



A child checks the thermometer at the River Road Preschool Development Center during learning center time.



Children at River Road Preschool study the wonders of color and light together.



A Preschool with Lessons for Everyone: River Road Church, Baptist in Richmond, Va.

Sitting just minutes away from the stately campus of the University of Richmond, a church named “River Road Church, Baptist” occupies a serene hilltop, its steeple stretching high above the tree line. Inside the church’s preschool, however, serenity gives way to classrooms and hallways brimming with activity daily.

Established in 1972, the River Road Preschool Development Center currently serves about 180 students ages 10 months through junior kindergarten. The school operates a standard half-day program that can be extended for convenience and tailored to each family’s needs. Danielle Simone, the Preschool Development Center director, has been on staff for three years. Her tenure has brought needed changes to both the preschool and its relationship with the church.

Daniel Glaze, pastor of River Road, says that since Danielle took the reins of preschool leadership, there’s been more effort to “blur the lines” between preschool and church and make the two less insular from one another. While the Covid-19 pandemic has been a struggle, the preschool has been able to emerge with no debt and an excellent rate of retention of its students.

Church preschools are perhaps one of the most common ways to make use of spaces that otherwise sit empty for most of the week. Many churches have preschools that are in high demand because of their location and/or reputation in the community, but preschools often present their own set of challenges. In addition to the logistical challenge of sharing spaces, preschools can contribute to excess wear and tear on the building

causing extra maintenance costs. Preschools can also pose a financial challenge as enrollment fluctuates from one year to the next. Many preschools see a balance sheet that is break-even at best, so the church must be willing to absorb costs associated with an operating loss and invest in the upkeep of the preschool area. The preschool model at River Road is not only self-sustaining but also provides some financial benefit to the church, which makes it extremely rare.

ENGAGING ENRICHMENTS PROVIDE AN ATTRACTIVE MODEL

The River Road Preschool Development Center operates its primary schedule from 9 a.m. until noon. But, Danielle says that periodically surveying parents has tremendously helped in providing additional services to meet needs of those families enrolled in the school.

Flexibility is the key, she says, in appealing to the schedules of those who attend the school. Early care begins at 7:30 a.m. and extended care is offered until 4 p.m., as well as “lunch bunch” and afternoon enrichments that change every 6-8 weeks.

Enrichments are seasonal and often feature outside vendors who come

to the preschool to provide classes and recreational opportunities for the children. These include academic offerings as well as classes such as dance, soccer and martial arts. Each December the Center offers a special Christmas-themed enrichment that is staffed by the preschool’s teachers and includes all things holiday—stories, crafts, snacks—to keep children structured and channel their enthusiasm for the season.

The add-ons to the half-day program make the preschool a one-stop shop in terms of managing the child’s day. Parents can pick up their kids from school and not have to taxi them to another area of the city to have their recreational and extra-curricular time, making it both convenient for parents and profitable for the preschool since enrichments are an additional fee. It also has added benefit for the enrichment vendors because they get another client base they wouldn’t have otherwise. The fee for enrichments includes lunch and staff supervision in the enrichment classes as well, making them even more attractive.

The preschool also offers six weeks of camps throughout the summer which include extended care offerings, except for the week of Vacation Bible School at the church. Children

from the school are encouraged to attend Vacation Bible School so as not to compete with the church's ministry. The students and families also contribute to the ministry of the church with two fundraisers each year that benefit the Fellowship Fund, which offers monetary assistance to families and individuals.

Because of the profit the preschool makes from this model, they are able to give back to the church as a way of offsetting the cost of operating rent-free. In a previous era, the preschool gave a set portion to the church, but under Danielle's leadership, the contribution from the preschool has been more generous. The funds contributed by the preschool bless the congregation by assisting with ministry programs as well as offsetting the cost of utilities and custodial staff.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE OBSTACLES THAT ACCOMPANY CHURCH AND SCHOOL COOPERATION

River Road is a congregation composed of many members who do not live in the neighborhood surrounding the church. They don't enroll their children in the preschool because it is not close to their home or work, so the connection between the church and preschool can be

challenging. A lot of the families who are enrolled in the preschool find the half-day model attractive because they have flexible schedules or a stay-at-home parent who can manage pick-up and drop-off. With this acknowledgement, the church has tried to be involved in the school in other ways.

One key piece to strengthening the relationship of the church and preschool has been Danielle's hiring as preschool director as a member of the ministerial staff. She attends staff retreats and staff meetings and has even shared her personal story at a summer Vespers service. Likewise, Danielle invites pastors to speak at the preschool's chapel services. Church staff ministers also host "coffee and conversation" with parents of preschoolers once a month before the preschool chapel services and attend the preschool staff prayer circle once a month. Daniel Glaze said that including Danielle on the ministerial staff has had "untold blessings" in terms of connecting the church and preschool.

The Fixers is a group of volunteers from the church who spend part of their Thursdays making needed small repairs and completing various tasks around the church. To show investment in and care for the

ministry of the preschool, they include the preschool's needs on their list. The church has also been involved in the preschool day of service on the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Individual members of the church also offer assistance. A retired principal in the congregation has served as a mentor to Danielle, which she says has been a tremendous source of support, especially during Covid. There is another member of the congregation who meets weekly with Danielle as needed to go over the preschool finances to offer advice and serve as another set of eyes to review the numbers. In addition, Danielle sends monthly financial summaries to the finance committee. When the preschool elected to add full-time positions, members of various church committees helped to evaluate this decision, and offered support, even knowing that it may take a few years to bring financial gain. While this has proven cost effective in just its first year, the support was there to back the preschool if needed.

While the mutuality between the church and school takes work, it is much improved under Danielle's leadership, according to Glaze. "It's been difficult to involve the church in the preschool and the preschool in the church," he remarked, "but in Danielle we have a strong leader."

CONSIDERATIONS FOR A MORE ADAPTIVE CHURCH SCHOOL MODEL

The River Road Preschool Development Center didn't employ an effective model of offering extended care and enrichments overnight. It has taken strategic communication and a delicate balancing act when it comes to logistics and staffing. Danielle has been a preschool director for 10 years and that experience serves her well.

For churches considering adding a church preschool, a thorough job description of a director is needed. A candidate for the position needs to be able to communicate clearly with parents and staff and foster a sense of professionalism among the teachers. Churches who currently operate a church preschool could offer professional development opportunities to the director and teachers to better equip them. For example, Danielle took a class on finance to strengthen her skills in budget development. She also ensures her teachers receive paid professional development each year to stay attuned to best practices in their field. Paid professional development and a higher-than-average hourly wage are keys to maintaining low teacher turnover

rates and fostering a positive work environment for faculty.

A congregation also needs to consider which spaces the preschool would use and how they would be shared (if that's necessary). At River Road, the preschool and the church share spaces. With storage for both, the rooms transition from Sunday school spaces to classrooms with ease. VBS is able to use art supplies and materials from the preschool to keep its costs down. The church also helps to cover the cost of renovations and furniture for the preschool and is able to do so because the preschool contributes so generously back to the congregation. In 2021, the church paid for a bathroom addition to one classroom because the preschool needed it for expansion.

The church and school are now considering allowing area nonprofits who would offer services with the preschool to use space in the church for low or no rent as an outreach that is mutually beneficial. "It gives an area nonprofit space and allows us access to services we might not otherwise be able to provide because of proximity," Danielle stated.

Your church might think about those who offer services in the areas

of speech therapy, occupational therapy, or autism as prospective occupants of office space. (A case study on Southside Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., related to leasing space to nonprofits and other congregations is available in this resource.) This would allow your preschool to broaden its constituency and serve families who might not otherwise have access to such agencies.

When asked for her best piece of advice when it comes to a more a la carte model of preschool operations, Danielle said, "Start small, and do it well." She added, "Evaluation is key, and knowing the cost of every seat in the school is very important in determining tuition and related fees." When it comes to the relationship with the church, both Daniel and Danielle agree that, like all relationships, it takes intentionality and communication. But it's worth the effort if the church and school become more collaborative and less insular. When churches and their schools can share events, spaces, and their mission, stewarding their resources looks less like a business and more like the Body of Christ.