

## Nursery school promotes child-centered curriculum



*Chef Nabor Vasquez puts on a cooking demonstration for students at the Highland Park Community Nursery School. Photos Submitted*



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It's no secret that children are naturally curious, especially at preschool age.

At Highland Park Community Nursery School, the teachers and care providers use that curiosity to their advantage.

While many preschools and day care centers teach from the top down — with teachers planning the curriculum and dictating it to the students — Highland Park Community Nursery School does things a little differently.

“We do a project approach,” Executive Director Pam Carlson said. “So we take what the children are interested in and the teachers build projects around what they are interested in. So the curriculum is coming from the children, rather than top-down from the teachers.”

That sort of philosophy, she said, encourages children to be problem-solvers and thinkers.

The nursery school, a staple in Highland Park for 62 years, offers services ranging from all-day day care to kindergarten enrichment, which provides a half day of education and care for students already enrolled in half-day kindergarten at a community school.

The project approach to learning, Carlson said, is used across the full spectrum of the nursery school's programs.

Recently, students in one of the school's classrooms participated in a restaurant project which, keeping with the school's philosophy, grew from the students' own interests.

“We have a 4-year-old classroom where the children were playing; we have a little house corner,” she said. “And the children were playing restaurant, they were serving each other and pretending [they were at a restaurant]. ... So the teachers took that lead and started to talk to the children about what do they know about

restaurants.”

As part of the project, she said, students visited and toured a local restaurant and also, by chance, had a well-known Chicago chef visit them in their classroom.

Nabor Vasquez, executive chef of Nieto’s in Highland Park, had come to the school to fill in for the regular cook who had taken a leave of absence due to injury. In addition to cooking the school’s daily meals, he took some time out to visit the students and answer their restaurant-related questions firsthand.

“He went into the classroom and he did this demonstration with them,” Carlson said. “They would have been thrilled if he [just] brought a cucumber and showed them how to cut it up, [but] he cooked in front of them. He made a three-course meal for them.”

Carlson said this student-centered, hands-on learning approach does an excellent job of getting students engaged in their own education.

“The process is so much more actively engaging,” Carlson said. “If we don’t give [children] the answers, they give them the framework to explore and discover ... they can build that knowledge together and that’s much more powerful than a teacher saying, ‘This is how you do it.’”

In this sense, she said, teachers act as facilitators and provocateurs, helping direct students’ questions and discussions.

That philosophy doesn’t stop with the teachers.

Carlson said the school has designed its classrooms to be teaching elements as well, incorporating interesting visual and sensory elements. This all-encompassing approach to day care and preschool, she said, is part of why the nursery school has become such a staple in the community, adding that many of the parents of their current students were once students at the school themselves.

“We really try to promote a community, family feeling,” Administrative

Director Lisa Adelmund said. “It’s like, once you’re in, you just never leave. You just stay.”

That paradigm goes for the teachers, too.

“Half of our staff started as parents here,” Carlson said. “And they weren’t parents who became teachers. They were parents who were already teachers, already bookkeepers, already administrative assistants who said, ‘Wow, if I go back to work, I want to go to work there.’”

For more information about the Highland Park Community Nursery School, visit [www.hpcommunity.org](http://www.hpcommunity.org).

- See more at: <http://www.hplandmark.com/nursery-school-promotes-child-centered-curriculum#sthash.28x7xSeU.dpuf>