Avery Island provides ‘paradise’ for learning

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AVERY ISLAND — When the school bell rings at Avery Island Elementary School summing students to their classes, they leave a world full of education behind them.

Some see this “academic paradise,” filled with fun and adventure, as an island unto itself.

“Not many children can see deer, raccoons or rabbits on their way to school,” said Principal Catherine Segura. “And this is probably the only school where students can chase peacocks before class.”

Located on a privately owned island, the kindergarten-through-sixth grade school is set amid stately oak trees, neatly manicured lawns and deer crossings.

“The students here are very fortunate to live in an environment where nature provides a great natural setting,” said Segura, who has served as principal for five years.

To begin each day, students assemble around the flag pole at 8:40 a.m. to recite the pledge of allegiance and sing the national anthem.

“There are a number of advantages in having a small school setting,” said Segura, who can greet each of the 175 students at the school by name. “It is a sense of security for the children.”

Educating fewer than 200 students a year is not a problem for staff members, who along with Segura said they have more resources than most larger schools. One of the greatest advantages is that students remain in the same class unit for six years and so become familiar with each other, she said.

“Once a student comes to Avery Island, each teacher knows them, their background, their parents and what their strengths and weaknesses are,” Segura said.

Because of the close knit educational environment, the school has had few discipline or learning problems.

“If there are problems with academics or discipline, we can see the problem developing before it starts,” she said.

“We have support groups for children with problems,” academic or social, she said.

With the number of students at Avery Island growing every year, the need for adequate space has become a concern.

Originally a two-room school house, it now has five classrooms and a library in its main building and five portable classroom buildings.

Currently, the portable buildings have helped to alleviate the school’s problems but in the future, there must be more facilities, Segura said.

The eight regular education teachers and six support services teachers at the school have classes with as few as 12 students. Only the first grade has to accommodate 30 students, one of the largest classes ever, Segura said.

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said.

But you won't hear any of the teachers complaining.

"My father attended this school, my husband attended this school, I attended this school and my three children attend this school," said first-grade teacher Eleanor Dore.

The family atmosphere and the opportunity to work closely with her students is what will keep her teaching there, she said.

"Once a student comes to this school for three days, every teacher knows his or her name," said Dore, who lived on the island for 35 years before recently moving four miles away.

The frustration and stress that most teachers at larger schools experience is not as prevalent, Dore said.

"I definitely plan to stay here," she said. "I know what I do is worth it when I see them (students) succeed."

First-year teacher Carol Degeyter drives 22 miles to get to school and "it is worth every mile," she said.

Degeyter, a fifth grade teacher who lives in Loreauville, said she wanted to teach at Avery Island after she met some teachers from the school at a workshop.

"I think I can find a lot of happiness here. I also wanted to find children who really needed me," she said. "And these (students) do."

In addition to the supportive staff, Segura has instituted several academic programs at the school.

At various times during the school term, the walls are adorned with colorful pictures, words and drawings. These are done to increase some aspect of their education, Segura said.

"Each week the teachers take a word and produce it in play form," she said. "The students present clues with the play and the student body has to identify the word from the clues."

Some classes write short poems or stories explaining their words.

"When I came here I knew the school would have to work in a cooperative effort in order to work," said Segura, whose school was selected as a model school in Iberia Parish last year.

One of the prime reasons the school has been so successful is because of the involvement of non-staff and faculty.

Parents, governmental agencies and local celebrities are recruited to do presentations at the school, Segura said.

The lineup of guests has included area fire volunteers who gave a talk on fire safety; the Iberia Parish Sheriff's Department presented a drug free program; author Mary Alice Fontenot who talked about her Clovis Crawfish books; the local postmaster discussed stamp collecting; and local businessmen have been brought in to talk about their professions.

"We have eight adopters," Segura said, speaking of businesses who adopt schools and provide them with equipment, funds and manpower. "The Tabasco plant and the salt mine are very supportive of the school."

These businesses are the largest on the island and employ many of the parents who live there.

Because most of the industry on the island is stable, students who start at the school normally finish, Segura said.

"Only those families involved in fishing or other seasonal jobs have to take their children out of the school," she said.

This stable, close knit environment has helped to foster the same type of environment in the school community.

"I've been a member of this community for nearly 30 years," Segura said. "As a teacher I have taught in other rural areas but always wanted to come back here."