

St. Nicholas favoured in poll on new name for Jean Vanier school

Jean Vanier School in Sherwood Park could have a new name as early as this week.

Elk Island Catholic school trustees are expected to vote April 22 on a new name for the kindergarten-to-Grade 4 school after an online poll solicited suggestions from the school, staff, and community of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish.

“I’m very pleased when we have that much response for this, both from staff as well as parents and the community,” said Shawn Haggarty, superintendent of Elk Island Catholic Schools.



Shawn Haggarty

Opened in 1973, the school was named after Jean Vanier, the Canadian Catholic theologian who founded L’Arche, an international network of communities in which people with intellectual disabilities live with their caregivers.

Trustees unanimously agreed to change the school name in February, soon after an independent investigation commissioned by L’Arche International found that Vanier had abused six women in the context of providing them spiritual direction. None of the women had disabilities.

Vanier died in May 2019 at the age of 90. Until the late 1990s, Vanier oversaw the entire L’Arche organization, which since the 1960s grew into 154 communities and more than 10,000 members, including 29 Canadian communities and two projects in nine provinces.

L’Arche Edmonton runs a day program and six homes for 24 residents with disabilities and 20 staff, including a home in Sherwood Park.

Elk Island Catholic Schools launched an online poll asking the Vanier School community, staff and parents, as well as Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish community and L'Arche for suggestions.

The community then ranked the choices in the poll that closed April 20.

Over 100 people participated in the poll. By far the most popular name was St. Nicholas, already the patron saint of Vanier School. Respondents say it would also be a nod to the Ukrainian bilingual program at the school, as well as L'Arche – because of St. Nicholas' care for children and the vulnerable.

Haggarty said from the start, L'Arche had input in the naming process.

"We wanted to continue our strong relationship with L'Arche, and the school community said they wanted to do that as well. I'm proud of the work the community has done in their relationship with L'Arche," Haggarty said.

"L'Arche works with some of the most vulnerable in our society and it really does speak to the role in education, in Catholic education, to be reaching out to and supporting. That's the power of our faith. That's the power of our Church."

Other name suggestions in the poll included St. Marguerite Bourgeoys, St. Kateri Tekakwitha, St. Bernadette, St. Anne, Pope Francis, Bishop David Motiuk (after the bishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton), St. Elizabeth Anne Seton, Good Shepherd, Our Lady of Hope and Holy Trinity.

Trustees may recommend further consultation or pick one of the names popular in the online poll. That name recommendation will then be sent to Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith for final review.

Haggarty said he hopes a new name will be chosen this week or at the next board meeting in May, so that the school can rebrand in anticipation of the new school year in September.

It's the first time a school in the Elk Island Catholic School Division has to change its name. Haggarty said trustees were unanimous in wanting a change.

Vanier School has more than 260 students and 24 staff.

