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Former teacher opens new private school in Woodlands

By Jamie Swinnerton, Staff writer | Sep. 28, 2020



Simon plays with toys at the Discovery School of Innovation in The Woodlands, Thursday, Sept. 24, 2020. The new school opened this year and plans to expand enrollment in the future.

Photo: Gustavo Huerta, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Catherine Sagar couldn’t find the kind of school she was looking for, so she decided to open her own.

This year, she launched [Discovery School of Innovation](#), a private school in The Woodlands, that uses the Texas TEKS curriculum but aims to be student-led learning with a focus on social-emotional wellness.

Right now, the school is accepting kindergarten through fourth-grade students and plans to grow a grade each year through grade 12. Currently, the school has nine students, the oldest of which is in third grade, and two educators; Sagar herself and Jenessa Rivas, a kindergarten-first grade teacher and licensed school counselor.

Sagar has taught internationally in Qatar and Singapore for several years and saw how education internationally differed from education in the United States. She saw a more student-led approach, letting students lead with curiosity, that she didn’t see in the schools she worked at in the U.S.

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“It’s really teaching children to look at the world through a lens of inquiry, where they’re just explorers, they’re curious, they have a passion for learning,” she said. “It really carries over to their everyday life.”

For now, Discovery School of Innovation is located within the Xavier Academy off Grogan’s Park Drive in The Woodlands. With only nine students they can still all fit in one room, but as the school grows it will need to move to a more suitable location.

Opening a private school in The Woodlands has been part of Sagar’s plan for several years, she said.

“I feel like my children were really privileged to have that experience overseas, because I also got to experience it as a parent, and they learned to be such open-minded citizens in general,” Sagar said.

The school takes a STREAM approach to education: science, technology, recreation, engineering, art, and math. The students spend a lot of time outdoors and take a lot of breaks because, as part of the “recreation” aspect, the students need to move around for their physical and mental health.

While Sagar said the school uses the Texas TEKS curriculum, they follow the students’ lead while teaching. It was student-led curiosity that brought them to Zooming with German author Peter Wohlleben about his book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*.

Sagar is in the process of getting DSI accredited through Cognia, an international education non-profit. In Texas, private schools are not required to be accredited. Looking ahead to the future of the school, she wants to keep the classes small, capping student capacity to around 11 to allow for more individual instruction.

Tara Mullee has two sons in DSI, but this is not the first time she has known Sagar as a teacher. Sagar was her son’s teacher at a previous school and Mullee noticed that he flourished in class under her care. When Sagar started Discovery, Mullee jumped at the chance to enroll both of her kids.

“I’ve been really, really happy so far,” Mullee said. “Both my kids are coming home really excited and talking about what they learned.”

She lives near Tomball and recognizes that the local public school is a good one, but she is excited about DSI because of its smaller class sizes and the one-on-one attention her students get even while doing online learning. Both of her students have bonded well with their teachers and that relationship building is someone she wants people to know about DSI.

Ronan Agard, a third-grader at DSI, loves the small class sizes. The extra attention and more personalized teaching he gets challenges him more than he used to be in larger classes, he said.

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“I’m always thinking about the next day,” he said. “I like this school the best of all the schools I’ve been to.”

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