



# Step into PreK through Explorative Learning

By Brandon Patton

First-of-its-kind school sets the bar high for early education.

**I**nspiration—it can be found throughout the Dr. Sarah K. Jandrucko Academy for Early Learners: Four-year-olds climb into a model rocket ship and watch real-life rocket launches. They and then cruise into the savanna on a wild safari.

The school’s environment was created to engage and encourage children to touch, play, and explore.

“It’s structured around early childhood research and what it indicates is best for students and how they learn,” explains Kristi Cobb, director of early literacy for Mansfield Independent School District, part of the Dallas–Fort Worth metro area. “Young students will interact with others and learn through play, and they’ll also learn by having these unique experiences that are everywhere.”

The district’s goal for the prekindergarten program is to improve the development of early literacy and numeracy and teach early learners to read on level or higher by the beginning of third grade.

“Many pre-kindergarten centers focus on active, hands-on learning, but teachers are working overtime to create environments conducive to that type of learning,” Cobb says. “At the Academy for Early Learners, the environment and architecture of the building were designed specifically to facilitate active, explorative learning.”

## Exploring and Learning

The 54,000-square-foot building resembles a hands-on children’s museum with dedicated themes that are carried out through decor and interactive exhibits. The learning environments are grouped into four main thematic pods and branch off into 16 distinct classroom environments. Students spend time exploring and learning about all aspects of life—taking pets to the

vet, building igloos in the Arctic, or tracing food’s journey to the shelves of a grocery store.

“It’s not like a traditional literacy center and not like a traditional school,” says Jeff Brogden, associate superintendent of facilities and bond programs. “One of the learning experiences is about the ocean, so students and teachers climb into an interactive submarine where students will learn about different mammals and life underwater.”

In another pod, children spend several weeks learning about space before walking back into prehistoric time, where they can



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LYON PHOTOGRAPHY.

*The Academy for Early Learners includes flexible common spaces that serve as gathering areas for students and staff outside of classtime.*



*Students get a hands-on ocean experience with a submarine, salt-water aquarium tank, and halo-lit panned ceilings in the Ocean Exploration Pod.*



*Zoo animals bring the animal kingdom to the children so their imaginations can run wild through exploration in the Zoo Animals Investigation Pod.*



*A journey in time in the Navigation Pod takes the students on a prehistoric playtime adventure, allowing them to don their paleontologist hat and take a trek alongside dinosaurs.*



*The community room in the Interaction Pod offers kids the chance to explore how communities are built, who their neighbors are, and what makes communities so special.*

touch, learn, and dig under the eyes of a giant stegosaurus. When they cruise into the next room, they learn about unique ways to travel with lifelike models of a kayak, hot-air balloon, and even a camper.

“Students are whisked into a classroom that takes them on an adventure from the moment they walk in the door,” Cobb says. “Our thoughts on how early childhood education should look are not new—we’ve just been able to put it all together inside one building.”

### Vision to Reality

Creative concepts and plans were implemented with the help of an education contractor in the state. Construction of the school began in July 2017 and was completed within 18 months.

Project manager Katie Hill describes the collaboration effort to successfully deliver the museum as envisioned by the district:

“We had a great design and construction team working on this project. Every team member understood the importance and community impact of this high-quality project, and this message was transcended to each and every entity involved. With that, all parties came into this project knowing that it was going to be unlike any other project they had been a part of before. This mind-set helped us achieve the vision and quality that the district was seeking. At the end of the day, the Academy for Early Learners is essentially an interactive museum where children can learn while they play.”

Between 480 and 500 students will be able to enroll at the Academy for Early Learners each year. The full-day preK will offer morning and afternoon sessions with classes of 15–17 students, a teacher, and an instructional aide. The school will also host field trips and other activities so that all students in the district have the opportunity to benefit from the facility.

“Our goal is to open our doors as often as possible while still honoring the learning environment,” Cobb says. “We’d like to share what we are doing with others, and hopefully encourage or inspire educators to think outside the box.”

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