

Private school for disabled students celebrates Sarasota opening

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President Marla Doss of Community Haven cuts the ribbon Monday morning to officially open The Selby School, a kindergarten and high school for children with disabilities.

SARASOTA -- After a year of ambitious planning, Community Haven has its new school. A ribbon-cutting Monday morning officially opened The Selby School, 4405 DeSoto Road, a private school for disabled students in kindergarten and grades nine through 12.

About 100 people gathered on the school's outdoor athletic court to hear opening remarks from a handful of officials, including Community Haven President Marla Doss and former Florida Sen. John McKay. The Selby School inhabits a completely remodeled 4,000-square-foot building on Community Haven's campus, once home to the pre-school.

The building, built in 1968, is now home to state-of-the-art classrooms equipped with new desks and two "smart boards" - interactive whiteboards -- a technology center with new computers and a consignment shop where students will develop vocational skills. A new roof and athletic pavilion for basketball, volleyball and shuffleboard courts was also part of the \$207,000 project paid for with grants and private donations.

McKay's statewide scholarship program, implemented in 2001, will help fund each student's \$11,000 to \$17,000 tuition. Some disabled students need special attention not provided in traditional schools, said McKay, who has a daughter with special needs. "The purpose of the scholarship is to allow students with disabilities the best opportunity to reach their potential in an appropriate education setting and with an appropriate course of study," he said to the crowd. "I applaud Community Haven's commitment to those in need."

The Selby School has six students in its high school, but plans to accept more down the road. There is space for another classroom in the building. "When we need to expand, we will," Doss said. "As the needs grow and opportunities start to unfold for our clients, we will open up that side and hire another teacher if need be." But the school's small class sizes are its best draw.

"When you're working with students with special needs, you have certain student-to-instructor ratios because of the intensity of the services," said Bethany Higgins, director of development at Community Haven. At the Selby School, students study the basics, everything from reading to math, and also develop vocational skills for a transition to adult life.

They learn about gardening, cooking and working with tools such as power drills and saws. They shadow professionals and experience real-life situations. Recently, students went to the Dollar Tree to buy something they needed -- not wanted -- on their own, said Carolyn Johnson, director of the Selby School. Then they came back to their classroom and filed their receipts.

"We have an extra-special niche here because these students get a chance to feel success and enjoy their learning experience," Johnson said. "We're always looking to develop job skills and life skills." Senior Bryce Burns said he loves to come to school each day to learn. After graduation, he wants to work with cars. Maybe become a mechanic. The school, approved by the Florida Department of Education, operates on Manatee County School District's schedule and is in session from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. weekdays.