



The Star-Ledger

Nooks for noggins

Learn at own pace

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Star-Ledger Staff

Five families who want their children to have a different kind of education, to unfold at their own pace in a holistic, child-led environment, have pooled their money to start an alternative school at a local church hall in Gladstone.

The new Wellspring Community School is wrapping up its first year as a state-licensed school. It currently has 13 children enrolled in its nursery through first-grade program, with plans to add a second grade next year. It is seeking to enroll more students.

"The fast-paced, frenetic, driven education thing is not for us," said Heather Laszlo, 39 of Chester, the mother of daughters Maelle, 6, and Nolan, 4, students in the school.

"We were five families, together in a Waldorf-inspired preschool in Pottersville, and it closed," she said. "When our children were 3 we went looking around. We did research in our own areas. We were not finding anything that spoke to us. Instead, we found a lot of coercive education, as we call it."

The typical choices were to settle or home-school. But these parents had confidence they could combine their talents and philosophies into a place where their children could thrive -- a flexible environment without tests or grades but focused on individual progress. They come from the fields of social work, art, health and yoga education, and holistic psychotherapy.

Laszlo is a fiction writer who also does work for Outward Bound, and her husband, Brandon Rosser, is a documentary filmmaker. They met in the Peace Corps in Gabon in Equatorial Africa in 1991-1993. She taught English in a small rural school; he helped build one. "But I never thought I'd be doing this," she said.

Finding affordable space for a new school was a challenge in this wealthy corner of Somerset County, until they knocked on the door at the Gladstone United Methodist Church and discovered the Sunday School and meeting hall, with kitchen and bathrooms, were newly available. The space was perfect, with a large yard, a meadow across the street for nature study, and the town center a short walk away.

Inside the densely decorated room painted light green, children eat lunch at one large wooden communal table, and move often with their gentle soft-spoken "facilitator" Anne Zimmermann, 45, of Mendham, to activity centers on the stage, in the center and along the perimeter. There are other "nooks" for family living, building, nature, yoga, art and writing, tray puzzles and rest time.

On that day the nursery children made their own clay. Some were ready to be finished and were excused to wash up. Others wanted more. So she placed tools on the table. "Suddenly we had pancakes and lots of balls," she said. Her role, she described, is to offer children "an extension to help them in their discovery."

Educational director Loring Nagle, 38, of Far Hills places high value on playtime. "I don't want children to be rushed. They need to play. They story-tell through their own play. Instead of learning about the plot of a

story they can make up their own. It's of higher value." The day's rhythm includes blocks of time for outdoor play, singing and poetry reading in a circle, book exploration alone or with friends, lunchtime, conversation and clean up. Twice-a-day there is "choice time" with music, when children can indulge in what interests them most.

The children are even their own self-governors, convening on the "peace mat" for democratic votes on problems, such as the consequences of not cleaning up. (No time with extra toys, they decided.)

Yearly tuition rates can be nearly half of what other local private schools charge in this area, said Laszlo. The nursery school is close to three half-days and costs \$3,995; the four half-day kindergarten is \$5,495; and the first and second grade full-day class is \$6,595.

Some parents offer their experience in the classroom, like Brian Gestring of Bridgewater, dad of 5-year old Zachary and a formally trained college forensic scientist and professor. Last week Gestring engaged the young children in exciting and wet -- science demonstrations involving water pressure. On another day he explained momentum, involving a wire, a toy truck and a fragile Christmas ball.

"Here, I think they are more centered on the child," he said. "They are stimulating their intellect. This country desperately needs more scientists, and we've got to give them science when they are young, when they are like sponges," he said.

The Wellspring School will hold an open house on Thursday from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. They can be reached at (908) 470-0004 or at www.TheWellspringSchool.org.

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