

## EDUCATION

## St. Benedict's Introduces Preschool, STEM Curriculum

By Elizabeth Wulfhorst



COURTESY ST. BENEDICT SCHOOL

Students at St. Benedict School recently participated in a coding challenge in conjunction with the school's new STEM programs and curriculum.

**H**OLMDEL – Parents will have another choice for preschool this fall when St. Benedict School opens its doors to 4-year-olds for the first time in the school's history.

Candace Wallace, principal of St. Benedict School, said adding a preschool to the Catholic elementary school, which currently educates children in kindergarten through eighth grade, “seemed like a natural step.”

Parents of students already in the school responded positively to a survey to judge interest in a preschool program. Those parents were given the opportunity to preregister their 4-year-olds for fall 2017. Initially Wallace planned only

one preschool classroom with 20 or fewer students, but demand has already pushed the program to two classes.

Parents currently have the option of sending their children for five full days, three full days or five half days. Cost for the preschool program ranges from \$4,500 to \$6,000 for the year, according to the St. Benedict School website. There is no plan at this time to include a 3-year-old program, but that could happen “eventually” if the demand is there, said Wallace.

Wallace is in her first year as principal at St. Benedict's, having worked in both public and private schools throughout her career as an educator and administrator.

St. Benedict's is the parish school of St. Benedict Church which also has a new pastor, the Rev. Garry Koch, also a former educator. Both Wallace and Koch believe in a “faith-building and character-building” approach to education. They also understand the benefits of educating the preschool age group so the students are not behind their peers socially or academically when entering kindergarten.

In addition to the new preschool program, St. Benedict's has also expanded its Extended Day Program, an after-school care option allowing students to stay at school as late as 6 p.m. on a school day, by adding a Before Care program which starts at 6:30 a.m.

Wallace says the program is very popular since many families have two parents working outside the home who need to get to work earlier than a typical school day allows.

The school is also revamping the middle school curriculum to a true “middle school model” for grades six through eight. The sixth-graders will be moved to the middle school wing of the building, located on Bethany Road, and will begin changing classrooms and teachers for each subject, similar to the practice in high school. According to Wallace, this creates a “more fluid educational experience” for all the grades. “Sixth-graders are a little more mature and need a little more challenge,” she added when explaining the reason for the move.

Wallace has improved the curriculum by introducing a STEM program for kindergarten through eighth grade with a dedicated MakerSpace. What was once just a library is now the “Center for Innovation” where children learn robotics, Lego engineering and take advantage of a green screen for making videos. Traditional books are also available. Structural changes are being made to the school to create a dedicated, state-of-the-art science lab which will be ready next school year.

While enrollment is down at St. Benedict's from 10 years ago, Wallace is not concerned about the school facing the same fate as other Catholic schools in New Jersey. Wallace says she “knows the signs” of a failing school and St. Benedict's shows none of them. With the advent of the preschool program and the curriculum advances for the rest of the school, “I foresee us growing,” said Wallace. “We are thriving.”