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All-boys middle school hopes to start in fall

By Ashley Wilson

Will Yeiser had been looking for a way to connect his love for the outdoors with his passion for teaching children.

Now he thinks he's found it.

In August, Yeiser, a former Spanish teacher at Asheville Middle School, plans to open The French Broad River Academy, a private all-boys middle school with a focus on the French Broad River and global awareness.

He will open the school with longtime friend David Byers, a former Asheville High science teacher.

"I got really intrigued with the idea of combining outdoor experiential education with the traditional public school setting," Yeiser said. "We both started talking about scaling up our passion and vision for what schooling should be."

After learning about the different ways in which boys and girls learn, Yeiser decided the Asheville area needed an all-boys middle school.

The move toward single-sex classrooms is a growing trend around the nation and in Western North Carolina.

Eight public schools in North Carolina offer single-sex education, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education.

Asheville is home to Hanger Hall, a private middle school for girls, as well as to some single-sex classes within coed private schools. Carolina Day School's middle school, for example, has single-sex classes for core subjects.

Yeiser hopes to use Hanger Hall as a model. The school was started by Howard Hanger 10 years ago because he wanted something different for his daughters' education. The school now has 63 students.

"If I would have had two sons, I would have started an all-boys school," said Hanger, a minister who heads the Jubilee community of faith. "There's just a need for it. An 11-year-old girl is going through things a boy won't get to until he's

14. If you try to teach an 11-year-old boy and an 11-year-old girl, you are going to miss one or the other.”

Boys, Yeiser said, tend to respond better to hands-on education, rather than to sitting at a desk.

That's one reason he and Byers plan to incorporate the river into most of their lessons. Both have been teaching outdoor education for more than a decade, including leading children on wilderness, whitewater and mountain biking trips.

They plan to teach students stewardship of natural resources through science, language arts and social studies lessons that involve the river.

“If we are studying science, we might focus on water quality and do water quality samples in the river and compare our results with results from the forest service — and incorporate language arts and create a report,” Yeiser said.

By connecting many lessons to the river, they hope the boys will understand the relevance of their studies and become more engaged.

In the middle of the school year, students will take a trip to Costa Rica, part of the school's international focus. Yeiser planned similar trips for students in his advanced Spanish class at Asheville Middle.

Asheville Middle School has experienced declining enrollment in recent years. The enrollment data shows that some students who attend Asheville City elementary schools leave after fifth grade in favor of charter, private or home schooling rather than continuing on to Asheville Middle. For ninth grade, many of them then return to the public school system to attend Asheville High.

Some parents worry about their children getting lost among the about 660 children at the Asheville Middle, or think the youths need more individualized attention during the often tumultuous middle school years.

That's the case for Sheri Lalumondier, who has enrolled her son in the new private boys middle school.

“I do believe he could get lost in the shuffle,” she said. “He's not going to get in any trouble, so I am afraid he's going to get lost.” Lalumondier's daughter transferred to Hanger Hall after two years at Asheville Middle.

The new private boys school will have 12-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio.

It won't be easy for The French Broad River Academy to open this fall. The school has yet to secure a location. Yeiser and Byers said they are looking for anything from downtown Asheville to Woodfin that has easy access to the river.

They also have only three students enrolled. They need at least 12 to be able to open.

Tuition is set at \$9,000 a year, and the teachers realize that cost may keep some students from attending. They plan to apply to become a public charter school that would be open to anyone in 2011.

Hanger said he went into debt starting his girls school because he could not generate enough funds to pay his teachers. It took four years for him to break even, he said.

"It is a leap of faith," Byers said. "Here you are writing a check to a school that doesn't exist yet, but we are selling you this program — this one-of-a-kind program that's going to leap your child into the future with confidence."

Additional Facts

For more information

The French Broad River Academy will hold an information session 5:30-7 p.m. Wednesday at the Grove Arcade Conference Room, 1 Page Ave. Take the elevators down to the lower level. Visit the school's Web site at www.fbriveracademy.com or contact Will Yeiser at wyeiser@gmail.com or 713-9734.