

Syracuse University students create program to teach kids that learning can be fun

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Peter Chen / The Post-Standard Syracuse students (from left) Tyler Thomas, 7, Ezra Williams, 8, and Ciara Smith, 7, make home-baked beans with help from Gabi Levinson, a sophomore at Syracuse University, at Wilson Park Community Center. The kids are making the meals for their lunches. Syracuse University students are creating a program at the center that tries to show kids that learning can be fun.

With most schools off for winter break, the Wilson Park Community Center was bustling with more than 40 kids a day this week.

One day, children worked on a "CSI"-style mock crime scene in one room, others took chess lessons in another room and a dozen kids gathered in a break room to fix lunch for everyone.

The activities are part of a new program, led by Syracuse University students, that combines fun exercises with educational lessons. The students said they want to show kids learning can be fun.

Michelle Walker, SU's director of community programs, got the idea for the program when she read about the recent violence in the area and noticed that Wilson Park was right in the middle of it, she explained. Wilson Park is at East Taylor and South McBride streets.

"I thought, kids have to have another outlet," she said.

Khaliah Franklin, 8, and Tyler Thomas, 7, wore aprons, gloves and chef hats as they prepared chicken and beef tacos. Organizers created lunch menus to teach the kids healthy eating habits.

Preparing lunch for everyone was a lot of fun, Franklin said.

Although the program is aimed at youths of all ages, the majority participating this week

were six to 13 years old. It's unfortunate that very few older kids showed up, Walker said.

Other activities organized by the SU students included karate lessons, an army leadership program, and a beginner's French class. The schedule during winter break was 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., but organizers plan to keep the programs going after school through the end of the semester.

SU provided the initial budget of \$2,500. The students have been able to stay well under budget and will use the rest of the money to continue the program through May, said Sarah Walton, a sophomore public affairs and public relations dual major.

"It's been going fantastic so far," center director Barbara Grimes said. The children have been very engaged and the parents love that they are not home alone during break, she said.

"It's a lot of work, but it's worth it," Walker said. "I'm just glad the kids are having fun and they have a nice, safe place to go during winter break."

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