

Slime, sundaes... and success

Fun drop-in last chance to mentor grads of inner-city school with excellent track record



Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

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Summer break may be in full swing, but Gonzaga Middle School invited graduates back to the building for water balloon fights and academic, employment and support services this week.

Roughly 30 alumni, including teenagers and twentysomethings, stopped by the grades 6-8 school in North Point Douglas on Tuesday afternoon. They were greeted with slime-making kits, ice cream sundaes and staff ready to answer questions.

The initiative — the final grad drop-in organized this summer — is a new extension of the mentorship and holistic programming baked into the funded independent school's mandate.



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Principal Rex Ferguson-Baird fist-bumps Kimber Louis, 14, at Gonzaga Middle School's annual summer drop-in Tuesday.

“We have 22- and 23-year-olds coming back and checking in and asking for help on their university papers,” principal Rex Ferguson-Baird said.

As far as Ferguson-Baird is concerned, that’s an unusual, albeit welcome, indicator of a school’s impact.

Since its inception a decade ago, Gonzaga has delivered Manitoba curriculum to students from low-income neighbourhoods. In its leaders’ words, the tuition-free program was founded to “(break) the cycle of poverty by providing an enhanced, holistic, culturally-sensitive, Jesuit-inspired middle school education.”

Nearly nine in 10 graduates have gone on to obtain a diploma to date. Multiple alumni have secured scholarships to continue their studies after Grade 8, both inside and outside the Manitoba Catholic Schools system.

The school, run by a board of directors led by Winnipeg Jets co-owner Mark Chipman, relies on individual donations and provincial funding.

Jason Bruce has been visiting his alma mater regularly since he graduated last year.

The 15-year-old said he always takes the opportunity to socialize with friends, see former teachers and shoot hoops in the gymnasium, which is how the soon-to-be Grade 10 student spent much of Tuesday afternoon.

“It’s such a small school — you get to know and talk to everyone,” he said, adding that he’s had a far different, and at times, overwhelming experience at St. Paul’s High School.

Fifty-two students were registered at Gonzaga, which has capacity for 60, at the start of his senior year. The St. Paul’s student population was roughly 13 times that size last year.

Gonzaga graduates have attended 17 different private and public schools, including St. Mary’s Academy, Children of the Earth High School and Technical Vocational High School.

Given many of them attend Tec-Voc, Gonzaga has been sending a support team to the Winnipeg School Division site to check in with alumni throughout the academic year.

All of its graduates are invited to their former school, located at 174 Maple St. N., for evening drop-in sessions hosted on a monthly basis between September and June.



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Chasity Berens-Francois, left, and Jade Smith-Kipling, both 13, create chalk drawings. Nearly nine of every 10 students go on to earn a high school diploma, the school says.

Karla Grobb, student and graduate support director, said staff are often asked for tips to navigate the Winnipeg Transit system.

Her team, made up of educators and social workers, also helps students secure school supplies, apply for post-secondary programs and runs “social-emotional check-ins.”

“Grads were missing out on our summer camp and they were asking if they could come (back) and volunteer, keeping the connection,” Grobb said about what motivated the recent addition of summer drop-ins.

Gonzaga organized two camps this year — a July trip to Camp Manitou and more recently, a field trip-filled week of swimming, bowling and land-based learning — for current students.

“I liked how all the staff members were super caring. It’s a place where I belonged. I had friends here,” recent grad Jade Smith-Kipling said.

Jade, 13, made sparkly slime with friends and entered a draw at the drop-in Tuesday — the first of many she said she plans to attend at Gonzaga.

There are 138 former students, including high-schoolers, those in post-secondary programs and young people who’ve joined the workforce, involved in the graduate support program.

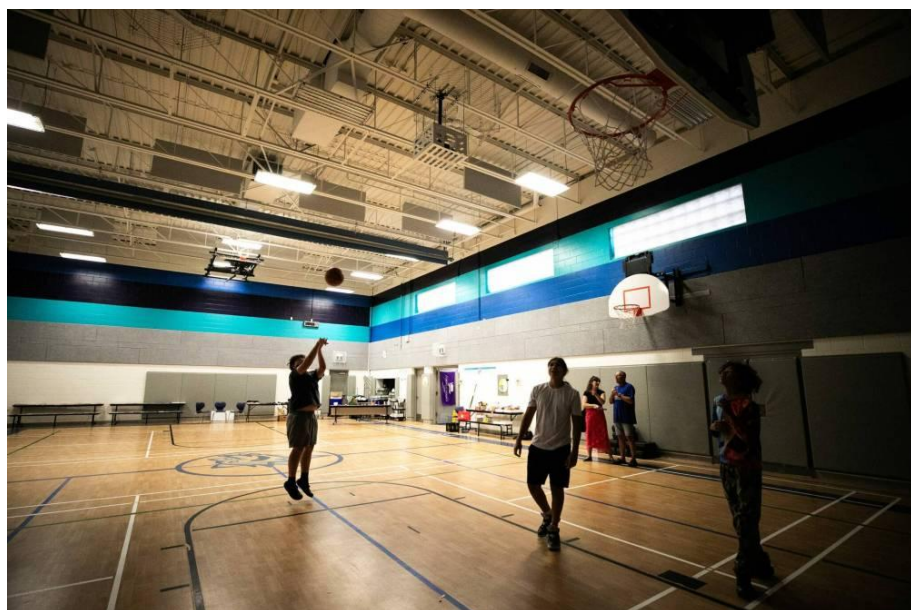
The school is named after Aloysius Gonzaga, a 16th-century patron saint of Catholic students, but it does not explicitly deliver religious instruction.

It was designed based on the Jesuit Nativity school model, established in New York City in 1971 to serve low-income students with an extended academic day and wraparound support.

The Winnipeg school gifts students with uniforms and facilitates ribbon skirt-making, along with other activities designed to address the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to actions.

"Gonzaga Middle School staff and board members are dedicated to moving forward in partnership with all Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration," is printed on a poster near the entranceway that is decorated with the four colours of the medicine wheel.

The school opens with a communal breakfast at 8 a.m. on weekdays during the regular school year. Programming runs until 4:45 p.m. from Monday through Thursday. Students are dismissed at 3:30 p.m. on Fridays.



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Kids shoot hoops at Gonzaga Middle School's annual summer drop-in on Tuesday.

The mornings are packed with "heavy lifting on literacy and numeracy," Ferguson-Baird said. Phys-ed, music and other activities are scheduled for later in the day.

The school recruits students via word of mouth and outreach efforts. Jade, a member of the Class of 2026, registered because her older sister had a positive experience.

Jason is an outlier in that he learned about the school when he accidentally hopped aboard the wrong yellow bus as an elementary schooler. His brief visit to Gonzaga made such a mark on him that he applied when he was old enough to do so, the now-15-year-old said.