

# Learning to Soar

## *Benchmark Summer Camp Keeps Knowledge Fresh, Brains Sharp, and Bodies Active*

By Jessica Siso

Just like going to the beach and roasting s'mores over a campfire, summer camp is a longstanding American summer tradition. But with all the choices out there, what makes Benchmark Summer Camp stand out over other summer camps?

For 40 years, Benchmark Summer Camp has bucked the idea of what a “traditional” summer camp experience should be like. Though the camp has some of the activities one would expect from a summer camp—outdoor sports and games, swimming, and arts and crafts—a Benchmark Summer Camp experience differs from many other day camps because it is purposefully divided between a language arts program and a recreation program that, together, “help to address the needs of the whole child,” said Sally Laird, assistant head of Benchmark School and the summer language arts program director. “In fact, everything we do at camp—whether in the classroom, socially, or physically—is based on working with each child to make sure his or her specific needs are met. It always has been and will continue to be about meeting the children where they are and working from there.”

### *Language Arts*

The five-week camp is offered to students entering grades 1-6 who can benefit from language arts instruction beyond the school year and would enjoy the fun of a recreational day-camp experience. The camp also offers one-on-one math tutoring and after-camp care.

All campers have the opportunity to experience an hour and 45 minutes of Benchmark’s nationally-recognized language arts program, based on cognitive research and years of experience studying how children learn. Though specific reading and writing activities vary based on the age and skill levels in each classroom, the goal is for campers to become better readers and writers, learn strategies for decoding, comprehension, and the writing process, have a successful classroom experience, and maintain their language arts skills over the summer. This is particularly



important because a “summer slide” of skills can occur when young minds sit idle for three months. “Our hope is to make reading a daily habit and to have campers carry that with them even after camp ends,” Sally said.

Similarly to how Benchmark School operates from September through June, Benchmark Summer Camp not only teaches strategies to build a child’s academic and executive skills, but also integrates confidence-building into the curriculum. “We want the children to know that they are in a safe learning environment where everyone has respect for one another as a community of learners,” Sally said. “We achieve this by making our classrooms positive and upbeat, giving an abundance of positive reinforcement, and focusing on complementing strengths.”

In addition, students are taught how to identify and understand the characteristics of their learning style that either impede or enhance their reading, writing, and learning. “It’s all about helping the children set goals for themselves and get a sense of both their strengths and what to work on,” Sally said. “By taking these steps, it’s helping them to start taking control of their education, which, in turn, increases their feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem.”

With the integration of learning strategies such as how to remain attentive, actively involved, adaptable, and organized provided by experienced and knowledgeable

teachers, along with parent participation in nightly reading, students consistently leave the camp as stronger, more confident learners—after only five weeks' time.

“Realizing that my son was not learning through the traditional educational curriculum, our doctor gave us a brochure for Benchmark Camp and told us to send him for the summer to learn some strategies to help him in school,” said parent Susan Dunn. “I distinctly remember that he had only attended a week or two of the camp when he came home and began to read aloud to himself. I asked him what he was doing, and he simply replied that he was doing his homework. I almost started crying on the spot, because, in such a short amount of time, he had already learned strategies to make him comfortable enough to work alone.”

## Recreation

Confidence-building is not only emphasized in the classrooms of Benchmark Summer Camp. It is also an integral part of the camp's recreation program. “The whole recreation program is also geared toward building confidence,” said Wayne Reichart, the school's physical education and summer recreation program director. “Every counselor is encouraged to focus on building campers' self-esteem and looking for the positive in everything they do.”

With activities such as Art Adventure, sports, games, swimming, Science Discovery Club, a 35-event confidence course and a 250 foot-long zip wire, there is truly something for everyone. “We not only aim to have a lot of fun, but we want to make sure that each child can find an activity that really speaks to him or her throughout the course of the day,” Wayne said.

With experienced counselors and junior counselors—many of whom are Benchmark Summer Camp alums themselves—the recreation program encourages students to “get out of their comfort zones.” “I think many of the counselors see themselves in these children

and feel a strong pull to help them succeed and thrive just like a Benchmark counselor had done for them years before,” Wayne said. “It's great because we specifically hire counselors with a variety of strengths so that they can relate to the various personalities of the kids that attend camp.”

In addition to being taught sports skills, rules and strategies, swimming, and engaging problem-solving skills on the confidence course, the camp also offers children the opportunity to engage in art and science.

## Art Adventure

Benchmark's Art Teacher Carol Rydel leads the Art Adventure program that is offered every day for full-day campers and twice a week for half-day campers. With daily “make and take” projects like Perler beads, friendship bracelets, Shrink Art, and drawing, the program offers campers the opportunity to work with a variety of mediums and be creative. “The art program allows the campers to relax in an environment where they chose to do the daily activity or create their own project,” Carol said. “Additionally, campers whose preference may not be outdoor games and sports get many opportunities to participate in activities that better suit their interests and strengths.”



## Science Discovery

Joyce Ostertag, one of Benchmark's lower school supervisors, leads the Science Discovery Club for full-day campers and enjoys the opportunity to help students experience the fun of science. “Each summer, we focus on three expeditions from topics like rainforests, coral reefs, space, Ancient Egypt, and dinosaurs,” Joyce said. “We do a lot of hands-on projects and even build a ‘giant creation’ (last summer's was a huge pyramid!) that students work on together to plan, create, build, and explore. While learning is taking place, so is a lot of fun.”

## Confidence Course

The recreation program also allows campers to take a “leap of faith” and soar down the 250-foot long, 48-foot high zip wire. “We purposefully do this activity in week four because it allows students to build their self-confidence for the first three weeks and get comfortable with the confidence course events on the ground before they are up high,” Wayne said. “It’s an exciting time for campers and their parents because taking that leap off of the platform is such a huge accomplishment.”

For parent Tina Fox, the camp experience for her son has been a memorable one. “The camp counselors showed great care and offered steady encouragement during recreation,” she said. “Our son was given the flexibility he needed to gain confidence and we were kept informed each day about the progress he was making. During his first summer, he took the ‘elevator’ up to the platform [he was lifted directly to the zip wire platform] because the ropes course was too challenging, but by his fifth summer, he negotiated the hardest and most challenging ropes course

option offered. I look back to the first summer at Benchmark and marvel at the positive changes I’ve seen in my son since then. I give a lot of credit to Benchmark Summer Camp for setting our entire family on an upward path.”

Although Wayne said the last day of camp tends to include a few tears along with the exchange of phone numbers, he knows that this just means that a strong sense of community and friendship has been built. “It’s amazing to see that bonds are formed everywhere,” he said. “Benchmark Camp is an amazing experience for all involved.”



## Benchmark Summer Camp BY THE NUMBERS



**12,556**

books were checked out from the library in summer 2014



**48** Number of feet Benchmark’s zip wire is off the ground

**40** Number of years Benchmark Summer Camp has been providing life-changing experiences for campers

1975 ————— 2015

Top **5** Recreational Activities:

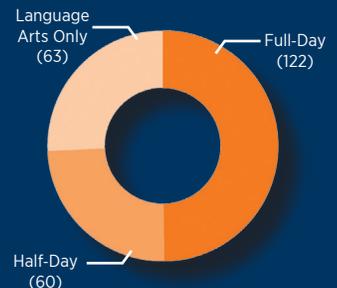
1. zip wire
2. swimming
3. kickball games
4. bombardment games
5. student choice week



**4** head counselors & **25** junior counselors were Benchmark students or alums in 2015



**245** campers attended Benchmark Summer Camp in 2015



**1/5** of campers in 2015 were Benchmark School students

