

## Case Study: Early Childhood Education Program of Distinction

### Saint Ann School, Delaware

#### the program

St. Ann School has deep roots in its Wilmington, Del., community. The stately Gothic church that anchors the school's campus was built in 1868. The school itself was established 30 years later. Today, teachers blend the best elements of the past with modern-day advances in technology and curriculum.

A private, Catholic school, St. Ann serves 255 students beginning at age 3 in its pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs through grade eight. There is one classroom per grade level.

The five-day per week pre-kindergarten program at St. Ann is focused on guiding children through the early development of their spiritual, intellectual, physical, social and language skills. Equally as important, the program is designed to make each child feel secure, confident and loved while deepening their understanding of themselves and the world around them.

The curriculum is modeled after research-based practices built around several key academic and social-emotional focus areas that include:

- Play-based activity. Children learn to make choices and choose their areas of play each day. Activities such as puzzles, Legos, blocks, bead stringing, housekeeping, books, trains, art materials, and dramatic play are available to help develop small motor coordination and stimulate cooperative play.
- Reading and language. Various language-building activities including finger plays, songs, and stories are incorporated into each school day. Phonetic sounds, letter recognition, application of letter sounds, sight words, and vocabulary are introduced during the second half of the academic year.
- Math. Introduction to number quantity, cardinal numbers recognition, ordinal numbers, patterns, geometric shapes, sequencing, graphing, and spatial relationships is provided. The calendar, days of the week, months of the year, birthdays, and holidays are discussed during the daily math lesson.

- Science and Social Studies. Each month a new theme is introduced that incorporates lessons in science and social studies. The five senses are explored in science and home and community are covered in social studies.
- Motor Skills. Fine motor activities as well as eye hand coordination skills gradually increase in difficulty as students become more proficient. Activities with paper crafts, paint, clay, play dough, scissors, and worksheets are aligned with the monthly theme.

Students also participate in weekly physical education, music, Spanish and library classes.

Religion is another key component of the St. Ann curriculum, and Bible stories and lessons on Christian values are taught daily. Students attend Mass on a monthly basis and perform in the Christmas concert.



#### the process

The Early Childhood Program at St. Ann was created more than 30 years ago in response to demand from local families. Initially started as a half-day kindergarten program, over time the school evolved to offer full day Pre-K and kindergarten. Today, the program operates year-round with a staggered start time for its youngest students. Parents value this built in flexibility.

The school pursued the Program of Distinction after the program for 3 year olds launched in 2016, viewing it as a tool for introspection and to ensure that the school is continually changing and improving to meet the needs of all students.

A primary focus of teachers is to provide a positive and creative environment for their students. Children who genuinely want to be in school usually learn better and

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connect with their peers.

To make the school day fun for students, teachers incorporate song, free play, hands-on activities, large motor activities and technology where possible, all while employing evidence-based teaching methods.

For example, in a recent Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math (STEAM) lesson, students heard a story about animal crackers that escape their box and run wild, eventually encountering a stream that they cannot cross. Students were challenged to consider what the animal crackers should do and eventually decided that building a bridge was their best option. Then they learned about two bridge types, beam and arch, used cups, popsicle sticks, poster board and other materials to build bridges. They tested the strength of the bridges, and when the lesson was finished, they were delighted to be able to eat the crackers. Lessons like these are common and incorporate fun into the learning process.

All early childhood teachers at St. Ann are required to have an updated state certification and are allotted \$1,500 per year per teacher for additional training and coursework.

Faculty meetings are held on a regular basis, and at an annual retreat teachers and staff are invited to come together for reflection and planning. Teachers in the early childhood and elementary school programs communicate regularly on student progress and expectations. Teachers work together to support children with special needs and to ensure that appropriate services are being offered.

Student progress is monitored and recorded and later shared with parents. This ensures that parents are informed about how their child is doing and that teachers and families can work together to address any issues.

Additionally, the school has a licensed nurse and counselor. These positions provide teachers with extra support and give students a safe place to address any physical or mental health issues.

### lessons learned

- Incorporate technology into the classroom in constructive ways. Smart boards are an easy way to enhance instruction. Teachers at St. Ann rely on iPads to take photos, track data and help with instruction. If these

supplies cannot be covered in a school's regular budget, inquire about discounts and work with parent groups to fundraise.

Be creative with your space. The St. Ann campus is

- small and children in the pre-k and kindergarten program needed additional opportunities for play and exploration. With help from the Home and School Association, the school purchased an Imagination Playground, which are life-size bright blue blocks and parts that can be put together and taken apart and enjoyed indoors.

Find good excuses for getting families together. This

- builds community and helps students to become better connected with their school. At St. Ann, there is an ice cream social, breakfast with Santa, pasta dinner night, concerts, a spring festival and auction, Mother's and Father's Day celebrations, movie night, field day, book fairs and more.

### program of distinction benefits

The process of applying for and receiving the Program of Distinction was validating for staff and faculty at St. Ann, who were able to affirm the strength of their program. While the Program of Distinction is appealing to families wanting to send their child to an award-winning school, it also tells people that St. Ann is willing to do the difficult task of analyzing and reflecting on its work in order to find ways to grow and improve.

### for more information

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To learn more about Middle States Programs of Distinction, visit [www.msa-cess.org](http://www.msa-cess.org).



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