



NEW SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH LANGUAGE-BASED LEARNING DIFFERENCES

An interview with Erik Heyer, Director

By Agnes Jones-Trower

The Siena School is a private, coeducational day school opening September, 2006 in Silver Spring, MD. This new school will offer a rich educational program for bright, college-bound students who are challenged by language-based learning differences, such as dyslexia. The program is designed for students with mild to moderate needs who are experiencing a discrepancy between their academic achievement and intellectual abilities in one or more areas such as reading, writing, oral expression or math. Erik Heyer, a highly respected education leader, is the founder and executive director. Jillian Darefsky, head of middle school, and English language arts teacher, is an experienced educator, having previously served as the founding School Coordinator at the Pershing School.

The Siena School is currently accepting applications for students in grades 5 – 9. In successive years, Siena will add one grade per year to include a full high school program. Expected total enrollment for the 2006-2007 school year is 40 students.

The school will feature small class sizes with a target ratio of 10:1. For critical subjects, such as reading, small group instruction will be employed to further reduce this ratio. The overall size of the school will be kept small to build a strong sense of community and to ensure close and caring relationships among all students and staff.

The Siena School will follow the Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum. Each student at The Siena School will have a Student Compass, an individual learning plan specifying key learning goals and strategies. The plan will be designed by the staff, in consultation with parents, and each week the school faculty will meet as a group to discuss and actively manage individual student progress.

Reading instruction is structured, sequential and cumulative, using Orton-Gillingham, Wilson, Lindamood-Bell Seeing Stars, and Phonographix methodologies. The student learns spelling simultaneously with reading. Cursive is explicitly taught and its use required for kinesthetic reinforcement. Active reading and vocabulary development is supported through visualization techniques, such as Lindamood-Bell Visualizing and Verbalizing, and Inspiration software. As an important component for language challenged learners, critical thinking skills are emphasized in order to build their ability to generalize, organize, infer, and deduce.

The language arts curriculum integrates reading, writing, speaking and listening, providing the students with the skills required to effectively communicate both verbally and on paper. A multisensory writing program called Step Up to Writing is embedded throughout the curriculum areas to strengthen the students' developing writing skills. Students are encouraged to read aloud within a safe and uncritical environment to increase their confidence and to draw upon their own experiences and prior knowledge when reading.

Saxon Math is used throughout the middle grades. The program uses distributed instruction to ensure that instruction, practice, and assessment of a concept are distributed throughout the lessons. Manipulatives are used regularly and real life scenarios are utilized to enable the students to relate to what they learn.

The social studies curriculum is taught during a three year rotation, and an inquiry-centered, science curriculum is used (Science and Technology Concepts for Middle School (STC/MS) program). Technology is also an integral part of all programs. The students' learning extends beyond the core curriculum areas with classes in Art, PE, Music, Health, Study Skills, Keyboarding, Careers (grades 7+), and Drama.

The school will work closely with external professionals providing related services, such as speech and language therapy, OT/PT, and counseling. Siena will be prepared to make referrals for any students requiring related services.

For information about admissions, to schedule a visit, or for any other inquiries, please contact the Admissions Office at (301) 592-0567 x21; e-mail admissions@thesienaschool.org; or visit the Siena School website: www.thesienaschool.org. Siena is hosting small group visits each Wednesday at 9:00am. Please call in advance to reserve a space.