

Catholic schools join national focus on early childhood

As the school year begins, institutions in the Archdiocese of Baltimore are focusing on a new demographic – preschoolers.

"I think the key thing is when you reach children when they're young – ages 2, 3 and 4, it really sets them up to start kindergarten ready to learn," said Erica Meadows, director of the Loyola Early Learning Center, a new preschool launching in September on the campus of St. Ignatius, a Jesuit-run parish in Baltimore.

LELC will start with a class of 18 2-year-olds, and by 2019 offer pre-K-2 through pre-K-4 classes, as that first group advances and younger students are admitted to follow them.

Sally Lake, director of Our Lady of Grace Preschool in Parkton, which is offering pre-K-2 through pre-K-4 classes, referred to recent scientific research pointing to a child's first five years as critical to his or her development.

"It is so important that children are spending that time in an environment rich with experiences," she said.

Parents, also, benefit from the availability of preschools, administrators noted.

"People are working," noted Mary Morrison, an administrative assistant handling admissions at St. Mark School in Catonsville, which has expanded its preschool offerings to include a full-day program for 4-year-olds.

"They need a place where they can feel their children are safe and secure," Morrison continued. "To have the option of full-day preschool is a bonus to some families, rather than daycare or a patchwork solution."

In other cases, such as LELC, which primarily serves students from families with low incomes, "many parents are in training themselves," Meadows noted, adding that one school parent is studying to work as a physical therapist, and another, a social

worker.

Furthermore, LELC will offer “education Saturdays,” which include seminars for parents on resume writing, healthful cooking and other topics.

“For us, it’s not just about preparing children for school, but also getting help for parents,” Meadows said.

All three schools – LELC, St. Mark and Our Lady of Grace – reported a positive response to their new offerings.

“She screamed on the phone,” Meadows recalled of one woman’s reaction when notified that her child had been accepted to LELC. “It was like she had won Publishers Clearing House.”

“Overall in the community, people are very happy we’re offering pre-K-2 as well as pre-K-3 and pre-K-4,” Lake said of Our Lady of Grace. “They don’t want their children to get behind, and they’re eager for quality education.”

They aren’t the only ones feeling eager.

“It’s been a lonely summer,” said Lake, who previously served as director of Epworth Children’s Center in Cockeysville. “It was a necessary time for preparation, but it will sure be nice when the children are here.”