

Miriam School Celebrates 50 Years Of Unique Service

By Casey Godwin



Tucked away in a quiet neighborhood in Webster Groves, sits a place that offers hope for children with disabilities. The Miriam School, which is celebrating its 50th year, provides children ages 4 through 14 a specialized environment in which to learn. The school caters to children with learning disabilities, attention deficits, speech and language delays and fine or gross motor delays.

"Often public schools are not built with these kinds of needs in mind," said School Director Joan Holland. "They'll just have a small area designated for special need kids, but here they have the room they need."

At first glance classrooms and hallways in the school look as though they would in any ordinary elementary or middle school. In the kindergarten class, children are engrossed in activity at small tables scattered throughout the room. In the third grade class, the teacher sits behind her desk while students stay busy with school work.

A class lets out and children fill the hallway. A closer look at the children in the hallway gives the first sign that this is no ordinary school. Most of the kids are bouncing down the hall on giant balls.

"Children use the balls to help them get out excess energy," said Andrew Thorp, executive director of the Miriam Foundation. "A few laps with those balls in the halls can help them refocus."

This particular group of children is moving to the sensory development room. Disguised as an elaborate playroom, it is actually a place where students work on their fine and gross motor skills by doing a variety of activities, including spinning and bouncing. Those with coordination issues are greatly benefited by this.

Next door, a speech therapist is working one-on-one with another child.

"A lot of the younger kids have regular articulation issues, with trouble saying R or W," Holland said. "We have four speech language therapists and four occupational therapists on staff."

The classrooms have an amplification system and teachers wear microphones in order to project their voices. Holland said this allows children to focus more on the teacher than on background noises.

"It's a challenge to get the remedial work in that they need," said Holland, who has been with the school for 17 years. "Some students may have difficulty reading while others have language issues. The goal is to make sure the kids have a general education while working with their needs."

Another feature of the school is the observation rooms attached to nearly every room.

"This is so parents can watch the child without them knowing," Holland said. "Kids will do things at school that they don't do at home and this gives parents a chance to see that and to see what we're working on so they can reinforce it at home."

The school, which has a student population of 96 in grades kindergarten through 8, was the first school in Missouri to dedicate itself to educating developmentally challenged children with at least an average potential. It's come a long way since its inception in 1956, with only two students.

The teacher to student ratio is kept low, typically with only 10 children in a classroom. Every teacher at the school is certified in special education.

The school is operated by the Miriam Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The foundation, which is nearing 100 years in operation, provides assistance to families challenged by disability or illness.

"The foundation provides \$600,000 in financial assistance every year to students at Miriam, which is a big help to parents," Thorp said. "We're talking about parents who really don't have a choice, their kids have to come here, or at least need this, and the tuition is \$21,000 to come here."

The foundation provides financial assistance to approximately 60 percent of the students attending the school. Funds are raised in a variety of ways, which include estate sales and profit from a resale shop on Big Bend Blvd., as well as donations.

"Seventy percent of the parents give, which is great considering they are already paying tuition," Thorp said. "And, we've had 100 percent of the board and teachers donate, which really matters."

On May 3, the foundation won the \$30,000 Deaconess Foundation Award to help fund expansion programs offered by the Miriam School. The award was part of the Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation Competition through Washington University. Miriam was one of six award winners that proved their ventures have social value and the ability to implement its plans.

"We plan to expand our services to include non-students," Thorp said.

An after school program for non-Miriam students will give parents a "one-stop-shop" for therapies and services for their children with learning disabilities.

"Children come here in a state of feeling like they are just complete failures, and we help give them back their confidence," Thorp said.