

## Disabled kids find hope, home at new school

Students with social disabilities were left hanging in January when school in Maplewood closed.

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Former students of a St. Louis County private school that closed midyear have found a new home.

The Edgewood Children's Center in Webster Groves has started a new school for students who have Asperger's syndrome and other social disabilities.

And its first group of students have arrived from the old Metropolitan School in Maplewood, which closed in January after losing students who couldn't get the loans that they needed to afford tuition.

The new school, called the Hitchcock School, offers small class sizes, individual attention and social-skills classes for children who have had difficulty at other schools.

"Hitchcock finds a way to reach kids," said parent Michelle Wingo. "Now it's easier to get my son on task, and he has a chance to be creative."

The new school, started at the end of January, now enrolls 16 students, and ends an uncertain time for many of the former Metropolitan families.

The parents tried to start their own school — Wingo said that the group wanted to hold classes in one family's basement and even talked about buying the building of the Metropolitan School. Then Edgewood approached the families.

Edgewood has long run a program for children with autism and has provided education services to children with emotional and behavioral disorders. But offering social skills instruction to children had been part of the vision of Edgewood for many years, said Maria Nash, director of special education.

It was perfect timing.

Metropolitan parent Paul Calabrese said Hitchcock is working well for his son.

After some initial scrambling, he said, students have settled into a routine. Without Hitchcock, Calabrese said, his son might not have been able to continue his education. "I've been impressed," he said.

Peer relations are a priority at the school. Students attend a daily class on social skills, during which they work with one another on solving disputes and modeling appropriate behavior. They also focus on practical skills — preparing for job interviews, for example. Calabrese said that these classes helped build a community of support for his son.

Tuition at the school is \$24,000 a year. Financial aid is available.