

Case Study: Early Childhood Education Program of Distinction

Saint John's School, Puerto Rico

the program

Saint John's School in San Juan, P.R., is a non-profit, college preparatory, non-sectarian, co-educational day school. It was founded in 1915 by the Episcopalian Diocese, but registered as a non-profit corporation in 1938.

Today, Saint John's School enrolls more than 780 students within three divisions: Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary.

The school's Early Childhood Education program enrolls children at age 3 and extends through the second grade. Focused on instilling a love of learning from a young age, the program provides ample opportunities for students to develop their physical, emotional, social and cognitive abilities.

Curricula and assessment are based on the early childhood program standards established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and on the school's philosophy of developmentally appropriate practices and learning through play.

Children engage in a wide variety of activities and subject areas that include: computer literacy, physical education, the arts, community service, language arts and a Spanish-language program.

Early childhood classrooms are arranged to provide children a number of spaces where they can play, gather and learn.

Key to the program's success is a low teacher student ratio of 7 to 1, which allows teachers to build strong relationships with their students.

the process

Saint John's School has included a kindergarten program since its inception. The school launched a pre-kindergarten in 1975, and in 2008 the pre-pre-kindergarten program was created. Spanish-language instruction was also introduced as an integral part of the curriculum at that time.

During the process of applying for the Program of Distinction, teachers in the Early Childhood Education

program came together to establish a common goal:

"To develop expressive language and mindfulness through play in order to promote the child's healthy socio-emotional development and a love of learning."

Teachers and staff evaluated existing practices to ensure they were implementing curricula and methodologies that exceeded standards of excellence. They initiated changes to the curricula in order to enhance the following programs:

- Language Arts: Lessons are taught using themes and give students the opportunity to develop reading, writing, oral expression and listening skills. A guided reading program supplements the literacy programs from kindergarten through second grade and a Spanish language program begins in pre-pre-kindergarten.
- Physical Education: A physical education teacher trained in early childhood education teaches healthy living and wellness skills to all students at their level.
- Computer Literacy: Young children learn basic computer skills through innovative projects and activities that teach letter identification, rhyming, syllables, word families and more.
- Arts: The arts curriculum is fully integrated into the program and provides a range of activities including painting, drawing, sculpture, music, theater and dance.

Further, Saint John's integrates the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) at all grade levels, including in early childhood. The SEM was first developed by Dr. Joseph Renzulli in 1977, and is widely implemented as both an enrichment program used with academically gifted and talented students and as an enrichment approach for all students.

Enrichment clusters are central to the SEM and engage students and facilitators in interest-based, student driven, real-world learning experiences.

Kindergarten students, for example, are tasked with creating a restaurant. They brainstorm each of the jobs involved in opening a restaurant and assign responsibilities, practicing knowledge of numbers, money,

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writing, drawing and decision-making. Eventually they transform classrooms and the playground and school lobby into a restaurant that their parents are invited to visit.

In the pre-pre-kinder program students engage in author studies. For example, students explore books by Eric Carle, including *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *The Very Busy Spider*, and then retell the stories using puppet props, discuss key vocabulary words and place textured items in a giant spider web.

Finally, Saint John's encourages professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. In recent years teachers have attended the NAEYC annual conference, the National Kindergarten Teachers' Conference and several workshops.

Lessons learned

- Stay up to date on current trends in child development. The field of early childhood education is continually changing as new research and best practices are brought to light. Ensure that school leaders are keeping track of these changes and sharing tips and tools with others.
- Students must always be your first priority. Running an early childhood program is demanding and time intensive, and sometimes it's hard not to get distracted by administrative and operational issues. Make sure that teachers and administrators have the ability to put the children's needs ahead of all other priorities.
- Develop written policies that are shared widely with teachers and staff, parents, students and prospective families. Saint John's developed faculty and student handbooks. Both documents detail what is expected of teachers and students and are accessible online by faculty, staff, students and parents.
- Hire trained faculty who are passionate about working with children. Working with young children can be challenging, therefore it's important that staff people have an interest in childhood development and find the work rewarding. At Saint John's, teachers and assistant teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. Classroom teachers must have prior teaching experience.
- Provide teachers opportunities for professional development. This can be as significant as sending

teachers to out of town conferences or as simple as giving them time to participate in webinars or attend local workshops.

- The accreditation process and Program of Distinction application process are enhanced when all stakeholders are invited to participate, from faculty and staff to parents and students. However, teamwork doesn't end there. Identifying opportunities for all stakeholders to work together on an ongoing basis is key to continuous improvement.



Program of distinction benefits

Earning the Program of Distinction in Early Childhood Education was an important milestone for faculty and staff who felt validated by the process. It also provides an opportunity to engage with prospective families and market in the community, and helps set Saint John's School apart from other schools.

For more information

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To learn more about Middle States Programs of Distinction, visit www.msa-cess.org.



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