



School Choice Highlight: Sidener Academy

By Shawnta S. Barnes - January 27, 2017

This week, Jan 22-28, 2017, is National School Choice Week. When parents send their children off to school each day they hope the school is the best fit, a happy, safe and academically appropriate environment. When children fail to be successful or school becomes a place they dread attending, parents wonder what their options are. In Indiana, parents can pursue various options, such as public charter and magnet schools, virtual schools, private schools or homeschooling. The only constraint in Indiana is only some of our traditional public schools allow students who do not live within the school's boundaries to attend.

Monday, I had the opportunity to attend the open house for Merle Sidener Academy for High Ability Learners part of the Indianapolis Public School (IPS) District located on the northeast side of Indianapolis. Sidener Academy became a magnet school for high ability students during the 2008-2009 school year. It serves students of diverse backgrounds in grades 2-8. There are various ways students are identified for placement at the school. IPS screens all students in first and fifth grade for high ability and parents and teachers of students in any grade can request testing. Families of students who scores identify them as having high ability in both reading and math are invited to apply for enrollment at the school. Students outside of the district can also attend, but priority is given to in district families.

During the open house principal Mr. Nolan-Watkins shared how dedicated staff were to meeting the needs of the whole child. Teacher Mr. Lawson wrote in his handout to parents, "I really focus on each student's strength and weakness, not only academically, but socially and emotionally as well. It is my goal to have created well rounded individuals." Children have a voice at the school and many of the after school clubs, such as yoga, karate and chess, were born out of student

interest. Mr. Nolan-Watkins said he recently received a few requests about adding a lego club.

Prospective parents had the opportunity to hear from and talk to current parents of students at Sidener. The PTA President stated the best part of her son attending Sidener is he now has friends. She shared her son's interests and abilities made it difficult for him to relate to students at his previous school. Other parents praised the hands-on learning, tailored lessons, field trips, class size, and caring environment as reasons they love this school. A few families previously had their children enrolled at The Sycamore School, Indiana's only private, independent preschool – eighth grade school for gifted students. All of the parents touted the great education their children received at The Sycamore School, but the \$16,960 annual tuition was the reason the parents ultimately switched to Sidener Academy. One parent said, "I can barely save any money and forget saving for college. It was an easy decision to switch knowing my child's needs would still be met."

Switching your child's school is never an easy decision. Indy's Child provides parents with good thoughts to consider when thinking about choosing a new school for your child. Sidener Academy is the right fit for the students who attend and every child should be able to attend a school that is the right fit for him or her. National School Choice Week is one of the many opportunities parents have to find the best school for their child.