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Miami Elementary School Caters to Commuters' Needs

By VANESSA PETIT
The Associated Press

MIAMI -- Toni Anderson drives 16 miles each day from her home in Hollywood to her office in downtown Miami with her 6-year-old daughter in tow. Each day, Anderson drops off Johanna at a new elementary school that caters specifically to parents who commute and want their children attending school close to where they work.

Ada Merritt Elementary School is South Florida's first public commuter school for elementary school students from MiamiDade, Broward and Monroe counties. It opened this year to about 200 students in prekindergarten through second grade and plans to add a grade each year up to fifth grade.

"What is different about the school is that there are no boundaries," said principal Coralía Gonzalez-Yglesias.

The school, named after Miami-Dade's first teacher-principal, originally opened in 1923 as a junior high and served as a gateway for Cuban immigrants who needed to learn English.

"Many of the Cubans who came in the 1960s were taught English here for the very first time, so in a way it started out with bilingual education," said Gonzalez-Yglesias.

And that bilingual tradition is still an important part of the school's curriculum.

Classes are conducted in English and parents and children must choose between a Spanish or Portuguese program. The goal is that all students achieve full literacy in more than one language.

Anderson, who works for a commercial real estate firm, said her daughter will benefit from the language training. "She is a total gringa," she said of her daughter, "but it is very important in Miami to know Spanish."

The school is open from 6:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. with extended before- and after-care where students activities range from homework assistance and tutoring to judo and drama classes.

"It maintains the traditions of the old school but they've mixed it with the new and contemporary, plus now I can get into the car pool lane," Anderson said.

There is one tradition missing: as a commuter school, there's no school bus service.

The school closed in 1979 because of structural damage and was later abandoned.



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The building was demolished and the new school was built based on its original 1920s design. All that remains from the original building are the lion statues in the front entrance. The tiles have been matched to preserve its Mediterranean style and a new wing was added with a computer lab and a media enter.

The reopening of Ada Merritt is part of a five-year plan called "I choose Miami-Dade County Public Schools" that gives students and parents a greater choice in public schools and access to schools outside their immediate neighborhoods. An additional eight schools will be opening in 2004 with different programs and themes.

Many parents who live outside Miami-Dade but spend most of their working hours in the Miami area had inquired about having their children attend schools in Miami.

"That was the rationale for making it a commuter school that starts so early and ends so late, to make it as convenient as possible for parents who live outside the county," said Helen Blanch, district director for school choice and parental option. "It was our opportunity to try something that hasn't been tried before in the region."

The definition of neighborhood public schools has been evolving since the 1990s with the increasing number of charter and satellite schools that give parents more choices. Schools have been opened at workplaces such as airports and large private employers. For example, The Medical Center Charter School in Houston was opened for the children of employees at the Texas Medical Center.

Ada Merritt stands out because it's serving a wide swath of South Florida, said Henry Duvall, spokesman for the Washingtonbased Council of Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation's largest urban public school systems. "What is unique is that the school is pulling students from three school districts to serve the needs of the community."

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