

Agora Prep Academy challenges traditional ideas of learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on teaching methods ? as they were and what they could become.

Students have been working virtually from home with educators on the other side of the screen and parents nearby to lend a hand.

In the view of Sylvia Martignani, this shift has highlighted shortcomings in the system and underscored pathways to innovation.

This is part of the driving philosophy behind Agora Prep Academy, a new independent school set to officially open in Aurora this Saturday in conjunction with Angelic Treasures Christian Daycare.

'I don't have a school, I have a learning environment,' says Martignani, principal and visionary of Agora Prep. 'I don't believe in 'schooling' because this turns learning off.'

This is not your average independent school.

There are no grades and no report cards. Learning at Agora is completely experiential and inquiry-based.

'Children come in, they decide what they want to learn, they decide when they want to learn and they decide how they want to learn it,' she says. 'They tell us what their interests are and then, using their interests, we teach them math, science, language, drama, history and all the content which comes later. The most important thing is engagement; children have to be engaged.'

Martignani brings 25 years as an educator to the table. She has taught kindergarten all the way through Grade 12 in more traditional school environments, and she has also taught in the Federal Public Service.

'I worked with children and adults of all age groups and I realized the current system is archaic,' she says, harkening to schools that streamed students onto specific career paths. 'There are systems, it is regimented, it's rigid and it's absolutely dated. It doesn't speak to our twenty-first century learners and they just keep making more schools where children can't be individuals. It's all just a lot of schedules, ringing bells, and they keep asking children to follow a system until they're 16, then they graduate and say, 'Okay, you can do what you want now.'

'Students going into university are either dropping out in their first year not deciding what they want to be and not knowing their own strengths, or they change their major two or three more times. Some of the most successful entrepreneurs today haven't gone to university, they just rebel against the school system. This disengagement with learning, which is a natural part of who we are, occurs. However, children are not really being disengaged from learning; they're disengaged from schooling. We decided to shift the paradigm.'

A contributing factor on this drive to shift the paradigm were Martignani's own experiences.

A mom of three, she said she was 'done' with kids being 'shushed all day', becoming overshadowed by other students who might be stronger in some subjects than others, and kids being 'displaced and labeled' ? even labelled with such challenges as ADHD 'when they are just bored!'

'We haven't been catering to their learning styles,' she says. 'My school is going to be built for children of all superpowers.'

Students at Agora will begin the day between 8 and 9 a.m., a relaxed schedule to minimize last-minute stress experienced by students and parents alike in beating the morning bell. Following the 9 a.m. start time, kids settle into an 'Agora Circle' where they can talk and discuss 'virtues and character traits' intended to develop life-long learners.

These virtues are rooted in a Christian philosophy, as is Angelic Treasures, although both components are open to people of all faiths.

'We understand the philosophy that it is not just about religion, but the virtues that are preached in Christianity,' says Angelic Treasures' Aaron Chen. 'It doesn't matter if you're a Christian family, the virtues are there but there is a standard. It is very important to say what is right and wrong, but be kind, be truthful, be courageous, be patient. We're not preaching religion [but] we're saying in Christianity there are these stories that are [just like] The Three Little Pigs who built three different houses ? you learn from these stories.'

The ventures, which are located at 101-126 Wellington Street West, combine teachings from North America, Europe, Africa and Asia, says Martignani, which come together to 'cohesively unite and build an environment where children of all abilities and capacities can thrive, succeed, and reach unparalleled heights of fulfillment.'

'Inspiring future leaders is my tagline for Agora Prep and I intend to make that happen,' she says.

For more information about Agora Prep Academy, visit agoraprep.com or call 1-888-5-AGORA-5. Angelic Treasures Christian Daycare can be reached at 647-812-1179 or by visiting atdaycareaurora.com.

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