

New charter school in Apple Valley opens its doors

By Erica Christoffer\Sun Newspapers

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"It looks like a school," said Amy Monson as she gazed at the building that holds Paideia Academy, the newest charter school in Apple Valley that opened Aug. 8.

The opening of Paideia is the culmination of a year of work for Monson, a Burnsville resident, and Tona Dove of Apple Valley, parents who said they who wanted to fulfill an educational dream for their children.

Monson, a nurse, and Dove, a lawyer, put their careers on hold to pursue the opening of the charter school.

"We basically told our husbands that we were going to start a charter school," said Dove.

Frustrated with the gaps they saw in their children's educational experience, Dove and Monson researched other options.

They discovered the Core Knowledge Sequence, a sequenced method of teaching in stages. Topics and concepts are continuously built upon in each grade level.

"So there's no gaps or repetition as there is in current district schools," Dove said.

Dove and Monson received sponsorship for Paideia Academy, in the former Apple Valley Theatre at 7200 147th St., from Friends of Ascension, a non-profit secular operation that supports content-rich schools.

The word "Paideia" is Greek meaning "to nurture a child."

Being a charter school, Paideia is public and any student can attend; however, enrollment is limited.

Dove said Paideia is not in competition with School District 196, in which the school is located, but rather offering families another option.

What sets Paideia apart, school officials said, is small class sizes. Each room is limited to 20 students, and language, music and arts are incorporated as core subjects. All children will be exposed to Latin and Spanish.

The school has also entered into a partnership with the MacPhail Center for Music for its music program.

"The other thing that we're really priding ourselves on is that we have incredible parental involvement," Dove said.

The nine classroom teachers at Paideia were in contact with parents before school started, Dove said.

In addition to the classroom teachers, Paideia has one special education teacher, one Spanish teacher, two music teachers and two teacher aides.

Parents were required to enter into an agreement with the school to contribute about 50 hours per year of volunteerism.

"There's just a true commitment to their children's education," Dove said.

Said Monson: "The parents want to be here."

Monson said she and Dove were overwhelmed with the number of parents who attended informational meetings about the school.

Kindergarten received the largest interest, with 85 applications for 40 spots, Monson said.

School started at Paideia with 203 students from 157 families enrolled. There are plans for the school to grow each year.

For manageability, the charter school started out with kindergarten through fourth grade this year and will add one grade level each year until reaching K-8.

"It's easier to start and build a community and have them grow up into it," said Paideia's director, Laura Porter-Jones.

Porter-Jones was recruited from an Arizona school district to serve as director. She now resides in Lakeville and her two sons will attend the school.

Paideia is governed by a school board on which Monson, Dove and other parents serve.

The contact that will occur between administrators, teachers and parents is something that could not happen in a larger district, Porter-Jones said.

"This is a unique and marvelous thing," Porter-Jones said. "It creates a completely different culture of educational opportunity."

Monson's daughter will attend second grade at Paideia, and Dove's children will be in kindergarten and second grade.

"We have students of all levels and abilities," said Porter-Jones, who added that 12 different home languages are represented in the student body. "To me that's extraordinarily exciting."

Paideia offers both half-day and full-day kindergarten, with the full school day running

from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in nine-week quarters year-round.

Mornings begin with a community meeting. An atrium at the center of the school will serve as a meeting place.

"It's really a very welcoming space," Porter-Jones said.

Eventually, the school will build out the second floor of the old theatre for classrooms and science labs.

Because Paideia is a charter school, it isn't allowed to own land due to lack of tax-base and inability to ask voters for levies or bonds. The school does receive lease aid from the state.

Dove said school officials were lucky to find the former theatre site, which has undergone a major renovation.

"This is my dream school," said Monson.

For more information on Paideia Academy, visit www.paideiaacademy.org or call 952-807-3760.