

Private Southside academy moves into larger facility

BY SANDY STRICKLAND | STORY UPDATED AT 9:23 AM ON THURSDAY, AUG. 27, 2009

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Lisa Garland, at left, does group work with seventh- and eighth-graders at Center Academy. The students also have their own study cubicles. SANDY STRICKLAND/Staff

Dominick Beutel likes the narrow cubicles and plain walls in his school's new facility.

It suits his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

"Nobody bugs you or tries to force you to rapidly learn something so they can move on for the rest of the class," he said.

At Center Academy at 2804 St. Johns Bluff Road S., every student has an individualized learning plan. The private school, which held an open house Aug. 25, is for students in grades 6-12 with learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

For six years, the academy was housed a quarter of a mile away, but it moved to larger quarters for the new school year, said James Schulz, the Southside academy's director. The majority of its students live in Southside and Arlington, though some live in Ponte Vedra Beach and the Northside.

As parents and representatives from other alternative schools toured the new campus, Beutel said he was in danger of failing school before coming to the academy a little more than two years ago. Now the 17-year-old Arlington resident is a junior with dual enrollment at Florida State College at Jacksonville's South Campus. He's an honor roll student in line to receive a Florida Bright Futures Scholarship.

"Center Academy has been a bright light in my life," Beutel said. "I was never a good student in public school. The way they work here you have two teachers. If one's not available, you can always get help from the other. They help you understand the things you need to understand. It's been like a miracle worker for me."

Because the facility wasn't completed when they decided to move, academy officials worked with the architect to design it the way they wanted, said Eric Larson, Center Academy's chief operating officer who is based in St. Petersburg. It has 5,800

square feet, compared to 5,200 at its old site, with the option of extending its space through a wall and expanding its size.

Amenities not available before are a basketball court, outdoor eating area and a small room whose usages could include consultations with a social worker, or as an art room.

The academy outgrew its old facility but has room for 80 students at its new one. It has an enrollment of 50 after graduating a class of 16 last year, Larson said. Four received Bright Futures scholarships.

"What we offer is an alternative for students not successful at other schools," Larson said. "We get referrals from public high school counselors and other private schools who cannot accept a student with a learning disability."

Students are evaluated by a psychologist, and the results are shared with their parents and used in putting together their academic program, he said. For example, Larson said, an eighth-grader may be doing math at the sixth-grade level and language arts at the 10th-grade level. He will be remediated in his area of weakness and encouraged in areas where he is doing well.

The academies, which are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, were launched in 1969 in St. Petersburg and now have 14 locations in Florida and Georgia. The St. Johns Bluff campus is one of four in North Florida. The others are in Mandarin, Westside and Orange Park.

Cost is \$12,020, which covers textbooks and supplies, Schulz said. Most of the students attend on the McKay Scholarship for students with disabilities, he said.

Parents are encouraged to visit at any time, Schulz said.

For information, call 645-5366.