

After-school learning

Academy takes education beyond the school day

BY ARLENE MILES
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Staying after school isn't only for Boy or Girl Scout groups or for students with discipline problems. At Nature Ridge Elementary School in Bartlett, it's a chance to supplement and go beyond what is learned in the classroom.

The Nature Ridge After School Academy, in its second year of operation, takes concepts learned in class and gives them a hands-on approach. The brainchild of the school's former principal, Phyllis Florin, the idea was put into practical application by Nature Ridge Parent-Teacher Organization member Wendy Kummerer.

"I wanted to come in to do a newspaper class with the students to expand on their writing skills," said Kummerer, a freelance writer. "That fit right in with this concept."

She drew upon prior experience in working for the Bartlett Park District to set up the structure for the program, which has averaged about 130 students per session.

"We start the sessions when the weather begins getting cooler and the kids want to be inside more," Kummerer noted.

The PTO runs four sessions of the after-school academy, with a range of eight to 10 classes per session for a length of five or six weeks. Classes are an hour in length and incur a nominal fee, primarily to cover the cost of hiring instructors.

Kummerer says she strives to keep the subject matter curriculum-

based. Classes such as volleyball are offered, however, for students who want to keep busy, but don't want an academic class.

Nature Ridge Principal Terri Lozier is grateful for the additional educational opportunity her students have.

"It's pretty phenomenal because the kids get to do things with learning that they normally don't get to do inside class," she said. "For example, in Silly Science, they get to do experiments and take them a step further with materials that usually aren't provided in school."

One of the Silly Science projects involved making super balls. Kummerer characterized the projects as "fun, gross stuff that kids enjoy."

Another unique class that will be offered this spring is geocaching, which, for the uninitiated, is essentially a treasure-hunting game that uses a GPS (global positioning system) receiver to aid in finding a cache.

Past classes have included a course on scrapbooking, snakes and reptiles, and the game of chess.

"In the fall we had a chess master who was internationally ranked," Lozier said. "How often do you have someone with that type of expertise come to your school?"

Instructors are drawn from various sources, including Nature Ridge's own staff, park district instructors, and experts in their field.

Kummerer also tries to keep a balance by offering a variety of courses for both younger and older students.



PHOTOS BY PAUL BEATY/DAILY HERALD

Bartlett Nature Center's Dan Mitchell, above, talks to students at Nature Ridge's After School Academy, a program where kids can take classes after school to supplement the curriculum, or classes that are a break from academics, like volleyball and chess. At right, Christian Lainez, 8, shoots a seltzer rocket while at the after-school academy.

