

## Montessori: Unique Early Learning Option in Edson at École Westhaven Elementary School

**Immediate Release: May 4, 2022** The first priority of [Grande Yellowhead Public School Division](#) (GYPSD) is **student learning**, and through its third priority, **community engagement**, its schools are always evolving and expanding their program availability to meet the needs of their families. For example, over the past 15 years, GYPSD's Board of Trustees has heavily subsidized the expense of providing a full week, full day kindergarten program at the request of their families – a significant cost as the province only funds this important early learning program as a half day program. Again, in response to families' requests, the Division began offering a junior kindergarten program for 3- and 4-year-old children in 2019 at the majority of their elementary schools; a natural transition for these early learners to their local school community led by a certified GYPSD teacher. Further, GYPSD schools in Edson, Hinton and Jasper offer kindergarten programs in either English or French Immersion, following the Alberta Program of Studies.

Principal Debra Boos at [École Westhaven Elementary School](#) (EWS) in Edson is taking the Board's priorities to a whole new level. Her goal is to offer a diverse range of learning choices for families to meet every student's individual learning needs. EWS is the only elementary school in Edson to offer junior kindergarten, and kindergarten programs in either English or French Immersion... but her vision did not stop there. This school year saw the start of a two-year pilot early learning program using the world-renowned Montessori method open to junior kindergarten and kindergarten students, led by Montessori certified teacher, Brooke Thompson. The second year of the pilot, 2022/2023, is open to kindergarten and Grade One students; the goal is to increase the program by one grade each year if student enrollment can support the expansion.

EWS is the only rural public school in Alberta offering the program outside of urban centres - something that Principal Boos, a former educator for several years in a Montessori school in BC is very proud of. "Montessori Schools are historically run as private schools with expensive tuitions, limiting access to this important learning structure for the majority of families. Having taught in a Montessori School and experienced the success of students who thrived in this learning environment, I wanted to incorporate the Montessori method within Westhaven, offering another option for our families."

The two-year pilot program has the full support of Superintendent of Schools, Carolyn Lewis, who encourages GYPSD schools to explore new ways and strategies to engage students through a wide range of learning options, regardless of their postal code. "Our goal is that the Division offers a world-class education for every student to be successful. Every student has different learning strengths and interests. We are proud to be able to offer choice in program options. Principal Boos' thoughtful and purposeful plan to provide a Montessori program within the public-school environment is innovative and exciting for our Edson community."

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So, what is the Montessori method of learning? On April 27, 2022, EWS held a very informative community information night to answer that question, and was joined by several parents, staff members, and community members including former alumni and educator, Janet Wilkinson, and current Edson Town Councilor, Peter Taylor. Along with a presentation and tour of the classroom, current Montessori parents gave glowing testimonials of the program.

“My child is still learning the same concepts as his peers but he is doing it in a way that is fun and hands on. One thing that I am especially excited about is that my child has been able to learn more about subjects that interest him that he wouldn’t have the chance to do in a traditional classroom. My child loves math and has been working on higher levels of math and is so excited when he comes home and tells me about it. I will continue to choose Montessori because I see how happy my child is and how excited he is to learn each day.” *Bailey Williams, parent of current Kindergarten student.*



Conventional Kindergarten and Montessori programs differ in the way that teaching and learning occur in the classroom. Kindergarten is a method of education used by the majority of schools. On the other hand, Montessori is a method of instruction that is used to educate. The Montessori style uses a child-centered approach where each student is empowered to express themselves and the teacher adapts to each student’s interests; “help me to do it myself.” Some other differences between the two include:

1. **Teacher Role:** In Kindergarten, the teacher is the center of attention and is responsible for deciding the methods of teaching and imparting knowledge. They decide what, how and when the students learn about a topic or skills. Conversely, Montessori teachers are a guide as they simply introduce a topic to a student and let that child explore the various possible outcomes for that particular topic or problem.
2. **Learning Pace:** In a traditional kindergarten environment, the child is expected to learn at a similar pace as the other students or they are considered to ‘fall behind’. With the Montessori style, children are allowed to learn at their own pace and take their own time to learn each skill. At EWS, learning outcomes still follow the Alberta Program of Studies and students are assessed the same as the other EWS students.
3. **Classroom Environment:** Traditional Kindergarten style classes are designed to keep the teacher as the focus. Montessori classrooms are designed after child behavior observations and keeping the child as the main focus. This allows for individual and very focused learning. Montessori students are EWS students; they take part in every applicable school activity or event.



Dr. Maria Montessori believed children learn best during particular early learning periods where children experience a fascination to learn a particular skill, such as numbers, colours, music, or language. Following her method, EWS teaches according to a child’s stage of development – not their age. Mixed-age classrooms are usually three ages together. The individual curriculum is based upon different areas such as:

- Culture, science, practical life and sensory education is **equally** important, not just academics;
- Educating the **whole child** - physical, social, mental and emotional;
- Individualized curriculum (within the AB Public School Curriculum);
- **Beautiful, calm, and purposefully prepared environment** - designed with everything the children need to explore and learn independently;
- **Experiential learning;**
- **Concrete materials** are used;
- **Mixed age** classrooms - they are also mixed skill levels;
- **No “set lessons”** with time constraints - rather than having a 20-30-minute lesson on one subject and then moving on, there are blocks of time to learn which integrates subject area outcomes.



Registration for the 2022/2023 school year is now open and Principal Boos welcomes families to contact the school to learn more about the banquet of early learning options that EWS offers to the community of Edson.