

New Christian school to open

Organizers in Seminole say the Bible and God need to be put back into the education system to help students learn.



Lighthouse Christian School project supervisor George Tripp watches Jerry Orcutt of Niagara Concrete fill in an 8-foot hole in the floor of the former Seminole Gymnastics and Dance Academy. Accelerated Christian Education Ministries purchased the building for its new school.

By LORRI HELFAND - © St. Petersburg Times, published June 27, 2001

SEMINOLE -- A Christian organization plans to open a private school for up to 125 students at the former Seminole Gymnastics and Dance Academy.

Accelerated Christian Education Ministries paid \$850,000 for the 10,000-square-foot academy at 7633 131st St. in Seminole. The Lighthouse Christian School is to open in late August or early September.

The school, which will serve students in kindergarten through grade 12, is planned to be a model school for Accelerated Christian Education, a Christian-based curriculum used at more than 7,000 schools worldwide. Several private schools in Pinellas County also use the curriculum, which has been around more than 30 years.

Accelerated Christian Education Ministries, formed about two years ago, is a non-profit branch of the School of Tomorrow in Lewisville, Texas. That for-profit organization provides Christian education materials for home schools as well as private schools.

School administrator Matthew Gibbs, who is assistant to the president for the Christian Law Association, a non-profit religious liberties group based in Seminole, said he was approached about a year ago to head the school.

The firm, owned by Gibbs' father, David C. Gibbs Jr., has acted as general counsel for the School of Tomorrow for more than 20 years, said firm ministry representative George Tripp.

Tripp said parents need educational options like Lighthouse Christian School for their children.

"School systems have taken the Bible and God out of school and then ask the question, "Why do we have problems?" " he said.

In Accelerated Christian Education, students work at a skill level, rather than a grade level, and progress at their own speed.

Gibbs said this type of education is advantageous to students who grasp concepts slowly as well as quickly. In mainstream education, Gibbs said, "You're lock-stepped with students your own age. It's kind of like sitting in rush-hour traffic."

The curriculum uses slim workbooks called PACES and teachers facilitate learning rather than lecture. Christianity and lessons in values are interwoven in all disciplines.

"Heroes of the curriculum are church and Christian heroes -- preachers and biblical characters," Gibbs said. Patriotism and respect for leadership also play major roles, he said.

Although the school is not affiliated with a specific church, Gibbs said the school would adhere closely to "Baptist doctrine."

Since the school cannot rely on church affiliation to boost its enrollment, Gibbs said it will solicit students through visits to area churches, communitywide mailings, advertisements and an open house.

"We want young people to come to our school that want to be examples of Christian values," Tripp said.

Although major construction work is not necessary, the former dance and gymnastics school is being remodeled to accommodate the new school. Pastel pink walls have been painted white and a massive gymnasium is being transformed into a multi-purpose room. The school will have two classrooms, or learning centers, an office and boys and girls locker rooms. All work should be completed by the end of July, Gibbs said.

Applications will be accepted within the next two weeks. However, application fees and the cost of tuition have not been determined. For more information about Lighthouse Christian School, call 399-8420.

- Times researcher Catherine Wos contributed to this report

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