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New school, new principal

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY

Thousands of students headed back to school Wednesday across Kane and McHenry counties inaugurating new classrooms, and welcoming new principals, programs and equipment.

Classes resumed in Elgin Area School District U-46, Huntley Community School District 158, Crystal Lake Community High School District 155 and Batavia Unit District 101, while Elgin's first charter school welcomed students.

The long-anticipated opening of the Elgin Math and Science Academy Charter School evoked a mixture of emotions from parents, school board members, employees, and its 208 students in kindergarten through third grade.

Having fewer students per classroom than U-46 elementary schools makes it easier for students to learn, said parent Ramiro Castrejon, of Elgin, dropping off supplies for his 7-year-old daughter, Aariana, who is starting second grade. The charter school has two classes per grade, each with 26 students.

Aariana previously attended Washington Elementary School in Elgin, but EMSA's math and science focus was an allure, Castrejon said.

"I love math," Castrejon said. "I would like her to do science. They get to go out, do exploration. Makes learning fun, I guess. She got up early for once. She was excited to ride the bus."

Elgin Police Sgt. Eric Echevarria said he and his wife, Maribel, who teaches first grade at the charter school, hope it will creatively motivate their 6-year-old son starting first grade there.

"He's been home-schooled up until kindergarten ... at Century Oaks," Echevarria said. "We needed a change, a place where our son would be challenged. I thought this would be a great fit."

Echevarria and another officer welcomed students handing out pencils, high-fives and "making sure everything is safe."

The group of parents and community members managing the Elgin charter school fought for and won state permission to open it after previously being denied once by the Illinois State Charter School Commission and twice by the U-46 school board. In October, the state panel sanctioned the charter primarily to serve at-risk students in the area under state oversight.

"It's finally happening ... a lot of hard work went into this by a lot of people," said Larry Sirridge, of Elgin, a member of the charter board overseeing facilities.

The school site is the Neill building on the campus of the former Fox River Country Day School on Dundee Avenue, leased from the city of Elgin. It houses 13 classrooms. School leaders plan to add grades each year through eighth grade for a maximum enrollment of 400 students.

"It's so exciting," said Principal Lezlie Fuhr, who has been working to get the school ready for months. "The first day is always the most hectic. The kids bring the magic."