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How a new school plans to incorporate 'principles of the lean startup'



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Special to Blue Sky

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Bennett Day School rendering

(Bennett Day School rendering)

View of the new flagship Bennett Day School building from Grand Avenue

Bennett Day School, which opens late this month in Chicago's West Loop, plans to offer the self-guided Reggio Emilia learning approach to students in early childhood through middle school. Founders say the school will serve children ages 2 to 6 and that, by 2016, a campus will open on West Grand Avenue and serve students through eighth grade. The school was founded by private equity investor Cameron Smith, former Francis Parker teacher Kate Cicchelli and Josephinum Academy director of finance Shuchi Sharma. Smith, the CEO, explains how the school aims to foster an entrepreneurial mindset.

Q. Why did you create Bennett Day School?

A. My wife, Erica, and I wanted an education for our kids that reminded us of our favorite educational experiences. We thought about college and grad school and experiences that were very much like the real world, team-based and collaborative, and we just weren't finding that when we visited schools. We stumbled on this approach called Reggio Emilia in other schools in the U.S. and to a limited extent in Chicago, but we didn't find any in Chicago that had it up through eighth grade.

Q. What attracted you to this approach?

A. Reggio Emilia is a collaborative approach to self-directed learning. The teacher is a co-researcher and co-learner with the student. We don't have prescribed content. We have cognitive skill goals that we reach every year. The teacher will provoke and provide materials that should stimulate thinking and then they have to follow where the children go.

After we experiment with materials inside of our school, we may take a walking field trip somewhere and have a very place-based experience, and that's very different than a more traditional means of drill and practice or memorization and worksheets. Students have an experience that is immersive where they have to explore, experiment and fail and then recalibrate what they're doing to learn, so the recall and the experience is that much more valuable.

Q. It sounds like you're trying to foster an entrepreneurial mindset. Why?

A. Absolutely. If you were at any entrepreneurial ecosystem around town, failing fast or iterating is key, and that's how students (will) think and learn at Bennett Day School. It's part and parcel to being a successful startup. You shouldn't have to wait 20 years to learn to iterate, fail and recalibrate. We're trying to bring the principles of the lean startup to the school environment.

Q. How does this square up with Common Core or other state standards?

A. You're still meeting the same standards but getting there a different way. The only area where we have a prescribed approach is we use Singapore-based math starting in kindergarten and senior kindergarten.

Q. What technologies will you use to teach?

A. The languages we teach are Spanish and computer programming and coding. In our TinkerLab, the walls are made of wood planks, plywood and pegboard. We will use tablets and lots of materials, particularly as kids get older. Colin Reynolds, our senior kindergarten lead teacher and the TinkerLab curator, created an industrial sound garden out of foil and other household materials, and it integrates music and science.

Q&As are edited for length and clarity.

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