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Breaking the 'assembly-line approach' to learning

Charter school built on curiosity

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When visiting Carolina School for Inquiry, don't call a class "first grade," "second grade" or "third grade."

"That's the assembly-line approach," said Victoria Dixon-Mokeba, the school's director and a lead teacher.

Instead, the multi-age classes are called "primary," "early elementary" and "upper elementary." The school uses an "inquiry-based" curriculum that capitalizes on children's natural curiosity.

The curriculum aligns with state learning standards, but also encourages students to identify subjects or ideas they want to learn more about. Teachers guide students in learning what South Carolina says each child should know while the children simultaneously explore ideas and subjects that interest them, such as studying science and geography while learning more about an interesting animal.

The new Richland 1 charter school's concept is so appealing that Carolina School for Inquiry used a lottery to select its class of 90 from 149 applicants. More than 30 are on a waiting list.

The new school opened Thursday, and lead teacher Stacie Mandrell received four more inquiries from interested families that day alone.

The first day set the tone for big things to come, teachers and parents said. The children said they didn't want to go home after school Thursday.

"We did coloring, and we read a note about math," said 7-year-old Anna Laughlin.

The multi-age system groups two grade levels in one class, which drew parent Yolanda Cooper to enroll her 7-year-old daughter.

"That will challenge her more, having older students in her class," said Cooper, whose daughter attended Hyatt Park Elementary last year.

School officials and parents already have big plans for the fledgling school, which is housed in Crane Creek Community Center on Fairfield Road in north Columbia.

"I want to put this place on the map," said parent-student association president Rhonda Coward of Blythewood. People say "this isn't the 'greatest area' to live, but it is great."

Coward foresees a Carolina School for Inquiry middle and high school, too.



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Carolina School for Inquiry students Tarlon Stewart, left, and Benjamin Eidson, both 6, build things Monday during free exploration time at the Richland 1 charter school.



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Kaylee Mickle, left, and Katie Tuten laugh with teacher Stacie Mandrell as they figure out math problems during 'circle time' Monday at Carolina School for Inquiry. The school uses an inquiry-based curriculum that capitalizes on students' curiosity.

"I already envision it," she said, testing the ring of renaming Fairfield Road "Education Boulevard."

Enrollment is open to any child living in Richland 1, plus a limited number of out-of-district students. The initial class of 90 is from across Richland 1; about 65 percent are black, 30 percent are white, and 5 percent are of other races.

As a charter, Carolina School for Inquiry receives state funding. It is considered a public school but is separate from Richland 1 and cannot charge tuition.

The Richland County Recreation Commission and school officials are aflutter with the school's potential impact on the community. The commission has been renovating the once-dilapidated Crane Creek Elementary School into a community center, where a sheriff's station will be housed along with other community services.

With \$25,000 in lease money coming from the school and other contributions, the center's largest wing has been renovated. And the school secured free, refurbished computers for a computer lab that will open to the public in afternoons and evenings, as will the school library.

USC educators clinched a grant to run an art class for the children, and the school will offer other specialist teachers in Spanish and music.

"We're just so happy, I can't even believe it," Coward said.

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