

Montgomery

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Montgomery | Education

Inside the Schools

For the Gifted and Challenged, an Easier Fit

By JULIE RASICOT
Special to the Washington Post

When 11-year-old Dakota Fernandez attended Meadow Hall Elementary School in Rockville, he often found himself falling behind in class, unable to keep up with the quick pace of daily academic lessons.

"It was just really confusing and hard for me, and I would come into school and not know what they were doing," said Dakota, a Rockville sixth-grader who's gifted in math. "I used to get a lot of homework, and I wouldn't understand any of it."

But that has all changed since Dakota started attending classes this fall at the Siena School in Silver Spring.

The newly opened private school, located in Montgomery Hills Baptist Church on Georgia Avenue, caters to bright, college-bound students who deal with language-based learning issues, such as dyslexia. With an enrollment this year of about 30 students, the school offers an individualized and multisensory approach for children in fifth through ninth grade.

For Dakota, the small class sizes mean that teachers have time to talk to him when he needs help.

"I feel much better asking the teacher because I know it will never be a waste of time to ask a question," he said. "I used to think I could never succeed in anything."

His good friend and classmate, Grier Freedman, 11, of Derwood, feels the same way. When he was at Lucy V. Barnsley Elementary School in Rockville, he'd find himself distracted by large class sizes and unable to concentrate.

At Siena, classes have an average of about 10 students and lessons often involve a hands-on approach, such as the social studies lesson that Grier particularly liked: passing a ball around to learn the names of the Great Lakes.

"It helps me learn a lot better than I did at my old school," he said.

Creating an environment where students like Grier and Dakota could succeed was the reason that founder and executive director Erik Heyer, 34, decided to open the school.

Heyer, who began his career in finance and later worked in charter school and public education reform movements, said his research showed that local students who weren't being adequately served by public schools often had to travel outside the county to find a private school that met their needs. So he created Siena: a school for students of average or above-average intellectual ability who are emotionally healthy and behave appropriately, but have mild to moderate learning needs that have kept them a grade or two behind their peers.

At Siena, the focus is on engaging students by using proven methods

and strategies that will best help them learn, whether that means using sophisticated reading software, color-coded guidelines for composition writing or physical movement. Teachers are trained to work with students who have language-based learning issues, and the school has invested in top-notch technology.

"It's not rows of desks looking at a chalkboard and then they go home and read a chapter," Heyer said. "You'll never see that."

Michael Fleegler, who taught middle school in Philadelphia before coming to Siena to teach language arts and Spanish, said the school's approach allows him to reach students in ways he couldn't achieve in a public school setting.

"Here I actually get to implement theory," he said. "Everything is curtailed to the individual student's strengths."

Located in basement classrooms at the church and financed primarily by Heyer, Siena doesn't offer many physical amenities; physical education classes and recess are held upstairs in the church hall with a once-a-week extended lunch and recess period at a local park.

The school, which will expand a grade each year to add a full high school program, is looking for a more permanent home, Heyer said.

While about 20 percent of students receive assistance with the annual tuition of nearly \$24,000, Siena



BY JAMES M. THRESHER — THE WASHINGTON POST

Kara Brown, 12, of Silver Spring receives instruction from teacher Elizabeth Augustine at Siena School for gifted students with mild learning needs.

has established a scholarship fund in partnership with the Washington Scholarship Fund, to help make the school more accessible to lower-income families, Heyer said.

Even though students have been in classes barely two months, parents say they can see that the emphasis on learning tailored to students' needs is paying off.

"Our son, Ryan, has flourished," parent Robin Salomon of Bethesda said of his seventh-grader. "He's gone from a kid who was teased to a kid who really thrives, who on the drive home from school takes out his book and does his homework, which would not have happened before."

Although Salomon and his wife

remain concerned about the lack of physical facilities and socialization associated with a small, start-up school, he said they've compensated by getting Ryan involved in extracurricular activities, such as soccer, tennis and horseback riding.

"It's a tradeoff that most parents would take," he said. "Anyone who's gone to school knows that if you're suffering and being teased, it flows over to social activities as well."

For Kara Brown, an eighth-grader from Silver Spring who used to feel like she was stupid before coming to Siena, the answer was easy when she considered what has been the biggest change for her.

"My report card," she said.