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Horizon excited about additions

Colleen Sparks colleen.sparks@arizonarepublic.com

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Horizon Community Learning Center was bursting with energy this week, with parents, students and staff eager to start new programs - including expanded pre-kindergarten classes - and a fresh school year.

"It's so magical. The first day of school is always so magical, to watch the kids and the dynamics of the kids and they look around and they're exploring a new room," said Susan Hale, an Ahwatukee pre-kindergarten parent.

Her daughter, Allison, 4, was a little apprehensive, sticking close to her mother when she first entered the pre-kindergarten class. But once introduced to another little girl, Kaycie Fidler, 4, she lit up when they discovered both like princesses.

Horizon serves about 1,500 students from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade. Classes began Monday.

It has added a pre-kindergarten foundations class for younger 4-year-olds than enrolled in the past.

The Ahwatukee Foothills charter school also has added more high school classes and plans to work with Arizona State University to bring more support and resources to the school.

School veterans have taken on new leadership roles, including Larry Pieratt, who left his job as the school's executive director but is continuing his role as chief executive officer. He recently started work as ASU's executive director for the University Public Schools Initiative and hopes to bring new ASU support to Horizon.

"It's all about lighthouses, being a beacon for children to help them embrace knowledge and grow academically and being a beacon for other teachers in other schools and sharing what we know and what we've learned," said Jan Gleeson, the school's new executive director.

"We just love what we do here. We have such great students that know they can share ideas," said Gleeson, formerly the school's primary and intermediate schools principal. Laura Wanstreet, a former Horizon master teacher, has taken over as

principal at Horizon Honors Primary and Horizon Honors Intermediate schools.

As of Monday, 30 children had enrolled in the pre-kindergarten class that serves children who will turn 5 between Sept. 1 and March 31, said Andrew Creighton-Harank, the teacher. He said 20 students meet in the morning and 10 in the afternoon.

Previously, Horizon offered a kindergarten foundations class for children who turned 5 between Sept. 1 and Dec. 31, but it wanted to expand to serve younger children ready for the experience, he said.

Children learn where to put their backpacks and other classroom rules, play with puzzles, Legos and other toys and read, count, learn some basic French and Spanish phrases in a curriculum similar to the traditional kindergarten classes, Creighton-Harank said.

Each pre-kindergarten class lasts three hours and students don't participate in physical education class or field trips.

Kim Fidler, Kaycie's mother, said her daughter, who had been in preschool previously, was "very, very excited" to start pre-kindergarten. She said she thinks pre-kindergarten helps children socialize and improve their reading and writing skills.

"This is the first time that she's come home from school and has actually initiated talking about school," Fidler said.

Parent Chris Donahue said his twins, Anne Marie and Daniel, 4, had big smiles on their faces after pre-kindergarten.

"I think it helps them to get ready for kindergarten," Donahue said. "(Creighton-Harank) introduces so many things to the kids in such a fun way that it is very educational. He lets the kids kind of go with it."

Starting the regular kindergarten class was exciting for Ahwatukee resident Natalie Huffman, 5, who said she played with blocks, colored and made five new friends on Monday.

Her mother, Karen Huffman, said she took a day off work to see Natalie and her son, Bryan, 7, off on the big day at Horizon, but her children were happy to get to class.

"Natalie went to preschool and was excited about coming to school," Huffman said.

Pieratt said research shows the earlier children start the educational process, "the more successful they will be over time."

He said it's too early to give specifics, but Horizon would like to establish a formal program where ASU student teachers work in Grades K-8 at the charter school and adjunct professors visit.

Pieratt also said the dream is that ASU's honors, math, science and engineering programs will join forces with Horizon to assist its seventh through 12th grades. That will allow students to explore engineering, science and research fields.

It's possible that Horizon Honors High School's juniors and seniors, as well as high school students around the state, will be able to take dual-enrollment classes with ASU, said Eugene Garcia, ASU's vice president for the educational partnerships.

Pieratt said the new partnerships with ASU probably won't start until next school year.

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