

They're reaching for the sky

By *CHERYL ZIEMKE*

CORRESPONDENT

A new middle school in Venice is creating a lot of excitement and energy in town.

That's the intention of one of the latest charter schools in the area — Sky Academy.

Charter schools are publicly funded and available to all students who are willing to meet their individual criteria. It is an alternative education directed to personal needs while still following school district policy and standards.

Sky Academy is located within the South County Family YMCA on Center Road in Venice. Its focus is on wellness — physical and emotional — and education.

Research has shown that endorphins produced from physical exercise increase brain function and ability to learn. At Sky Academy the two required physical education periods a day promote this. Sky Academy personnel believe children learn faster, easier and better after exercising.

It isn't, however, about being the best athlete on the team. Instead, students are encouraged to put forth their best effort for their own well-being. This includes academics as well as physical education and social interaction.

The students are in school from 8 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. They take the required four subjects — language, math, social studies and science — along with the two physical education classes.

The students have found a place where they can burn off energy and still focus on their school work.

"They can expound their energy while still learning" said Suzanne Bula, director of student services at the YMCA.

She believes all students have potential and can do anything and everything.

"Education is the key," said Dr. Oleh Bula, principal. "We want the children to succeed in life. When they see they can actually run a mile and then beat it the next time, they know they can tackle that math problem."

"The kids get it," said Mike Sweeter, one of the two physical education and fitness teachers. "I have come back to education because I believe in this concept."

He has seen much improvement in the children's attitudes.

"It is great to see the happiness in their faces, when they have met their fitness goal," he said. "So many more of them are learning to be team players and play fair."

Erin Holloway is the other physical fitness and education teacher. She came to the area for the opportunity to be involved in Sky Academy.

She brought with her a concept she was teaching in Indiana. Fitness Grams is a program that measures each child's height and weight and fitness level and records his or her progress throughout the year. It is a concept promoted by the National Football League; the Miami Dolphins are the sponsor for Sky Academy.

"The children like charting their progress," said Holloway. "It is individually based and there are no set requirements; it is for their own benefit."

It appears to be working out very well. James Smalley is a sixth-grader at the school who has met and surpassed his own expectations.

"I like Chinese kickball now" he said.

Last year he hated any form of physical education. This year he is running the mile.

Kayleigh Garbrandt couldn't wait to share with Holloway that she had lost 5 pounds over winter break.

"I usually gain weight but I stuck to my goals," she said.

Nutrition plays an important part in these children's education as well.

Ryan Mohr is the chef at Sky Academy. He believes in simplicity and being able to pronounce every ingredient in what you serve.

From the looks of the plates at lunch and the positive reactions of the kids, he's on to something.

"The first week I bought packaged fruit cups and set them out beside the fresh fruit we serve," he said. "The children's choice by the second week was the fresh fruit."

Tom Zuber and Amy Roche help him serve food after and before their busdriving duties. They enjoy his selections as well.

"Time to eat," said Tom.

His plate held a delicious-looking turkey sandwich on whole-grain bread with a fresh apple and noodles with tomato sauce.

"I see a difference in these kids," he said. "I also drive for other schools. I think they have the right idea here."

State-certified teachers Jessica Henches, Jana Minorini, Ryan Lee, Nicolette Smith, Jeanette More and Courtney Hinton round out the staff. It is a gregarious mix that motivates the students.

"We want to do good," said sixth-grade student Ethan Phillips. "I want to have a successful career and life when I am older."

For more information, visit www.skyatthey.com or call 941-244-2626.



SUN PHOTOS BY CHERYL ZIEMKE

Tom Zuber helps out in the cafeteria and is a bus driver as well at Sky Academy. He enjoys being part of it all.



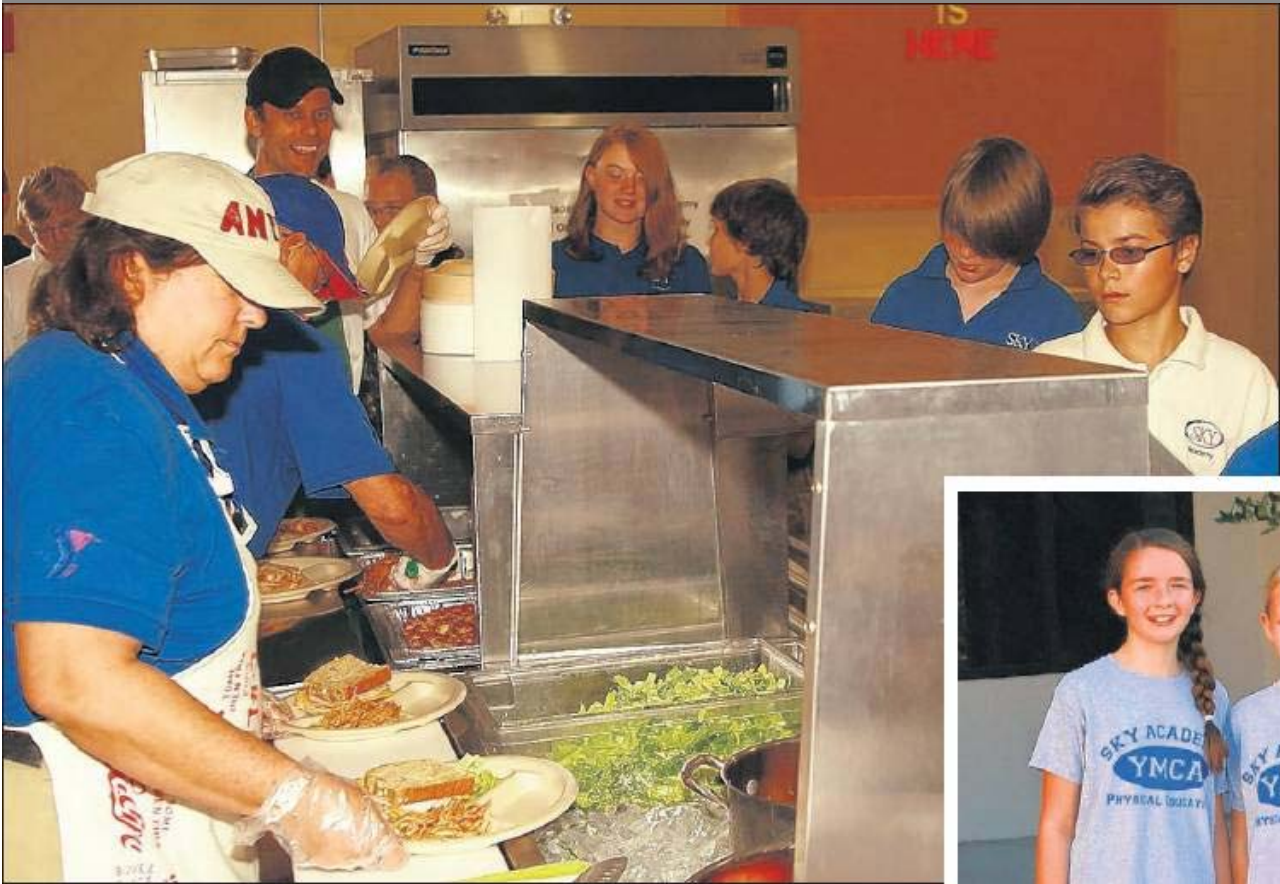
Suzanne Bula, director of student services, is a smiling, driving force always wanting the best for her kids at Sky Academy in Venice.



School chef Ryan Mohr believes in quality ingredients that appeal to the middle school students at Sky Academy in Venice.



Kyle Marios, Christian Gardner and Ethan Phillips believe Sky Academy is a kid's dream.



SUN PHOTOS BY
CHERYL ZIEMKE

Lunch is served by Amy Roche and her co-workers, and students agree it's delicious.



Alexis Worth and Caroline Kincaid are friends who help each other at Sky Academy.



A perfect example of Chef Ryan Mohr's contribution to students eating healthier at Sky Academy in Venice.



Around the table in the lunch room at Sky Academy are Brooke Vercheski, Bianca Munoz, Isabelle Mangin, Valerie Morey and Emily Pellegrino.



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Sky Academy Coach Mike Sweeterman is referee when students play flag football during one of their two required physical education classes.
