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FAMILIES CREATE SCHOOL OF THEIR OWN



ALLISON SMITH, second- and third-grade teacher at St. Monica Academy in Pasadena, collects spelling papers from students. The fledgling private school has an enrollment of 44 students. (Staff Photo by **WALT MANCINI**)

Parent-run St. Monica Academy sets out to meet high standards set by organizers

By Mary Schubert
STAFF WRITER

PASADENA – A start-up with about four dozen “investors” opened for business last month in rented space at an Orange Grove Boulevard church. Its product, organizers hope, will be an academically strong education.

It’s not a dot-com; rather, it’s several local parents who have banded together to form a school that meets their standards.

The result is St. Monica Academy, a fledgling private school with an enrollment of just 44 students from 22 families. Classes started Sept. 5 in three classrooms at Neighborhood Church, 301 N. Orange Grove Blvd.

School headmaster David Burroughs describes the curriculum as challenging and “academically rigorous.” Students wear uniforms and read classic literature, learn languages including Spanish and Latin, memorize poetry, speeches and scripture passages, and study art, music, science and public speaking skills.

“This is not some newfangled approach to teaching. We’re not trying to be cutting edge,” Burroughs said. “Many (parents) are coming here to give their kids the ability to excel, rather than be held back in a group.”

Family involvement will be crucial, from the parent-run school board to the fund-raising activities that will be needed to cover costs that tuition alone can’t handle.

Annual tuition is \$3,500 per child, with family discounts for each additional child.

“What we’re looking for is families who like our approach to education...and who are willing to actively support the school,” Burroughs said.

“We don’t want this to be the type of school where parents write a check and expect us to return fully-formed, fully-educated young men and young women,” he said.

The families have come from nearby towns like Alhambra and Monrovia and from as far as Newhall and West Covina, Burroughs said.

St. Monica is rooted in Catholicism but not tied to a parish church or the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

“We have weekly Mass and everyone is expected to come, but we don’t have any litmus test for faith,” Burroughs said, adding the school is open to non-Catholics.

Nora Urrea and her husband Paul enrolled their fourth- and sixth-grade daughters and second-grade son at St. Monica.

“Their curriculum and the values they’re trying to instill in our children certainly mirrors our home environment,” Urrea said.

“In a public environment, you have to cater to the masses. All the regulations of the state...and the content of some of the books aren’t in line with your way of thinking,” she said.

When the couple saw the school coming together, “we pitched in to make it happen,” Nora Urrea said. “Once I saw the caliber of the teaching staff, I was completely on board.”

Pasadena obstetrician Murphy Goodwin and his wife Joanne decided to send four of their sons – ages 7, 10, and 13-year-old twins – to St. Monica.

Over the years, the Goodwins had tried public and parochial schools for many of their nine kids, but ultimately decided that Joanne would home-school them instead.

“Until eighth grade, we taught them at home. It was a full-time job,” he said. “But we had a chance to be involved in the formation of this school, and the establishment of the curriculum.”

“We were always frustrated in other school situations, having the teachers telling the parents: ‘This is how it’s going to be,’” he said.

“Most school establishments, public or parochial, treat the parents as if they’re outsiders to their children’s education,” Murphy Goodwin added.

“It’s as if: ‘You don’t really know anything; we’re the professional educators.’”

That’s not the philosophy at St. Monica, Burroughs said.

“Parents are the primary educators of their children. We’re here to support them in their job of raising children,” he said.

“The existence of our school shouldn’t be taken as a swipe at any (other school) – public, private or Catholic. The public schools have a difficult job, and they have a different job than us,” Burroughs said.

“When you have 40 students in a class, you can’t teach the way we’re teaching,” he said.

“The (parent-run) board has made a commitment to never have more than 18 students in a class...so we can work with each student according to their strengths and weaknesses,” said Burroughs, who previously worked at Saints Felicitas and Perpetua Church in San Marino and Mayfield Senior School in Pasadena.

Homework is kept to a minimum. Parents won’t see “second-graders hauling pieces of carry-on luggage behind them to bring home all the homework,” Burroughs said.

“Instead, the instruction should take place as much as possible in school.”

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