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## **Elementary students learn water safety as summer heat wanes**

The swimming pool at the Oakwood YMCA is closed to the public after Labor Day, but on Wednesday, some lucky third-graders got to jump in.

“We would love to see every single child in every elementary school in Hall County get swimming lessons,” said David Houston, executive director of the Oakwood Family YMCA. “Clearly the Oakwood YMCA can only do so much to make that happen, but by partnering with the other YMCA branch and trying to reach out in the community as much as we can, that’s our ultimate goal.”

He got a little closer to achieving that goal over the past couple of weeks, with all third-grade students from nearby Oakwood Elementary School learning how to swim — all at no cost.

“Initially, we lowered the rates to just our costs, which was \$16 a child,” he said. “We lowered it just as minimally as we possibly could so we could get these kids some lessons.”

But some parents still found \$16 unaffordable. Unwilling to give up on the program, Houston approached businesses to sponsor the 84 students. Hayes Automotive, Signs by Tomorrow, King’s Hawaiian and Farmer’s Insurance — Kristy Slaton Agency made the program possible.

Beginning Aug. 26, the students have walked to the Oakwood YMCA twice a week for hourlong swimming sessions.

The students began at different stages of expertise, some being knowledgeable swimmers while others clung to the sides. The program ends Friday, but even in the short amount of time, the instructors have seen improvements.

“We got a group that hadn’t really been experienced in the water,” said swim instructor Kara Neuhaus. “Most of them are to the point where they’re jumping in now, and they feel comfortable in the water.”

As Oakwood Elementary teacher Susan Shilling pointed out, it’s not just about the technical aspect of swimming.

“It’s teaching them what to do and what not to do,” she said. “It’s not just teaching them how to swim. It’s not just them getting in the water and having fun and playing the whole time. They’re learning skills so if they fall in or if they have a friend who falls in or something like that, they know how to react to it. They’re better prepared.”

As Houston and Shilling both pointed out, being so close to Lake Lanier makes it even more important to teach water safety at an early age.

Since Jan. 1, there have been eight reported drownings at Lake Lanier, according to Mark McKinnon with the Department of Natural Resources.

A possible ninth may be added to that number as rescue groups continue searching for a woman reported missing on Labor Day. That number does not include incidents that have occurred in swimming pools or other open bodies of water.

“We’ve had some children coming to this where they were completely terrified of the water and now they’re swimming and jumping in,” Houston said. “They’re loving it.” Water safety is an important lesson, but it’s still fun for the kids — and a welcome bit of relief on a 90-degree day.

“I’m a great swimmer in my neighborhood so I don’t need anyone’s help,” said student Will McArn.

“But I’ve learned lots of things. I’ve already done lots of them but they got harder since the last time I had done them.”

His classmate Kaiya Green also has swimming experience, but she’s appreciated getting some help on her technique.

“I hadn’t really learned how to do my stroke yet and that really helps me swim and it makes me swim faster,” she said. “It helps me by kicking my legs, and just having fun.”

“Even if they only see it as fun, they’re learning while they’re having that fun,” said Houston.