

# Edmonton teacher receives Prime Minister's Award for Excellence



Tonya Byrne

Whether she's bringing a beehive or a squid into her classroom, Tonya Byrne believes that teaching is all about engaging the students.

For her unique and passionate approach to teaching, the teacher at St. Monica Catholic School in Edmonton recently received the *Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Early Childhood Education*.

The national award honours teachers who show innovation, engagement and a variety of other talents and skills. Byrne took the award for the province of Alberta this year, and it has also been given out in New Brunswick, British Columbia and other provinces.

Byrne's main drive in teaching is to make each class unique by discovering what fascinates her students and then reorganizing her curriculum around those interests. Her reputation includes not only bringing squids and beehives into her class; she also had students make colouring books to raise their awareness of the damage plastics do to the oceans.



Tonya reading to her class Photo: St. Monica Catholic School

For Byrne, this innovative way of teaching is both the great challenge and the great reward of her career.

“Teaching this way requires you to be very creative, and you have to think outside the box. If children are interested in Star Wars, you have to find a way to somehow bring that into the curriculum,” she said. “Not all teachers are going to bring dead squids into their classrooms. But I did, because I saw that interest.”

“It brings an excitement because I see their enthusiasm, and every year is something different.”

Byrne began her teaching career at St. Monica 15 years ago, teaching both kindergarten and the Edmonton Catholic School District’s “100 Voices” pre-kindergarten program.

Last year she took notice of the students’ interest in the bees pollinating flowers outside their classroom window. Byrne then decided to translate that interest into her classes.

She not only found books on bumblebees to help with their reading, she even obtained a hive full of almost 2,000 bees from a beekeeper she knew, and brought it into the classroom. The beehive was kept safely contained within glass panes.

“There was so much interest that I thought, ‘I’m going to teach my numeracy through bumblebees, I’m going to teach my literacy through bumblebees, the differences between fiction and nonfiction through bumblebees,’ ” said Byrne. “When you teach through [students’] interests, it’s much more meaningful and information is retained so much quicker.”

Byrne also uses her teaching technique when imparting the Catholic faith. She feels that the most effective way to bring the gifts of the Church into children's lives is to show them, on a level they understand.



**Classroom cross festooned with poppies for Remembrance Day.** Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

The morning prayer in Byrne's class includes saying 'Good Morning' to animals, bugs, trees and flowers, because children tend to take an interest in God's creatures.

A cross in her classroom is utilized throughout the school year, aligning to the work the students do.

For Thanksgiving, the students attached leaves to the cross with a message of what they are most thankful for. Then for Remembrance Day, they made poppies and attached them to the cross.

"Having that cross in the room and constantly going back to it, it always reinforces the importance of Jesus as a figure in their lives, and making those simple connections so they can understand that," she said.

Early in 2019, Assistant Principal Nancy Bromley came across an advertisement for the *Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Early Childhood Education*. As soon as she saw the ad, Byrne's outstanding work came to mind.

"The poster had this line 'If you know a phenomenal educator...,' and as soon as I saw that, I thought 'Yes I do!'" Bromley said with a smile.

"Teachers are chronically underappreciated, so this is an important

way for people to know what work goes into it, especially in early education. Some people just think of it as babysitting, but an award like this really gives a validity to early childhood educating that isn't always present."

Bromley knew for certain Byrne would get the award as soon as she submitted her application.

Still, when Byrne finally learned she was selected, it came as an absolute shock. Her passion for teaching has become so second nature to her, she says it's more like a hobby than a job.

"I never thought I was different than any other teacher," she said. "I just have a love for children and an excitement for teaching."



Tonya Byrne reading to her class Photo: St. Monica Catholic School

Byrne's focus on the oceans and conservation was key to her receiving the award. Two of her students had an incessant interest in whales and other aquatic life of the ocean. As those students brought up that interest continually in class, Byrne decided to make this a focal point of her curriculum. From there she developed a variety of initiatives around the harmful effects plastics have on ocean life, including a colouring book and a letter to Mayor Don Iveson the students helped write.

That effort also ended the use of plastic straws in the school cafeteria.

Byrne then went to her local T & T Supermarket and bought two dead squids to take into her classroom. She got the students to see first-hand some ocean life and practice their counting on the squid's tentacles.

"She made me feel very excited, and she made me want to come to school every day," said Eli Watanabe, a kindergarten student Byrne taught for 1½ years. "I just want everyone to know how amazing she is."

Currently, Byrne has taken a position as coordinator, mentoring teachers within Edmonton Catholic Schools. She looks forward to returning to teaching next year.