

Valdez Cooperative Preschool Gets Things Going



Left: Co-op Preschool Board members and children pose by the sign at their new location.

Photo by Sharon Crisp

Above: The kids of the hour enjoying themselves at the Spaghetti Feed Fundraiser.

Photo courtesy Captured by Diane St. Amand

The Valdez Cooperative Preschool is a non-profit 501(c)3 cooperative established by a group of parents whose vision is to create a safe, educational, and loving environment where children and families learn, play, and grow together. Learning through play and family involvement in their children's education is at the heart of the Valdez Co-op Preschool's philosophy.

The Valdez school has actually been around since the 1970's, but a combination of events led the former members to stop holding class six years ago. Recently, there has been increasing interest in starting back up, and a new Board of Directors has been created to facilitate that process.

The preschool is run entirely by volunteers with the exception of one paid teacher. That is what makes the Cooperative special and different from other preschools. Many parents want to be involved in their child's education, and a cooperative preschool allows them free-

dom to do that at whatever level best fits their family.

The group of families who run the school share similar philosophies and hire a trained teacher to provide their children with a quality preschool experience. The school is administered and maintained by the parents and each family shares in the business operation of the school, thus making it a truly cooperative venture.

This type of arrangement provides benefits to both students and parents. Parents can observe the behavior of their own children and other's, learn how professional teachers handle various situations and gain greater understanding and enjoyment of their own children through active participation in their education.

Children benefit by participating in a supervised play and learning experience with children their own age. All aspects of learning are geared to their needs and developmental levels.

The Valdez school's classroom features

an open floor plan with several different areas for children to explore, socialize and learn.

The classroom features a welcome area, a dramatic play area, a block and learning toys area, library/story time area, and an art area. They also have a seating area with tables for reading, writing, arts and crafts projects and snack time.

Currently, the preschool plans to offer two morning classes and an afternoon Pre-K class in the fall. The Valdez Co-op Preschool believes in smaller class sizes, so enrollment will be limited to 10-12 students per class.

The educational foundations of reading, writing, math, science, and art are introduced, but the learning is enriched through the offering of art, drama, music, dance, exercise, language introduction, hands-on learning, play and socialization.

Parent participation in the Cooperative is essential in creating a safe, caring, nurturing, loving and fun environment for children to thrive.

The dynamics and structure of family involvement in a co-op preschool has unique opportunities provided by families of enrolled students who have special talents or skills to share with the classes.

While each family can choose their level of participation, all families are required to participate. There is a program to fit most every family's needs. There are different 'levels' of involvement for each classroom. The Cooperative offers three levels to fit the different needs of member families.

Level I parents volunteer in the classroom once every two weeks, Level II parents volunteer once a month, and Level III families are not required to volunteer in the classroom at all.

An interesting aspect of family participation is that it can affect the amount of tuition a family has to pay. Tuition is adjusted based on the level of involvement parents choose. This can be very helpful as preschool, and childcare for that age in general, can be very expensive. Given they are volunteer run, co-op preschools can offer reductions in rates and scholarships, often making them more affordable than traditional preschool or childcare.

Tuition is important to the Valdez Cooperative Preschool as it is their primary source of funding, although additional support is provided from the community and through various grant programs.

Funds are also raised through fundraisers and events. On April 29, the Cooperative held their first Spaghetti Feed Fundraiser, complete with a silent auction and spelling bee that featured many special talents in addition to spelling. This event raised \$2,500.

According to Board Member Jessa Comer, "our first Spaghetti Feed Fundraiser was a wonderful success! We really couldn't have done it without all of the encouragement and donations from the people of Valdez. We had over 20 local businesses donate items for our silent auction! We really owe our success to our



supportive community." Staci Beauvais, Valdez Co-op Preschool's Board President, said they are likely to make this an annual event.

The Cooperative parents are currently selling raffle tickets to win one of three beautiful quilts that were donated by Trudy Koszarek, Shelly Stubblefield, and Janai Comer. Tickets are \$10 each or three for \$20. They also have fun summer events planned; including a Summer Solstice Luau at Dock Point on June 21, a booth at the Block Party on July 4, and they'll be out in full force during Gold Rush Days in August.

In addition to raising money for the program, the Valdez Cooperative Preschool families are busily preparing for the fall. They've moved to a new location; now located behind the Veterinary Clinic on Egan Street.

They are currently accepting applications for a teacher. This person will work hand in hand with parents to find solutions that will give the children the strongest educational and developmental foundation possible. The minimum qualifications include at least 12 months experience in a formal classroom setting and a high school diploma. They are hoping for candidates with additional experience and education to help them on their journey.



Top: Members of *Upcountry Bluegrass Band*, winners of the Spelling Bee at the first Cooperative Preschool Fundraiser. Above: Hailey and Addison, students at the Co-op Preschool.

Photos courtesy Captured by Diane St. Amand

Enrollment in the Co-op hasn't started yet. They plan to make this available sometime in June. They do encourage families to sign up early to get the best choice in involvement level.

Registration will open to members prior to opening to the rest of the community.

For additional information or if you are considering enrollment, call 835-2667 or visit www.wix.com/vdzcoop/vcp. ■