

School of Imagination becomes reality

Dublin program melds special needs children with those who benefit from low student-teacher ratio

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For Charlene Sigman, imagination has become reality.

The founder of the speech therapy program Happy Talkers wanted to place children with special needs — and those without — where they can attend school together.

So the School of Imagination, the first inclusionary preschool program in the Tri-Valley, was born.

The preschool is held at the Crosswinds Church on Sierra Court in Dublin. Parents and the church helped build a playground, so the program can be certified by the state, Sigman said. She hopes the state will license her program to have more than 30 children.

"This is pretty exciting," Sigman said. "It's something that I wanted to do."

Sigman's preschool program is aimed at children with mild speech problems who are almost ready to attend regular public school but need extra support. It also is for preschool children who could benefit from a lower student-teacher ratio — 4 to 1 — than other Tri-Valley programs.

The teachers have degrees in speech language pathology or related degrees, as well as in teaching.

The preschool program is an extension of Sigman's Happy Talkers, with a structured, hands-on curriculum and individual attention.

Sigman, a licensed speech therapist, founded Happy Talkers in 2000 as a play-based therapy program for children with speech disorders that uses music and interaction. It was designed as the opposite of treatment in a clinical setting. Sigman gives free consultations to



TEACHER KIM ALBERTY (left) leads the discussion during preschoolers' circle time at the School of Imagination on Wednesday in Dublin. (SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD MediaNews staff)

parents and helps them find the best way to help their children who need it, be it through her program or not. In 2006, she won an award for public service.

Pleasanton resident Marilyn Weinstein, who has two children enrolled in the school, helped start a parents committee that helped with the playground and other projects to get the preschool off the ground. Getting parents together to help Sigman and her teachers was not a problem, she said.

"It's a really great place for kids," Weinstein said. "It's non-denominational and academic, it's a little nurturing environment."

Sigman said having programs that can help children with special needs is important, especially in light of recent news of autism. According to a new study from the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, one out of 150 8-year-old children has the disease.

"There is nothing like this (school) in the area and it is needed badly," Sigman said. "These kids are not leaving us and we need to make sure they get educated."