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## German-immersion school first of its kind in Seattle area

By **Rachel Tuinstra**

*Seattle Times Eastside bureau*

The word sprang from 3-year-old Isabelle as naturally as if she had said "playground" in English. "Spielplatz," the chubby-cheeked girl said with a wide smile. It was her third day attending Seattle Area German American School (SAGA), and Isabelle was already beginning to pick up on some of the foreign words.

"Blau? Rot?" SAGA teacher Anita Dunlap asked, and the girl pointed to a blue toy, then a red toy.

Isabelle is among eight students enrolled in SAGA, which opened Sept. 7 in Issaquah and is the first five-day-a-week private German-immersion school of its kind in the Seattle area.

The cozy room full of vibrant-colored toys, rugs and play mats looks like any day care.

"But you can't really compare it to regular day care," said Anette Lusher, SAGA's principal. "This is a school, with a curriculum to learn a different language."

Two other private full-time language-immersion schools are located on the Eastside — the French Immersion School of Washington in Bellevue and the French American School of Puget Sound on Mercer Island.

A smattering of programs are also available in public schools, including a dual-language Spanish program at Woodin Elementary School in the Northshore School District and Spanish immersion programs at three Bellevue schools — Puesta del Sol Elementary School, Tillicum Middle School and Newport High School.

In Seattle, John Stanford International School offers dual-language immersion in Spanish or Japanese. There are also numerous Saturday schools or evening schools in the Puget Sound area that give children and adults exposure to other languages and cultures.

For Uschi Nagel, who is from Germany, SAGA is a way to connect her 3-year-old son, Sean, to the culture and language of her native country.

"My parents and brother speak German, and I wanted him to be included in those conversations," Nagel said. "My husband is from Australia. He doesn't speak German, and Sean's already picking up on that. He picks out English books for his dad to read and German books for me to read."

The school was formed largely by a group of parents, including the Nagels. Some had children who attended the Eastside German Language School, a Saturday school in Issaquah. Both the Saturday school and SAGA are housed at the Community Church of Issaquah.

While some students' parents don't speak a word of a foreign language, others may have one parent who is bilingual.

The school is starting with a class of pre-kindergarteners but plans to add grades as students move up. It wants to eventually open a second location in Seattle, Lusher said.

The school is hoping to become accredited by the German government, and has been working with Heinz Kohlmeier, a German language consultant attached to the Consulate General of Germany in Los Angeles. Kohlmeier works with about six full-time German immersion schools across the country, including the German American School of Portland.

A school that is accredited by the German government follows German and American curriculum, and students who graduate from such programs can go on to study at either American or European universities, Kohlmeier said. The German government financially supports some of the schools by sending German teachers and paying for educational materials, books and teacher training, he said.

"About 60 percent of our student in the U.S. don't have a German background, they just have American parents that want them to learn another language," Kohlmeier said.

The German government supports these schools in the hopes that those students who learn the language and culture will eventually go to work or do business with Germany when they are adults.

"What we see so far in SAGA is encouraging," he said.

SAGA has been using the German American School of Portland as a model for its program, Lusher said. The Portland school is in its 11th year and has more than 100 students in preschool through sixth grade.

Like SAGA, the Portland school started with a small group of children and parents, said Blake Peters, head of the school.

"The school is a labor of love between teachers and parents," Peters said. "We started with a little group of parents in 1995. They wanted to do something different. The language the kids are learning is not important. What is important is that they end up bilingual or trilingual."

Becoming bilingual in any language will benefit a child, said Thea Fortune, president of SAGA's board of directors.

"Knowing another language gives you a broader sense of the world," Fortune said. "[It] opens you to travel and meeting new people and broadens your work choices."

A number of studies have shown that it's easier to learn a foreign language when you're young.

Said Darla Abbas, Isabelle's mother: "We wanted to get [Isabelle] in an immersion-school program, because now is the best time for her to learn another language."

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