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A school classic to the core

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The promise of small classes and academic rigor attracted teacher Suzy Webster and parents John and Susan Hessburg to Paideia Academy, the new charter school in Apple Valley where classes began Monday. Webster, a second-grade teacher, is one of a dozen staff members; the Hessburgs, of Apple Valley, are the parents of Robert, who will be in third grade. Webster and the Hessburgs discussed their expectations for Paideia last week with Star Tribune South's Tom Ford.

Challenging job, short commute

Webster, who lives in Apple Valley three minutes from Paideia, learned about the school last spring from a flier in her mailbox.

She was no stranger to charter schools. After a year teaching seventh-grade math at a South St. Paul public school, the 26-year-old spent three years teaching sixth grade at Twin Cities Academy, a St. Paul charter.

She liked its "core knowledge" curriculum, which follows a model of a classical education. But she had an itch to teach younger students.

Sixth-graders, while enthusiastic learners, are easily distracted by the social side of school, she said. Plus, the 20-minute commute was becoming a hassle.

"Looking around, I knew I wanted another charter," Webster said.

She attended an open house, and from there she was hooked.

One of the attractions was that Paideia would use the Core Knowledge curriculum, which Webster praised for its broad historical focus.

"Most second-grade teachers don't get to teach [about] ancient Greece, at least not in depth," she said.

An even stronger draw was small classes and a small building.

Paideia limits itself to about 20 students per class. Enrollment -- at least in the first year with only kindergarten to fourth-grade students -- will be capped at 200. (The school plans to add one grade each year through eighth grade.) "Within the first two weeks, I'll know all the kids in the building," Webster said. "I like the small community that provides."

She expects that the ties she finds at Paideia -- not to mention the short commute -- will keep her there for many years.

"I see this as a long-term position," she said.

Mixed feelings, bright prospects

When the Hessburgs signed up their youngest son for Paideia, Susan Hessburg shed many tears.

It saddened her that Robert would be leaving Apple Valley's Westview Elementary School, where he was in the gifted student program and staff often went the extra mile to challenge him.

But that regret coincided with a deep excitement for the opportunities the couple thinks are in store for 9-year-old Robert at Paideia.

"Paideia is going to be insisting on excellence from the students and the teachers," John Hessburg said.

They said that is crucial for a child such as Robert, who has been wowing his parents with his intellectual gifts. A highlight occurred about a year ago -- after listening to Mozart's "Turkish March" and seeing the music, he taught himself to play the piece on the piano in about an hour.

"My heart skipped about three beats," John said.

The couple decided that, despite the strong efforts of Westview teachers, the school could not offer the necessary rigor.

Paideia will require Spanish and Latin and has a year-round schedule with a few weeks off between each quarter. John Hessburg also cited its regular art and music lessons as further draws.

"We'd be profoundly incompetent parents not to take advantage of this opportunity," he said.

The couple would have enrolled older son, Jack, 10, but as a fifth-grader he is too old to attend Paideia.

Which has a bit of a bright side, Susan noted, as the family can still remain a part of the Westview community while joining a new community at Paideia.

• QUICK FACTS

Paideia Academy charter school opened Monday.

ADDRESS: 7200 W. 147th St., in the former Apple Valley Theater.

ENROLLMENT: About 200, kindergarten to fourth grade; administrators hope to add other grades in coming years.

COST: Free and open to any student as long as there is space.

CURRICULUM: Core Knowledge, based on concepts developed by education reformer E.D. Hirsch Jr.

SCHEDULE: Year-round; quarters separated by two- to four-week breaks.

Tom Ford