As the cool weather approaches, some kids are moving inside to prepare for next summer.

As the landscape of summer swiftly fades, soon to be replaced by abandoned beaches and cooler temperatures, one social service organization in the South Bronx is opening its pool to the surrounding community.

BronxWorks, an organization that strives to support individuals and families in need by offering a wide variety of services, operates one of the only four indoor pools in the Bronx. One of the most popular services offered is swimming lessons.

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, Joel Chavez is one of about 30 young children in the pool. He's in the deep end, wearing a blue bathing cap and swimming comfortably with some nearby friends who are also wearing blue caps.

At BronxWorks, skill level may be easily identified by color. There are about 10 kids wearing blue bathing caps, six kids in the middle wearing yellow caps and 13 kids in the shallowest part wearing red. Eileen Towey, the aquatics director at BronxWorks, is demonstrating proper streamline position for the kids in the shallow end.

Chavez said he came to BronxWorks a few months ago without knowing how to swim, but now says he's happy to have earned a blue bathing cap.
"At first, I was scared of the water because I didn't [know] how to swim," Chavez said. "But now, Ms. Eileen [Towey] teach me a lot of things that I have to know about swimming."

BronxWorks currently runs six classes ranging in age, skill level and class type. Despite the class specifics, however, Towey says that safety is supreme when she's in the pool teaching.

"Every time [before community classes] we have to sit down together and talk about another aspect of being safe around the pool," Towey said. "With my [younger students], as well, [we] sit down and talk about how to be safe around the pool, who the lifeguard is, where you should be swimming, who you should be going swimming with, always having a parent with you or knowing where you are, getting permission to go into the water, reading the signs on the pool deck, knowing how deep the water is that you're about to go into."

Drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional death for children between the ages of one and 14, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Towey said the problem is particularly bad in the South Bronx area where many parents don't know how to swim and are often hesitant to sign their children up for lessons.

"I've found that so many parents and adults that come in to sign their children up, or that I've just talked to, don't know how to swim," Towey said. "Their parents never had them learn how to swim, [they] didn't think it was important and now they are fearful of the water and don't necessarily want their kids to get in the water."

Towey said that drowning is "absolutely" preventable if kids are properly taught how to stay safe in the water, but believes that swimming lessons should not be made mandatory in New York City public schools.

"If the school is kind of like science class, or something, learning science on your own outside of school might be fun, but being forced to learn what the textbook says — it's just in the kids' nature to not necessarily want to be told what to do," Towey said.

Toward the beginning of the class, Chavez said he often goes swimming with friends during the summer — some of whom cannot swim. When asked if that has ever made him nervous: "Yes, [it's scary] because they might drown and then I might have to carry them or swim and help them."