

# Baby steps for new school

Parents create place that meets a need in Chicago



## STORY AND PHOTOS BY DANIELLE BRAFF

**T**ucked inside an unassuming building, steps from President Obama's home in Hyde Park, four children practice a play on a recent school day.

"What would you say to the woodcutters?" one of the two teachers asks Ella, a curious girl with big eyes and long, wavy hair who was pretending to be a butterfly.

"Oh no," Ella shouts. "Stop. Go away. This is our home."

The woodcutter retreats.

From afar, the small group of students, who range from kindergarten through second grade, seem like any other group of students. They hug each other in the middle of the play. They talk.

And when it is time to clean up, they scatter like

birds, pretending not to hear their teachers' pleas to figure out what was out of place in the room.

But looking a little closer at this intimate classroom, there are signs that these students are just a little different.

During the play, Elliott wanders off for a few seconds, over to a beanbag on the side of the classroom, sits down and rocks for a bit before one of his teachers rubs his back and carefully maneuvers him back to the group.

When Elliott decides his mask is bothering his face,

his teacher quickly swaps it for a hand puppet, no questions asked.

The school is City Elementary, founded in September 2014 for diverse learners who are highly functioning but aren't well suited to Chicago's public or private schools. The tuition is \$20,000 annually, which has been supplemented with donations, and the school is preparing to apply for Chicago Public School funding with the Illinois Board of Education.

Unlike traditional schools, this one has no desks, and the children take frequent

breaks to shake away their energy. They grab scooter boards and race them down the halls for two minutes between activities, and there is a routine to their days, which is never, ever disrupted.

Blue drapes in the three classrooms cut the glare so there's never an abundance of light, and the teachers focus on social learning and help students understand how to be a part of a group and to learn others' perspectives.

It's exactly what Elliott needed, despite what his parents originally thought.

When the couple enrolled their preschool-aged son into an elite private school, they were thrilled. But just two weeks into the school year, Elliott's teacher called, saying something might be wrong.

Parent-teacher conferences were a disaster.



Eventually, a formal evaluation determined that Elliott was on the autism spectrum. The couple enrolled him in a therapeutic preschool program where he thrived academically and socially, but when it was time to send him to elementary school, they couldn't find a school that could meet his academic and socio-emotional needs.

So they co-founded City Elementary.

Nearly all of the parents who send their children to the school are doing it after finding out that their children couldn't thrive elsewhere.

"Both my husband and I came to the same conclusion when looking for a school for our older child who is autistic, and I ended up quitting my job and homeschooling her," Penny Visser says. "My daughter joined the school in February, and it's been incredible. She's doing unbelievably well because she's in a setting that's conducive to



her particular learning style."

City Elementary is one of a handful of schools in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs that are popping up for special needs children who aren't quite fitting in Chicago schools.

These include the Chicago Autism Academy in Frankfort, founded in 2005, and the Alexander Leigh Center for Autism, which opened its doors in 2004.

"In the education world, kids are fit into a structure that they need to adapt to and that doesn't fit all the kids," says Karen Daiter, head of City Elementary. "Sitting at a desk and listening doesn't fit all the kids. What we grew up with isn't working."

City Elementary has three rooms for its four students (it plans on increasing its numbers, slowly through its rolling admissions, and adding one grade

annually through fifth grade). One room is devoted to sensory needs. It's filled with everything from a quiet tent to cushion discs to balancing tools for the children to help develop sensory integration and muscle response.

This room is incredibly important for these little learners.

"Without their sensory needs being met, they won't be able to explore or be curious," says Leah Harp, vice president of the board of the school and one of the founding parents.

She also knows from experience.

Harp wanted to send her son to the local public elementary school, but, she says, being in the school building with a bulging class size would have been too overwhelming for him.

So she called 25 Chicago-area private schools to find out what they could offer.

"They said it would be seven hours in a classroom, but that

*continued on page 30*



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wouldn't work for him," says Harp, explaining that her son, like all the children there, needed the sensory plan time. "We didn't want to move to the suburbs, and we didn't want to homeschool."



but no desks, where the children do the bulk of their academic learning.

That's where Kate Bonfante, the lead teacher, works with each child individually, adjusting to their sensory and cognitive challenges. She's implemented

learning strategies focusing on each of their abilities.

City Elementary is small now, but it's gotten a lot of attention from Chicago parents.

Daiter says they expect the enrollment to grow to seven by September, and there have been requests to open a North Side school as well.

Another dream is to open a city school for kids who aren't verbal.

But, like the students they're serving, these administrators are taking baby steps. For now.

*Danielle Braff lives with her family in River Forest.*

So she helped figure out what needed to be in place to help these children flourish.

One of those elements is the activity classroom, which is filled with plants and globes and books.

"It's where they learn through their environment," Harp says.

It's also where Ania Gardner, the classroom aide, uses horticultural and art therapy. The former marketing consultant changed career paths when she had two children with special needs. She is now studying special education and being certified as a horticultural therapist.

Finally, there's the main classroom, which houses tables



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