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New Grande Prairie technical school aims to help students succeed in the trades

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By: Susan V.H. Thompson, Town & Country News

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A new school in Grande Prairie aims to help kids learn valuable real-world skills early while also getting a quality academic education.

Students at Grande Prairie Technical Institute will graduate with a fully recognized Alberta High School Diploma, but with the added advantage of earning trade certifications and getting hands-on career training.

The new school is located in the former Harry Balfour School building and is currently accepting applications for students Grades 7 through 10 for Sept. 2026. The school will be accepting students up to Grade 12 for 2027.

GP Tech was co-founded by Karim and Noshaba Harji.

In an exclusive interview, Noshaba Harji said they are teachers by trade who've taught all over the world. She is also Executive Head of Business Development for the Lil Einstein learning centres in Edmonton that offer Montessori education.

She first had the idea for the new school about two and a half years ago. She said it came from talking with a group of friends about hands-on learning, what it looked like, and what it would feel like to be a part of an educational environment where that was the key component.

"Charter schools have always been kind of the education labs, where you can pilot a program," Harji said.

She explained that innovation in a charter school can then lead to the integration of successful new practices within the broader education system.

The co-founders started looking around the world at different institutions that offer hands-on learning, including schools in Europe, Asia, and two schools in the United States. Based on that research, they decided they would need to combine a few different types of instruction to meet the needs of students.



Grande Prairie Technical Institute co-founders Karim and Noshaba Harji said the school is set to open in the former Harry Balfour School building. The school is currently accepting applications for students Grades 7-10 for Sept. 2026 with a focus on trade certifications. (Photo by Austin Payeur)

But then they needed to decide where to start a new school.

"We thought ok, where does this fit? Where does it make the most impact?" Harji said.

"The more we spoke to industry and the community we realized yes, there is a need for this kind of learning environment in Grande Prairie. We didn't want to do this anywhere else, and there's a reason behind that.

"We are very much a group of teachers trying to offer something different, and feel that this community would benefit from this the most."

According to Grande Prairie MLA Nolan Dyck, this new charter school will provide "countless young people with a headstart in establishing the skills they need to build a fulfilling and successful career in the trades."

Starting hands-on learning about the trades benefits younger students because it allows for more opportunity for explanation, Harji said.

"Currently in Alberta, the education system allows students to pick trades and enter into the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) later on," she said.

"We're trying to encourage early opportunities for learning and getting to know more about the trade, so by Grade 10, when they do go into RAP or are becoming an apprentice, they are a lot more aware of what the day-to-day looks like in that trade."

The new school will feature four core trade pathways: Automotive Technology, Construction & Carpentry, Welding & Metal Fabrication, and Culinary Arts & Commercial Kitchen Operations.

However, Harji said students won't need to pick their pathway right away.

"In Grades 7 and 8 they can choose more than one. By the end of Grade 9 they can start to streamline their pathway."

GP Tech will also have a strong emphasis on student-led or self-directed learning, allowing students to take ownership of their education and build their confidence.

"When it comes to GP Tech, there will be opportunities for lots of entrepreneurship, and lots of project-based learning," Harji said, giving the example of a farm shop project, where students might be responsible for growing produce, learning about plant science, and eventually harvesting their crop.

Students at the new school will also have the opportunity to get additional certifications such as WHMIS, First Aid and others that could be useful to their careers.

GP Tech plans to integrate technological innovations like VR learning and AI into their courses, although Harji said they are still working on developing that aspect of the coursework as the technology itself continues to rapidly develop.

"Looking at what's happening out in the world, we either walk away from it and let students navigate it on their own, or we include it and help them understand how to use it effectively," she said.

Harji said GP Tech is open to any students who want to explore this new learning opportunity, no matter their background or where they are in their learning so far.

"I think it's important that the community knows that this is a public school. We are open and inclusive."

There won't be any additional tuition costs for students to attend GP Tech, which is a non-profit. "We're a public charter. There is no tuition, and there will be similar costs to what parents currently pay in the public system, such as for options," said Harji.

Harji said GP Tech is now counting on industry and the community to help them ensure the success of students.

"We very much want partnerships with industry, with family, with other institutions," Harji said.

There are several ways to support the new school, such as volunteering; making a financial donation to support program development and student resources; sponsoring equipment or materials to enhance the technical training labs; or partnering with GP Tech to provide industry internship or apprenticeship opportunities.

"We want to invest in your children, but families and the community must step up to be part of that environment for our students to reach their highest potential," Harji said.

"This school is meant to be by the community, for the community."



Joe LaValley, Karim and Noshaba Harji, and Grande Prairie MLA Nolan Dyck. (Submitted photo)

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