

St. Louis sees opening of a new preschool learning center

by **Curtis Wildfong**
Herald Staff Writer

A new preschool learning experience is now available to all Gratiot County families in the form of the Middle of the Mitten Learning Center located in the Westgate School building at 840 W. Cheesman Rd. in St. Louis.

Similar to a childcare center in some ways, the tuition based center also offers young children the same learning experiences as any preschool.

The center fills all the state's requirements of time allotted to subjects like word and letter recognition, mathematics, and language arts said Cassie Thelen, owner and director of Middle of the Mitten.

Thelen has 13 years of teaching experience ranging from pre-school to college. She earned a Bachelor's degree in elementary education and a Master's degree in curriculum and teaching, both from Michigan

State University.

Thelen and her husband Glenn have four children, Emily, 10, Stuart, 8, Danielle, 4, and Zachary, 1. Her daughter Danielle is one of the two children currently enrolled at the center, which opened Monday, November 2.

Daily activities at the center include reading, group work, music, outside playtime, and enrichment activities like cooking and technology.

Thelen said she recognizes that cuts in education funding from the state have regrettably forced preschools, at no fault of their own, to turn away students.

"Our county needs more pre-school resources," she said.

Middle of the Mitten offers both morning and full-day sessions Tuesday through Thursday and is open to any child in the Gratiot County area ages three to five.

"Kids can have an early childhood experi-

ence without having to qualify. We accept anyone," Thelen said.

Thelen, whose son Stuart is diagnosed with autism, added that she is also accepting children with disabilities.

Thelen is licensed to enroll up to 38 students at Middle of the Mitten, but is required to add staff members based on enrollment to fulfill the state's supervision and ratio requirements.

In addition to offering pre-school services, Middle of the Mitten also holds an after-school program Tuesday through Thursday from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

The after-school program offers homework help, activities, and gym time to pre-school to fifth grade students.

For more information on the Middle of the Mitten Learning Center, call (989)-681-2868 or visit the website at mmlearningcenter.weebly.com.



Cassie Thelen and her daughter Danielle Thelen, 4, pretend to mix up eggs at the play kitchen in the Middle of the Mitten Learning Center in St. Louis. (Herald Photo - Wildfong)



Danielle Thelen, 4, and Will Tuzas, 4, play 'hoops' on the Middle of the Mitten's outside playground (Courtesy Photo)