

# Meet Me at the Playground

## Joining Schools and Communities to Promote Academic Skills, Wellness and Mentorship Over the Summer Months

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### ABSTRACT

Meet Me at the Playground is a unique program developed to coordinate and collaborate the efforts of community agencies, individuals and schools in providing a variety of academic and wellness activities to children living in a low income apartment complex in Greenville, SC. These activities are provided at the apartment complex where the children live to prevent transportation barriers, and are scheduled to coincide with the school district's food truck service that delivers lunch to the children throughout the summer months. In addition, the many volunteers and presenters from throughout the school district and community provide mentorship opportunities for these children and allow them to experience a variety of activities that may not otherwise be available to them. The goal of this program is to foster a stronger relationship between the children and schools, to decrease academic decline over the summer and to provide children with a variety of wellness activities to keep their minds and bodies healthy and active over the summer.

### OBJECTIVES

- Combine the efforts of school personnel and community agencies in promoting the success of children;
- Foster positive mentoring relationships;
- Provide academic activities to reduce the loss of skills over the summer;
- Promote opportunities for mind-body awareness and wellness;
- Increase connections between students/families and schools;
- Provide opportunities to children in a low income apartment complex that may not otherwise be available to them;
- Decrease transportation difficulties that families face when attempting to engage their children in summer activities;
  
- Through the above objectives, we would also like to see a decline in disciplinary referrals and maintenance of academic skills once the children return to school.

### The Program

Meet Me at the Playground- Shemwood Summer Program provides 35 hours of summer academic, wellness, and mentoring opportunities to children ages two to sixteen years old within the Shemwood Community. The program takes place after the students have received their free lunch from the Greenville County Schools Summer Food Truck program.

Shemwood is a 200 unit Project-Based Section 8 apartment complex with a contract with HUD. Many of the rents at this property are based on tenant incomes, with a minimum of \$25 contribution per tenant. Households earning less than 60% of the area median income qualify for units with reduced rent.

Low socio-economic status (SES) students lose an average of two months of reading skills over the summer, accumulating to performance two years behind peers by sixth grade. If children struggle with reading skills, they are thirteen times as likely to drop out.<sup>1</sup> Low SES students experience increased health problems and emotional dysregulation, leading to lower academic performance and intensified school behavior problems.<sup>2</sup>

Our program utilizes activities which mitigate such negative outcomes<sup>12</sup>. Through partnerships with Greenville Library System, Public Education Partners, and Greenville County Schools, our program enables students to receive assisted reading and books to take home weekly. Volunteers afford consistent adult mentoring. Connections to community organizations enable weekly health and wellness activities.

The following activities were presented: Weekly lending library, one-on-one or small group reading opportunities with an adult and completion of a reading log, mindfulness sessions, read alouds from local authors, inspirational speeches from adults who had grown up in similar situations, art projects, football drills and games, lacrosse skills with water balloons, National Day of Dance activities, building projects with the Home Depot, Zumba lessons, soccer drills, information on how to dress for success and tie a half-Windsor knot, performances by local poets with the opportunity to create their own poetry to perform, engineering skills building from Bricks for Kidz, science lessons from Roper Mountain Science Center and fire safety information from the local fire department.

The children were also provided with back to school haircuts and back packs full of school supplies before returning to school. Families were provided with access to a Medicaid representative, the Diaper Bank of SC, resources for developmental milestones and information pertaining to Greenville County Schools 4K program.

The efforts of this group were made possible through volunteers from the schools in which the children are zoned to attend, community volunteers, the management of Shemwood Apartments, the Church Without Walls, and local businesses and individuals.

### 2017-2018 School History for Children Residing at Shemwood Apartments

Mauldin Elementary School is one of the two elementary schools that the children who live at Shemwood Apartments are zoned to attend. The following information was taken from the Early Warning Response System used to collect and analyze data regarding the students within Greenville County School District:

- Children from Shemwood make up 25% of all students at Mauldin ES retained during the 2017-2018 school year;
- These children also make up 4% of all students at Mauldin ES who triggered the Early Warning Response System due to a combination of high absences, poor course grades and behavior referrals.
- These children accumulated 11% of all bus referrals at Mauldin ES during the 2017-2018 school year.

Mauldin Elementary also composed a target group of students in grades 3-5 who reside at Shemwood Apartments because data collected through statewide testing measures and the Early Warning Response System indicates:

- 62% of the 3-5<sup>th</sup> graders who live at Shemwood Apartments had 2 or more behavior referrals during the 2017-2018 school year.
- 86% of the 3-5<sup>th</sup> graders who live at Shemwood Apartments had 10 or more absences during the 2017-2018 school year.
- 71% of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders who live at Shemwood Apartments Did Not Meet standards on the ELA state-wide testing measure (SC Ready).
- 50% of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders who live at Shemwood Apartments Did Not Meet standards on the Math state-wide testing measure (SC Ready).

Greenville County Schools Food Services also collects and reviews data in determining sites for the Summer Food Truck program. Shemwood was selected to be a site for the Summer Food Truck Program based on the following criteria:

- 50% or more of the children living at Shemwood Apartments receive Free or Reduced Lunch at school.

### Outcomes

- 21 different presenters attended the program.
- 19 individuals or companies donated money and/or materials to assist the children and program.
- 46 individuals from schools and the community volunteered at the program.
- Children from 1 public Child Development Center, 3 public elementary schools, 2 public middle schools, 1 public high school and 2 charter schools attended the program.
- 3748 lunches were served at Shemwood from the GCS Food Truck.
- 52 different children participated in the lending library activities and those children read a combined total of 136 books for which they completed reading logs detailing what they had read.
- 20 families received support from the SC Diaper Bank.
- The program averaged between 22-33 children per day in attendance.
- Data regarding disciplinary referrals and maintenance of academic skills is in the process of being collected.
- Meet Me at the Playground has become a leadership project for SC LEND to work on becoming a Non-Profit Organization in the hopes that we can expand the program model to other similar apartment complexes within Greenville County School District.

### References

<sup>1</sup>Afterschool Alliance (2009). *American after 3 pm: The most in-depth study of how America's children spend their afternoons*. Retrieved from [http://www.afterschoolalliance.orgAA3\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](http://www.afterschoolalliance.orgAA3_Full_Report.pdf).

Alexander, K. L., Entwisle D. R., & Olson L. S. (2007a). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review*, 72, 167.

<sup>2</sup>Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with Poverty in Mind. What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It*. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/109074/chapters/How-Poverty-Affects-Behavior-and-Academic-Performance.aspx>

### Acknowledgements and Contact

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