

SciTech fans preview preschool at first End of Summer Bash

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AURORA — SciTech staff greeted Fox Valley families Saturday for their first-ever End of Summer Bash at the museum's outdoor science park.

And although kids enjoyed music performances and all of the outdoor science attractions at SciTech, it was their parents who got a sneak peek of the first-to-be STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) focused preschool in Illinois. The SciTech Discovery Preschool will be the second of its kind in the country when it opens in October.

Although museum leaders hoped to open in September, the date has been pushed back at the request of the state's fire marshal to October, said SciTech Executive Director Carol Rehtmeyer.

About 36 3- to 5-year-olds are enrolled in the preschool. About 80 families applied for the spots, according to Cheryl Newman, director of the preschool.

"We're not afraid of big concepts. We're going to challenge the kids," Newman said.

Parents touring the facility Saturday saw what Newman called a "hands-on and fun" approach to learning. Doctors' costumes and stethoscopes are already set up for the kids' first biology lesson.

"We know that compared to other nations, our children are falling behind," Rehtmeyer said. "Starting a love for learning at a younger age is going to create more effective and efficient (students)."



Aidyn Roach reacts as she demonstrates static electricity on Saturday at the SciTech Museum's End of Summer Bash. |JEFF CAGLE / FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA

Preschool enrollees will also be taught in foreign language, art, music and computers. Foreign language will be taught by native Spanish speakers, and music classes will have a science-based theme.

"We're going to have some readers by the end of the year," Newman said. The school will incorporate the Zoo Phonics program, which uses letters in the shapes of animals to aid in letter recognition.

In addition to the STEM focus of the school, the teacher-to-student ratio will be one-to-six.

"The state mandates one-to-ten, but it's not good enough," Newman said. "The 18 kids per class will have three teachers in the room."

The directors and lead teachers at the preschool

UPCOMING SCITECH EVENTS

Pumpkin Painting and Decorating Workshop — Oct. 22

SciTech Haunted Museum — Oct. 15-30

Murder at SciTech Cafe Mystery Theatre and annual SciTech Theatre Gala — Dec. 9

SciTech Museum is at 18 W. Benton St., Aurora.

have their teaching certificates, too, although the state only requires preschool educators to have taken a few education classes.

Meals at the preschool will be locally grown, organic and have vegetarian options, Newman said.

A full day at the preschool, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., costs \$1,200 per month. Parents have the option of enrolling their student for a half-day for about \$600 per month.

The preschool was partially funded through a \$50,000 Dunham Fund grant. SciTech has been planning for the school for about a year.

In addition to the preschool preview, Saturday visitors sipped on beer, wine and lattes while enjoying performances by SciTech actors and the band Bobby Hollywood and the Hills at night.

"People were coming out in groups between the rain-drops," Rehtmeyer said.