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Adam Ousley, a third-grade teacher at Lorane Elementary in the Exeter district, works on math skills with fifth- and sixth-graders during the Teachers in the Parks program.

Exeter summer school program is gaining attention across state

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WITH THE sun shining and the wind blowing over her at a picnic table, 11-year-old Heidi Patten practiced solving a math problem for an unknown variable.

Sitting under the pavilion in Community Park in St. Lawrence, Heidi balanced the equation by using a dry-erase board, large numbered dice and white pawns.

As she moved the pieces to isolate a pawn, or unknown variable, Heidi said she didn't used to like math. It was frustrating when she didn't get it. But Heidi is one of 337 students from Exeter elementary schools who are enjoying the chance to spend part of their summer break taking classes outdoors. The program, Teachers in the Parks, offers lessons in math and reading for students of all levels at the Community Park, Crestwood Pool, Antietam Pool and Exeter Community Library. Exeter teachers lead the classes, which are designed to combat learning loss during the summer. The activities have an air of summer camp.

Having grown from just six students when it began in 2004 to 337 students this summer, the program shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, it's gaining attention from other educators, locally and statewide.

"It's not your traditional summer school program," said David Volkman, special assistant to the Pennsylvania secretary of education. By holding classes exclusively outside, the program adds variety for the students, he said.

Volkman said Teachers in the Parks provides a model of a unique way to engage students, strengthen their skills, and prevent the "summer slide," a term used to describe how material students already learned is lost due to educational inactivity over the summer. He said the Exeter model could be replicated in other districts.

Gov. Mifflin is one district that has taken notice.



Derek Donardo, a fourth-grade teacher at Lorane Elementary, teaches multiplication to Sydney Wood, left, and Joanna Knepp, both 11 and students at Ralston Elementary in the Exeter School District, using a card game called Math Trash.

Damien Drago, a fifth-grade teacher at Gov. Mifflin Intermediate School, and another teacher are holding a math class for 12 students entering fifth grade in Shillington Park this summer.

"This constant practice is going to give that step ahead going into the school year," Drago said, noting that the program is designed to feel less like school.

"We try to do a lot of fun games that include math," Drago said. "The kids always comment on how fast the two hours goes by."

Matthew Hathaway, founder of Teachers in the Parks and a fourth-grade teacher at Exeter's Owatin Creek Elementary, said traditional summer school programs struggle to enroll students. Children may think that summer school is only for students struggling in classes.

But Teachers in the Parks welcomes all students, so the classes don't have the same negative connotation.

"It's like a summer day camp, but you're really focusing on learning," said state Sen. Judy Schwank, who is advocating for the program to be supported and replicated across the state. "This keeps students learning in a way that's not a chore."

When Schwank visited the class, she said, "I was just bowled over

by how enthusiastic the students were."

"It's fun," said Brenna Droudberty, 8. "You're learning while having fun."

Olivia Humphrey, 11, said, "It's not really school. You don't really know that you're learning."

The program began on Hathaway's parents' porch in 2004 for just six students whose families asked for extra tutoring. Hathaway quickly realized the advantage of doing learning activities outside and moved the lessons to a nearby park.

"Districts everywhere are chipping summer programs because they can't figure out how to get kids to the building," Hathaway said.

Since children were already in the parks and pools in the summer, the classes that last just two hours or less have been easily accessible for students, he said.

And, when Exeter schools cut most of their summer school programming in 2011, the parks program filled the void. Teachers in the Parks is privately funded through tuition and community partners, including Dairy Queen and the Exeter Community Education Foundation.

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