

Building the Blocks Together

Written by Written by Nichole Brophy

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It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes strong family-community alliance coupled with compassion to ensure a successful beginning to a lifetime of education.



Sue Johnson, the executive director of The Family School—a preschool and kindergarten facility that provides counseling, special education, and early childhood education for Valley children and families—doesn't set out to take on as much as she does. It's just in her nature. For instance, Johnson didn't go searching for the opportunity to act as guardian for a Family School student with severe dyslexia living in an environment unsuitable for her needs. Nor did she plan on welcoming a family of four with special-needs children to live in her guest house for the better half of four years. But she did. Johnson's compassion and desire for the betterment of others has, over the years, propelled numerous families and children to the right start on their paths to the future.

It is through Johnson's work at The Family School that this observation becomes apparent. Nearly 17 years ago, Johnson and co-founding partner Susan Cedar joined forces intending to create a place where children of all backgrounds could come together and learn.

"We wanted to build a place of community for [the] children and family's first school experience where children and families could get everything they needed in one place," says Johnson, who adds that the school's sense of community can be attributed in part to the numerous family-involvement events and programs aimed at providing exceptional care to students—including those with developmental and special education needs.

The campus's four classrooms, which are housed in two historic homes in Central Phoenix adjacent to an additional home for administration, cater to 65 children as young as 18 months and feature head start, preschool and kindergarten options that offer all-day and year-round care to children of all backgrounds.

"Another school mission is diversity. We wanted [the student body] to look as much like the world as possible so children could learn to get along with all different kinds of children," Johnson says. "Ethnically and socioeconomically, they are all very diverse, and the abilities of the children in the different classrooms are very diverse as well."

An individualized curriculum and a highly trained staff are mainstays, and a strong alumni program acts as a support system that remains intact free of charge for an entire year after a child transitions to their next school. The highest success rates come from the school's main focus: tailoring the learning experience to each and every child's particular needs. Family involvement expedites the actualization of this goal.

"We say that we enroll a family, not a child," Johnson says. "And we ask for a family's commitment to the community if their child is going to be a part of it."

Parents of children enrolled at The Family School are asked to volunteer at least two hours a month and an additional six hours over the course of the year in any arena to which they are willing to contribute their skills.

"Because there is a lot of diversity here at the school, there are a lot of opportunities to help out," Johnson says.

Johnson knows this firsthand. Six years ago, she became the guardian of a 5-year-old named Chantel, who had severe dyslexia paired with other learning disabilities. Now 11, Chantel has since graduated from the Family School and has received a scholarship to New Way Learning Academy, an organization that focuses on children with learning disabilities.

"I wasn't out there looking for an opportunity like that; it was just that I really cared about this kid and I didn't want something to happen to her," says Johnson, who is also a foster mom and respite sitter. "I think people should help when they can help. I'm pretty lucky, and I think that if there is something I can do to help somebody else, that's what people should do."

The Family School, 602.252.5866, <http://www.thefamilyschool-phoenix.org/>.