



SAINT BONIFACE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

St. Boniface Elementary School to offer unique, individualized approach to education



St. Boniface School is preparing to make a major addition to the education landscape in Elk County, offering a unique and time-tested educational approach that will be available in the region for the first time, and an intensive workshop dedicated to this innovative concept has teachers, parents and students extremely excited about the future of the Kersey school.

"St. Boniface tested the idea of multiage classrooms this past year," said principal Monica Schloder. "Using feedback from students, parents and faculty, we are enthusiastically embracing the concept and offering something local students cannot get anywhere else."

Up until the 2015-16 school year, St. Boniface School was a typical curriculum-centered environment. Bureaucrats in Harrisburg and Washington developed content standards (Common Core, Pennsylvania State Standards, etc.) that they determined the average student should know by a certain age. The multiage model is based on the assumption that each student learns at a different pace. Rather than focusing on what the curriculum dictates, the teachers develop an individual plan for each student. Those who are ahead of the standards work ahead. Those who need more time to develop get that time and the individual attention they need.

"Our small class sizes at St. Boniface offer the perfect setting for this child-centered approach," Schloder said. "Now it is not the curriculum that is driving our instructional methods - it is the needs of each child. This approach is labor intensive, but it plays to our strengths as an intimate learning environment."

Jessica Gnan, a teacher at St. Boniface and the parent of an incoming student, agreed. "I am excited about providing students with an individualized education that meets the needs of every child," she said. "Multiage is an amazing avenue for educating, because it gives every child a feeling of success and value."

Multiage learning requires special training for teachers. Dr. Sandra Stone, an expert in the area of multiage education, came from Northern Arizona University to lead a special three-day workshop in Kersey last week. Director and founder of the National Multiage Institute, Dr. Stone has worked with schools around the globe for more than 25 years.

"A curriculum-centered classroom measures students against one another and an expected grade level standard," said Dr. Stone. "In the child-centered multiage setting, there is no competition, no need for formal tests or letter grades. Children's work samples are collected in a portfolio and quarterly narrative reports inform parents of their child's progress and successes."

What takes place in a multiage classroom is very different from a standard classroom. While teachers pull individuals and small groups for tailored instruction in reading, writing, and math, others are busy working at carefully planned centers and on personally developed projects that tie to the learning theme. All students work at their own pace, at a level that matches their developmental readiness.

There is also a completely different approach to homework. Rather than assigning common work to all children in the classroom, teachers work with individual students on their own projects. Rather than busy work, this has them doing work they are excited about, geared specifically to their needs. In a sense, they assign themselves homework.

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"Multiage classrooms make for a contagious learning environment," said Beth Hoffman, parent of a St. Boniface student. "Some students like reports; some students like to build things. Last year provided many opportunities such as researching a famous person and creating a costume from items found at home. Students were able to help each other out. Research was done at school, but I found my boy going to the library, browsing the internet at home, going to school early just to work on his project. He wanted to finish his quicker so he could help others."

Teachers are confident that the recent workshop will allow them to make the most of the multiage model and to serve students on an individual basis. "The multiage training that we recently participated in has exceeded my expectations," said St. Boniface teacher Tracy Cesa. "Dr. Stone provided us with so much valuable information about multiage as well as an abundance of ideas, activities, and projects that teachers could use. I'm excited and looking forward to the start of the next school year focusing on a student centered/directed classroom."

The school will continue to be rich with Catholic identity and hold true to many time-honored traditions at St. Boniface. "A successful multiage school needs two things," said Bill Stone, Dr. Stone's spouse and dedicated co-worker. "One, teachers who are filled with enthusiasm and have a solid understanding of this approach. Two, a principal who is dedicated to the philosophy and committed to supporting the staff. I see both these things very evidently here at St. Boniface."

According to Elk County Catholic School System president Sam MacDonald, allowing St. Boniface to build on its strengths offers great opportunity to build Catholic education in the region. "We are really fortunate to have three great Catholic elementary schools in Elk County," he said. "They all have their own flavor, their own approach that works. We want to give families a variety of options. Multiage is something that has proven to work at high-performing schools across the country. The teachers and the parents at St. Boniface are excited about it. This is something that isn't available anywhere else in the Diocese of Erie. I am thrilled that we were able to bring Dr. Stone in to take it to the next level."

Schloder agreed. "Some parents simply feel that the typical classroom environment is too restrictive for their child," she said. "They feel that a classroom driven by standards and curriculum is a bit cookie-cutter, or that their child feels like a square peg getting forced into a round hole. Our multiage environment is specifically designed to serve children on their own terms, and to do so in a way that still delivers tremendous rigor and achievement."

As always, the driving force behind the school's approach is the desire to develop young men and women who can read, write and think clearly and to do so in a way that helps them develop morally and spiritually. "St. Boniface is open to people of all faiths who want a values-based education for their children," said St. Boniface pastor Fr. Ross Miceli. "At the same time, the multiage approach is deeply aligned with the school system's Catholic mission, which is to develop the whole student in mind, body, and spirit while nurturing the values of knowledge, peace, and holiness."

"Consciously and intentionally serving the students' direct needs in a multiage environment is our way of offering families a unique service," he added. "Maybe your child has struggled in a typical modern classroom. Maybe your child is bored. Maybe you suspect that your child is independent, interested in a hands-on approach, or in some way breaks from what people in Washington, DC, thinks an 'average' student ought to be doing every day. If so, you should strongly consider multiage."

If you are interested in exploring whether multiage learning would be a good fit for your child, please contact Monica Schloder at 814-885-8093 or monica.schloder@st-boniface.org.

For more information on multiage classrooms as well as the curriculum at St. Boniface School, please visit www.eccss.org/sbcs.