By Jan Rahn
Managing Editor

It's probably a toss up who's more excited about preschool—the brand new preschoolers or the teachers.

Just walk into the classroom and enthusiasm radiates throughout.

Connie Mahnken leads the classroom along with help from paras Kami Krajewski and Gretchen Schmidt. Mahnken will receive her Masters Degree in early childhood education from Concordia University in December.

With 20 years of educational experience under her belt, Mahnken said she pursued this public school preschool position the minute it was approved for Perkins County Schools.

"I knew I wanted to be part of this program and as soon as the board approved the program, I shared with the administration that I would very much like to be the teacher," she said.

Her goals for the inaugural 2011-12 preschool program are to offer students developmentally appropriate experiences that will promote growth of physical, social, creative arts, math, science, language and literacy skills.

There are fun, creative, colorful stations set up in the large open classroom inside the elementary's front doors that warmly invite the little minds that will enter as the first day of preschool begins this week on Wednesday, Aug. 24.

There will be two sessions of preschool classes offered: The morning group has 14 three- to four-year-olds. The afternoon group includes 18 four-year-olds.

Each of the sessions is three hours Monday through Thursday and is based on the Nebraska Department of Education's Rule 11 regulations in all aspects of the program.

Mahnken's career background with Perkins County Schools includes special education resource teacher, Title 1 teacher, special education para and speech/ language tech. She also taught preschool for three years in Grant for ESU 16 and two years at St. Paul's Lutheran Preschool in Ogallala.

The Merna native graduated from Anselmo-Merna High School and attended Kearney State College where she received her Bachelors Degree in K-8 special education and adapted physical education.

Although she has taught many grade levels through the years, she has always enjoyed working with the younger children.

She has been a part of the discussion the past few years by school administration, staff and concerned citizens who have recognized the need for a public school preschool in Perkins County.

“The need became obvious when more and more children were unable to attend private preschools, because of high costs of living for their families,” said Mahnken.

One of those private preschools was run by Krajewski, who happily accepted the position in the public sector when it was offered.

“I am very excited to have the help of two highly qualified and experienced paras working with me this year,” said Mahnken. “Kami, Gretchen and I will work together to develop a quality preschool experience for our students.”

Mahnken views this new position as fun because she wants to help children become excited about learning.

“Young children are very curious and want to learn about everything!” she said. “When children are excited about learning they become confident and successful life-long learners.”

Mahnken said the job she and the paras face in preschool will be to stay a step ahead of the students, in order to plan inspiring learning experiences for everyone so they develop a desire to keep learning.

“I am grateful for the opportunity to teach at the Perkins County Pre-school and to serve the young children of this county and their families,” said Mahnken. “I feel blessed to be part of a great school system and community where the education of young children is highly valued.”

In her free time, Mahnken likes to read, crochet and travel with her family to visit extended family and friends.

She and her husband, Keith, have been married 28 years. They have three sons, Tyler, a 2010 Doane College graduate; Andrew, who attends Mid-Plains Community College; and Jordan, who is a junior at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Preschool Daily Routine

The morning group has the opportunity to eat breakfast before class begins and the afternoon group can come at noon to eat lunch before their class starts.

The day is planned around multiple experiences which help the child learn about him/herself, family, friends, environment, community and world.

Concepts will be presented through hands-on activities, stories, games, songs, movement, finger-plays, real life experiences, exploring and technology.

Mahnken said each child’s individual needs will be considered to assist them in developing to the best of their ability.

Those involved in teaching the developmentally based curriculum include: early childhood teacher, para educators, and other service providers such as speech/language pathologist, physical and occupational therapist for those children with verified disabilities.

The daily routine includes large group, small group and individual instruction through teacher-directed and free choice activities.

Every child will be offered many opportunities to learn, said Mahnken, such as during circle time, story time, field trips, outdoor exploration, projects, and in learning centers.

Classroom centers include: dramatic play (store-housekeeping-community workers), blocks, books, cars and trucks, science, games and puzzles, sensory table, music and creative arts.

Reading and writing experiences will be incorporated into every learning center.

Snack time and outdoor recreation are included in the daily schedule.

“Our purpose is to provide every child with a quality early childhood experience in a secure,

nurturing and stimulating environment,” said Mahnken.