

Early Childhood Education

A New Atelier Blossoms from the Reggio Curriculum at the Meyerhoff ECE



When it comes to education at the Meyerhoff Early Childhood Education Center (ECE) in Park Heights, Director, Zac Price and his staff have taken the ideas of two learning perspectives and merged them into an organic and unique JCC learning philosophy.

These perspectives parallel a set of criteria established by the Park Heights ECE staff, which include five precise focus areas: *Kehillah*, which mean community, *Tzelem Elohim*, which means divine image, *Hit'orerut*, which means amazement, *D'rash*, which means interpretation, and *Masa*, which means journey. These Jewish values essentially express the embodiment of the ECE.

To further these values, Price is introducing an atelier, which is French for "workshop." In English the word is used in reference to artists' workshops, where a principal master and a number of assistants, students, and apprentices work together, producing pieces that go out in the master's name. This modern atelier uses the mentor approach to a small number of students. As mentors, teachers will be using

a workshop space in the school that resembles a black box style theatre with separated sections for students to focus on numerous creation modes, such as art, theater, clay works, and other aspects of educational enrichment. Price says that students will be looking at facets such as shape, material, color, three-dimensional work, the uses of light and dark, and how tools are used to change substances. The children become part of the creation of community (*Kehillah*) in the process.

Tzelem Elohim and *Hit'orerut* (divine image and amazement) come into play in that both self-image and inquiry work in the process of creating in any medium. Price says teachers will be trained to elicit individual inquiry of the students and then allow for reflection; the teachers will give only prompts and make suggestions so that the child gains ownership of the product. The key element is the process of learning by creating art.

Art education is extremely valuable for young children say the experts at Americans for the Arts. "It stimulates and develops the imagination and critical thinking, and refines cognitive and creative skills." In the ECE our students will also learn to experiment with cause and effect and engage in a cycle of inquiry with their mentors. This idea falls in line with *D'rash*, where both the teacher and the student place equal emphasis on the answers while allowing each to explore expectations and preconceptions. Price says, "Once children engage in the process of learning about art, they therefore learn about the world." This idea equals a sense of craftsmanship, quality task performance, and goal-setting—skills needed to succeed in the classroom and beyond (Americans for the Arts).

According to Price, the atelier is a perfect complement to the Reggio Emilia Approach followed by our school. This curriculum was developed after WWII in Italy by teacher Loris Malaguzzi. It is based on the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum. The focus is on the principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment.