



Galapagos' lesson plans ready

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ROCKFORD — The first day of school is less than one week away, and neat stacks of boxes and rows of little chairs lined hallways at Galapagos Rockford Charter School this afternoon.

Instructors — Galapagos-speak for “teachers” — were busy taking inventory of tables, chairs and desks in each classroom. Others were unpacking, decorating classrooms and preparing bulletin boards.

By 8 a.m. next Tuesday, hallways will be clear, and about 100 kindergarten through third-grade students will have started their first day of school.

Galapagos is the second charter school to open in the Rockford School District. The school's proposal listed 200 students as capacity, but officials recently decided to keep it at 100. The school stopped taking new students, or “scholars,” on Monday, but children can be put on a waiting list.

It made more sense to begin with a smaller staff and create a close-knit team at the school, Galapagos Executive Director Michael Lane said.

“We're very happy with where we are,” Lane said.

The school will have two kindergartens with about 15 children in each class, and one class each of first, second and third grades with about 21 children each.

There also is one science teacher and one social studies teacher.

The Illinois State Board of Education performed a walk-through of the school today, a requirement before the school can officially house students.

Galapagos, housed in the old St. Patrick School at 2605 School St., has new furniture and doors in the main entrance, and new tile flooring has replaced the old, dark brown, cracked floor.

Each teacher has his or her own classroom library, and several books were purchased through a grant from the Walton Family Foundation. That \$250,000 grant also helped purchase laptop computers for

teachers, curriculum, additional program ming and developing a literacy coordinator position for the 2010-11 school year.

Galapagos also secured a \$400,000 loan with IFF, a community development financial institution, for such building renovations as asbestos removal and updating the building to meet health and life-safety code.

Professional development with Galapagos' Rockford and Chicago staffs began Aug. 3, and the Rockford staff on Monday observed the first day of school at Galapagos' Chicago campus. The school first opened in 2005 and, like in the plan for the Rockford model, added a grade level each year.

Rockford has three approved charter schools. Legacy Academy of Excellence opened Aug. 17 to about 300 students in grades K-5 at the former Evergreen School, 4029 Prairie Road. CICS Rockford Charter School will open in fall 2010 as a K-4 school at Patriots' Gateway Center, 615 S. Fifth St.

First day plans

Galapagos has an open-door policy — after day one. Parents won't be allowed into classrooms on the first day, much like the policy at the Legacy Academy.

After Tuesday, a parent can come into the school and observe their child's classroom. Galapagos officials said they have made that policy clear to parents.

Before a child is registered, he or she attends orientation, and parents have several chances to ask questions about the school.

The school administration also has sent four or five letters, and a schoolwide newsletter has been sent regularly since late July.

Each child's teacher also has sent a personalized letter to his or her incoming students.

There's also an open house Thursday for parents to tour the school and ask any last-minute questions.

All that communication is more than what's typically done at Galapagos' Chicago campus because charter schools are new to Rockford and don't already have support like they do in Chicago, Lane said.

“We want to make sure everyone is successful,” Lane said.



Lessons learned

Galapagos officials saw the way Legacy officials handled their first day of classes, but they aren't comparing the schools.

Their goal: “How do we continue with the Galapagos way?” Lane said.

The Galapagos way includes starting the day in the school's multipurpose room with breakfast, the Pledge of Allegiance and the Galapagos pledge. Then students will go to their classrooms and learn school rules, expectations and even talk about college.

At Galapagos, the expectation is that all students will have the opportunity to attend college, and that college mentality is the focus from day one.

The idea is to get away from perceiving college as being for only select people and to seeing it as an opportunity for all students.

“That's not even a question that comes up anymore,” Lane said.

College pennants were sitting in an open box, ready to adorn the halls.

The flair represents a variety of colleges — historically black colleges and universities, Ivy League and Big 10 schools.

Teachers will have larger banners outside their classrooms from their alma maters.

All the school's classrooms won't be used right away, but the school's lockers will come in handy. Students will have just what they need for class in their classroom, which helps with the clutter, third-grade teacher Rebecca Bennett said.

She was organizing books today and planning her classroom's layout.

“This room is going to be really fun,” she said. “I want them to want to be here. I don't want it to be my classroom, I want it to be our classroom.”

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