

Sarasota Herald Tribune

Imagine no lectures; well, just a short one

Charter school uses interactive learning to get FCAT success

By CHRISTOPHER O'DONNELL

Published Thursday, March 27, 2008 at 4:30 a.m.

ELLENTON — In a classroom inside the Ellenton Ice and Sports Complex, Melissa Olin taught third-graders about silent communication.

"Who can show me another gesture?" the Imagine School teacher asked the excited students.

Olin choose 9-year-old Travis Butcher, who extended his arm forward and raised his hand vertically.

"It has two meanings," he said. "One's 'stop' and the other is 'talk to the hand.'"

Making learning fun is seen as one of the keys to successful teaching at the charter school in Ellenton. Lectures are kept to a minimum, allowing students to learn through interactive assignments and team exercises.

Officials say the approach works.

In 2007, Imagine was the only elementary school in Manatee County that achieved a 100 percent pass rate on the reading portion of the FCAT, meaning all of its third-graders advanced to fourth grade.

"It has a long-term benefit for a child who is struggling," Principal Christy Catlin said. "If we can make learning fun, they're willing to try harder."

The approach, known as Project Child, was developed as an alternative to traditional classroom teaching, where much of the lesson is direct instruction from the teacher to the entire class, Catlin said.

At Imagine, only 20 minutes of a 90-minute class follows that format.

For the remainder, students rotate between learning stations, spending 20 minutes at each exploring the topic in a different way. At one station, they may use textbooks or written assignments. At other stations, they work on a computer or in teams.

"It gives children a lot of individual time with their teacher," Catlin said. "Children learn in lots of different ways. Here, the children have five ways to learn that one skill."

Another approach favored at Imagine is to keep students and teachers together for longer. Students learn from the same reading, math and writing teachers for three years.

Advocates say it creates a stronger bond between teacher and students and that teachers become familiar with a student's strengths and weaknesses.

The nonprofit Imagine Schools runs charter schools in 10 states, including 19 in Florida. Charter schools, are publicly funded, but run by independent governing boards.

The North Manatee school opened in 2006 with 85 students and now has 220. It has achieved that growth while operating out of portable classrooms and renting space from the ice complex.

The school had planned to build a new 750-student school on 25th Street East south of U.S. 301. But it was forced to scrap those plans after encountering fierce opposition from neighboring residents.

Instead, school officials plan to convert an unused in-line skating rink inside the ice complex into 40 classrooms. If work begins before April, the facility could still be ready for the start of the upcoming school year, Catlin said.

"By three to four years from now, we hope to be a capacity of 750," Catlin said. "Being a school of choice, we're an option for parents that want to remain with public schools."