



Vanier Vistro serving up a tasty educational experience at G.P. Vanier

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DONNELLY, AB – Special Education students at Georges P. Vanier School in Donnelly are demonstrating an insatiable appetite for learning life skills these days.

It's all part of the launch of a new educational business initiative called Vanier Vistro, which offers food for both the soul and mind in a warm and inviting restaurant-type atmosphere set up in the school's Home Economics on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.



Back row from left: Vanier Vistro staff including Diane Blanchette (educational assistant), Dylan Deslauriers, Spencer Dumont, Joel Boivin and Ryan Chomiak. (Front row from left: Cheryl Fortier (educational assistant), Jennifer MacCalder, Emilie Tanguay, Niketa Chalifoux and Diane Martel (educational assistant).

“There’s a real sense of value and benefit attached to this program in terms of its ability to provide our students with a very unique hands-on learning experience through the introduction of a wide variety of important personal life skills,” says Marion Lessard, junior high teacher and special education coordinator at G.P. Vanier.

Those skills range in nature from maintaining effective customer service relations and hospitality (social interaction and etiquette), to comparative shopping as well as food planning, preparation and cleanup. Students are also learning about effective financial planning and budgeting skills, thanks to the purchase of a dishwasher for the Home Economics room as part of a “business loan” from the school.

“The students took out a business loan to purchase the dishwasher and are making monthly payments on it through operational revenues generated at the Vistro,” says Lessard.

The Vanier Vistro program was founded in September of 2009 following direct consultation with Karen Chrenek, educational program consultant with the CASE team from Grande Prairie, which operates a similar diner at Crystal Park School.

“We were given the opportunity by administration to visit Crystal Park School and view the diner in action,” says Lessard, adding they were “quite impressed with the potential learning opportunities for G.P. Vanier students” through the introduction of a similar program.

That process began to take shape in early September as Lessard worked closely with Chrenek, support staff, High Prairie School Division and the community and business sector to firmly plant the roots of the program within the school foundation.

Doucet says direct involvement from this willing support network of internal and external resources has infused Vanier Vistro with all the necessary ingredients for a true recipe for success. That includes sponsors such as J & G Glass and Houlder Automotive in Falher in addition to Girouxville Co-op, which generously stepped up to the plate by sponsoring the purchase of G.P. Vanier aprons and T-shirts for students to wear during operational hours of the Vistro.

“We’re very thankful and appreciative for the collective spirit of cooperation and high level of support shown towards this program. The community as a whole has embraced it right from the start,” Doucet explains.

It’s that same tsunami-like wave of support which allowed Vanier Vistro to make its successful debut to a receptive group of parents on Sept. 30, 2009. That was followed by a special invitation to HPSD Executive Council, school council and central office staff on Oct. 28 and the grand opening luncheon on Nov. 18.

Doucet says all three events were very well received, adding it quickly became apparent that the school had hit an “educational homerun.”

“The response to the Vanier Vistro program has been extremely favourable. We’ve had nothing but positive comments. Everyone’s been extremely impressed by the hard work and attention to detail that goes into making each luncheon a unique experience,” Doucet explains.

Accepting the lion’s share of the credit and praise for their instrumental roles are the seven dedicated special education students and their educational assistants, who work diligently behind the scenes each week to create exceptional meals in a comfortable setting.

Students spend a portion of every second Friday (prior to opening the doors of the Vistro) to thumbing through supermarket flyers for comparative shopping purposes while fine-tuning a grocery list for their chosen meal of the week. On Monday, they make their way to the local grocery stores with support staff (courtesy of a van provided by HPSD’s transportation department) and purchase the food prior to returning to school to stock the shelves. Food preparation for items on the menu begins the following day in advance of Wednesday’s official opening, which is dedicated to final food preparations, setup, food and beverage delivery and cleanup.

Lessard says the roles and responsibilities of all students rotate on a weekly basis to ensure everyone has an opportunity to be involved with the different aspect of the Vistro, adding their combined work ethic and commitment to the program is indicative of the enriching energy needed to continually feed the program’s success.

“To witness the level of enthusiasm and maturity by our special education students and see the smiles on their faces each week is inspirational, gratifying and rewarding,” Lessard explains. “It’s really priceless.”

Vanier Vistro operates twice a month on the second and fourth Wednesday. Reservations are required in advance (by the Friday before each Vistro) and can be made by telephone (780-925-3959) or by stopping in at the school’s main office. All meals are \$7 with cash being the preferred form of payment.

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For additional information please contact G.P. Vanier Principal David Doucet at 780-925-3959 or HPSD No. 48 Communications Officer Kevin Laliberte at 780-837-6638.