

## BUILDING A SCHOOL



**Mikia Pollard, the head of Blossom Wood Day School, talks about the school's philosophy and relationship with the pupils' parents.**

*In 1998, Mikia Pollard started teaching 11 kindergartners in her condo in North county. This fall, Pollard's Blossom Wood Day School opens with 75 children in a school building in Hazelwood.*

When Mikia Pollard quit her job as an early childhood specialist in 1998, her plan was to have children and become a stay-at-home mom.

Pollard also decided that she would home-school her children – once

she had them. To get ready for that commitment, she decided to try teaching a group of 11 kindergartners that year in her condominium in Florissant.

She told herself it was just for practice.

But this weekend, Pollard was coordinating the placement of boxes, desks and computers at the new site of her Blossom Wood Day in Hazelwood.

That's the school that she started in her condo in 1998.

"This was just not suppose to happen," said Pollard, 34.

All Pollard wanted to do with that first group of 11 pupils was to provide them with a rich learning experience in a small group setting. The school year went well - so well that parents asked Pollard to take additional children. By the fall of 1999, her little Blossom Wood Day School had enrolled 36 children, included a first grade and borrowed class space from a church in Spanish Lake. Pollard hired faculty member, developed an early learning center for preschoolers and started summer enrichment programs.

"Parents just kept calling," Pollard said. "I actually found this to be really hard for a while, but we just kept seeing the results we were getting with the kids. An we just kept getting good people coming to us to help. I just couldn't let go."

By that time, Blossom Wood Day School had developed a philosophy of education: Pollard hoped to provide her students with an academic foundational that was

more advanced than what they would receive in a public school. They also would develop a commitment to community involvement and to building good character.

Last year, Blossom Wood was accepted into the Independent Schools of St. Louis, joining other local schools such as Crossroads Schools and Mary Institute-St. Louis Country Day School. The school is the only one founded by an African-American to join that organization. Blossom Wood also is a member of the Independent Schools Association of the central States, an accrediting organization

While African-Americans make roughly 5percent of the enrollment in similar independent schools nationally all of Blossom Wood's students are African-American. Pollard attributes that to the way the school developed in the community. She is optimistic that the school's multicultural focus, emphasis on small-group learning and Christian environment will attract families of all backgrounds.

"We want to be a good school, not a good white school or a good black school," she said.

And this year, Blossom Wood's 75 pupils from preschool to fourth grade will be learning in a building all to themselves. An aggressive fund-raising campaign allowed the school to lease and renovate the former St. Bartholomew Catholic School building at 8390 Latty Road.

Lee Ross, a polite fourth-grader, who will be taking pre-algebra this year, is suitably impressed by the school's evolution and new spacious quarters.

"We could fit out (old) school five times in this room, believe it or not," the 10-year-old said while giving a tour of the school's new cafeteria.

Genie Newport, the head of Independent Schools of St. Louis, said having an independent school in north St. Louis County provides a great option for parents.

"From what one observes at Blossom Wood, the children appear highly motivated, (and) the teachers seem very committed to learning," she said. "There appears to be a strong market in this area of St. Louis County, and the conditions are ripe for enrollment growth."

Tuition at Blossom Wood ranges from \$3,600 to 4,000 annually, and parents like Dr. Maxine Stewart donate at least \$200 above that each school year. But Stewart says her investment is worthwhile when that money spent produces exciting results like a new school building and a sound education for her daughter, Jnev.

"I am beyond tickled about this school," she said. "The values that I want my child to learn at home are reinforced here. It's not OK to call another stupid and it's not OK to be disrespectful to others. And what's important to me is that this done in conjunction with her education, not at the expense of it."

With Saturday's move, Pollard says she is happier now than she has ever been – even if it seems that her joy developed at the expense of her original plans. “At this point I have the school and a puppy,” Pollard said. “I still don't have any children.”