

School stresses creativity, not rules

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Leaders say flexibility lets student body of 29 achieve individual goals

By TOYA LYNN STEWART
Staff Writer

FORT WORTH — One classroom. Four grade levels. And 12 students of varying ages.

To some, it's a description that harkens back to the days of one-room schoolhouses.

But it's a present-day reality for youngsters at the Center for Creative Living School in East Fort Worth.

"The reason I started the school was to have a creative place to teach and for my children to attend," said Dian McClain, who founded the private school in 1974 and serves as its director of education.

In addition to the classroom for the dozen students in grades five through eight, a separate room houses 17 pupils from kindergarten through fourth grade. There are two teachers in each room.

There's also a preschool on the campus with 21 students taught



EVANS CAGLAGE/Staff Photographer

Taylor Hazelwood, 12, soaks up a book before lunch in an antique tub at the Center for Creative Living School in Fort Worth.

by five teachers who work split shifts.

"I wanted a place where children could be intellectually stimulated, where they could explore who they were and be OK with who they are."

To help accomplish those goals, the school relies on the students as much as its instructors.

"The children do brainstorm-

ing exercises and have input into what is taught and the way it is taught," Ms. McClain said. "There's a lot of interactive participation in classes. We have small groups and peers helping peers."

Recently, the students decided how they would study a lesson about the human digestive sys-

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Photos by EVANS CAGLAGE/Staff Photographer

Founder and teacher Dian McClain talks with students about their current project on human digestion. Teachers and students determine when it's time to move ahead based on a lesson's progress.

School emphasizes creativity

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tem. One group of students opted to watch a video that included vocabulary words. Then they took turns explaining definitions to each other. Another group colored pictures of the digestive system and cut them out to make a model.

In another part of the classroom, a boy used a dictionary to find the words. Another girl decided that she, too, would work solo and relied on a science textbook.

"Students know that every assignment for each student could be different," Ms. McClain said. "We talk about it so they feel OK about it."

There are other things that set the school apart from traditional institutions.

No homework is assigned because students are expected to complete their work at school. No textbooks are used cover-to-cover, except for math. Textbooks are used simply as references. Students help brainstorm lessons and activities and address their teachers by their first names. Weeklong field trips are taken to complement Texas history lessons.

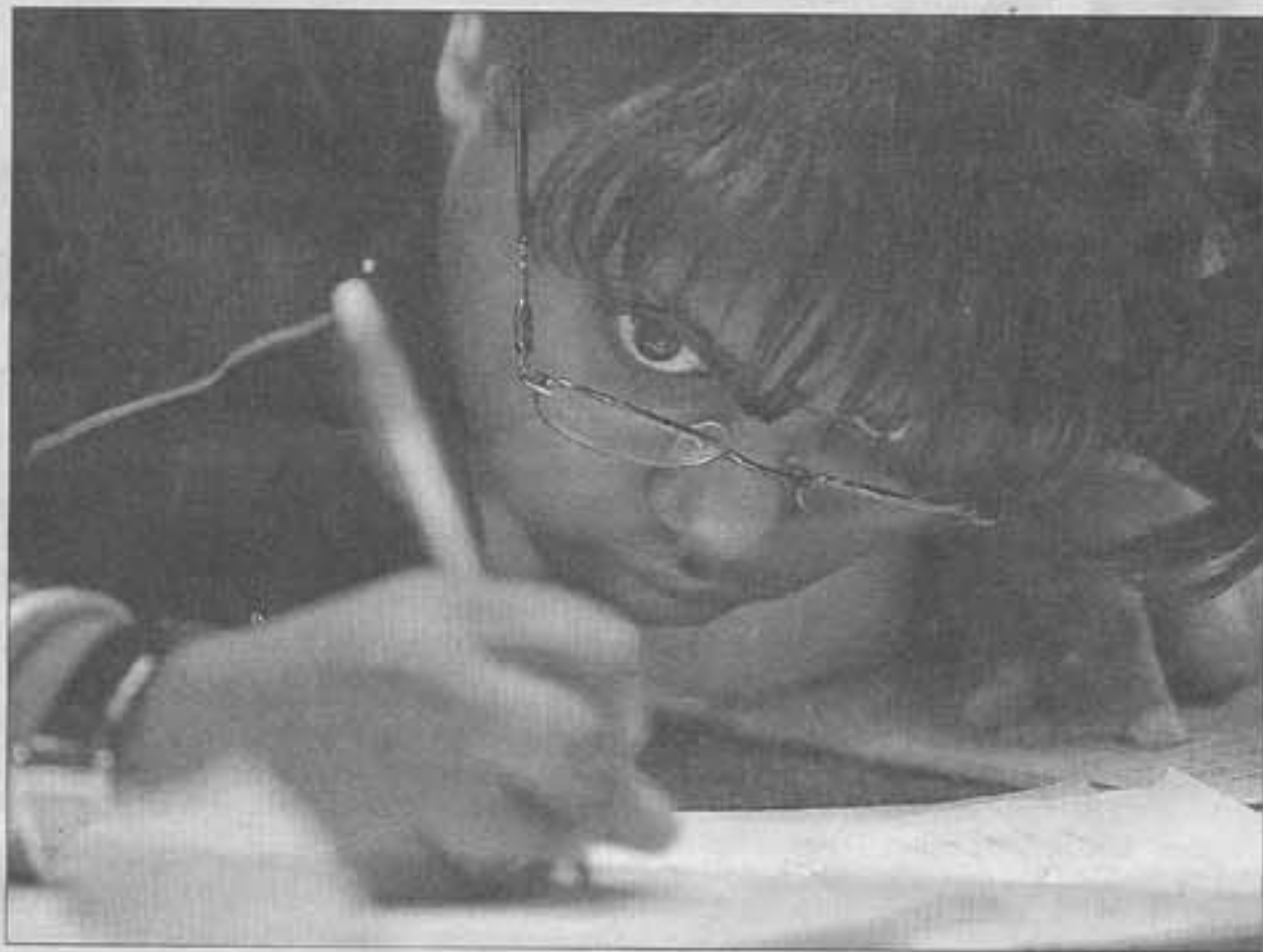
There's no strict schedule and no bells ring to signal the end of class. Instead, the teachers and students determine when it's time to move ahead based on the lesson's progress.

"We do have structure here, but if we make a judgment that what's happening now is extremely important, then we'll continue with the lesson," Ms. McClain said. "If that means we bump English, then we do."

Eighth-grader Andrew Hirsch, 13, enjoys the school's atmosphere. "I like the flexibility," said Andrew, who attended a public school before transferring five years ago. "I really enjoy the ability to plan things instead of having things planned."

All traditional subjects are taught, including Spanish and choir, and typically for an hour or longer.

Each day, the students get 50 minutes of outdoor activity, often including trips to a local



Latisha Scott, 11, works on her paper on human digestion. The students decided how they would study the topic, with some coloring pictures of the digestive system.

AT A GLANCE

Name: Center for Creative Living School
Address: 2401 Oakland Blvd., Fort Worth
Phone: 817-534-2189
Web site: www.cclcf.cc

park. They get 15 minutes of quiet time to read or meditate. They also use Bible stories to help teach values and acceptance of beliefs.

On Fridays, there is a 30-minute group counseling session to talk about frustrations, transitions, school subjects or whatever is happening in their lives or at school, said Roger Doss, a teacher at the school who also holds a Ph.D. in counseling.

Students take their own lunches or eat school-supplied vegetarian meals.

"It's our way of helping with health education," said Ms. McClain, a vegetarian who prepares the meals.

The students also share the

load when it comes to classroom upkeep. They're assigned weekly chores that include answering the phone, helping with lunches and straightening the bookshelves, lockers and the bathrooms.

"I think the integrated approach of combining academic, emotional and physical works because you develop a relationship with the kids," said Dr. Doss, who has been at the school for 30 years. "You're able to reach them better than during 50-minutes-a-day class."

"What makes me a believer is my own experience — two of my daughters went here and are both in college — and seeing others who have graduated," he said.

Many students from the school go on to other private schools to finish high school and later to college, school officials said. There are students enrolled whose parents attended before them.

Craig Bass of Fort Worth said he likes the school's teaching practices and philosophies.

"They have a good process there," said Mr. Bass, who has two daughters enrolled and another who has graduated and is attending a private high school.

"They let the kids be kids, but they're involved in the process," he said. "They take responsibility for themselves."

One of the school's biggest challenges is convincing parents that its methods work.

"I am so convinced that this is the way to learn. I've seen it happen," Ms. McClain said. "My problem is convincing others that this works."

Many of the students don't need convincing.

Eighth-grader Marah Irving enrolled as a sixth-grader.

"I think it's a wonderful way of expressing yourself and learning," she said. "Here, you get more time to study subjects for a longer period of time, and it's a smaller class, so it's better."

"Teachers have more time to attend to you."

E-mail: tstewart@dallasnews.com