



News



Parents snap up seats at new charter school

Registration for classes starting in the fall indicates Imagine School may need a lottery.

By Jeffrey S. Solochek, Times Staff Writer
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LAND O'LAKES - It has no buildings. It has no teachers.

But Imagine School of Land O'Lakes has 233 students registered to attend when the charter school opens in the fall.

"We're really well on our way," principal John Selover said, noting that the school aims to enroll 350 kindergarten through sixth-grade children for its first year. "We've just had a tremendous response from parents."

Interest has been strong enough that Selover predicted he'll have to run a lottery for seats and set up a waiting list for families that don't get in.

No one at Imagine Schools, a Virginia nonprofit that is opening 10 new schools across Florida in the fall, is saying "I told you so" to Pasco County district officials, who rejected the school's 2006 application and fought it all the way to the State Board of Education.

The district contended that the firm offered no support to show it could draw the 400 or more students it wanted. The state board affirmed that decision.

But the firm refiled its application and won approval in December. Contract negotiations are almost complete.

The company's regional development director, Kathy Helean, isn't surprised that Imagine is getting noticed now.

"Historically, when we tell parents what our program is and what we provide, parents seem to want that," said Helean, who has opened seven charter schools in Florida for the firm and run one - Learning Excellence of North Tampa, an alternative center that had academic success but closed in 2003 because of financial issues.

A key draw of the Imagine School is its adoption of Project Child, a model developed in 1988 by Florida State University researcher Sally Butzin, who now oversees the initiative for the Institute for School Innovation in Tallahassee. The focus of Project Child is what Butzin calls the three T's of time, technology and teamwork.

In Project Child, classes are organized in three-grade clusters, with each teacher focusing on one aspect of the curriculum. The children rotate among the teachers, who keep them in class for three years.

The classrooms are set up in six stations, allowing children to conduct hands-on activities about the lessons that the teachers present. Lectures are kept to a minimum.

"Our approach is a very active approach, where we want the kids to be doing the bulk of the work," Butzin said. "The kids are learning in a multitude of ways."

And the results, she added, "speak for themselves."

Studies have shown that children in Project Child classrooms regularly outperform their peers in other classrooms on tests including the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

The most appealing part to Selover, who came here after leading a small school district in rural upstate New York, is that the model makes sense in keeping kids with their teachers.

"It allows for a more effective use of time," he said. "When they come back the next year, the teachers aren't spending a month of time getting to know the kids and their abilities. It allows them to customize learning for their needs."

Pasco school superintendent Heather Fiorentino said Project Child is nothing new to the

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county. Some of the original research for Project Child occurred at San Antonio Elementary, and Mitty P. Locke Elementary once used the model. Several teachers still incorporate some of its ideas into their teaching.

Charter schools in theory are supposed to provide something that the public schools can't or don't. They're freed from many of the state's bureaucratic rules in order to be more flexible in the way they reach students.

Fiorentino said she worries about charter companies and whether they will provide that something new. But she supports parents' right to choose and said she hopes they get good choices.

"I want quality charter schools here," she said.

Imagine Schools officials said that's their goal, too. That's why they worked with district leaders, even after their first application was rejected, to gain entry to the county.

"Our mission is to assist parents," Helean said. "We believe parents should have a choice and make a decision for what is best for their children."

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Fast facts

Want to know more?

The Imagine School at Land O'Lakes will have parent meetings at 10:30 a.m. Friday, 4:30 p.m. March 20 and 6 p.m. April 2, all at the Land O'Lakes public library, 2818 Collier Parkway.

To sign up, call (813) 909-4501 or visit the school's web site, imagineschoollandolakes.com. For more details about the school's Project Child philosophy, visit ifsi.org.

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