

Catholic school opens for students with autism

ST. LOUIS – A new Catholic school for children with autism is opening Sept. 5 in the St. Louis Archdiocese.

The development of the school, the St. Gemma Program for Children With Autism and Developmental Disabilities in Ellisville, is in response to a survey sponsored by the archdiocesan Department of Special Education.

Response to the survey was overwhelming, said Michelle Wright, the mother of a student who will be attending St. Gemma. “So the department moved forward and started the school. ... St. Gemma demonstrates our Catholic community’s commitment and responsiveness to the emerging needs of that community.”

The school, in a one-story former residence on the grounds of the Passionist nuns’ monastery, will serve children ages 6 through 12. There will eventually be two classes, each serving five students, and each class will have a trained, certified teacher and a trained teacher’s aide.

A community volunteer will assist with the students, and a trained speech and language pathologist will provide therapy. Occupational therapy will be available should parents wish to contract for it, said Sandy Sperino of the Department of Special Education.

Monsignor Vernon Gardin, vicar general of the archdiocese and the department’s executive director, described the new school as “simply another way we continue our mission of providing quality education, success and a living faith for children with special learning needs.”

“That has been our mission for decades, and it continues in this new program,” he said. “Every child has dignity and is a blessing from God, and we do all we can to further that belief.”

In 1950 the Archdiocese of St. Louis became the first Catholic archdiocese or diocese to have a special education department. Today it includes two schools, numerous learning centers, a high school enrichment program, two preschools, a vocational program, a guidance center and a religious education ministry.

“To have St. Gemma, faith-based and on the grounds of a convent, is wonderful,” said Wright, the mother of 10-year-old Victoria, who will be attending the school.

Catherine Forder, a longtime teacher with the Department of Special Education who will be teaching at St. Gemma, received additional training this summer at the Judevine Center for Autism in St. Louis County.

"I went through the training to give me an overall knowledge of autism and how to provide the educational needs for each of these children," she told the St. Louis Review, the archdiocesan newspaper. "We are trying to individualize the educational needs of each child," she added.

Both Wright and Forder referred to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistics that autism affects one child in every 150.

"We are diagnosing it more now," Forder said, "and there is a huge scale of autism. Early diagnosis and help are really important. There are many people with autism who lead very successful lives. They've learned how to manage their autism through programs like this."

Forder said she is excited to be teaching with the program and said the "archdiocese needs this."

Jan Butler, another longtime Department of Special Education professional, is the speech and language pathologist at St. Gemma. Butler became interested in autism when her daughter, now a high school student, was diagnosed with autism. Butler is a certified autism consultant and has more than 200 hours of additional training in autism.

"I think this is desperately needed. There is a huge population out there that is not being reached academically because they can't quite function in the regular classroom. But they have the potential to make it into a regular classroom," Butler said. "I'm really excited about this program opening up."