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## Academy atypical school

**By Kate Arthur**

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BLOOMINGTON -- Westminster chimes tell students it's time to change classes. Freshman quietly rush to their lockers, careful not to run into a band of kindergartners. A couple of students stop to hug the school administrator.

Not your typical school. But Cornerstone Christian Academy isn't typical in a lot of ways. Started as a preschool with 45 students only seven years ago, the independent, non-denominational Christian school now has 350 students in preschool through ninth grade.

Classes met in three churches over the last several years but on Dec. 1, the students moved into a new school: a \$5 million red brick and glass building on Ireland Grove Road east of Bloomington.

It sits on 78 acres of land, surrounded by plowed fields crossed by power lines. There's only one empty room in the school and plans are underway to add another wing. The goal is to provide space for an additional grade each year until the first high school graduate walks across the stage in the 300-seat gymnasium.

The 52,000-square-foot building has 27 classrooms, a library, computer lab, art and music rooms.

"Everywhere you cast your eyes is something that's been given to us," said administrator Becky Shames.

One year after construction began, nearly 200 parent volunteers arrived to load and unload seven semi-trailer trucks. In four hours, they moved the school from Faith United Methodist Church in Normal, Grace United Methodist Church in Bloomington and Second Presbyterian Church in Bloomington.

Classes are small, with 12 to 15 students. Core classes include Spanish and Bible study, beginning in kindergarten. Students represent 60 churches and an unknown number of denominations.

Kindergarten mom Debbie Skinner of Mackinaw makes the hour-long drive each day. She and her husband looked at several schools before choosing Cornerstone for their 5-year-old son, Samuel.

"We were so impressed with the curriculum and Biblical background," she said. "We wanted him grounded in the early years."

The school will more than double in size to 120,000 square feet as wings are added. The high school wing is a priority, even higher than a \$1 million kitchen that would provide hot lunches.

"We are praying right now that God will give us a high school wing," Shames said.

As she looked out a wall of windows facing south, she pointed to where the high school wing and athletic fields will be. She hopes to add baseball, softball and soccer teams in the spring. A playground and landscaping will take shape then too, with the help of parent volunteers.

Andrea Henrichs of Normal, who coordinates the parent volunteers, drives her kindergartner and second grader to school each day.

"It's 11 miles one way but it's a fun 11 miles," she said. "All of the families here are committed academically and spiritually," she said. "It's like having a really big extended family."