



The Children's House Prepares To Open New Downtown Junior High

By Beth Milligan | Jan. 12, 2022

Three months after Traverse City commissioners approved an ordinance change to allow schools and universities to operate in downtown Traverse City, The Children's House is preparing to open the first such school Tuesday: a Montessori junior high school located in the 101 North Park building at the corner of Front and Park streets.

The Children's House is relocating its junior high classes – including 25 students and three classroom guides – from its Long Lake Road campus to a new 6,000 square-foot space on the second floor of the 101 North Park building. The space formerly housed tech incubator 20Fathoms, which relocated to the Bayview Professional Centre in 2020 (<https://www.traverseticker.com/news/as-more-tenants-leave-downtown-tc-dda-explores->[↑]

options-for-relief/). The move marks not only a significant leap forward for The Children's House, which launched its junior high program eight years ago with just four students, but also for the City of Traverse City and Traverse City Downtown Development Authority (DDA), which supported a zoning change last fall to allow schools to operate in the city's urban core.

FEATURED VIDEOS



Classroom guides Tree Sturman and Kristina Weidenfeller – along with a math specialist who is currently obtaining his Montessori certification to become a classroom guide – are joining the roughly two dozen seventh and eighth grade students pioneering The Children's House's new downtown location. In keeping with the Montessori approach of hands-on learning, the students have been heavily involved in the move: helping design the layout of the new space, packing up the old classrooms, and planning to work alongside the adults this Friday when the school rents a moving truck to relocate the junior high. Following a day off for Martin Luther King Jr. Day Monday, the students will officially start classes in the new space Tuesday.

Head of School Michele Shane says that as the junior high expanded in recent years and began outgrowing its space, school leadership “really started thinking about the downtown area as being ideal for this age group. We looked at the partnerships we could potentially forge with businesses downtown, accessibility with walking and biking and BATA, the natural resources. It felt like a good move to look at the urban environment.” As Shane and her team began scouting locations, the departure of 20Fathoms provided a sudden opportunity, with building owner Thom Darga and his son Nick Darga – a Children's House alumnus – working closely with the school to negotiate a deal. Though The Children's House is leasing its square footage to start, the school ultimately hopes to purchase the space, according to Director of Advancement & Admissions Renee Hintz.

Sturman and Weidenfeller echo Shane's remarks about the opportunities posed by having classrooms located in the heart of Traverse City. In Montessori education, the adolescent program recognizes "that this is a time when young people are thinking of becoming increasingly independent, including financially independent," says Sturman. "Our hope is that our students can learn from small business owners, the DDA, the Rotary Club, the for-profit and nonprofit organizations, about how the economy works and how our community functions. What better way to do that than being downtown, which has all of those things?" He notes that The Children's House is open to collaborating with any downtown owners or organizations interested in working with students. In addition to being near institutions like the Governmental Center and Grand Traverse County Courthouse, the junior high will also be able to take advantage of the nearby Boardman River, Grand Traverse Bay, and NMC's Great Lakes Campus – all opportunities to engage in water-based learning and science studies, says Weidenfeller. "It allows endless possibilities for us and our curriculum," she says. "It's exciting."

The junior high will have an open floor plan in 101 North Park with a variety of "small environments" customized to the use intended for each particular space, another Montessori educational tenet. "There will be a quiet library space where students can read and work on projects," says Sturman. "There's a grand open space where we can all be together and collaborate. Previously students worked on their laptops and moved around, but here there's a dedicated space for a computer lab. We'll have 3D printers for robotics and a robotics room, and a traditional science lab space." An exercise room and educational kitchen space could also be in store for the future.

The DDA has been enthusiastic about bringing schools downtown, with DDA CEO Jean Derenzy previously noting that many parents already work downtown (<https://www.traverseticker.com/news/tc-planning-commission-to-consider-downtown-schools-new-housing-rules/>) – making it easier to pick up and drop off students – and that urban centers can act as an "extended classroom" for students, as well as offer after-school job opportunities for students old enough to work. Schools can become a "focal point for the community and a neighborhood anchor," according to Derenzy, with educational space often used "after school hours for a number of school and community events and activities." There is also the spending power that accompanies tweens and teens ages 10-17, who account for \$44 billion in discretionary spending each year. "Most is spent on entertainment, food, and clothing, which we have in downtown Traverse City," Derenzy says.

Traverse City planning and city commissioners have also been generally supportive about schools like The Children’s House opening downtown, though some raised questions during the zoning approval process about traffic and parking impacts (<https://www.traverseticker.com/news/tc-planning-commission-to-consider-downtown-schools-new-housing-rules/>), particularly during drop-off and pick-up times. Hintz notes that seventh and eighth grades are more self-sufficient than younger students and will be dropped off in designated parking lot locations downtown near 101 North Park that are approved by the DDA, walking the short distance to the building. Other students may walk, cycle, or ride public transit to school.

Given the amount of space available in the new facility, Shane says there is still “plenty of room for the program to expand,” with the goal of adding another 10 students for a maximum 35 students on-site. The Children’s House anticipates most of those students will come from the school’s existing elementary program, with younger students and their families “already excited” about the possibility of coming downtown in the future, Shane says. “We’ve gotten overwhelmingly enthusiastic feedback,” she says. “During COVID, there’s been a lot of evolving into different ways of learning. The time is right for us to be on the forefront of doing something different.”

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