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# Rocky Mountain News



STEVEN B. HICKERSON/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

**Uriah Henry uses his cane** to navigate the Braille Trail, a walkway with letters and numbers formed in the concrete at the new Anchor Center For Blind Children. The \$7 million school opened its doors Tuesday in Denver's Stapleton neighborhood.

## 'All about light, not darkness'

**New \$7 million Anchor Center for Blind Children excites kids, staff.** NEWS 8

# School opens for blind tots

\$7 million facility in NE Denver lets kids be kids



Steven R. Nickerson © News

Paula Stallman holds Skyla Walsh after an exercise class at the Anchor Center for Blind Children, which opened its building Tuesday at 2550 Roslyn St. in the Stapleton neighborhood. The school is open to any child with significant visual impairments.

**By Jean Torkelson, Rocky Mountain News  
September 5, 2007**

Huggable pine trees and Braille etched into the floor - unexpected stuff like that made Tuesday's first day of school truly a new adventure for a group of blind kids in Denver.

And not just for the kids.

"We're just beside ourselves - I don't think we ever dreamed how beautiful it would be," said Alice Applebaum, executive director of the 25-year-old Anchor Center for Blind Children, which opened its \$7 million building Tuesday.

Until now, the school, which serves about 100 children, has operated out of a former cinderblock dormitory in north Denver.

Both grown-ups and students, who range from toddlers to pre-schoolers, spent the first day exploring the 2-acre site at 2550 Roslyn St. in the Stapleton neighborhood.

From its cuddly soft climbing wall called the Tree House to a room with a rubber floor for rolling, crawling or jumping, everything has been designed to let kids be kids even if they're visually impaired.

"More spinning!" crowed 3-year-old Anton Kiwimagi, testing out a toy ride that resembled a record turntable.

The state-of-the-art building draws on years of experience serving blind children. The Denver school was one of four launched in the early 1980s as part of a national service project by Delta Gamma, a 134-year-old women's sorority based in Columbus, Ohio.

Today, the private, nonprofit school is open to any child diagnosed with significant visual impairments.

Over three decades, virtually every student has mainstreamed into a regular school system, Applebaum said.

She attributes the success rate to the school's confidence-building philosophy, which is to teach visually impaired children how to learn about the outside world at their own pace and in their own way.

The sighted staff are learning as much as the students, she said. For example, people who are blind (the word is just fine with staff) often respond to colors and their mood-enhancing qualities just as sighted people do.

"You know, it's all about light, not darkness, for these kids," Applebaum said.

That truism led to a lighting feature whose effect was so startling that even the staff was oohing and ahing: A long band of artificial light running down the hallway perfectly mimicked sunshine filtering through a skylight.

"It's magical," Applebaum said.

An acoustical engineer made sure that sounds always come from a specific direction. That's because kids who can't orient themselves by sight are confused by echoing sounds whose direction they can't place.

In a touch-sensitive world, hardwood, tile and carpet alternate on the floors to help define locations. Grooves in the floor help students know when they're approaching a door.

The whimsical playground includes a Braille Trail pathway inscribed with the alphabet. Cane Walk Lane helps students learn how to navigate city streets and curbs.

Children are even invited to plunge their hands into the bristles and cones of a "weeping pine" so soft that its needles feel like crunchy velvet.

Of course, some old things may trump the new.

Toddler Miranda Soto didn't mind that the new hobby horses haven't arrived yet. She was beaming as she galloped away on the squeaky toy steed brought from the former school.

"They love the squeaks and moves of these old horses," said her physical therapist, Mindy Doyle-McCall.

## **Anchor Center for Blind Children**

- **Location:** 2550 Roslyn St., Denver
- **Information:** 303-377-9732 or [anchorcenter.org](http://anchorcenter.org)
- **Founded:** 1982 by Delta Gamma Sorority, Columbus, Ohio. One of four schools across the country that were part of a national service project for the visually impaired. Now operates independently as a private nonprofit.
- **Eligibility:** Any child, toddler to preschool, who is diagnosed by an ophthalmologist with significant visual impairment.
- **Tuition:** \$80 per month for toddlers and \$120 per month for preschoolers. Grants and donations help defray tuition but every family is asked to contribute something. No child has ever been turned away. Openings still available for the current school year.