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Delaware schools: Young teachers learn on the job

Special preschool pairs toddlers with teenagers

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At <http://stgeorges.nccvt.k12.de.us/>>St. Georges Technical High School near Middletown, students learn from children one-fourth their age -- and the toddlers learn right along with them.

The older students, all majoring in early childhood education, are teachers three days a week for 3- and 4-year-olds who have enrolled in the Preschool at St. Georges.

The preschool, with its own private entrance at the 3-year-old technical school, is the latest of a handful of labs like it at Delaware technical schools with early childhood education programs. Working preschools also can be found at Hodgson Vo-tech High in Glasgow, Polytech High in Woodside and Sussex Technical High in Georgetown.

"They actually have real children to work with, which is a big advantage," said Lynette Williams, an early childhood education instructor at Hodgson. "It's about as close as they're going to get to the outside programs."

Colleen Conaty, who has teaching experience and ran two day care centers for 11 years, was tapped to develop the St. Georges preschool, which opened last year. This year, 22 toddlers were enrolled at the school-within-a-school, and they enjoy a one-to-one ratio with the 22 juniors who spend most of the time teaching them during the all-morning program, Conaty said.

The little children live mostly in the Middletown area, and instructor Conaty had no trouble getting them enrolled, mostly through word of mouth. Parents and guardians are attracted by the reasonable rate: \$675 per school year for the two hours and 45 minutes of special attention Tuesday through Thursday.

The younger children benefit from "a high-quality early-learning experience in a safe environment," Conaty said. "And it gives the children a peer group they learn with. They learn as much from each other as they do from us, how to compromise, how to solve problems."

The St. Georges students get a good taste of what it will be like when they become teachers, day care providers or take other career paths that involve working with small children.

"I tell them, when they go to a day care, they'll be alone with the children," Conaty said. "So this is a safe start for them. They have a safe environment to work out their kinks. They can take some risks, and they're not alone. They have a lot of support when they're learning. And when they do go out to a job, they're a strong candidate, because they've already done it."

"There's nothing I can make them read or take notes or lecture about that can substitute working with children on a day-to-day basis," she added.

Emily Peterson, 16, a junior, wants to be a first-grade teacher, and she believes the experience will

be very helpful.

"It's a really great experience to actually interact with the kids three days a week," she said. "Actually being in here, I think you develop the skills a lot more quickly, and you learn from your mistakes."

Aroya Ponzo, 16, a budding child psychologist, works with 15 other sophomores who take over from the juniors for the final half-hour of the preschool. She also values the experience.

"It's not all just textbooks," she said. "You get to see how they learn and how you can help them learn, and how it's going to be when you actually work with children. Working with them, you actually get to feel out their energy. You've got to deal with the ones who are shy and the ones that are rambunctious, like very active."

Seniors in the three-year program -- there are 19 of them this year -- work in co-op jobs at real-world day care centers, mostly in the Middletown area, Conaty said.

On Mondays and Fridays, when the sophomores and juniors are not working at the Preschool at St. Georges, they learn in the classroom about childhood development and plan the curriculum for their preschoolers, she said. Each week the lessons focus on a theme, such as dinosaurs or holidays around the world, and the student teachers incorporate that theme into subjects such as math and language arts.

Parent Angela Brown of Port Penn is pleased with the preschool experience her 4-year-old son, Carson, has been getting at St. Georges.

"It's got an academic focus," said Brown, who also has had two children in the preschool at Hodgson. "My son just loves doing all the crafts. He brings something home every day. They get a lot of attention from all of the teachers, and it's been a wonderful experience for all three of my children."

The toddlers get much of what they would at preschools elsewhere, including snack time and time on playground equipment just outside the door, Conaty said.

"There are no naps," she said. "The three hours they're here is their learning time. Their rest time is at home."
