

# **Marietta Daily Journal (GA)**

## **Center Academy celebrates grand opening Georgia Special Needs program gives rise to first new school**

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SMYRNA -- Center Academy in Smyrna is the first private school in the state to open in response to the new Georgia Special Needs Scholarship program. The sixth- through-twelfth-grade school, located at 3499 South Cobb Drive, conducted its grand opening last night.

Center Academy came to Georgia as a direct response to the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship, said Steve Hicks, vice president of operations for Center Academy, based out of St. Petersburg, Fla. The scholarship legislation was signed into law by Gov. Sonny Perdue last May.

"The parents who couldn't afford private education, they now have a choice in where they send their child," Hicks said. "We know that the students are underserved here in Georgia in the private sector."

Center Academy operates 13 private academies across Florida. The schools serve children with mild-to-moderate learning disabilities, such as attention deficit disorder or dyslexia. This will be the first Center Academy to open in Georgia, Hicks said.

The Georgia Special Needs Scholarship, sponsored by state Sen. Eric Johnson (R-Savannah) and state Sen. Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock), allows eligible students to transfer to other public schools, or use the state-funded scholarships to attend state-approved private schools. "This is an incredibly special day for me. Having an educational entrepreneur come in here is an affirmation of the free market system," Johnson, who flew in for the ceremony, told prospective Center Academy parents Tuesday evening.

Center Academy evaluates a student's skill set, grade equivalencies and learning styles, and then selects individualized curriculum to meet the needs of each child, Hicks said. The school favors small learning communities, with 15-20 students per class, he said. Last year was the first year that students could use the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship to attend a private school.

Ninety-eight Cobb students used the scholarship in the 2007- 08 school year, state Department of Education officials reported. To qualify, students had to

spend last year enrolled in a Georgia public school and must have an individual education plan.

It is hoped that about 60 students from across the metro Atlanta are enrolled at Smyrna Center Academy this year, Hicks said. Almost every student at the school could expect to receive tuition help, he said, although each student's scholarship is at a different value. Students would pay tuition on a sliding, need-based scale, varying from \$1,000 a year to \$10,000 a year for families at the top of the economic ladder, Hicks said.

Hicks estimated that about 80 to 90 percent of students at the Smyrna academy would receive the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship. Center Academy will be housed in an existing building -- formerly a Caldwell Bank and later a State Farm office -- that was gutted on the inside. Circle W Construction owns the building, Hicks said. Center Academy spent approximately \$150,000 on renovations, he said.

Dr. Louis Manzella, who has spent 25 years in public education, with 14 of those years in nearby Cherokee County, has been hired as the principal of the new school.

Gwen Mason of Kennesaw said she is considering sending her 16-year-old son, Cameron, who has learning disabilities, to Center Academy in the fall. "It just seems smaller classrooms work better for him. At the high school, he was kind of getting lost in the shuffle," Mason said. She found out about Center Academy while surfing the Internet, looking for schools that would accept the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship, she said.

About 1,000 Georgia students used the Special Needs Scholarship last year, and officials expect that figure to double in the coming school year, Hicks said.

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