

Total team approach

ECEs, teachers collaborate to advance student learning



Kindergarten teacher Michelle VanHeugten, left, and ECE Kristen Virban compare notes in preparation for the start of the new school year at St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School in River Canard.

(Windsor, Ontario, Thursday, August 31, 2017) – When children from across Windsor-Essex take those first big steps and enter kindergarten at area Catholic schools next week they’ll be greeted by teams of early childhood educators and teachers who work closely together to make sure their students get the best start possible.

“It’s really all about understanding each child’s individual needs and creating an environment where they can succeed,” says Michelle VanHeugten, a kindergarten teacher at St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School in River Canard.

VanHeugten has been with the WECDSB since 1995, and started teaching at St. Joseph in 1996, where she’s been ever since. About five years ago, she was joined by ECE Kristen Virban. Since

then, the two have developed an excellent working relationship built on mutual respect, shared values, and a common desire to help their students get a great head start on lifelong learning.

“We look at where the child is now and we build off that,” says Virban. “Developmentally, we need to meet them where they are. It’s not a top-down approach. It’s a child-up approach.”

Linda DiPasquale, principal at St. Joseph, says the two are highly compatible.

“They share the same values, the same work ethic, the same goals, and the same philosophy about education,” she says. “Michelle has lots of experience, but she’s very open to learning new things. Kristin brings a lot of knowledge about early childhood development, so they learn a lot from each other.”

In addition, she says, the two have developed a reputation in the community as a dynamic educational team, which is evident in the continued growth in English language enrolment at the school as well as in the French Immersion program.

ECEs have been working alongside teachers ever since the Ontario government launched full day kindergarten in 2010. Integrating ECEs into kindergarten classrooms has been an evolutionary process which has involved a learning curve for everyone, including administrators.



Katie Rebner, left, and Tanya Ferri

A key part of making the relationship work depends on the willingness of both teachers and administrators to respect the roles of the ECE, and to rely on their abilities and contributions to the classroom environment, says Maggie Dorion, a vice-principal at the new St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic Elementary School.

At her school, the team of ECE Katie Rebner and kindergarten teacher Tanya Ferri have been clicking ever since they started working together about five years ago at St. Bernard Catholic Elementary School.

“From the beginning, I’ve said that I look at Katie as an equal in the classroom,” says Ferri, who has taught for almost 20 years. “She was my first partner and I learned a lot from her. I feel like I won the jackpot.”

Rebner, who graduated from the University of Windsor’s Faculty of Education with a concurrent degree, is a qualified teacher as well as an ECE. She says the responsibilities she assumes and the environment they create in the classroom results in students who don’t necessarily differentiate between the teacher and the ECE.

“I don’t think the kids even know who the teacher or the ECE is,” she says. “They’ll approach both of us for help.”

And by adopting that team approach, they’re modeling a type of behaviour they hope their students will emulate, which is highly consistent with their Catholic faith and values, Ferri says.

Both teams agree that the success of their relationship depends on largely constant communication.

“You have to have communication, even if it’s just 20 minutes at the end of the day, to share and reflect,” says Virban. “As educators, there’s going to be some work after school. That’s just part of life.”

Besides communicating with each other, communicating regularly with parents about their child’s progress is also extremely important, they say. With last year’s introduction of kindergarten report cards, ECEs now have their names on student assessments.

According to Rebner, it’s the formalization of collaboration on student progress that has always existed, but it lends legitimacy to the role nonetheless.

“It’s meaningful in the sense that there’s more recognition given to the title,” she says. “It makes you feel more valued by the system.”