

School's in for Edmonton little tykes ^[1]

Catholic schools program welcomes kids as young as three into classrooms

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That action was just a sample of the play taking place this week in teacher Colleen Cackett's classroom, the site of a new Edmonton Catholic school district program aimed at three year olds. Called Little Bethlehem, the startup program will run four mornings a week. If there is enough demand, principal Jeff Johnson said the west Edmonton school located at 17655 64th Ave. could add an afternoon class too.

This year marks the first time that Edmonton Catholic Schools has aimed a class at children as young as three.

Previously, the district introduced a junior kindergarten program aimed at four-year-olds known as 100 Voices, now offered in 14 schools.

The Edmonton Public district also has early learning programs at eight schools for children who are 3-1/2 years old as of Sept. 1. District spokeswoman Jane Sterling said the first program for that age group was introduced at Norwood School 10 years ago.

But the Little Bethlehem program is the latest example of the growing emphasis some districts are placing on early childhood education.

"We know the years from zero to five are absolutely critical for early learning and for child development," Corine Gannon, Edmonton Catholic's district principal of early learning, said as she visited the Little Bethlehem classroom.

"Knowing we could tap into some funding and knowing that programming for three year olds is just as important for programming for a four-or five-year-old, we felt it was a responsibility we were willing to take on."

While Gannon said the program has similarities to a traditional preschool, she said the teacher-led class is rooted in Alberta Education's early learning principles, an early childhood education philosophy known as Reggio Emilia and the catechism of the Good Shepherd. Language, fine arts and exploring the world will be key focuses.

"A program that is very, very rich with language and peer interaction really enhances how prepared kids will be for kindergarten and particularly Grade 1," Gannon said. "We know that language has direct links to literacy.

"So the richer the programing we can provide to kids with language and developing skills like fine motor and gross motor, all of that has a huge impact on where they are at in Grade 1."

Funding for the program comes from two sources.

The provincial government provides funding for children with severe speech and language delays, medical or behaviour challenges. Those children will work with a team of the district's specialists such as speech therapists and occupational therapists. Parents of children without special needs are being asked to pay \$250 a month.

Parents helping out in the Our Lady of the Prairies classroom Tuesday morning said they welcomed the chance to enrol their youngsters.

"We have one daughter, so we think she needs to socialize with others and learn to play together," Brenda Rodriguez said as she watched her daughter Sara Navarro run around the gym and experiment with small Hula Hoops and colourful scarves.

Rodriguez said she was comfortable with enrolling her daughter in an early learning program in a formal school setting because she was accustomed to seeing children attend school at the age of three in her home country of Mexico.

"She needs to learn English, so that's another reason we want her to be here," Rodriguez said.

Maria Corazon, mother to twins Robert and Martin Merritt, said she also signed her boys up for the Little Bethlehem program to help with their language skills. A speech assessment found the boys were behind for their age, and Corazon said she was grateful the school registered the twins, even though they won't celebrate their third birthday until Halloween.

"I hope this program will help my kids so they have progress," she said, adding the boys seemed to really enjoy their first week in class.

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-reprinted from the Edmonton Journal

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