

High River Day Care helps to shape early learning in Alberta ^[1]

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Source: High River Times

Format: Article

Publication Date: 7 Jan 2014

EXCERPTS:

Through a historic flood, hail damage and tornado warnings, the High River Day Care has continued to play an important role in a program that could shape the future of child care in the province.

The local day care centre is one of 10 Alberta sites testing a brand new curriculum framework for young children, with the goal of eventually rolling out the program across the province.

"If it goes through, this is history-making for early learning," said Andria McCrae, director of the High River Day Care.

The Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework was developed by experts at Grant MacEwan University and Mount Royal University, through funding from the Ministry of Human Services.

Since early last year, the High River Day Care and other selected sites have helped to examine the "made in Alberta" curriculum in practice in their everyday activities with infants and children up to five years of age.

The pilot project will conclude by March 2014, when those involved will provide recommendations and strategies for implementation throughout Alberta.

The key goal is to help care providers and educators of young children examine and reflect on their practices to see how they can encourage their students' development. Benefits include the creation of a common language among those in the day care industry and formalizing practices that have been common in day cares for a number of years.

Because the curriculum deals with very young children, it is much different than what people might think of in an elementary or secondary setting. Most notably, this curriculum is centred on play.

One example McCrae cited is the act of kids using Play-doh. While it may look like simple play, it helps to engage children in numerous lessons, from creating shapes to learning about their senses to understanding colours.

Encouraging educators to recognize those lessons helps them to plan activities in a more intentional way. These are strategies McCrae plans to implement throughout the day care, even if the curriculum framework isn't ultimately accepted province-wide.

Each site is paired with two pedagogical partners, who are experts in child care from the participating universities and in the wider community. They visit the pilot sites on a regular basis to observe the children and curriculum in action and provide feedback on its effectiveness.

Local resident Caitland Valgardson is one of the two pedagogical partners who have worked with the High River Day Care. She has seen the rich opportunities that have come through the program during visits over the last several months.

"We think of the word play and we think, Oh, they're just playing. But really all of the rich learning opportunities that come out of play are what the curriculum is all about - and how kids learn about themselves, their classmates, what it means to be a citizen and a leader."

One important contribution of the High River Day Care to the program is the perspective of a smaller town and a rural setting. Because the curriculum framework encourages localizing lessons to meet the needs of individual communities, High River is helping to look at incorporating aspects of rural and farm life in Alberta.

High River has also provided an interesting case study into child care throughout the unprecedented circumstances the town has faced over the last six months.

"One thing that the (pedagogical partners) told us was that we pretty much gave them most of the information they needed," said McCrae.

"We had the stress of the flood and recouping from that. We had staff changeover. We had staff with English as a second language. We had a range of staff education levels. So we really gave them more than they'd ever hoped for, just because of our situation. I'm really proud of how our staff was able to pull together and be there for the kids."

When the day care got involved with the provincial program early last year, their staff couldn't have predicted the coming months following the June flood.

Fortunate to escape direct contact with the flood waters, the day care has been able to navigate community challenges while remaining a source of support for the families they serve, said McCrae -- from providing care free of charge in the days immediately following the

reopening of the town to fighting for subsidies for those who have been displaced.

Watching the children work through their thoughts and feelings on the flood has been interesting, she added, from hearing the way they share their families' stories to seeing them incorporate their thoughts on it into their play.

"This whole generation of kids, those colours -- red, orange, green -- are going to mean something totally different to them than it will to anybody else," she said. "So it's kind of a shared experience that they've all had."

Despite some initial concerns about the future of the centre, enrollment numbers are close to where they were prior to June 20. While some children have had trouble processing the flood and the day care has lost some staff members, they are seeing their community persevere, said McCrae.

"Everybody here is doing pretty good," she said. "We have a few kids that are still working through some issues, but in general, the staff and the kids, we think we're doing pretty good... Just the fact that we were able to do the curriculum framework in amongst all of that, we're quite proud of that."

-reprinted from High River Times

Region: Alberta ^[2]

Tags: curricula and pedagogy ^[3]

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