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## School reopens after blaze

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WASHINGTON TWP.

Theresa Damico hugged everyone in sight Tuesday morning as she bounded up and down the hallway at Archway School.

"You can't beat a new beginning," Damico, a teacher's assistant, said in breathless excitement.

Students and staff returned to the school Tuesday for the first time since a fire on Feb. 6 caused about \$1 million in damage.

"It was devastating," said Damico, 58, a 16-year school employee. "When I came back and saw the place, I started crying. This wonderful place that had so much love was gone. But I knew from the ashes, we'd get something wonderful."

Around 8:30 a.m., Archway teachers and staff filed out of the school to greet the 52 students who entered the parking lot on a caravan of buses. They hugged the children, welcomed them back to school and steered them toward breakfast in the refurbished cafeteria.

The private school, which opened in 1989, educates students from kindergarten through eighth grade who have behavioral problems and some learning disabilities.

The children come primarily from public school districts in Camden and Gloucester counties.

The goal is to teach them the skills they need so they can return to a traditional classroom environment in their home district, Principal David Ballard said.

Authorities ruled the fire arson, said Dan Martin, CEO of the Atco-based Archway Programs Inc.

"The kids were very, very angry and took it personally that someone would set their school on fire," Ballard said.

Detectives in the Gloucester County Prosecutor's Office have some leads, but haven't made any arrests, said Bernie Weisenfeld, a spokesman for the office.

Archway hired allRisk, a property damage company in Somerdale, to repair the site by mid-August. Everything but the building's structure had to be ripped out and replaced.

Security cameras now monitor the school's property, which is in a residential neighborhood near the township's border with Glassboro.

"It was a tragedy, but we all pulled together," said Pariss Archie, 21, a former Archway student who now works one-on-one with a girl at the school. "I think it fazed the students a little bit, but not too much."

Teachers and staff worked hard to convert a building next to the damaged school into classrooms.

Many used their own money to buy supplies and decorations to make the temporary location more inviting for students, said Donna Drouin, a teacher's assistant.

By the Thursday after the fire, the kids were back in school.

Shane Costello, 10, a student from Atco, called the fire "harsh," but chose to focus on the future rather than the past on his first day of school. If he works hard this year, he will return to a regular classroom by fall 2006.

Said Shane: "This is cool because there's a lot of new classes and new kids."

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