

Education: A Clintonville school goes back to nature

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Red Oak Community School offers “education through nature immersion.”

With trees for climbing, ropes for swinging, rocks for pounding and water for splashing, recess at the new Red Oak Community School in Clintonville seems more like a summer camp than your typical elementary-school break. It’s just one of the unusual aspects of the tiny school, which just completed its first year and is barreling into its second.

For an hour each morning and afternoon, the school’s 37 students stoke their imaginations in the wooded recess area as their teachers observe, answer questions and occasionally intercede. When the hour is over, they return to two indoor classrooms for a snack and academic time. “Having the full hour to play calms their brains,” says director Cheryl Ryan, one of a small group of Central Ohio moms who started the school last year as an alternative to a traditional elementary.

The idea for the school began in mid-2015 as an online discussion among parents with preschoolers at School for Young Children in Clintonville about the creation of a new school with plentiful outdoor playtime (they called it “education through nature immersion”) and no testing, grades or homework. By October 2015, papers were filed with the state to start a private school. They decided to follow Ohio’s learning standards to guide the academics and to hire accredited teachers to shape the school’s curriculum. They found classrooms to rent, as well as outdoor space, at the First Unitarian Universalist Church, which also houses the School for Young Children.

Red Oak accepted children ages 5 to 8 during its first year and will expand to include kids as old as 11 in the upcoming year. Eventually students up to age 14 will enroll, Ryan says.

Red Oak is not a charter school, Ryan explains. It is 100 percent tuition-based, charging from \$5,610 to \$6,480 for its five-day program for the upcoming year. Home-schooled children also can attend two or three days a week for a lesser amount.

The school was just what Kacy Wiant of Delaware wanted for her son, Colten, 8, who started there in November after more than two years at a public school. “Colten is a really kinesthetic [hands-on] learner, and public school wasn’t fitting his needs,” Wiant says. “Here he gets to climb trees and play in the woods, and his personality is shining through more than ever.”

Maureen Alley, one of two Red Oak teachers, taught for 15 years before she leaped at the chance to join the new school. “I was excited about the opportunity to build a school that would be the best for kids; a lot of traditional schools don’t take that into consideration,” she says. Students are grouped by ability rather than grade level, Alley says, following a model used at the Antioch School in Yellow Springs. “We’ll have a whole-group lesson to talk about a concept, then the kids break into [smaller] groups and continue to study the concept at their own level,” she says. And although no homework is given, students often practice what they’ve learned at home, parents tell her.

“To me, this is how a school should look,” Wiant says. “It was definitely a leap of faith for us, but being able to focus on education rather than tests is amazing.”