



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Teachers Michael Dunsiger, left and Cindy Spring with Principal Steve Gardner in a classroom at Vaughan Secondary School Friday.

# Summer school: who teaches, who goes?

*In York Region, they're not reluctant instructors and underachieving students*

BY MITCHELL BROWN  
Staff Writer

Anyone who remembers the 1987 movie Summer School knows the Hollywood version.

Underachieving, misfit students. Reluctant teachers conned into giving up their summer vacations. Wild and zany adventures that, by the end of the movie, end up teaching important life lessons to everyone involved.

But if that's how it's supposed to happen in real life, then someone forgot to tell Mike Dunsiger.

During the school year, he's a special education teacher at Ventura Park Public School in Thornhill.

This summer, though, you can find him teaching junior-high math courses at Vaughan Secondary School.

And yes, he's definitely there of his own free will.

"I love it," the 27-year teaching veteran says during a break. "I've never taken a whole summer off. I like working with the kids."

"I mean, I like making a little extra money, too, but I'd probably be here even if I wasn't."

Down the hall, Cindy Spring instructs a class of students seeking help with their reading and writing skills.

With 14 years' experience as an English teacher, this is the first year she's signed up for summer school duty and she readily admits it was initially a financial decision.

"Basically, I do need the money," she said.

"I have two teenagers who are going to university, so I need to supplement my income."

Now, halfway into the first of two three-week programs, she says it has been an eye-opening experience working with students seeking a second chance to bring up their marks.

"I have to admit, I did come in thinking, 'I have three weeks to go, but the kids here are really great."

*'Summer school, it helps you... You can actually get help during the summer.'*

"These are the kids who often sit in the back of the room (during the school year). Here, you're giving them an opportunity to shine," she said.

And it's not just the teachers who say they're happy to be here. While it's inevitable some students pressured to attend by their parents will drop out in the first few days, those who stay say they're here because they want a head start on the coming school year.

"I volunteered to come here," said Sandra Malkin, 14, who is brushing up on her math. "It's fun being here with my friends."

Besides, she added, "What would I do at home? It's better to

get ready for school."

Her classmate, Shannae Donaldson, agreed.

"I asked my teacher if I could come," the Woodbridge student said.

"Summer school, it helps you... You can actually get help during the summer. I'm here to go over the stuff so I know what I'm going to do when I get to high school."

There are two streams, vice-principal Fran Harvey explained. The reinforcement students attend three-week courses to review material they have already seen and to bring their marks up, while the acceleration program caters to students looking to get a leg up on the coming year.

Exact numbers aren't available, but Ms. Harvey estimated about 60 per cent of the 750 students at Vaughan this summer are taking reinforcement courses.

Math is by far the most popular subject in both streams, followed by English, science, history and civics.

This year, York Region schools offering summer courses experienced a huge increase in applications, causing first-day frustration for many students and their parents.

In 1998, about 4,000 students enrolled in summer school programs at the region's high schools.

Last year, that number climbed to 7,000, and a spokesperson for the continuing education department at the York District School Board

says about 8,000 students had signed up by the end of the first week.

While other boards in the Greater Toronto Area don't have exact numbers, most are reporting increases, as well.

A spokesperson for the Simcoe County District School Board said its numbers look normal for most courses, but enrolment for grades 9 and 10 summer courses is up 50 per cent because of the new curriculum.

*'There isn't any secret some students are finding the curriculum more difficult than previous years.'*

In an interview last week, board spokesperson Ross Virgo said the new curriculum was a factor in the number of students seeking math courses.

"There isn't any secret some students are finding the curriculum more difficult than previous years," he said.

Ms. Harvey said the increased interest in math has caused some problems for summer school administrators trying to accommodate the rush.

"It's difficult because you need specific teachers in specific areas," she said.

"It's always better if you've taught the course before, because in summer school they're condensing it into such a small time."

The other challenge facing administrators, she said, is they can't make final staffing decisions until the final enrolment numbers are in and that doesn't happen until the first week of July, just a few days before classes start.

"By then, a lot of teachers who have put in their name for summer school may have made other arrangements for their summer because they didn't hear anything," she said.

Add this to the fact high schools during the summer are also slated for other uses — Vaughan Secondary, for instance, is hosting a gymnastics camp, as well as undergoing the usual summertime maintenance — and things can get a little hectic.

Not that the students have much time to notice the din, as they're in class from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. five days a week, absorbing up to a week's worth of material every day.

Discipline, said principal Steve Gardner, is "a non-issue" because the students want to be there.

Much like the teachers teaching them, if Mr. Dunsiger is anything to go by.

"I'll be back next year," he said, adding teaching almost year-round is his secret for staying young.



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