

A place for the gifted

Gibson School celebrates 30 years of meeting the needs of bright children

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

Vivienne Luckson knew there was something different about her son, Joshua.

It was his first year in school and he wasn't fitting in. He threw tantrums. He was already reading but he clammed up in the classroom. He didn't want to stand out from the other 25 children in class. He became withdrawn.

"I started out reading books on what is wrong with my kid. Slowly I began to realize that he was gifted," Luckson said.

The realization was a "rude shock," as it is for many parents who often mistakenly think they have a child with a discipline problem.

Luckson of Southfield started looking for a school where Joshua, now 7, would be more comfortable.

Since coming to Redford's Gibson School, Luckson has noticed a transformation.

"The change was instant," she

Will Rogers Elementary became a haven for children with a special need.

The school currently has 67 students in the K-8 gifted program and 40 children in a child-development preschool, which is not intended for gifted children.

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

To have a child admitted to Gibson's school for the gifted, parents are required to have their child take an IQ test with a licensed psychologist. The child needs to have a tested IQ of 130 or above, with some exceptions made for the youngest children. Parents are also required to bring their child to the school for a visit before a decision is made.

"We get to observe the child's interaction with students we have already and parents get to see how their child fits," said Young. "One woman came with her daughter and saw her daughter skipping down the hall, and the mother started to cry. She said, 'She's happy.'"

Kelli Dade Haines of Livonia was well aware of the problems faced by a gifted child. When she was 2 years old, her parents had her tested when she said a polysyllabic word that no one knew.

Her parents were educators who knew something was special about their daughter. They sent her to Booper School in Bloomfield Hills.

Haines noticed the same qualities in her son Blake, 8. She spent a sample day at Gibson. She and Blake visited some classrooms.

"He said, 'Mom, I really like it here, can I stay?'" she said.

Before Gibson, Blake was acting out his frustration.

"If you talk to any parent, it's the nightmare story of not fitting in," Haines said. "Blake was reading but he had trouble making friends because he knew the answers and the other kids think of him as a smart aleck."

At Gibson, Blake has been able to make friends. His best friend is Joshua Luckson.

"He gets more involved. He puts himself into his projects. He's working up to his potential," Haines said.

Getting involved is an important part of the Gibson philosophy. "We're sure to cover curriculum that the state requires, but deepen and broaden it and have integration of various disciplines," Young said.

When Margaret Mayer of Westland was looking for a school for her son, Christian, 6, she already knew a lot about Gibson. She attended the school in the late '80s and early '90s. In 1991, her eighth-grade graduating class had just 10 students.

"It was structured like other schools but you were more free to learn at your own pace and abilities," Mayer said.

She said the school gave her a chance to go "above and beyond."

Her son had been attending a

IS YOUR CHILD IS GIFTED?

The most common question asked at Gibson School Open House events is "How do I know my child is gifted?"

If your child fits the following descriptions, you might consider contacting a licensed psychologist for an evaluation. Or contact Gibson School in Redford for more information.

My child...

■ Learns at a faster pace or differently than other children.

■ Asks more questions than I can answer.

■ Is a perfectionist who is reluctant to try new things.

■ Is self-directed and driven.

■ Is overly excitable or intense in what he or she says or does.

■ Is more comfortable talking with adults.

■ Is simultaneously different ages intellectually, emotionally and socially.

Montessori school when she moved him to Gibson's preschool program. She began to notice that he was working above his age level and had him tested for admission to Gibson. She said he has been adjusting well to her old school.

RELATED THEMES

The school has five home-room teachers; children are grouped together by age but can work with older children in areas where they have a special gift. In addition, the school has five special teachers for computer science, art, music, Spanish and physical education.

In the spring and fall, the school selects themes around which teachers can build a curriculum. Themes have included dinosaurs, oceans, the space program and this year's theme, "Soaring into the future."

Field trips are another big part of the program, including two trips a year to the Detroit



PHOTOS BY BILL BRESLER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Students prepare for an upcoming concert. Astli Pearson, Rebecca Molinas and Jasmine Udoma (foreground to background) practice the recorder.

Institute of Arts.

The recent Columbia tragedy will be the focus of debates for the middle school students.

A popular interactive program is called "mini society," in which the children create their own community. One day they were creating products for sale, setting their prices in "shenanigans."

The school's library was recently renovated. A computer lab has 22 functioning computers but, as of yet, no Internet access. Young said that is a top priority.

The annual tuition is \$8,500 a year and is expected to go up slightly next fall. About 20 students are attending on scholarships based on financial need.

"We have an endowment fund for scholarships. We don't want to be a school just for people of means," Young said. The school has a \$500,000 endowment.

The school's board comes from a cross-section of the community's business and educational leadership but does not include parents. Parents, however, are an important part of Gibson.

They serve on subcommittees and volunteer their time. Students come from 23 different communities throughout metro Detroit, including Livonia, Redford, Plymouth, Canton and Westland.

Jeanne Nance of Bloomfield Hills works in admissions for the school. She brought her son, Bill, now in high school, to Gibson when he was in the sixth grade.

"Everything was a debate with him. I had him evaluated, tried to work with a psychologist," she said. "We found Gibson when he was in sixth grade. Within a week he was anxious to go to school, excited. The whole family relaxed."

Nance said one thing her son learned at Gibson was that girls can be bright and be friends.

Young said it has been a challenge to attract girls to the school. The school sponsors an annual Girls' Conference (Girls are Gifted Too!).

A DIVERSE GROUP

The open, accepting environment of Gibson was important to Rosco Foggia as well.

Foggia, 24, of Farmington Hills, played football at Purdue, in the 2001 Rose Bowl and is now a National Football League free agent.

"The biggest thing was that black, white, Asian everyone got along," he said. "There were no racial issues. There was a commitment to teach children and help them get along. There was never any disruption at the school."

Foggia was attending a

parochial school and feeling "ostracized" because he was so far ahead of his classmates in reading and math. His parents checked several schools and decided on Gibson.

"The classes were a lot smaller. You got extra attention, because everyone is gifted in their own way," he said.

Adam Chalom remembers that when he was a student at Gibson in the '80s his two best friends were a Korean boy and the son of a Nigerian father and white American mother.

"I found it a supportive environment that allowed you to pursue what you were more interested in," he said.

He remembers doing detailed research papers on complex subjects when he was in the middle school years.

Chalom of Farmington is a rabbi at the Birmingham Temple.

For the parents, Gibson is a place for their children to be normal, to develop with other children like themselves and to grow at their own pace with strong support.

"It's a myth that gifted children learn on their own," said Luckson.

"They need as much help as a special ed child."

h.gallagher@ee.hometownlife.com



Blake Haines and Joshua Luckson are best friends.

said. "He got his self-esteem back. He was happy with who he is. He said the other kids get his jokes. He doesn't have to explain himself."

A NEW APPROACH

Gibson has been the answer for many parents with gifted children since the school was founded 30 years ago by educator Walter Gibson.

Gibson was a downriver elementary principal who became curious about the children who were repeatedly sent to his office for discipline.

"The only thing they had in common was that they were bright," said Suzanne Young, director of Gibson School.

He began working with counselors, teachers and parents on a curriculum geared to gifted children, who were often being disruptive because of boredom and frustration.

In 1972, he started his own school with 30 students in a church basement in Dearborn. The school's curriculum was experience-based with an emphasis on hands-on projects, experimentation, student-centered learning and cross-discipline.

"In 1972, it was pretty cutting-edge to do field trips to allow students to have more experiences," Young said. "It was cutting-edge to have classes with multiple ages. It was cutting-edge to have an integrated curriculum with teachers teaching around a topic, every teacher teaching about dinosaurs or space exploration. It's more common now but not in those days."

In 1975, Gibson began leasing its current building on Fenton Road from South Redford schools. The former

Auction theme is a dream

Gibson School is celebrating the 2002-03 school year with several special events to highlight the Redford school's 30th anniversary.

In keeping with this year's overall theme, "Soaring into the Future," the school's annual auction, its major fund-raiser, will focus on the theme "Dreamers of Dreams."

The auction organizers selected the event's theme to highlight the future roles which the school's gifted students expect to play in their adult lives.

The 17th annual auction is

Friday, March 28, at the Italian-American Banquet and Conference Center, 39200 Five Mile at 1-275 in Livonia. Doors open at 6 p.m. with food stations and a silent auction. At 8:15 p.m., the auctioneer will conduct a live auction featuring such items as family getaways, sports memorabilia, a week's stay anywhere in the world, use of Ford SUV for a week, a hot air balloon ride, a gourmet Italian dinner and more.

Tickets for the event are \$20 and are available by calling the school at (313) 537-8698.

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