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For some, old school is best option

One-room schoolhouse provides structure, love

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Sun photo by Jed Kirschbaum, October 25, 2007

Sandy Herman heads the school. "We give them the best of both worlds; the structure of a school [and] the love of a big family."

By Ruma Kumar | Sun reporter
October 26, 2007

There is a little-known, one-room schoolhouse that sits on the second floor of a strip shopping center, off busy Forest Drive, above a Hispanic grocery store whose name translates to "Divine Providence."

Some parents say providence led them to the Benjamin Franklin Learning Center, run by a warm but tough grandmother who put her youngest son through the program.

For 13 years, the center has served home-schooled children seeking a greater academic challenge and more socialization, and refugees from traditional public and private schools who found larger classes, peer pressure and a constant focus on test scores demoralizing.

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Benjamin Franklin Learning Center Photos

"The parents who bring their children here have had some tough experiences in other traditional schools, or home-schooling just wasn't enough," says Sandy Herman, who heads the school. "We give them the best of both worlds; the structure of a school, with classes, tests, grades, teachers, and we give them the love of a big family, with older children helping



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The school has 22 students, 17 in the middle school age group and five of high school age. Herman limits enrollment to 30 students.

The school includes three black students, three Asian students and one Hispanic student. The class is a hodgepodge of students who have been home-schooled and those who tried public or private schools and didn't like it. The tuition is \$4,200 per year, with after-school electives costing more.

High school students take the General Educational Development test to graduate, and nearly 100 percent of them have gone on to community colleges and then to four-year schools, Herman said.

When the students get to school at 9 a.m., they sit together in a large classroom. On a recent Wednesday, they started the day with a prayer and a reading from the Bible.

Then it's on to math. Three older students help some of the younger ones struggling with pre-algebraic concepts, while others work independently out of their workbooks. Some are on long division; others are doing algebra. A teacher, one of two at the school, walks around the room, checking work and answering questions. Most of the work is independently done, with students charting their own pace while listening to music streaming through iPods and CD players.

When math hour is over, Herman's voice echoes through the hall, "OK, everybody, get ready for science." Though they're at different levels in math, English literature and writing, everyone takes the same science class. This year, it's Earth science.

Herman takes care of everything, including payroll and refereeing scuffles between students. She's the first to say that her disciplinary style is unorthodox. Students who act up are called into her office and counseled about responsibility and maturity, "and sometimes it takes a solid thump on the chest to say, 'What were you thinking? You know better,'" Herman said.

"They need parents, not friends. People to be firm, but then people who can hug them too," she said.

She keeps track of how every child is performing and calls parents at the first signs of a student's academic struggle.

Herman uses the school's student council members as ambassadors, each assigned as a mentor and counselor to three or four students.

the younger kids, and vice versa."

The traditional one-room schoolhouses are fading, but their philosophy of small class sizes, multi-age learning and peer tutoring are being adopted by public school districts

"The one-room school is an excellent model for American education. Unfortunately, what we have done is go in the wrong direction [with large classes and schools]," said Andrew Gulliford, director of the Center for Southwest Studies at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., a leading expert on one-room schools and author of America's Country Schools.

"These schoolhouses help build character, provide students with opportunities for self-confidence and leadership," Gulliford said.

The Benjamin Franklin Learning Center, which runs three days a week and has students who range in age from 10 to 18 years old, looks like any other school. Its walls are plastered with colorful posters about parts of speech, wry warnings that "Due Dates are closer than they

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a mentor and counselor to three or four students.

Dava Desjarlais says the independent work and the personal attention helped her daughter, Brooke, care about school again after a rough experience at a Crofton middle school with 1,000 students.

The 13-year-old had been in public school since kindergarten but had a tough time when she got to sixth grade.

"In elementary school, she was the funny one. She got a lot of kudos, encouragement from teachers; she's a great writer. She gets to middle school, and all of that stopped," Desjarlais said. "Suddenly, she didn't know who she was in this school of 1,000 kids."

Brooke began having anxiety attacks and mood swings. She was teased at school for being overweight. She became more isolated, opting to stay in her room and listen to music rather than spend time with friends. The Desjarlais family had considered Benjamin Franklin years earlier for their older son but decided against it. This time, Brooke's struggle spurred the family to take a second look at the school.

A year later, they say, the school has helped Brooke get back to being the kind of student she had once been.

Herman's "tough love" and the absence of cliques among the students helped revive Brooke's self-esteem and confidence, Dava Desjarlais said. Brooke tied for the highest grades in the school in her first year there. This year, she's a student representative in the school's student council.

"We will never go back to public school," Dava Desjarlais said. "This is a place where Brooke, all the students, feel nurtured, loved and accepted."

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