

# Ground broken as construction begins on new St. Kateri Tekakwitha Academy in Morinville

Shovels are in the ground to build St. Kateri Tekakwitha Academy, a new kindergarten to Grade 5 elementary school in Morinville, named and built around the life of Canada's first Indigenous saint.

"The sod turning is a milestone for the project that honours St. Kateri, and reflects a growing and strong community in Morinville," said Joe Becigneul, chairman of the Greater St. Albert Catholic school board.

"Building new schools for our students is one of the most important investments we can make for the future of this community and the surrounding region that accesses Catholic education in our Morinville schools."

Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools officials were joined by dignitaries, project partners, students and teachers and at a sod-turning ceremony Feb. 19. The \$12.2-million school, which will be built in the new Westwinds subdivision, is set to open in September 2020.



**Joe Becigneul, Board Chair, and Rhonda Nixon, Asst. Superintendent Of Learning Services**

St. Kateri Tekakwitha Academy will offer options include a sports academy – focusing on gymnastics, cheer, dance and hockey – as well as a strong academic focus, school officials said. It has a capacity for 350 students.

The school's namesake, St. Kateri Tekakwitha, is the first North American Indigenous person to be canonized in the Catholic Church, and she is

affectionately called the “Lily of the Mohawks.”

“What’s nice about the school is that, in every facet, it represents her life,” said Rhonda Nixon, an assistant superintendent for Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools. “She was known to be very courageous and also dedicated to giving back and always taking care of others.”

In a nod to Kateri as the patron saint of ecology and the environment, there will be solar panels on the school’s exterior and interior. Students will also be able to use mobile solar panels and software as part of lessons on tracking energy production and use.



The school also features a longhouse-shaped gathering space for students and staff, and the building’s natural-coloured floor represents St. Kateri’s artisan skills as a basket weaver.

Each of the school’s pods represents a certain aspect of St. Kateri’s life. A blue pod represents a blanket she used to cover her face, which was marred by the smallpox that killed her family. A yellow and white pod represent the lilies in St. Kateri’s environment, in what is now Quebec and upstate New York. The green pod represents her father, who was a Mohawk Turtle chief.

Becigneul said the name was chosen to represent the district’s continued work with Indigenous people, in particular the Alexander First Nation west of Morinville.

“St. Kateri was a tremendous role model to Indigenous people, a significant role model to students,” said David Keohane, superintendent of Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools. “When it came down to the final names, it wasn’t close. St. Kateri was really the predominant name on people’s minds.”



**Bishop Paul Terrio speaks during groundbreaking ceremonies for Morinville's new St. Kateri Tekakwitha Academy. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media**

St. Kateri Tekakwitha Academy will be the first school built in Morinville by the Greater St. Albert Catholic School District since 1994. And Becigneul said the sod-turning represents a long-awaited effort. Plans for the school were promised four years ago, and St. Kateri Academy will ease some of the pressure on Ecole Notre Dame elementary school in Morinville.

Education Minister David Eggen said the school was much needed.

“We know that Morinville is one of the fastest growing towns in Alberta, with a young population. It really captures the sense of optimism that we see across the province,” said Eggen, noting the Alberta government has funded 244 new and modernized school projects since 2015.

“You need to make sure you make those investments for the future. Yes we’ve had an economic downturn but yes, we are still a fast-growing, strong economy, strong families, and this school represents that perfectly.”



**Serena Shaw**

The construction of St. Kateri Tekakwitha Academy is also a reminder of the value of Catholic education in the province, said Serena Shaw, president of the

Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association.

“When we have the opportunity to open a Catholic school here in Alberta, where we still continue to enjoy publicly funded Catholic education, it’s a real blessing,” said Shaw, a trustee with Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools. “We know that choice is available as well for our parents and our students.”

The \$20-million Sister Alphonse Academy, named after the first Catholic teacher in St. Albert, opened in September.

With a provincial election expected to be called this spring, Eggen reiterated the NDP’s support for publicly funded Catholic education in Alberta.

“We support Catholic education, our government, every step of the way. We see that investment in faith-based education is super-important, and it’s super-important to have that acknowledged in kids’ education. I’m a fan of choice, and Catholic education is part of those choices in Alberta.”

*-With files from Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media*