine students who thought they couldn't write two sentences without pulling their hair out,” says Cowan, who graduated from the University of Maryland with a degree in art history and archeology. “If nothing else, at the end of the six-week session, the confidence level of these students – when it comes to writing and solving math problems – has significantly improved.”

“Mr. Matt,” as the kids call him, attributes his students' success to the collaborative nature of the classroom.

“It's not that there is only one way to do something. There is more than one path to get to what we're after,” says Cowan, currently a social studies teacher at Wye River Upper School in Queen Anne's County. “This is about building a team – peers helping peers and teaching peers as much as possible.”

And although Cowan runs his class like a game, the game has rules.

Rule No. 4: Make smart choices.

“It's not a matter of right or wrong or good or bad, it's a smart choice. It's about understanding a poor choice they made and why they made it and what they might do differently next time,” he notes. “Processing with children is important. I don't believe apologies cover it. It's more about recognizing the behavior.”

Rule No. 5: Keep your dear teacher happy.

“They've really become a team. We still have our little cliques and occasional animosity, but in the end it's nice to see this group of kids moving into middle school and still able to have a little fun, set aside some of their differences and come together as a team,” Cowan says. “Once we were all on the same page, working toward the same goal, things really took off.”

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Tim Wintermeyer is a sixth grader who has had academic challenges at school.

At Horizons, he flourished.

“These teachers show me examples of how to do something – and I do it,” said Tim as he researched not just coal but solar, wind and biomass energy in the computer lab. “At middle school, I get all stressed. If these teachers were at the middle school, I'd be getting straight A's. I love this program. I'm learning a lot and it's fun. I have a really good life right now.”

—Ellen Uzelac



Matt Cowan

Brad Willson

**Friday lunches got a whole lot better this year, thanks to community donors who prepared and delivered the meals to Horizons' 88 students.**

Previously, lunches were supplied by the Kent County Board of Education – but Friday lunches were prepared on Wednesdays.

“We are grateful to everyone who participated. It's a new program that's off to a great start,” said Nancy K. Nunn, a Horizons volunteer who launched the program. “We're thrilled with the response.”

Pictured with the kids here, from far left to right, are Jana Carter, representing University of Maryland Shore Medical Center at Chestertown; Radcliffe Creek School director Molly Judge; and, kneeling, Shore Medical Center's Scott Burleson. Carter and Judge are members of Horizons' board.

In addition to the hospital, thanks go to: St. Paul's Parish, Kent, and volunteers Ann Bricker and Betsy Butler; the Chestertown Presbyterian Church Youth Group; Christ Church IU; the Nunn family; Shrewsbury Parish; Horizons board president Kay MacIntosh and her husband Bill; Horizons board member Ed Hatcher and his wife Angie Cannon; and Horizons board members Wendy Coslett, Erin Gillespie, Marianne Hickman, Deborah Julian, Mary Price and Jesse Schaefer.

Interested in participating in the Friday lunch program next summer? If so, please contact Nancy Nunn at [nunn@dmv.com](mailto:nunn@dmv.com) or 410-778-5968.



Jacqueline Armstrong

**The assumption in the U.S. has been that public schools are failing our neediest children. Your work suggests otherwise. Why the disconnect?**

I think it's a case of appearances being misleading. Clearly, public schools in places like Baltimore face daunting challenges. Children come to school without strong supports at home in terms of getting them ready to hit the ground running and be effective and engaged learners. When we see disappointing achievement scores, we look to the schools and say they're just not doing the job. The research we've done looking at achievement gains on a seasonal basis shows that disadvantaged children come close to keeping up with children who are better off during the school year. The problem is they fall behind during summer months and many start school in the first grade already behind. Schools have a big job. My sense is that schools actually are performing more effectively than they get credit for.

**Your research focuses on urban children. What about the rural poor and small town poverty as it relates to summer slide?**

Somebody ought to be researching that, it's a really important issue. The literature basically looks at places like Baltimore, Chicago, Atlanta, New Haven, Conn. There's nothing in between, which is quite striking. There's no Kent County comparable. Yet it is not the case that poverty is exclusively an urban issue. I remember when LBJ launched his war on poverty in the 60's. Poverty then was substantially rural poverty. Over the years, poverty has become concentrated in our big cities where it is more visible and gets more media attention. But there is poverty elsewhere in large numbers. Is there poverty in Kent County, Md.? Absolutely. It's important to get the word out.

**What are the consequences of a summer learning shortfall over time?**

You can forecast to a pretty high degree of reliability what path this group of kids will follow. It's almost the natural order of things. Kids who are far behind when they move to middle and high school are at high risk of dropping out. Kids who don't finish high school are at high risk for other things: difficulty in getting and keeping jobs; they're more likely to get in trouble with the law; more likely to wind up on welfare rolls and in jail. I focus on early schooling. It's critically important to have kids not fall so far behind in the first place. Early intervention is key – even before first and second grade.

**Horizons of Kent County serves elementary and some middle school children. Next year, we plan to add an eighth grade and eventually reach into the high school. What kind of impact might that have?**

So many interventions are of the one and done variety. If you can get these kids in a good summer learning program when they are six or seven, that's a fine thing to do. But it's not reasonable to expect that will be transformative. There are challenges that hold these children and their families back. They don't go away because they've had one good summer experience. The specter of poverty is ever present in their lives. What's particularly nice about Horizons is that it is trying to keep the same kids coming back year after year. That does have the potential to be transformative.

**Is there a model that you advocate?**

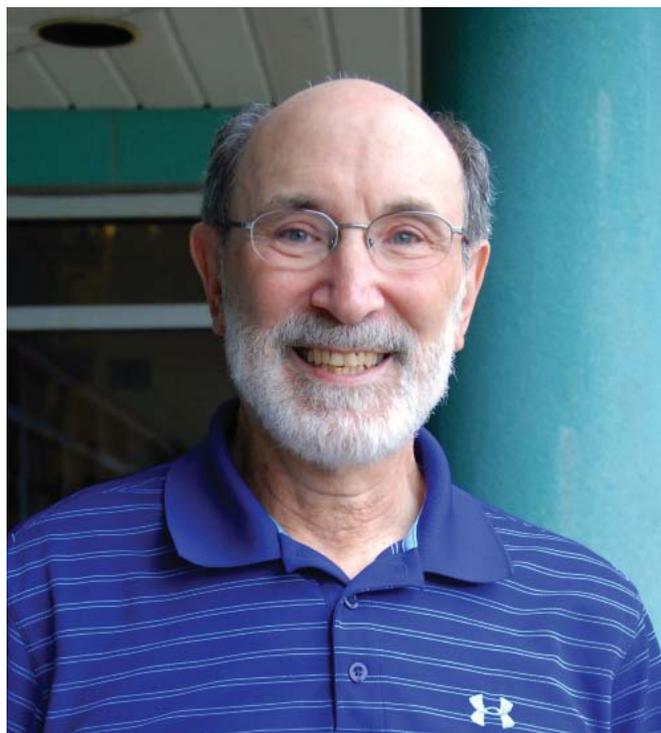
I'm not wedded to any particular intervention model. What I think is important is that the intervention be well rounded and multi-faceted. What a poor child needs is a strong foundation in basic academics. They also need enrichment experiences that will expand their horizons, things middle class kids get all the time like trips to museums, wholesome exercise, team sports. A lot of learning happens from team sports. Poor kids often have a very constrained world view. They don't get out and circulate. There is also the matter of nutritionally based meals and a safe, secure and supportive environment. A lot of kids don't have any of those things. I have to say Horizons touches all those bases.

**Are you a fan of year-round schools?**

I'm ambivalent about year-round schooling in large measure because I don't know of any convincing evidence that it's an effective solution in closing the achievement gap that builds up over summer months. And to break up the long summer break and parcel it out in small chunks throughout the school year requires a fundamental restructuring of how we use our time. High quality summer programming is easier to accommodate to family schedules and the way schooling has traditionally been organized.

**Is the notion of summer slide on the radar screen of public policy makers today?**

I think it is. I like to think we've put it there. There has been something of a sea change in awareness. A mere decade ago, you wouldn't hear the conversations you are hearing today. Even (U.S. Secretary of Education) Arne Duncan is talking about the importance of helping poor children keep up over the summer months. It's certainly a start.



Karl Alexander

## Horizons program looks BACK, and AHEAD

In a questionnaire last summer, Horizons asked the parents of our 88 students to grade the learning enrichment program. The mother of a third-grade boy had this to say:

*“The nurturing environment and attention he received gave him what he has been needing from school. He seems more comfortable with himself and more independent. He was able to make choices and develop friendships. He loved going and came home in a relaxed mood, which was not the case during the school year,” she wrote. “This is how school should be!”*

Horizons’ most recent test results also reflect a positive arc. According to reading and math scores, some students held grade level and most increased achievement by two to three months in both subjects.

This past summer, our young dynamic teachers succeeded in implementing a solid academic program. Swimming, as always, remains the kids’ favorite activity. And we closed out our summer with field trips to the Franklin Institute and the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia.

What we believe is a good program is about to get even better.

Starting next year, in an effort to expand our reach, Horizons will add an eighth grade. That’s good news for our seventh-graders because it will give them an additional year with the program. We are also studying the possibility of including a pre-Kindergarten class. The earlier that summer learning intervention occurs with low-income children, the more likely they will overcome an academic summer slide.



Brad Wilson

Horizons, for the first time, will also hire a part-time coordinator to work with our middle and high school students during the school year and during the summer session to prep them for both college and various vocations. The hope is that this will open their world to even greater opportunity.

Finally, in a move to more accurately reflect our mission, we have changed our name from Horizons at Radcliffe Creek School to Horizons of Kent County.

Our non-profit is still headquartered at Radcliffe Creek School, which continues to generously support us administratively and otherwise. But it is the low-income children of Kent County whom we serve – and that is what we wish to clearly communicate.

—Bob Parks, Executive Director