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By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Home-educating families have been back in school, just like public school students for a while now. In fact, many kept at it through the summer. Even so, a new year means a fresh start, and that includes co-op classes in Liberal for area homeschool families.

This year's session of Heritage Homeschool co-op classes will begin in October, running for eight weeks in the fall, and ten weeks in the spring. Organizers are still finalizing details, schedules and volunteers. They're also putting out the word to families who homeschool: the co-op would like more participants.

"We'd like it to grow," said Nikki Whitaker. Several families traveled to Liberal from Garden City,

Sublette, Elkhart and the Oklahoma Panhandle last year, she said, and the group hovered at a participation level of about 40 students. “We had some families move, but we’re also trying to fine-tune it so that it’s really a benefit for families,” she said, especially those who drive long-distance to join in. “co-op will be a little different this year.”

Among the changes are the project’s course offerings. The co-op’s Spanish teacher moved to Tulsa, but the group still intends to offer something other than English. This year, it will be American Sign Language, taught by local homeschooling mother Christina Abel.

For science, the co-op will offer robotics classes at the beginner, intermediate and advanced levels, taught by Whitaker. She noted that while LEGO robotics might sound like a fancy way to play with construction toys, the course is based on real science and complies with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) educational standards. Robotics have become popular in Liberal, with programs taking off at Mid-America Air Museum, where Whitaker taught last year, in USD 480 schools, and through 4H clubs in Seward County.

“Last year was pretty intense,” said Whitaker, who currently coaches and teaches robotics for a 4H program in the public school system’s after-school program. “This year, for homeschoolers, we’re going to establish a team that can compete, but I want to focus on making it fun without overdoing it.”

Heritage Homeschoolers will also offer a creative writing class, taught by Kathryn Robinson, who works as an adjunct instructor at Seward County Community College.

“That’s going to be a lot of fun for the kids,” said Whitaker. The creative writing class will be open to students middle school age and up.

Kimberly Robinson, who performed professionally for two years with the Dallas-based “Ingredients” dance company, will provide dance instruction for beginners and intermediate dance students. The group is also exploring options for art classes and study hall tutoring.

Multi-level class offerings are standard for the co-op, which aims to draw in entire families with

children of all ages.

Kathryn Robinson said that's an important component of successful co-op efforts. Families who educate at home do a great job of working with children on an individual basis and encouraging siblings to develop strong relationships regardless of age. That said, it's still helpful for children to encounter group activities and teachers other than their own parents.

"My oldest daughter is an example of that," Robinson said. "When Kimberly was 4, she could play up a storm at home with her younger sister, but when I took her to her first ballet class, she was so shy. She just had a more reserved personality, but she overcame that because we kept putting her in situations where she was challenged to get out of her comfort zone."

In a co-op setting with families that share a commitment to home-based education, Robinson said, children have the opportunity to branch out a bit in a safe setting. It can be helpful for mothers, too.

"Sometimes, it's just good to get out there where you can see different things than you do at home," she said.

In keeping with that desire, Heritage Homeschool co-op plans a modest, but well-structured day for all ages, with supervised activities and games for younger children as well as academically focused classes for older students.

"We'd love to get more homeschool families involved," said Whitaker, who has been at it for 14 years. She noted that there are lots of families in the area homeschooling, but they don't always connect with each other.

"They're at home, doing school," she said. "We'd like them to join us on Fridays, and we can encourage each other."

Home educators gear up for co-op classes

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Heritage Homeschool co-op will begin the first Friday of October, with sessions scheduled from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., with a bring-your-own lunch period. Courses are still filling up, with fees that vary from free to \$5 per class, per student to cover materials and copying costs. Volunteers are needed, as well.

In coordination with area-wide activities for homeschooled students, the co-op will dismiss on some Fridays, in order to participate in a soccer tournament, Fine Arts Festival, Midwinter Tournament and spring track meet, all taking place in Garden City. The fall session will run for eight weeks; spring is scheduled for 10 weeks.

For more information, contact Nikki Whitaker at 626-7044 or Kathryn Robinson at 309-0541.

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