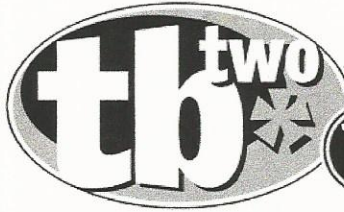


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Morning Star School for the learning disabled expands its high school program

By Gabby D'Annunzio, Clearwater Central Catholic

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At most schools, hearing one boy tell another that he looks "very pleasant and beautiful today" would turn more than a few heads. But at Morning Star Catholic School, moments of sweetness like this are the norm. • Morning Star is a private school in Pinellas Park exclusively for children with learning disabilities, such as autism or processing disorders, that would make learning at a regular school a challenge. Three years ago the K-8 school, complete with religious instruction, opened a high school program, which this year expanded into two portables.

When the high school program began, Phyllis Steele was the only teacher, in a classroom half the size of the new ones, and she remembers everyone was always banging into each other. Now the two classes, one with 11 students, the other with nine, enjoy the increased space and flexibility.

"I like it here," said freshman Kait-lyn McGovern of the high school's new home.



"The hallways and lockers look different."

Now that they're in separate buildings, the students feel as if they've moved up. Thom Laux, the new high school teacher this year, encourages his students to see themselves as role models to the younger children.

Both teachers are grateful for the way the new portables give them room to divide the students into small groups. "I have nine students in the classroom, and they're at six different levels when it comes to math," said Laux. There is also a broad spectrum when it comes to reading. Steele says her class ranges from non-readers to students who are reading on grade level, and she often works with them one-on-one.

"The flexibility of the portables really helps with that," Steele said. If she needs to, she can give students written directions or visual cues without taking away from the group lesson.

Laux said now that he can arrange his students' desks by ability, during independent study times he can circle the classroom knowing precisely what to expect at each section of the classroom.

Next year, four of the students will be seniors, graduating from Morning Star with a Special Diploma that allows them to go on to a trade school or get their GED, if that's an option.

Both teachers are trying to get their students to become more independent. Steele started the first day of school by showing them a recipe book and teaching them to make cream cheese sandwiches. "There were many problems with spreading the cream cheese," she said, but whether they live alone or with their parents, she wants her students to at least be able to fix themselves a snack. She also teaches them sewing, woodworking and other basic tasks.

Though at times the teachers struggle to meet everyone's needs, they try to create an encouraging environment. "I have the best teacher in history," said sophomore Colt Dininos.

Samantha Klieforth, who went to a public elementary school before coming to Morning Star in middle school, said she greatly prefers Morning Star to her old school. "Every time I would write, they would give me bad grades," she said. "Here, no one does."

Bullying is less likely, too. The degree to which the students care about each other is almost unparalleled in traditional high schools, according to the teachers.

"They respect each other deeply," Laux said.

Accomplishments that mean little in the world outside are highly celebrated here. Steele attributed the pleasant atmosphere to the school's faith basis: "It's like that Bible verse; only when you become like a little child can you enter the Kingdom of Heaven." She said her students are like little children because "no one tries to be cool here, (they) can be who they are."

In the new space, staff and students all share an obvious positive attitude. Jenny Downey, a junior who has been at Morning Star since second grade, put it simply enough: "It's more fun to be in portables."

Her best memory from all the years she's been at the school?

"Everything."

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