Opportunity for learning
knocking in Gardere area

By KRISTEN KING
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Just as she was on the way to the store, Debra Blake’s daughter interrupted, babbling on about some sort of “brand new opportunity” knocking at the door.

The unemployed mother of five figured she’d might as well go see what all the fuss was about, but by the time she got to the door, the opportunity had stopped knocking.

Blake’s daughter had already invited Mavis Henderson inside their Gardere area apartment.

Though a little skeptical at first, it didn’t take long for Blake to decide her daughter hadn’t exaggerated. What the teacher had to offer was more than Blake had expected.

Henderson described a new pre-school program a block away that would teach her 2-year-old son and 3-year-old grand-daughter and would help her get her high school equivalency degree at the same time.

“I hurried up and signed the papers,” Blake recalled Friday while attending an open house for the newest location of the East Baton Rouge Parish school system’s Gus the Bus Family Literacy Program.

Needless to say, she was one of the first in line Friday.

The free program offers basic preschool skills for children ages 2 to 5 who aren’t enrolled in another program. It also offers classes for their parents that range from basic literacy to high school equivalency. And, it teaches parents how to continue their children’s learning at home.

In the past, the program has been focused in public housing complexes in Scotlandville, north Baton Rouge and the inner-city.

Mavis Henderson, center, speaks to a mother and her son about the Gus the Bus program at the Gardere Lane Kids Activity Group on Friday.

Opportunity

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But interest from the Gardere area prompted the school system’s Title I program to set up camp there this year, said Joe Maggio, an instructional supervisor with the family literacy program.

Another new Gus the Bus program is being offered in the LaBelle Aire area, Maggio said.

The program—which now has eight sites—operates with Title I dollars, which are federal funds that go to schools and districts to help poor students.

Maggio said the mobile program is a great way to reach children early so they can be prepared when they get to school.

“So many children who enter pre-kindergarten or kindergarten are so far behind,” Maggio said. “Research shows if you can reach them at an early age, they’re more successful.”

Blake said that makes sense to her.

“There’s nothing to do at home,” she said, explaining that her children normally spend their time watching television.

“My third-grader, he’s been behind for years,” she said. “Maybe if he had this when he was starting, he wouldn’t be so slow now.”

Blake said the fact that someone showed up at her door to recruit her family also inspired her. In addition to getting her high school equivalency degree, she hopes math classes she takes will help her pass a test to get back into the nursing industry.

The Gus the Bus program takes place both in an actual bus — refurbished to act as a pre-kindergarten classroom — and in a building, where parents take their classes and work on computers.

In most situations, the rooms the program uses belong to the Baton Rouge Housing Authority because they’re in public housing complexes, Maggio said.

But the Gardere area program is different since the apartment complexes being served are privately owned.

The program is stationed in an apartment Ruby Jarrett has transformed into the Gardere Lane Kids Activity Group.

Jarrett began that program in 1994, offering after-school tutoring and holiday camps for students from 6 to 16 years old.

For their parents, she has a few things — a list of jobs from the city and a couple of computers to work on.

But the addition of Gus the Bus expands those opportunities tremendously, she said. Just as an example, the parents will have access to eight computers, rather than the two she has, she said.

“I think it blends in just fine,” Jarrett said of Gus the Bus.

Maggio agreed that the two work well together since both have the same goal of better preparing children for school.