

Active in the arts

A new setting with a leaning towards cultural and artistic pursuits is proving an exciting addition to one chain's offering, finds *Karen Faux*

These are exciting times for Active Learning, which in September launched its ninth nursery in a new, state-of-the-art Jewish Community Centre in north London.

The chain has been going from strength to strength since it launched in Crouch End in 2005 and is now spread across London and Surrey. Its North Finchley and Dorking nurseries are currently graded outstanding while the rest have all been rated good, some with outstanding features.

Chief executive Amanda Johnson reports that its recent launch in the JW3 Jewish Centre is proving a great success. She says, 'It operates a full Active Learning curriculum, but this is overlaid with an ethos of Jewish culture and tradition. The nursery is non-denominational and so introduces the children to all cultures and religions just like any other of our nurseries, but does follow many of the Jewish festivals given its location.'

The building itself is amazing and Ms Johnson feels the nursery is privileged to be able to access a number of additional facilities and resources, including a theatre, demonstration kitchens and dance studios.

'The nursery is Kosher and is staffed by a mixture of both Jewish and non-Jewish staff,' she says. 'Demand for places has been very high and we are continuing to settle children in over a sustained period of the next few months.'

FUN FACTOR

Active Learning is very proud of the 'unique curriculum' it has developed, where children explore a wide variety of cultural and artistic pursuits.



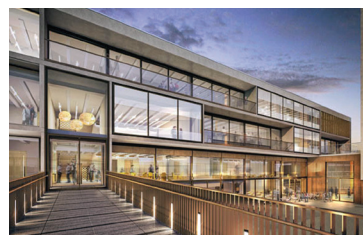
'Our curriculum has proven to be a huge success with children, parents and educationalists, and is the reason that some of our Ofsted good ratings have been awarded "outstanding features in education",' says Ms Johnson.

'It is very different to how a nursery usually works, in that the children move through the various studios as opposed to staying in one base room. This is a far better representation of how children spend time at home and so provides quite a seamless transition between home and school.'

But Ms Johnson points out that the biggest advantage of its curriculum is quite simply the fun it delivers, and children benefit from qualified teachers and specialists in a range of areas across the arts and sport.

She says, 'Last week, for example, our nurseries pursued projects looking at Damien Hirst, Anish Kapoor and Black History Month, and a wonderful musical performance of A Bear Went Over the Mountain, composed by the children and teachers as part of a charity fundraising for Kids Company.'

While Active Learning's fees may be considered high, everything it offers



is all-inclusive and comes with the added benefit of its specialist teachers, who are supernumerary to its practitioners. Ms Johnson believes parents see this as an attractive package.

'We also took the decision earlier this year to only recruit fully qualified staff at a minimum of Level 3. Any staff not currently holding that status are training towards qualifications, so this target will be achieved.'

ROAD TO SUCCESS

For the first time recently, Active Learning has seen a shift in trading as a result of weakened economic conditions.

'Parents are definitely shopping around and although once upon a time they would have chosen the nursery they thought the best, there has been movement towards less expensive options,' says Ms Johnson.

But she adds, 'Fee increases have certainly been lower while costs have increased, but we have still managed to deliver staff salary rises and bonuses in an effort to recruit top staff.'

Active Learning is now investing in new technology to give it a competitive edge, and Ms Johnson is upbeat about the future. 'The current climate means the road is a little longer yet, but the future for Active Learning and the quality of pre-school educational development is exciting and one to look forward to,' she says. ■

Specialists help children to explore a variety of pursuits, above left; the exterior and dance studio at JW3 Jewish Centre, above right; two of the chain's settings are rated outstanding, below

