



Kirsten Kinzler, right, school director, and science teacher Kendra Hunding were surrounded recently by a classroom still a work in progress, as electrical work was completed and furniture was rearranged.

## Charter school finds new habitat

Nature-focused school once named for environmentalist Michael Frome has moved from Woodbury to St. Paul Park.

By [TIM HARLOW](#), Star Tribune

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During its first two years, the two most common questions fielded by teachers at the Michael Frome Academy came from those who wanted to know who he was and more about the school's mission.

Now that the three-year-old charter school named after the environmentalist has become the Natural Science Academy -- a name that more accurately reflects its green-friendly curriculum -- the next question that likely will surface is: "Where are you located?"

Over the summer, the school vacated its former home adjacent to the Math and Science Academy in Woodbury and moved to its new digs at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in St. Paul Park.

Last week the school's three full-time teachers faced the daunting task of unpacking boxes, wiring four classrooms for computer use, hooking up telephones and arranging furniture in the space it now occupies in one of the church's education wings at 920 Holley Av. Hope Christian Academy occupies the other wing.

And, as if the name change and moving were not enough, the school also added a grade for the upcoming year. It now will serve kindergarten through grade 5.

"It hasn't been the most relaxing summer vacation," said Kirsten Kinzler, school director and part-time music instructor.

Kinzler said she hopes to have everything in place in time for Thursday's open house.

The school opened in 2008 with 40 students in kindergarten through grade 3 at 8500 Woodbury Crossing in Woodbury. Last year, with the addition of fourth grade, enrollment rose to 55, and Kinzler knew the school was going to need more room. That is when the search for a new home began.

The plan was to stay in Woodbury, but Kinzler said the school could not find suitable, affordable space. The school also wanted to stay within the boundaries of the South Washington County School District because the academy could not provide its own busing.

"It's not always convenient for parents to drive their kids to school," she said. In fact, eight students from the Lake Elmo area are not returning to Natural Science Academy this year for that reason. Still, enrollment is expected to reach 62 this year. Eventually, with its new space and maybe one day a building of its own, Kinzler dreams of having 150 students.

School officials found the new space when a parent learned through the grapevine that the church had empty classrooms it had not used since a preschool closed in 2007, except for religious education and parish functions. The academy signed a lease at the end of June and moved in Aug. 2.

"It seemed like a good match," said Cheri Dixon, the church's business manager.

Woodbury's Math and Science Academy also is reaping benefits from Natural Science Academy's move. The charter school with 300 students in grades six through 12 is expanding into Natural Science's old space so "our kids can have more breathing room" and some teachers will be able to have their own classroom instead of having to move around the building, said Paul Simone, the charter school's director.

In its move to St. Paul Park, Natural Science Academy said goodbye to its beloved half-acre woods, where kids played at recess and took part in hands-on nature lessons.

But teachers such as Kendra Hunding already have ideas for creating lessons applicable to its more urban setting, including using the church's large lawn and walks to nearby parks and the Mississippi River that's just down the road.

"We can create a rain garden to attract frogs, snakes, bugs and bees -- the things we all love," she said. "We'll miss the woods, but nature is everywhere."

And an upside, she said, is that "we won't have to worry about as many wood ticks."

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