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## Red Bank pupils 'party' after hours

BY GRAELYN BRASHEAR · STAFF WRITER · MAY 15, 2009

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**RED BANK** — For more than half of the students at Red Bank Middle School, the end-of-school bell doesn't mean it's time to head home.

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About 200 students at the school, which serves around 390 kids in grades four to eight, participate in a host of extracurricular clubs and activities as part of a state-funded afterschool program.

On Friday, students at the school were treated to an afternoon of special outdoor activities as part of Celebrate Afterschool!, a statewide campaign aimed at putting programs like Red Bank Middle School's in the spotlight.

With flower planting, an educational GPS activity, outdoor games and more, the event showed that "learning doesn't have to be in a classroom," said Samantha Maurer, a special education teacher who coordinates Red Bank's afterschool program.

In that sense, Friday's celebration was a reflection of the school's after-hours program as a whole: there's homework help and extra study opportunities, but the afterschool program also offers tae kwon do, ballet, robotics and art clubs, Maurer said.

"They're given extra learning opportunities, and they're socializing with their peers," she said. And, Maurer said, the kids love it. The program started in October 2008, she said, "and to this day, I still have kids coming up asking me if they can join afterschool."

There are more than 40 programs like Red Bank Middle School's throughout the state, all funded by grants from the 21st Century Community Learning Center, a state-supported program created by the No Child Left Behind Act, said Christine Corrison of the New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition, a nonprofit that's behind the Celebrate Afterschool! campaign. The group acts as a support network for the state's afterschool programs, Corrison said.

Afterschool programs are vital for students and working parents in New Jersey, said Corrison. During hours when kids might otherwise be unsupervised, they're studying, staying active and gaining essential skills. Corrison said studies have shown that programs like Red Bank Middle School's have a positive effect on academic achievement, and can also boost self-esteem.



Red Bank Middle School holds "Celebrate Afterschool!" highlighting the importance of afterschool programs and the need for outdoor recreation. Participating in the "Nature Fair," Erick Perez, 12, and Khalia Smith, 12, both of Red Bank, help sixth grade language arts teacher Stacy Curcio plant flowers. (STAFF PHOTO: KEITH J. WOODS)

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"They're just more interested in learning overall," she said.

The programs also forge partnerships within communities, Corriston said. Schools partner with local businesses, from karate studios to performance venues, bringing in instructors and letting students show off their skills to friends and family outside the school walls.

School principal Maria Lozzi said the program has given her students many enriching experiences, and "opportunities that they wouldn't otherwise be exposed to."

Part of the afterschool program's success, she added, is that it gives kids the time and freedom to focus on activities they're excited about.

"That way, they're invested in it," she said.

Energetic 13-year-olds Najahee Tyler and Joseph Hoff, both in seventh grade at Red Bank Middle School, said they like the program for different reasons. Tyler spends time drawing in art club, and Hoff loves practicing martial arts.

Hoff said he's also learned self-discipline through the program. "It keeps me out of trouble," he said.



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