

Francophone division looking to build school

By Bruce Campbell
Staff Reporter

The little school that started in a library six years ago is thriving and bringing a ray of sunshine to those who want a francophone education for their children.

Ecole Beausoleil started the 2011-12 students with 71 students — approximately 10 times the number of students in class when the school began in 2005.

"We started with five to seven students in the library of Big Rock School," said Ginette Beaulieu, principal of the preschool to Grade 9 school. "Just six years later we are up to 71 students — we're here to stay."

Okotoks has changed significantly since 2005 and so has Ecole Beausoleil.

"A lot of our first students were from parents who have moved into the Okotoks area from out east, but we have noticed we have more students who are second or third generation Franco-Albertans," she said.

Ecole Beausoleil is part of the Greater Southern Public Francophone Education Region. Since 2007, Ecole Beausoleil has had its own facility, located directly south of Ecole Percy Pegler School.

Unlike their friends at neighbouring Ecole Percy Pegler School and Okotoks Junior High School, where some of the students are immersed in French, Ecole Beausoleil students are totally submerged.

French Immersion programs, such as at Percy Pegler, have students taking core classes in French, but are speaking English when taking other classes or dealing with staff and students.

At Ecole Beausoleil, the students are speaking French the minute they walk into their school.

Except for the odd public health announcement, such as flu shots or a community event, the school is a total French environment, except for one class.

"The difference is the kids live the culture — they live in French in the hallway, they live in French everywhere



BRUCE CAMPBELL/OWW

Madame Anne-Marie Giasson reads to her Kindergarten students at Ecole Beausoleil. The school has gone from seven students when it opened in 2005 at the library of Big Rock School to 71 this year.

except for an English class," she said. "All the other classes: math, sciences, social studies are taught in French."

All of the subjects are from the Alberta curriculum and the students are expected to write provincial achievement tests the same as their English counterparts.

Several of the students come from families in which French is not the first language. She said the small classes at Ecole Beausoleil allow teachers to spend extra time with students who are picking up the language.

The school has six classrooms, some of which are split, such as a combined Grade 2 and 3 class.

"It's a challenge but it's not hard because we only have 10 students in a classroom," she said. "One thing parents like is our ratios (teacher to students) are small."

The school offers regular physical education by sharing playground facilities and fields with Ecole Percy Pegler

— which now has a principal who is fluent in French. Ecole Beausoleil also rents the gymnasium in the Okotoks Recreation Complex just across the field from the Francophone school.

The school also participates in inter-school activities. They were involved in

Terry Fox walks with schools from the two other Okotoks schools systems. Students also participated in recent Okotoks elementary schools cross-country running events.

While Ecole Beausoleil has plenty of room at present, that may not be the case in the years to come.

School board superintendent Jacqueline Lessard said it is currently working with the Town of Okotoks, and Foothills and Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools for a proposed site for a new facility for Ecole Beausoleil.

She said the division would like to have a school with its own gym, music room and other amenities other schools have. The present school consists of modular classrooms, it is not a standalone structure.

"We would like to get a new school site as well as a new core school," Lessard said. "We have been working with the parents getting their input, because it is around community. We understand Okotoks to be community based, and our students are part of that community."

She said a proposed new school for Ecole Beausoleil is high on the division's capital priority list.

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