

September 14, 2007

New school, new friends

By Sarah Koenig
Enterprise writer

Sharie Landsverk's son Aaron, a fifth-grader at Forest View Elementary, has autism, and usually struggles with change.

He's just one of hundreds of students who started school at the brand-new elementary last week, leaving familiar faces and patterns behind.

"Transitions are probably the most difficult thing for children with autism," Landsverk said.

"This year he has a brand-new school, a brand-new teacher, there's an aide, a new speech therapist, a new music teacher, occupational therapist, a new principal -- everything is new."

But things went smoothly, thanks to a lot of preparation, Landsverk said.

Last year, principal Brenda Fuglevand set up a meeting between Aaron's teachers and specialists and those who'd work with him at Forest View. She let him meet his teacher early and tour the school the day before it started, both exceptions to the rule.

Aaron's mother drove him by the school often while it was being built to give him a sense of familiarity.

"He loves the school. He commented on the architecture and how he loves the building, and he loves the people," Landsverk said.

The transition to Forest View went well for Hartley Steiner's first-grade son Gabriel too, minus a transportation glitch on the first day. Socially, it helped that most of the kids in the neighborhood were going to the same school, Steiner said.



Enterprise/ CHRIS GOODENOW

After his mother suggested they be best friends for the day, first-grader Gabriel Steiner (left) holds hands with Juliana Mothersbaugh, as they walk to the school bus stop on their way to the new Forest View Elementary School, Monday, Sept. 10, in their neighborhood in unincorporated Bothell.

"He's excited about the school and excited to have a new teacher," Steiner said.

The only thing missing for Gabriel seems to be a map. "He wishes he had a map," Steiner said. "He's 6 -- he can't read a map."

In addition, the gym's not finished, students eat in their classrooms and they don't actually go anywhere, Steiner said. But the school "rocks," and Gabriel just wants to know where everything is, in addition to his many questions about things in general, she said.

Steiner has been bowled over by the school's design. Since the standard Everett School District elementary school design didn't fit the site, the building had to be designed from scratch.

That's meant architectural details you don't usually see in a school, Steiner said.

There are two-story windows that overlook a green belt, wavy lines in the concrete dyed blue-green to resemble a river, exposed logs in the walls, wrought-iron willows, solar tubes that trap sunlight to bring it from one area of the building to the next, and more.

The school's opening, however, didn't go off without a hitch. On day one, there weren't enough buses to pick up all students after school. Children were supervised and waited at the school, getting home late. Steiner's son didn't get home until after 5 p.m.

Many parents were upset about the missing buses and the fact that the school hadn't called them. But the problem was fixed by the next day, and glitches are to be expected, Steiner said.

Unlike Steiner's son Gabriel, first-grader Megan Fettig didn't have many children from her old school come to the new one with her -- about five, and those children didn't make it into her class.

"At first she was kind of curious why that didn't happen, but she makes friends easily," said her mother, Dawn Fettig. "She was excited to make some new friends and see some of her old friends at recess. She absolutely loves the school."

Megan Fettig said she likes the school, especially her teacher.

Tracy Grayson, whose son Christopher attends first grade at the school, liked the fact that parents got to stay with their kids on the first day for 30 minutes to see the school and get oriented. Students in her son's class were given a checklist to mark off. It ensured they found their lockers, their cubby and other essential

places.

"I have found the bathroom and understand how to work the hands-free sink and toilet," one check box read.

Grayson also likes the fact that the younger children are upstairs, near the school office, and the older children are all downstairs.

"Just for influence, and I think it's just nice to know the littler kids are right down the hall from the office and just protected and cared for," she said.

Principal Fuglevand has stood in front of the school each day answering questions and making sure people find their way, which Grayson appreciates.

Steiner, like other parents, said she was nervous about going to a brand-new school.

But after she joined the PTA and met the staff and principal, she was immediately impressed and her concerns vanished, she said.

She's only heard good things about all the teachers, and that's unique, since usually everyone at a school knows who the best teachers are, she said.

"I think everyone thought in the beginning that we were forced to go to the new school," Steiner said. "Now I feel lucky that we get to go to the new school."