

St. Patrick hopes to draw parents into preschool program

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The first preschool program the elementary school has offered in more than a decade will open its classroom doors. As part of enrollment, however, the school also will ask students' parents to receive some training.

"We have to be drawing parents in and making them a very strong part of the education process," said Judi Willard, St. Patrick's development director.

Willard brought the idea to school officials after learning about the Griffin Early Childhood Center, a preschool in Chicago Heights, a Chicago suburb. That preschool was the brainchild of John List, a University of Chicago economics professor.

According to the preschool's website, one of List's goals is to learn more about whether investing in parents, by paying them to attend a parent academy, will improve student achievement and behavior.

A research team will study student success compared to the school's level of investment in parents and teachers, and vice versa.

Willard said the study gives children of low-income families the opportunity to go to preschool free of charge, but parents have to attend bi-monthly meetings. At the Griffin center, however – unlike the plan at St. Patrick – parents are paid to do so.

"Half of the parents will receive up to \$7,000 a year for attending the Parent Academy, while the other half will be given about \$3,500 cash and \$3,500 into a fund set aside for college," Willard said in an email. "The parents are taught what their children are being taught and given tools for bringing the learning into their daily routine."

Parental engagement

Though the Griffin center has been open only a few years, Willard said the parental engagement aspect of the program was appealing enough to immediately replicate in Springfield.

Officials at St. Patrick, 1800 South Grand Ave. E., will have one-on-one meetings with parents of their preschoolers in an effort to teach parents the merits of staying involved with their children's day-to-day schoolwork.

"If we don't educate our students well by the time they hit third grade, if we haven't done a really spectacular job of educating them, then we will pay for them through incarceration and welfare later on," Willard said.

Part of meeting that goal, they say, is to overcome the challenges that can arise from having a student body that is 100 percent low-income. To Willard, one way is to produce an army of parents with an attitude like foster parent Wylse Smith's.

Smith has three foster children who attend St. Patrick School. Her youngest will be in kindergarten this year.

"I commend them for getting parents more involved, because a lot of parents drop their kids off and that's the end of it," Smith said. "With something like that, the parents have to have a more hands-on (relationship), and I think that's excellent."

But List and his research team has the financial backing of hedge fund billionaire Ken Griffin. St. Patrick School, which has an annual budget of about \$500,000, will have to attract parents in other ways.

Daycare approach

"We don't have the money to be a motivator like in Chicago," Willard said. "We are sure that community and business leaders may be able to help provide incentives -- we are just excited to get our program up and running and being part of what is right in this community."

By December, St. Patrick School officials also hope to be able to buy the curriculum model used at the Griffin Early Childhood Center.

"Our main focus at this time will be a daycare approach with educational offerings," principal Kim Marsaglia said.

The preschool will be open from 7:15 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. Enrollment costs \$120 per week, although some parents may be eligible for financial assistance from the Community Child Care Connection.

Enrollment in kindergarten through fifth grade at St. Patrick costs \$73.50 per month per student.

About 60 students are currently enrolled at the school, which nearly closed its doors in 2010. After preschool registration, Willard expects that number to jump to about 70 students.

Last school year, St. Patrick had 46 students.

“We’re going in the right direction,” Willard said. “A lot of parents come in and they say they want the best for their kids. Word is getting out, and we are willing to research what’s going on in new frontiers of education.”

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