

## A new school's old-school ties

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Day after day, Layla Raye-Ryan asked the same question: "Is this the day I go to my new school?" The big day finally arrived yesterday. Dressed in a crisp, new khaki-and-white uniform and a pink jacket, and bearing a pink backpack, Layla, 4, joined 35 other children from preschool through first grade at the opening of Community Partnership School in North Philadelphia.

The private elementary school for inner-city children is a U.S. first and an unusual experiment, national educators say. Germantown Academy, the venerable private school in Fort Washington, founded the Community Partnership school with Project HOME to provide for bright inner-city youngsters the same academic program it offers at its leafy campus - but for a fraction of Germantown Academy's tuition.

Project HOME, the nonprofit organization that Sister Mary Scullion founded in 1989 in an effort to help break the cycle of poverty and homelessness, will provide social services and support for pupils' families. "We have been working on this for eight or nine years," said the Rev. Keith Williams Sr., pastor of a Nicetown church and a Germantown Academy parent who serves on the new school's board. "It's a dream come true."

The school uses GA's lower-school curriculum; limits class size to 12 children; begins its seven-hour day with breakfast; and provides up to four hours of after-school activities. Charles G. Muir, a former head of GA's lower school, oversees the staff of three experienced teachers and two assistants.

"I think it's a great opportunity for an education I couldn't otherwise afford," said Aisha Raye, Layla's mother, a licensed practical nurse.

"I think it's fantastic," Elvira Savage said after snapping photographs of daughter Miyoshi Savage-Hadid, 4; godson Donnell Blackson, 6; and niece Aanisha Savage, 6, in the school hallway. "It's beyond words!"

The school, which is ultimately to extend through fifth grade, is located in Project HOME's Honickman Learning Center and Comcast Technology Labs on Judson Street near Diamond Street.

"It is a real opportunity for these children to have a bright future," Scullion said. "Every child in our city should have an opportunity like this."

Other private schools have opened publicly funded charter schools, but educators and officials at the National Association of Independent Schools in Washington said this was the first time one private school had founded another private school for inner-city youngsters in partnership with a social-service agency.

Parents pay between \$11,470 and \$21,095 to send their children to GA for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. But Community Partnership has a sliding fee scale based on family income. Some families will pay only \$300. The typical family will contribute \$1,200 toward a total cost of \$14,000 per child.

The school gets no public funds except for federal lunch money for some students. The founders say they raised \$1.07 million from individuals and foundations to open. And they're embarking on a fund-raising campaign to keep the doors open, create an endowment and - ultimately - own their own building.

James Connors, head of Germantown Academy, said school leaders began considering an inner-city program after they had to turn away promising minority students at sixth grade and above because they had learning gaps. The new school is beginning with students ages 4 to 6. He said Community Partnership's goal was to ensure that young inner-city children are prepared to succeed at GA or any top college preparatory school in the area.

All the children at Community Partnership were selected after meeting the Germantown Academy admissions criteria, including tests and interviews with parents and children. Nearly all who applied were accepted.

"We have lots of programs in the public sector for helping kids who are behind or have difficulties," Connors said. "Having programs for kids who are advanced is just as important." Lynn Gadsden, who stepped down from Germantown Academy's board to head the new school's board, said admissions officers from Germantown Academy and Episcopal Academy in Merion who screened the students told her: " 'We'd take these kids at Episcopal. We'd take these kids at GA.' They are bright and eager and interesting."

But Connors said the most important ingredient Germantown Academy brings to the new school is a student-centered approach to learning that is possible with such small classes.

"The idea is to advance a kid according to his or her developmental needs and, at the same time, push a class forward," he said.

Educators in the region and elsewhere said they were intrigued by the new school.

"It's a wonderful experiment," said Peter J. Kuriloff, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. "People are very curious about how it's going to go."

Charles Tesconi, an American University professor who studies child poverty and education, said he hoped organizers planned to measure the students' progress. Community Partnership officials say that's part of their plan, because they hope their school inspires similar projects.

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For photos of the school's orientation and first day, go to <http://go.philly.com/partnerschool>

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