

Jul. 23, 2005. 08:19 AM

Paying the price for real life lessons

Costly summer school booming

Full credit earned in two weeks

LOUISE BROWN
EDUCATION REPORTER

MATTAWA, Ont.—As if Grade 10 science isn't scary enough, suddenly Erika Fabian has to watch out for bears.

Deep in the woods beyond North Bay, the Etobicoke teen is one of a group of Grade 9 grads spending two weeks — and \$1,300 — to earn their Grade 10 science credit this summer so many can fast-track into Grade 11 science this fall.

They are partway through a field trip to a logging camp as part of another 10-hour day when lumber boss Shannon Clouthier warns them to "stay close — there ARE bears in this forest."

These science buffs are part of a growing breed of suitcase scholars who pay for intense, hands-on summer courses around the world to get ahead in school.

They read Shakespeare in 15th-century halls at Oxford, study biology with Charles Darwin's favourite tortoises in the Galapagos Islands and experience the physics of speed body-surfing down rapids and clocking each other with a radar gun.

Welcome to the boom business of big-ticket, "reach-ahead" summer credits.

With Ontario's new packed four-year curriculum, many public high school students are paying up to \$6,600 to earn credits in the summer to lighten their load during the school year.

While some warn these high-priced options give middle-class kids an even wider edge, others argue such immersion in the real world is how learning should be for all.

"It's all about getting ahead. I want to do really well and I think you learn so much better



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

A logger explains his job to summer students at the Canadian Ecology Centre in Mattawa, Ont., during a field trip to a nearby forestry operation. Their next assignment? To devise their own forestry management plan. These students are part of a growing number paying for enriched summer courses to get ahead in their academic careers. In just 14 days, they'll earn a full Grade 10 science credit.

in a hands-on environment," said Fabian, 14, of Etobicoke Collegiate, as she stood in a sun-drenched clearing.

Students arrived at the non-profit Canadian Ecology Centre in Mattawa last Sunday and already they're halfway through and face their final exam next Saturday. The next day they'll go home with their Grade 10 science credit from the Near North District School Board.

So far, they've bodysurfed the rapids — wearing life jackets — to track a physics formula for speed. They donned night goggles to observe nocturnal species, searched by canoe for loon nests and predict the weather each morning by checking an old wooden weather station.

Not all these "reach-ahead" courses cost money. The Toronto Catholic District School Board offers such courses for free in the summer and has seen demand soar in recent years. But as today's teens gain a taste for globetrotting, private companies with glossy brochures and fancy itineraries are elbowing out more modest school board offerings.

The Toronto District School Board, for example, offers a one-month French credit in Switzerland at about \$6,000, but has only 27 students, says a board source, partly because there are too many better offerings in Europe.

Some educators warn these blue-chip courses increase the gap between have- and have-not students.

"If this kind of summer opportunity gives richer kids another edge, it can lead to a two-tiered system of education within the public system," warns professor David Livingstone of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, who oversees a public opinion survey about education every year. Livingstone wonders about the fairness of some public school students paying to earn compulsory credits in exotic locales, in shorter time and in a much more engaging style.

"Two-thirds of Ontarians in our survey say they are concerned that kids from low-income families are not getting equal access to post-secondary education. Equity is a big deal."

Yet some middle-class parents seem increasingly ready to spend on educational extras, especially families concerned about the tightness of the new four-year program.

"Lots of kids look to do credits in summer so they'll have time for extracurricular sports during the year," said Bill Steer, program co-ordinator of the Canadian Ecology Centre. "You can put together your high school diploma in a number of different ways — some credits you earn during the year from your school, and others you get somewhere else."

Blyth Education runs courses overseas for nearly 500 southern Ontario teens, and owner Sam Blyth says his company subsidizes a number of talented students.

"It's not our intent to put together a course for a bunch of overprivileged kids from Rosedale. I do not want to run an elitist institution," said Blyth.

Others question how well students can learn an entire course load of physics, biology, chemistry and ecology in just 14 days.

Yet many say such hands-on learning engages students more quickly and stays with them longer than months of classroom lectures.

"Even my teacher friends ask me how we can possibly cover the course in two weeks," laughs teacher Keith Dillabough of Mattawa, who works each summer at the centre. "But this is hard-core learning, and the more senses you use, the more deeply you learn and the more intrinsically you retain the material. You're just more engaged."

Besides, he asks — why do kids typically fail in school? They skip class, ignore their homework or hang out with kids who aren't motivated. "Here you can't skip and 100 per cent of the work gets done and a rising tide lifts all ships. No wonder kids here get better marks."

Jacob Porter, 15, of North Bay is taking the course this week in order to "open up a lot more room in my timetable in Grade 11 to take courses I want."

Toronto mother Beth Aitken has sent two teen sons to the camp for Grade 10 science because she believes it suits children of all different learning styles. "And with the cutbacks to education in recent years, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for field trips and these kinds of hands-on lessons."