

Award-winning education programs show innovation

BY SHARON STURDEVANT
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Teachers study earth science at the Kellogg Biological Station so they can better teach Plainwell Middle School students.

Elementary students develop reading skills during a summer camp at an outdoor education center operated by Vicksburg Community Schools.

Individuals and groups get VIP tours of Kalamazoo Public Schools to offer a new perspective on the urban district.

The programs, each of which received a 2001 Education Excellence Award from the Michigan Association of School Boards, represent innovative approaches by local school officials to improve student achievement, says Gail Braverman, communication director of the MASB.

Four to six programs are recognized annually from each of eight regions across the state, including southwestern Michigan.

Each winning district in 2001 got a \$500 grant and a trophy, Braverman said. Information about programs also will be published in an annual directory that is

mailed directly to legislators, school administrators and key educators.

"Some of the programs may impact student achievement indirectly," Braverman said. "That's OK as long as the bottom line equals more students succeeding to higher levels."

For example, the judges recognized the merit in a districtwide mentoring program within the Constantine Public Schools in which high school seniors work to teach elementary and middle school students about foreign languages, science, math and technology.

In Plainwell, the award-winning program involved a partnership between the middle school science teachers and scientists at the Kellogg Biological Station. This led to a marked improvement in scores on the MEAP science test for eighth-graders in the district. Scores jumped from 15.2 percent in 1998 to 38.7 percent in 2000.

"We think the partnership has been very effective," said Phil Robertson, president of Plainwell's school board and a Michigan State University crop-and-soil-sciences professor who works at the biological station.

Please see **EXCEL**, A6



JENNIFER GIESEY / SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Laura Broughton, left, discusses scheduling for a Michigan State University Kellogg Biological Station seminar with Bob Farris, center, and Marty Green. The biological station is a partner with Plainwell Middle School in an award-winning program of day-long science workshops for teachers.

EXCEL

From Page A3

Robertson said the five-year partnership involves bringing science teachers from four area school districts - Plainwell, Gull Lake, Galesburg-Augusta and Delton Kellogg - to the biological station six times annually for day-long science workshops.

"We provide two things through this partnership," Robertson said. "First, we provide science content knowledge, which is a fancy way of saying a deeper understanding of the concepts they teach."

The partnership also enables the teachers to focus their teaching methods on activities that encourage students to gain hands-on knowledge, Robertson said.

In Vicksburg, district staff found a way to improve literacy rates during the summer as students in first and second grade participate in camp activities at the outdoor education center during Sunshine Academy.

"We don't put them into a traditional classroom, and we don't call it summer school," said Tonya Nash, community education director for Vicksburg Community Schools. "We've created more of a camp experience."

Two teachers coordinate a variety of activities, including reading sessions on floating docks and in treetop overlooks, Nash said.

During the past four summers, she said, 87 students participated in the program. Testing indicated that 54 students improved their reading skills, while 25 students maintained their skill level. The remaining students either left the district or dropped out of the program.

"We don't twist anyone's arms to join," Nash said. "But the kids

'We don't call it summer school. We've created more of a camp experience.'

Tonya Nash

Community education director for Vicksburg Community Schools.

think it's quite an honor when they are selected."

Participating students attend the program for six weeks on a rolling schedule through the summer, Nash said. Students meet for four hours each weekday morning for two weeks and then take a two-week break. The pattern is repeated two more times.

"It keeps the kids involved the whole summer and keeps them reading all summer," Nash said.

In Kalamazoo, benefits of the district's Very Important People tour program, which won the MASB community relations achievement award for southwestern Michigan, are less tangible.

"The program was not designed to be a hard-sell approach to get people to bring their children here," said Alex Lee, executive director of communications for Kalamazoo Public Schools. "It was designed as a perception-reality piece."

The program, which brings a variety of people into a school for personalized tours and interaction with students, was implemented four years ago shortly after Lee assumed his position within the district.

"Those people who have never been in our buildings do not have a very accurate perception of what is going on in the district," Lee said. "But we are still accountable to those folks."