

SUBURBAN JOURNALS

Metropolitan students find new home at Edgewood

School of 11 seeks boost in enrollment

By Shawn Clubb

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Parents feared how a sudden change of schools in mid-year would affect their children.

They learned in November that the Metropolitan School in Maplewood would not offer a second semester. Twenty-five families of children with autism and other learning challenges began looking for other options. Ten of them chose Hitchcock School.

This new school opened for them on the campus of Edgewood Children's Center in Webster Groves. It was a welcome offer, but it would mean change.

"Children with developmental delays typically transition very hard," said Michelle Wingo, whose son, Elijah, a seventh-grader, was among the students to move. "We thought it was going to be pretty rough."

By all accounts, it worked better than anyone had expected. It helped that the students moved with some of their peers and some Metropolitan teachers.

Wingo, a south St. Louis resident, enrolled her son last fall at Metropolitan. He previously attended private and public schools, where other students bullied him. Wingo constantly fought staff at those schools to get services for her autistic son.

For the family, Metropolitan had been a "dream come true." Then Wingo learned it lacked the money to continue operating.

Families of the Metropolitan students then began meeting every weekend to try to find options. Some Metropolitan teachers talked of opening their own school.

The staff of Metropolitan School arranged a transition fair for families to learn about other schools. Edgewood Children's Center stepped forward with an offer to open a school.

Edgewood primarily serves as a child welfare agency. Its staff planned to eventually open a private school, said Wayne Crull, executive director of Edgewood. The closing of Metropolitan caused them to move up their plans.

The Hitchcock School opened Jan. 20. Ten students from Metropolitan and one other enrolled.

Three Metropolitan teachers came as well. They brought with them the educational practices that made Metropolitan work for non-traditional learners. These include a low student-teacher ratio, lots of hands-on instruction and an understanding approach to the social challenges these students face.

The new school also offered more, said Catherine Pilant, the former dean of students at Metropolitan, who is now assistant director of special education at Edgewood. The campus is set on a large lawn and offers fresh air and the chance to learn outside. Students can participate in soccer and track events. Metropolitan had no green space.

Besides core academics, the Hitchcock program offers social skills groups, community service involvement and the opportunity to mentor younger students, said Maria Nash, director of special education.

Paul Calabrese of Des Peres moved his son, Clay, from Metropolitan to Hitchcock. He expected it to be hard for his sophomore son.

"Clay says 'I hate change' all of the time," Calabrese said, "(but) to him, this was just normal school. 'I was going here. Now, I'm going here.' He jumped in very quickly."

The parents have become partners in making the school work, Crull said. They've helped the Edgewood staff learn some of what it takes to run a private school.

"Edgewood wanted parents to be an integral part of this," Wingo said. "We're always working on ways to tweak things and make it better."

The parents also became partners in trying to grow the school. Before it opened, they were told it needed a minimum of 12 students to be viable.

Nine families have committed to send their children to Hitchcock for the 2009-2010 school year. Edgewood has committed to keep the program at least that long.

Nash hesitates to put a number on how many students would make the school viable, but said it needs "more than ten or 11." Tuition currently is \$24,000 per year. Crull said adding students would help bring that cost down.

Wingo has led the parents in sending out mailers, contacting support groups and "calling everyone we know" to get the word out about the program.

"Obviously, the big thing for Hitchcock going forward is growth," Calabrese said. "I think there's a need for this kind of school in St. Louis. It's just a question of finding the right kids that match to this."