

Private Academy For Children With Special Needs Opens New West County Facility

By DIANE PLATTNER

A unique Christian academy for children with special needs recently opened a new facility in West County.

On Aug. 17, approximately 150 people attended the Promise Christian Academy dedication and ribbon cutting ceremony to commemorate the opening of its new facility at 800 Maryville Center Drive in Town & Country.

Classes began Aug. 21 at the state-of-the-art modern facility, which is meant to accommodate the academy's growing student population of 13 students, ages 7 through 14, who are divided into two classrooms. The academy formerly had just one classroom at Kirk Day School, located at Mason and Ladue Roads in Town & Country.

"We now have many windows, unlike before when we were in the basement," said Tena Harjoe, Promise's special education lead teacher and administrator. "We have beautiful views of trees. It makes a huge difference and keeps the children calm and happy."

That is important because Promise is one of only a few Christian schools in the country that caters to children with certain disabilities, including autism and cerebral palsy. Harjoe said the academy has six staff members with professional backgrounds, including occupational therapy, speech and language, handicapped and behavioral disorders.

"It's like the Ritz Carlton of schools in this area," said Colleen Dolnick, parent of an 8-year-old child with autism who attends the Academy. "There are very few schools for kids with special needs



Promise Christian Academy has opened for students with special needs.

and Christian-based learning. They are very loving, nurturing, and the staff's level of expertise is among the top in the country. It is just amazing how in tune they are with the children's needs and every aspect of their lives. Even outside of the classroom at home, they have such a desire to help the child and family. You can't find a school like that."

Promise focuses on vocation, and students take a weekly trip to Kirk Day School where they participate in physical education and other activities. In addition, Promise students take field trips to other area venues, such as the zoo and the St. Louis Science Center.

Annual tuition is \$11,000 per student at the Academy, which also accepts donations, including a family donation of computers for each child.

"It is very modern," Harjoe said. "It is more than we could ever ask for. It's been a blessing from day 1. There have been no meltdowns. The kids are doing just great."