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## New Bithlo school affords help to parents on a budget

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All three of Stephanie Johnston's children are dyslexic and are having trouble at the public school they attend.

The Bithlo resident has been contemplating sending her children to Orange County Academy, a product of nonprofit organization United Global Outreach, which is dedicated to providing private education to financially disadvantaged children in Bithlo.

The school sits on land donated by the First Baptist Church in Bithlo and operates solely on private donations. While there are scholarships available, the school will not turn anyone away for financial reasons, so if a family can't cover the difference, they can volunteer time back into the community with any organization to pay it off.

Johnston recently applied for the McKay Scholarship for children with learning disabilities, a move she discussed with Tim McKinney, executive vice president of United Global Outreach, for several months. She's still waiting for approval.

"It's hard to take a child and put them in an environment where they're not familiar with anybody, especially with children that have learning disabilities," Johnston said. She considered putting her children in a private school farther away but likes the idea of them attending OCA, which is closer to home.

The school was not part of UGO's original plan for Bithlo but McKinney said that soon after working in the community, he realized that their efforts would be like a "squirt gun on a fire" if they didn't address illiteracy in Bithlo. McKinney estimates that 70 percent of the 5,000-person population cannot read or write past a sixth-grade level.

"Kids here get pushed through the school system because no one has time to deal with them, and then when they reach high school, when it counts, they can't

catch up and they drop out," McKinney said.

Despite its financial forgiveness, McKinney promises that OCA will be as good as any other private school in the country with the highest-quality teachers, first-rate facilities and uniforms.

"Kids will qualify because they're poor but as far as they know, we selected them. They can be proud to go to school here," he said.

OCA gained approval from the Department of Education in late January and now has about a dozen students, with more planned for enrollment through the end of the school year. The school has the capacity for 39 students, grades kindergarten through third grade. The goal is K-12, which McKinney said they plan to rapidly reach.

"We want to help as many students as soon as possible. There is really no time to waste," he said.

Before the addition of five more students this week, OCA teacher Glynn Gilbert had one student, Zoe, 6. When she enrolled in OCA, her learning level was below kindergarten yet she was in first grade in public school. After one month at OCA, Gilbert said she has made vast improvements.

"I have the freedom here to allow them to learn the way they need to, like putting shaving cream on the table and practicing writing in it," she said, pointing to the letter "T" Zoe made out of small plastic eyeballs. "Here I can do whatever it takes to get them to learn."

OCA teachers are more sensitive to the



Tim McKinney flips through a thick pile of applications for Bithlo's new private school, Orange County Academy.

local environment than public teachers can be. They don't assign hours of homework each night because they assume there is limited parental support.

"In Bithlo your dog might literally eat your homework," McKinney said. "We don't overload them because we don't want to set them up for failure."

Another scholarship newly available to OCA students is the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, offered through Step Up For Students, a nonprofit organization serving all of Florida.

Adam Emerson, Step Up For Students spokesperson, said he's excited to work with OCA. The organization reserves the scholarship for families who meet specific income eligibility guidelines. The amount fluctuates depending on the number of people in a household.

"They want to reach out to the kids who, ideally, we want to reach out to," he said. "So our missions will essentially be the same."

*For more information about eligibility requirements, visit [mckayscholarship.com](http://mckayscholarship.com). For information about applying for the scholarship, visit [stepupforstudents.org](http://stepupforstudents.org).*