

NATIONAL CHILD CARE FRANCHISE GODDARD SCHOOL TO OPEN SOON IN FARGO

By Tracy Frank • September 18, 2011



Marsha Bittner stands in front of the Goddard School under construction at 4665 44th Ave. S. in Fargo. The new state-of-the-art 8,400-square-foot building has been designed to accommodate approximately 140 children from infancy to 6 years old. The new school is projected to open this winter. David Samson / The Forum

FARGO - The Goddard School®, the national chain of child care centers with educational philosophies that mix learning and play, will be coming to Fargo, and the waiting list to get into this school already exceeds the number of children the business will be able to accommodate.

Part of what makes the Goddard program so attractive to parents is that preschool is offered for infants through 6-year-olds on a flexible schedule, says Marsha Bittner, of Lisbon, the franchisee of The Goddard School that is under construction at 4665 44th Ave. S.

Bittner says it's more of a school than a child care center, but kids are learning in a fun environment at their own pace, guided by teachers as they play.

"We'll really fill a void right there," she says. "It's very open to what the parents need."

The Goddard School will take children anywhere from two days a week to full time, and each classroom will have a certified early childhood education instructor.

"That's what kind of sets us apart," Bittner says.

The Goddard School is part of a national child care franchise that offers year-round programming. The 8,400-square-foot building is planned to open around the first of the new year and will be open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The school will accommodate 140 children and will provide after-school programming and a summer camp for older kids up to age 9 with fun learning activities, Bittner says.

"The biggest thing with Goddard is, it's very engrained right now in child development in psychology and in education that the best way to learn is to play," Bittner says.

Teachers create their own curriculum around domains such as language, literacy, math, science, social studies, art, physical and social development, based on the kids' development.

The waiting list already has more than 140 names. Parents will be able to secure a spot by paying a deposit at a pre-enrollment event toward the end of October.

"I think our infants will be filled immediately," she says. "It's going to be a different option for parents. This is the first franchised child care center of any kind in North Dakota."

The Goddard enrollment prices are not yet finalized. Bittner says she will be doing a market survey in the next few weeks to determine fees, but they will be comparable with the market. The average cost of weekly child care in Cass County at a center for infants is \$151.31 and for preschool-aged children \$129.10, according to Child Care Resource & Referral.

Different than Montessori

While some people might equate the Goddard School to educational methods like Montessori, there's one major difference; Goddard is a national franchise while Montessori is a teaching philosophy.

Inside the Goddard Schools, the teachers develop an environment that adapts education to an individual child's needs.

Meanwhile, the Montessori method is based on observing and supporting the natural development of children. Teaching is more individualized as opposed to group-based. Children choose what to work on and are given uninterrupted time to concentrate on that project.

"A Montessori setting is unique in that the environment itself is viewed as a really important part of a child's learning," says Camille Brandt, director of education for the Children's Montessori Center in Fargo and an assistant professor of teaching and learning at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

Children play with specially created hands-on materials that are child-size but not necessarily plastic toys. They learn about everything from manners and working out problems with their classmates to math, language, and science.

"It's learning through play, it's learning through social interaction, it's learning through working independently for long periods of time where the kids don't have to be interrupted," Brandt says.

Both Goddard School and Montessori methods, along with many of the accredited traditional child care centers, like A Child's World in Fargo, operate under the philosophy of helping children learn through play.

"That's how children learn the best is through interaction and play," says Linda Sakrismo, director for A Child's World. "They have to be interactive and they have to be involved."

'Like a little classroom'

Among the people on the Goddard School's waiting list is Amy Anderson of West Fargo. She wants her 3-year-old daughter to attend the school because she likes the idea of the way the day is structured, almost like a little classroom.

"It's just one of those things where you're always looking for something that's going to provide the right kind of structure and preparation for your kids," Anderson says.

She also likes that a lot of the curriculum is based on information from child psychologists. Still, she says choosing child care is not an easy decision.

"It's extremely difficult because you've got the scientific aspect of what are they going to teach them and how are they going to structure their day, and then you've got the aspect of is the person going to care for my child as I think they should and be compassionate," Anderson says. "Finding that combination is really hard."

Bittner found interest in the Goddard Schools after reading about the franchise in a magazine. She later toured three Goddard schools in the Twin Cities area and realized the school fit with her passion of helping and educating children.

Bittner, who has seven children of her own ranging in age from ages 4 to 27, was a school psychologist and clinical social worker before becoming a Goddard School franchisee.

She says she learned so much raising her own kids and her dream is to bring adventure and play-based learning to other children, develop a life-long love of learning and make sure each child in the school knows they are important and valued.

Judging by the more than 140 names on the Fargo Goddard School's waiting list, those are philosophies shared by area parents, too.