

HEAD & HEART

How a balanced education nurtures happy
children who excel in academics and life

A Book of Inspiration
for Parents & Educators

From the 40-year experience of the
Living Wisdom Schools

Stories • Methods • Research • Results

Copyright © 20016 Living Wisdom School of Palo Alto
All rights reserved.
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Cover Photograph © 2016 by George Beinhorn

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any other information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

DEDICATION

For SK

CONTENTS

PREFACE	5
1. Introduction: A Conversation with LWS Director Helen Purcell	5
2. The Philosophy of Living Wisdom School.....	13
3. First Steps at Living Wisdom School	21
4. The 5 Stages of a Child’s Development.....	33
5. A Visit to Third Grade	39
6. Meaning at an Early Age	51
7. Addressing the Best in Each Child	63
8. Academics at Living Wisdom School.....	71
9. Maturity and the Qualities Award Ceremony	81
10. Crash and burn — a twisted picture of success	91
11. Choosing the Right School: a Teacher’s Suggestions	101
12. Creating a Caring Community at School	105
13. Inclusiveness Training at Living Wisdom School.....	119
14. Educating Middle Schoolers at Living Wisdom School.....	127
15. How LWS Trains Teachers.....	143
16. Academic Achievement and Education For Life.....	161
17. An MIT Grad Reflects on Teaching at Living Wisdom School	165
18. Mathematics Competitions at Living Wisdom School	175
19. LWS Graduates’ High School and College Grades 2011-2014	187
20. Standardized Test Results	189
21. Ten Questions Parents Ask About Living Wisdom School	191
22. Students and Parents Talk About Living Wisdom School	213
23. How Educating Children’s Hearts Improves Academic Performance	223
24. Can the Arts Help Children Excel Academically?	231
Appendix 1. Living Wisdom School Rules	241
Appendix 2. The Education For Life Curriculum	243
Appendix 3. Education for Life Resources	255
Appendix 4. Research that Supports Education For Life.....	257

PREFACE

Shhhhh. Let's lower our voices. After all, we wouldn't want to embarrass the educational establishment by suggesting that a tiny school in northern California first discovered solutions *forty years ago* to the "overwhelming" problems facing schools today.

The Living Wisdom Schools are based on an almost ludicrously obvious insight – that children who are shown how to bring their hearts and minds to the process of education will thrive, each at his or her own level.

In recent years, the authors of books such as *The Happiness Advantage* and *Beyond Measure* have spearheaded a rebellion among parents who, in the words of *Beyond Measure* author Vicki Abeles, are intent on "rescuing an overscheduled, overtested, underestimated generation."

Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage*, found while mentoring hundreds of Harvard undergraduates that the most successful did not match the stereotype of the typical academic grinder – the pale and wan kid who buries himself in the library stacks, intent on carving out top grades by sheer force of will. The students who earned top grades were uniformly those who knew how to be happy in school. They were social, talked constantly about their academic assignments with other students, and formed study groups. In short, they were happy people who possessed the personal skills to make their time at Harvard as enjoyable *and* successful as possible.

In *Beyond Measure*, Abeles documents the vast numbers of unhappy high school students and parents who've accepted the widespread but false belief that anything less than acceptance by a top-tier university spells failure.

Abeles describes the “no child left behind” dogma that imposes a standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculum on all students, regardless of their native intelligence and individual talents. She singles out those rare teachers who’ve defied the system with notable success – for example, the teacher who found that his students’ test scores rose when he *decreased* their homework.

Once again, let’s remind ourselves to be quiet, lest we give offence. These “new” discoveries are exciting to the teachers and parents of Living Wisdom School, because they lend weight to something they’ve known for forty years. At Living Wisdom School, we long ago bypassed the problems that are besetting schools today and dove straight into the far more productive endeavor of refining solutions that are only now beginning to be hinted at by the advocates of reform.

The Living Wisdom Schools, with their Education for Life philosophy, have avoided the trap that has led government officials and mainstream educators astray – namely the assumption that we can *EITHER* have brilliant, academically successful students, *OR* we can have happy, carefree kids who’ll never amount to much in their lives.

The Living Wisdom Schools have shown that we can have both – that we can teach children to be spectacularly successful in both ways – in school and life. We’ve shown beyond any possibility of doubt that it’s possible to have happy, enthusiastic, bright, positive kids who love their academic subjects and excel at them.

We’ve shown that it’s possible to create a school where it is not uncommon for the kids to actually beg us, at the end of the school year, to find a way to make the school year last year-round. (I know, I know – it baffles us, too!)

This book reveals the methods that have made the Living Wisdom Schools so outstandingly successful. In the words of teachers, parents, students, and academics, it presents an earthy,

practical approach for transforming education and nurturing happy children who excel in academics and life. Our students look forward to coming to school every day – read on and discover why.

NOTE: We've included hyperlinks in the text. You can download a free PDF version of the book with active links that you can click to visit the referenced pages.

The contents are primarily drawn from the experience of the Living Wisdom School in Palo Alto, California which was founded in 1987. They reflect the philosophy that also guides the original school in Nevada City, California, as well as the schools in Portland, Oregon and Ljubljana, Slovenia.

1. INTRODUCTION: A CONVERSATION WITH LWS DIRECTOR HELEN PURCELL

Q: Helen, what does Living Wisdom School offer that other schools generally don't?

A: Most parents who inquire about our school are concerned about two things. They want a personalized, highly individual education for their children. But they also want rigorous academics. Often, they feel that if you have one, you can't have the other. At Living Wisdom School, we've shown that you can provide both, with excellence.

Q: Do the children receive individualized attention?

A: Our small size allows the children to move through their education fluidly, with attention to their individual needs. Our current teacher-student ratio is approximately 1:9.

If a child is ahead of grade level, that's not a problem here, and if a child is behind, that's also accommodated. I have a boy in my eighth-grade class who's doing high school senior-level math. He has the ability to become a world-class mathematician, and we're helping him learn at a pace that's appropriate to his abilities.



We're small enough that if a child has any kind of an issue, the entire faculty will know about it and can help the child. Nothing is compartmentalized, and nobody falls through the cracks.

We also have a fabulous parent community. The parents are highly interested in their children's well-being, and it isn't unusual for a parent to share their special expertise in the classroom.

For example, an LWS mother who is a scientist taught science here for two years. It was a marvelous experience for the children, and for her. Another parent taught a unit on marketing and computers – he showed the children how to create a PowerPoint presentation complete with text, charts, and images.

Q: You emphasize “spiritual” education. Are you a parochial school?

A: We are not a parochial school, even though the main school building is located next to church grounds, and two of our classrooms are in the church office building.

Our belief is that every religion, in its essence, encompasses the universal truths embodied in our school rules. Rule Number One is: *“Enjoy yourself!”* As we interpret it for the children, it means that if you really want to enjoy yourself, you must be concerned also for the happiness of others, and for the single, deeper Self of which all religions speak.

When we speak of “spirituality,” we aren't talking about blind belief or intellectual abstractions. We're talking about some very down-to-earth, practical truths. For example, spirituality is what happens in math and science class when we teach the children about the unity of all living things.

In fact, that's an excellent illustration of a spiritual principle that has profound implications for learning. Brain researchers have discovered that when children are given opportunities to make strong associations between their separate school subjects, they become

better learners, because associative thinking creates new dendritic connections in the brain.

Thus, if a child can understand a math concept by looking at the printed page, that's certainly well and good. But if you can connect the math concept with science, poetry, and music, which we do all the time, the child will become a better learner.

We are extremely sensitive to the need to create these connections, and it's one of the reasons there's a great deal of thematic integration in our curriculum.

Q: Are your teachers well prepared in math and science?

A: Over the years, we've developed a math program with a depth and breadth that excites even those children who may not be particularly gifted.

At our year-end ceremony, the younger kids get to stand up and tell what they like about the school. Over and over, they say "I love math!" Our math and science teachers communicate the love that talented mathematicians and scientists feel for their subject. Their classes combine lecture, lab, and projects.

Q: You emphasize the performing arts. Why is that?

A: We place a tremendous emphasis on the arts, though by no means to the detriment of math and science.

Many of our parents are Silicon Valley scientists, engineers, and computer professionals who tend to be initially skeptical about the arts program. But we're very balanced. In fact, some of our best student scientists and mathematicians are also our best violinists, artists, singers, and dancers.

The point is that we want to educate the head *and* the heart. We're very clear about this, and the performing arts program is a glowing example. Each year, we challenge the students to participate in a play that has the sophistication of an unusually advanced high

school production. We then support them in stretching their minds, hearts, and wills to rise to the challenge of performing.

The play is an enormous stage for exercising and developing skills that will help them in their academic development. They learn to be completely focused on the subject at hand. They learn to “think on their feet” and express themselves clearly. And they develop a fiery passion for learning.

The play is an excellent expression of our interdisciplinary curriculum, as well as how we educate the children’s hearts and minds.

One year, our theater production was *Jesus of Nazareth*. As the children prepared, they became little biblical scholars. They were also studying Greek and Roman history and mythology, so as to better understand the historical background of the play.

When we produced a play about Kuan Yin, the Chinese goddess of compassion, we studied Chinese literature, history, and philosophy, and the children learned about Chinese art, music, and dance.

Year after year, as the children produce the plays, they internalize the great stories of the world. Thus, they receive priceless keys for deciphering great literature. And they’re not only studying related academic subjects, they’re learning to be poised and graceful, to concentrate, cooperate, and receive direction and feedback.

Q: Do they enter into the experience willingly, or do you have to push them?

A: They are so excited! And it’s their enthusiasm that motivates them to master the challenges.

As an example of the challenges involved, the vocabulary of the play is always far above the third-grade level, so the third-grade teacher makes it part of the children’s vocabulary lessons. They learn to use the dictionary, and they master the big words until they’re able

to listen during play rehearsals and understand the meaning of the lines.

The children pick up vast stretches of each other's parts, so it isn't as if they're just learning their own part in isolation. They become verbally very sophisticated, because as they learn to speak the words with understanding, those words become a permanent and meaningful part of their verbal repertoire.

Q: You seem to be saying that the arts stimulate of all kinds of learning.

A: yes, and the children not only learn a great deal about intellectual subjects and social and character development, they're receiving non-denominational spiritual instruction by acting out the lives of great teachers from many spiritual traditions.

By performing these epic stories, they learn about the play of light against darkness in the history of the world, and in the lives of genuine heroes. In the context of the life of a great soul such as Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Moses, St. Francis, or Joan of Arc, they are offered the possibility that they can confront evil and win. Year after year, they're acquiring a repertoire of heroes against whom they can measure their own efforts to lead a good life. And they learn what it means to love God and "love your neighbor" through participating in the lives of these great examples.

Q: Do the lessons rub off in the classroom?

A: Yes, emphatically, and they rub off on the playground as well, where you find out how well you're doing as a person, or not doing. These are normal children, and they sometimes get into conflicts. We don't pretend that they won't. But when they do, we have a conflict resolution program in place from kindergarten through eighth grade. And the lessons they learn from putting together these plays transfer to the playground as models for how good behavior yields the greatest happiness.

The father of a little girl in our school reported that his daughter has become the neighborhood referee, so that when the other children have a conflict, she faces them off and says, “Okay, you stand here, and you stand here. Look in each others’ eyes. You listen; you talk. Then you listen, and you talk.” She is teaching the children to come to their own resolution.

With the younger ones, the teachers will naturally have to provide the language. But with the older ones, the teachers can simply monitor the students’ energy, because the children are familiar with the process. They might say, “I didn’t like it when you did this to me.” And the other child knows that he must acknowledge what the first child has said. In this way, through respectful dialogue, the children learn to reach harmony. In many schools, these issues of conflict and feelings are ignored or buried and seldom addressed. Yet they are critically important for creating a harmonious learning environment where the students can feel supported and safe.

Q: How do the teachers earn the students’ respect?

A: Certainly by being real with them. We don’t look away from anything. We face things head on, and we will draw the parents in as needed.

One child suffered from separation anxiety from her mother. She would get all the way to the door of the school, but she couldn’t come in. I was in contact with the mother, and we worked to help the child. Meanwhile, I shared with the other children that this little girl was having trouble coming to school. I said, “First of all, we’ll pray for her.” So we offered healing prayers, which the children love to do – they pray for everything – pet rats, hamsters, parents, siblings, all in the same breath.

Several days later, they were out on their morning run, and they came around the corner as the little girl was getting back in the car. They went over and literally “loved her” out of the car – they tugged

at her and said, “We want you to come!” And she came back into the classroom.

Shortly after, she had to decide if she would go on a major field trip across the country with her classmates. We bought her a ticket, and on the day of the trip she came to the airport, but she was holding her mother’s hand with an iron grip. I thought, “I don’t know if she’ll be able to do it.” But at the last minute she got on the plane, and she sailed happily through the trip.

If you bring children into the reality of what’s going on, you have no trouble. But if you impose an unnatural authority, they immediately know that it’s fake, and they don’t respect it. That’s true in any school, but we have a student-teacher ratio that allows for a level of personal attention that enables the children to develop a respect for the teachers, the school environment, and each other.

Q: Many people believe that time spent addressing feelings is just time that’s lost for learning.

A: Some parents say, “I’m going to let my child attend this magical school, and after three years I’ll take him out and put him in a *real* school.” But I say, “The children who’ve gone all the way through Living Wisdom School have done exceptionally well not only in public high schools but in highly rated, academically focused college prep schools. They thrive not only academically but personally.

Q: Does the children’s enthusiasm for their academic subjects affect how they feel about the teachers?

A: When you have a vibrant curriculum that draws out the children’s enthusiasm, it truly does help cement the relationship between the child and the teacher.

The children aren’t afraid of us. They feel perfectly fine about coming up and asking how we are. They treat us with the greatest respect, but there aren’t the usual barriers, because the children feel

the teachers' authenticity. They feel that what we're doing here is real, and it helps us be much more effective as teachers and counselors.

One little boy missed his dad who was away a lot, traveling on business. His teacher trained the child to take a running start and leap into his arms and give him a big hug in the morning. It's in these small things that you can see the relationship between the teachers and students, and the quality of attention the children are receiving.

2. THE PHILOSOPHY OF LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL

What are your hopes and dreams for your child? Not just for kindergarten, but for the whole of his or her life?

Financial security? A good job? A nice home?

Material goals are necessary and worthwhile. But many intangibles are surely also worth considering, such as happiness, character, and peace of mind.

We all want our children to acquire positive values and ideals, as well as a deep understanding of the meaning of life.

What role will your child's school play in helping him or her to become an inwardly strong and secure person?

Education Reflects Parents' Goals

No influence outside the home has a greater impact than the child's school. Yet schools today pay little attention to developing children's values. But values are the road map that helps children understand where true happiness lies.

And what if your dreams for your child extend beyond material fulfillment? Will educating your child for a good job be enough?

Intellectual training is essential; it's difficult to succeed in our culture without it. But life teaches us that success and happiness depend to a great extent on human skills such as knowing how to get along with others, how to persevere in achieving goals, how to focus our attention, how to cooperate, and how to be a loyal friend.

At Living Wisdom School, we feel that children should benefit from the storehouse of wisdom that humanity has gathered through

the ages concerning the best ways to achieve a happy, fulfilled life. We feel it is our God-given duty to teach children these essential life skills, starting at a young age. An education that gives children the tools they need to achieve both internal and external success is a useful education, indeed!



For more than forty years, we have seen that children who are taught how to be happy are more likely to achieve academic success as well.

At LWS, children learn the life skills they need to be balanced, mature, effective, happy, and harmonious human beings. We call this art “Education for Life,” because we continually relate the children’s classroom lessons to life as a whole. At LWS, we study not only the great things that people have done, but the human qualities that enabled them to attain those achievements.

Secrets of Success

Before we can be happy and inwardly secure, we must know a great deal about the world around us. We need to learn to interact appropriately with the people and circumstances in our lives, because life doesn’t always mold itself to our personal expectations.

We must be ready to adjust to realities outside our own. We must learn practical skills, and we must master academic knowledge. Education for Life helps children prepare for maturity on every level: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

More Than Natural Talent

At Living Wisdom School, we guide children in developing the five “tools of maturity”: body, feelings, will, mind, and soul. With health and high energy, expansive feelings, dynamic will, and mental

clarity, each child can experience a gradual increase of awareness that provides them with a solid inner sense of meaning and joy.

We gauge our students' success not only by their academic results but by the quality of each child's attitudes, effort, and interactions with others. In an Education for Life, the children practice dealing successfully with whatever their lives may bring them.

True Teaching is Individual

Children reveal a broader range of individual traits than adults, who may have learned to mask their individuality in order to fit in. Rather than force the child to conform to strictly standardized learning methods, we feel it makes better sense to discover the child's essential strengths and encourage them. When children's individual strengths are continually and consistently encouraged and reinforced,

they develop self-confidence and enthusiasm for learning.



Our classes are kept small, so that the teachers can work closely with each child. The teachers are trained to assess each child's physical, mental, and emotional development

and guide the child accordingly. The teachers relate to the children much as their parents do, from the perspective of the child's ever-changing needs. We respect and encourage individuality.

Joy in the Classroom

We feel that we have a responsibility to help the early years of each child's life be a joyful experience, while laying the foundation for a happy adulthood.

In a Living Wisdom classroom, the atmosphere is relaxed and family-like, while at the same time there is order, discipline, and a

clear sense that the teacher is in charge. Living Wisdom School teachers win the children's respect by skillfully guiding their enthusiasm and energy into the tasks at hand. The children learn that they are expected to behave with consideration and respect, and that they can approach the teacher for individual guidance.

Creating a positive learning environment isn't, by itself, sufficient to transform the children into angels. At LWS, the same issues, interactions, and challenging transitions occur that we would expect to see in any classroom. What's different is that the children are given opportunities to learn effective, enlightened ways of dealing with situations as they arise.

The Inner Life

At Living Wisdom School, the children's natural spirituality is acknowledged and encouraged. Each classroom has a universal altar, with symbols from the world's religions. The classroom may be decorated with objects that the children consider personally sacred and spiritually meaningful.



At Living Wisdom School, spirituality isn't defined as a particular dogma or creed. Thus, it isn't "religious instruction" in the traditional sense. Rather, the focus is on the child's personal, direct experience of universal spiritual truths such as kindness, compassion, empathy, loyalty, honesty, and courage. The key is Self-realization – the individual realization that our happiness increases as we expand our awareness to embrace ever-broader realities.

Every morning, and occasionally during the day, we set aside time for chanting, singing, quiet meditation, affirmations, prayer, yoga postures, and other uplifting activities. Through these forms of

worship, the children experience for themselves what it feels like to be in harmony with a higher level of consciousness.

When it's appropriate, we hold discussions and answer the children's questions about spiritual truths. The children discover that expansive feelings, thoughts, and actions increase their own sense of well-being, whereas contractive feelings and actions take that happiness away. "Right and wrong" thus become first-hand experiences of the consequences of personal behaviors, rather than a fixed set of abstract rules.

The children become deeply interested in changing their behavior when they realize that it is an effective way to increase their own inner level of joy. At LWS, the children talk as readily and naturally about God, angels, saints, and the spiritual side of life as other children talk about sports or TV.

The Importance of Good Teachers

"Who you *are* speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you're saying!" This adage is especially true when it comes to selecting teachers.



Living examples can inspire children much more effectively than rules. A teacher who deeply understands his or her subject is better able to awaken a similar love and commitment in the children. Our school is built around our teachers' open-hearted sensitivity to the children in their charge. It is essential, therefore, that in their person lives, the teachers express the positive attitudes, spiritual and moral values, and maturity that we seek to impart to the children.

Our teachers participate in Education for Life as a lifelong process. Each teacher is deeply involved in personal development,

and the teachers receive ongoing support and training to stay fresh, enthusiastic, and expansive.

An education that ignores individual differences and tries to run children through an assembly line is bound to produce shoddy results. An education that is deep, enduring, and effective must be highly individualized.

In the education of our children, we need to help them develop their characters and their minds, but we must also help them prepare for living successfully in this world. We don't want them to go out into society and find themselves incapable of relating to what's going on. They need to have the facts that are a part of our modern upbringing. But they don't need to have those facts taught to them in such a way as to leave them believing that there's no value in anything.

There is a great deal of emphasis on the wrong things today. The basis of spiritual education is to prepare them for society in a way that will help them remain idealistic.

Suppose you have children who have learned how to love everyone, who have learned the goodness of life. When they go out into the world they may face hatred, criminal activity, and many other negative things. Will they be prepared?

This is one of the primary concerns people have with spiritual education. But the answer is seen in those who live with love. It isn't as if they become stupid or lose the ability to relate to the world as it is. In fact, the broadest understanding is centered in love; the narrowest understanding is centered in hatred.

If you're on the lowest level, you can relate only to the lowest level; if you're on the highest level, you can relate to all levels. To see that this is true, we can study examples of people who live that way and who are able to handle life's many challenges far, far better. We've all observed that people who are complete as human beings

are generally more successful. A spiritual education can actually guarantee greater success, even in the way worldly people define it.

A good example was Paramhansa Yogananda's most advanced disciple, Rajarsi Janakananda (James J. Lynn). He was the chairman of



several large companies and owned several others. He had the clarity, calmness, and centeredness to be able to pull back from the stress and excitement of his outward role and see the way to resolve difficult issues. The secret of his success was the fact that his

consciousness was rooted in God, and in the desire for right action.

Children are born with different inclinations, with different strengths, weaknesses, and educational needs. One of the unfortunate aspects of modern education is the assembly-line approach to teaching, where the same information is more or less dumped out to everyone. There isn't any philosophy; it is just information. Small classes, where the teacher can get to know each child personally, are essential for giving individual attention and for discovering what the natural level of understanding is for each child.

By teaching children kindness, concentration, will power, strength of character, truthfulness, and other higher qualities, life is made richer. These are deeply important to the development of the human being, but such things are not taught today in public education. The ultimate purpose of life is not simply to get a job. So many people live this way and then die, not of old age but of deep disappointment with the life they have led. If you don't know how to be truly happy, money won't buy it for you.

Spiritual education is training people for life. How many people get married, and then get divorced because they don't know how to

get along with their spouse? They're not educated for that role, nor for an awareness of the practical values that enable us to be successful in every aspect of our lives.

Education, rightly understood, is expansion of awareness. It is preparation for that process of real learning which takes place after we leave school, when we are in the constant struggle, the battlefield of life. By giving children the tools and understanding to make the right choices in life, we can lead them to lasting happiness. Then they will be able to achieve the kind of spiritual victories that are the true meaning of success.

3. FIRST STEPS AT LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL

A Conversation with Living Wisdom School kindergarten teacher Mahita Matulich



Q: Mahita, how did you become a teacher at Living Wisdom School?

Mahita: I heard of the school about six years ago, while I was living in San Ramon, in my spiritual teacher's ashram. My roommate invited me to the school's annual theater production, and I was completely blown away – I could not believe the quality of the performances, and the energy and poise of the children.

Over the next several years I came to see the plays on Krishna, Hafiz, and the Dalai Lama. I would watch the plays and leave feeling so moved. I had been studying early childhood education, and then my roommate introduced me to Helen and Gary, and I came on as an intern.

Q: What has it been like to teach kindergarten?

Mahita: I love teaching here – it's been a great blessing, but I was surprised by how much energy it took. During my first year, my greatest challenge was to adjust my energy to the needs of the children. The energy that's required of our teachers is tremendous, especially when you're working with young children.

I have to be very mindful of my actions, my words, and my interactions with each child. With children of four, five, and six, even the smallest interaction can be very significant for them, especially when it's coming from their teacher. And it requires that I be very aware.

Q: Have you always wanted to teach? Some teachers have known practically from the womb that they would be teachers.

Mahita: I'd never really thought about teaching, although I had some strong ideas about education, based on my early experiences. My mother is a professor, and my grandmother was a teacher, so there was always a lot of encouragement in our family to be lifelong learners. But I had no idea that teaching was what God had in store for me.

As a child, I had an incredible kindergarten teacher, and I still have vivid memories of my experiences with her. In fact, my first three teachers touched my life profoundly, because they truly inspired our creativity and our joy in learning. As a result, I grew up knowing what a tremendous difference it makes for children to have strong teachers in their earliest years.

Q: You mentioned creativity and learning in the same breath. That's a strong theme in this school, isn't it, to tie those together?

Mahita: Oh, it's huge. Last year, a woman asked me during an open house, "How do you get the children to do things?" And I had to laugh, because it's so naturally a part of what we're doing, and I've never had to consider how I could motivate the children.

The way the children's classroom experience is set up, they're given a tremendous number of opportunities to exercise their creativity, and it engages them very deeply in what they're doing.

With a math activity, I'll say, "What kind of math story do you want to write?" Or, "What kind of math story do you want to tell? Do you want to tell it with stuffed animals, or do you want to tell it using math cubes? Or do you want to tell your math story by drawing a picture?"

The emphasis on creativity that is such a major part of our curriculum inspires the children to want to participate. They aren't as likely to resist learning, when they're in a space that welcomes their ideas and their creative energy.

Q: Is it bringing their hearts into the equation, instead of just drilling facts?

Mahita: Yes, it's bringing the heart, the enthusiasm, and honoring each child by letting them know, "You're important, and what you value, and your experiences, are important to me." It's telling the child that it matters a great deal to me as their teacher how they want to pour their creativity into a project, and how they want to approach their math.

Q: Do you interact with the other teachers? Do you feel that you're part of a team?

Mahita: I do. It's a little different because I'm working with the youngest children – I have mostly five-year-olds in my classroom, with a few four-years-olds and six-year-olds.

But I'm very inspired by the other teachers. I look up to them, and I know that I can count on them when I need help. The feeling isn't so much of a team; it's more that I know they're solid, and that they'll be there. They're like old trees that I can go sit under and get shade or relief or wisdom, and we can talk about any kind of situation that might arise with a child. If I'm trying to figure out how to help a child have more energy, or if a child is feeling sad, I can ask the

teachers what they've done in similar situations. It's a very solid support system, for sure.

Q: Did your early education influence the kind of teacher you want to be?

Mahita: As I mentioned, I was lucky to have amazing teachers in kindergarten and first and second grade. And then, after second grade, I became bored and disinterested with public school. I was a very smart child, and I wanted to learn – I wanted to feel engaged, and it just wasn't happening. So, when I was in fifth grade, my dad took me out of public school and home-schooled me.

We were living in Santa Cruz, where there are beautiful redwood forests and beaches, and I spent two years with my father, learning about nature, and reading and doing math outdoors, and that early experience profoundly influenced the way I teach.

After being home-schooled, I skipped sixth grade, then I skipped eighth grade and most of high school, and I finished high school when I was fifteen. I went to a community college, and after getting my degree I spent some time traveling with my spiritual teacher. Then I became very interested in finding a career that would align with my goal of helping create a more peaceful world.

The experience of being homeschooled by my father showed me how powerful it is when you challenge children in meaningful ways. I feel it's very important that the children in my classroom are challenged, and that they don't become disinterested. If I sense that the children are sleepy, or there's some grumpiness in the room, I'll change the curriculum and take them outdoors for a nature walk. Seeing the colors of the flowers, and being outside under the sun and sky transforms their day, so they can come back indoors with their energy renewed.

I try to incorporate nature into their daily experience, and I try to make sure they have some outside time together, to be among the trees and plants.

Q: You said that you challenge them. Can you talk about that?

Mahita: A very unique feature of this school is that we have an individualized curriculum, so that each child will be learning at their own level. It makes a lot of sense, because whether we're doing math, reading, or writing, every child will be learning somewhat differently.

I feel that my job as an educator is to challenge the children in many ways, and not just academically. I do challenge them academically, of course. And if I see a child who's accomplishing their math tasks easily, I'll make sure they've truly mastered those math skills. And then I'll need to immediately think of how I can keep challenging them.

In our school, we recognize the importance of creating a relationship of trust with each child, so that the children will feel safe when we're challenging them to go to the next level. If they think they can't do it, you're there to tell them, "I *know* you can." And they'll trust you enough to try, because they know you, and they know you aren't going to judge them.

I also challenge the children to be their best selves. I have very high standards for them – I expect them to treat each other kindly, and to articulate their words with care, and to practice having consideration for others. I challenge them to learn how to self-regulate – how to choose an appropriate activity to calm their bodies, like deep breathing. Or maybe they need to sit and read a book for a while, until they can get calm and re-join the group.

Self-regulating is a skill that can be very challenging for four-, five-, and six-year-olds. The Education for Life philosophy has helped me understand how I can help them manage their energy. And I've also been inspired by Bev Bos, a brilliant early childhood educator who believed in giving children a creative curriculum. My teaching has been very influenced by Bev, and by the Conscious Discipline methods we use here at Living Wisdom School.

Conscious Discipline is a set of tools that help children learn the basic things they need to say and do. For example, I will never tell a child, “Say it nicely.” Instead, I’ll give them the exact words: “Say to your friend, ‘Can you please hand me the pencil?’” I’m modeling the sentences the children need to know in order to express themselves effectively, which is a big part of what we’re doing at this age, teaching the children what they should say, and how they should say it.

I believe in Conscious Discipline very strongly, because it’s a beautiful set of tools, and it works. I think it’s wonderful that we’re encouraged here to help the children acquire these essential skills.

Q: It sounds like they’re developing skills that may not be directly related to their academic subjects, but will help them be successful academically – how to master a challenge, and how to succeed in small ways and enjoy their successes.

Mahita: And teaching them to love the challenges, and to feel confident within themselves that if something is challenging, they can do it. It’s about giving them a confidence from within, instead of trying to motivate them by external pressures and external rewards.

I think it’s very important that the children learn to be intrinsically motivated – that they’re motivated from within themselves to do their best, and not that they’re motivated from outside. It’s why I don’t use sticker charts, or reward systems. I’ve read lots of research on this, and I feel it’s best for the children if you can teach them, starting at a very early age, that the best rewards are when they’re able to look at their art or their math, and feel very happy about it from inside.

Q: Is there an emphasis on language arts in kindergarten, on helping them learn to read and write?

Mahita: Yes, because developing literacy and language is extremely important for young children. There are many studies on the importance of exposing children to words and environments that

are rich in a variety of print materials. They need to be exposed to a great many new words for their optimal growth, and it's why I read lots and lots of stories to them.

Storytelling and story reading play a huge role in the curriculum. I took a course on literacy and language development for young children, and I learned that you need to read slowly to children at this age, at a significantly slower pace than you would read to an adult. And it's because they're forming a tremendous number of new ideas in their heads at this age, and they're learning to understand the context of each new word. So I'm very intentional in how I read to my class. I'll make the voices of the characters in the stories, and in the second part of the year I'll read lots of poetry to them, and I'll get them started writing poetry, with some prompts, because it's very helpful for developing their language and thinking skills.

As far as writing goes, at this age I'll wait to see when each child is truly ready to start doing their own writing. Some of the children will be ready to start writing words and sentences halfway through the year, and they'll be very excited. And some will still want you to write out the words for them, which is fine, because they don't all develop these skills at the same pace. I teach writing on whiteboards instead of paper, because it's easier to erase and edit on a whiteboard when you're very young and still developing your fine motor skills. And I teach phonics, so they can start to recognize the sounds of the letters and work out the sounds of new words.

Language plays a huge role in how the classroom is structured. As I mentioned, I'm very careful about the language I use with the kids. I don't tell them "Good job!" or "That's perfect!" or "I really like it." I stay away from those kinds of value judgments. Instead, I'll try to find out about *them*, and how they're feeling and where their energy is. "Tell me about your art. Tell me what you did. Oh, wow, I can see that you put green and blue there. Tell me about that."

Q: They're rewarded because you're interested, and because they can tell you what's fulfilling them?

Mahita: That's right. When the children first enter kindergarten, they'll hold up their art and say, "Do you like it? Did I do it right?" And it might take a month or two, but then they'll stop asking for approval, and they'll start saying, "I did a masterpiece, Mahita!" Because they're telling me how they feel about it rather than asking if it's right.

Q: Does it affect the way they approach their academic learning?

Mahita: Very definitely, yes. They're learning a process, and they're learning to articulate, at a very young age, "This is what I feel, and this is what I need, and these are the tools I can use to calm myself and make myself feel better, and prepare myself to face this challenge."

I don't think that any human being can succeed academically in the deepest, most lasting way, to their full potential, if they aren't able to self-regulate. As the children navigate high school and college, they'll face many stressful situations. And having the tools to calm yourself and self-regulate and know what's really alive within you will make a big difference.

I teach a high level of math in kindergarten. (laughs) Some people don't believe me when I say this, but I teach algebraic thinking at this age, and I really try to develop a solid number sense in the children. When they have a solid number sense, what happens is that they'll breeze through math when they reach fourth and fifth grade, because they'll have the right understanding, from tangibly working on these things since they were four and five.

Q: You're giving them content in kindergarten that they'll be using in fourth and fifth grade?

Mahita: Exactly. For example, I might put on the board: “Ten is the same as five plus what number?” Or “Ten is the same as eight plus what number?”

Q: That’s amazing.

Mahita: And they’re doing it all the time, so it becomes very natural to them. I start teaching these concepts in the first or second week of school. And I do lots of things to make math fun. I have a Math Owl who tells math stories, and I do activities that bring out their natural joy at this age, through storytelling, role playing, improv, and so on.

Q: *The Education for Life* book suggests that young children are working very much with their feelings, and that they need appropriate learning tools.

Mahita: Yes, exactly. We’re using appropriate tools. We’re using the tools they naturally have. Children at this age play, and if we can incorporate play into what they’re learning, and make it playful for them, then the learning sinks in easily. And we can carefully observe what they’re learning, and what we can do to help them learn even better. I’m always watching and thinking of what I can bring into the classroom that will help them in their play.

Q: I visited the fourth-grade classroom, and the focus of the children was amazing. I asked a little girl if I could take her picture, and without glancing up from her book she said, kind of impatiently, “All right.” She absolutely did not want to be distracted from her math book. It was inspiring also to see them working in pairs and deeply concentrated on their math. It’s not at all as if they wanted to be someplace else.

Mahita: It’s pretty incredible. I think sometimes I might take it for granted because I’m in the middle of it all the time. But I have five- and six-year-olds who are so dedicated to what they’re doing that they’re completely absorbed, and they’re engaged and excited.

Q: Five-year-olds are notoriously distractible. It's fascinating to hear that they can be deeply focused.

Mahita: If you can frame an activity for children so that their enthusiasm is alive and they're fully engaged, the learning happens naturally, and then you're just there to support it.

I think it's only when you don't frame a lesson or an exploration of ideas properly, that the children are more easily distracted. I'm very, very carefully observing all the time what's working and what isn't, and what I need to fix. Maybe there's a lot of joy around an activity, but maybe the energy is a bit too high. I have to be on my toes, and be ready to adjust to each moment and stay flexible.

Q: It seems very different from the image of kids sitting in rows, doing the same thing at the same time.

Mahita: I can't imagine having kids sit at their desks all day, especially at this age. I can't imagine how it would affect their learning and development.

I'm continually problem-solving and adjusting my teaching. I always have a curriculum planned for the next week and month, but if an activity isn't working, or if it's taking too long, or if the children are taking it to another level, I will go with that. There's no doubt that being flexible is a key requirement for being effective as a teacher.

Q: One of the most common complaints among public school teachers is that they must follow a state-mandated curriculum, and it takes away their flexibility to adjust the curriculum to the needs of the individual students.

Mahita: At this age, they're naturally curious. They naturally want to learn, and I feel it's tragic when a child's curiosity is shut down in an attempt to deliver some sort of prescribed lesson plan. My hope is that when the children leave here, they'll feel that they can ask questions and be curious, and cultivate their natural love of

learning, and not feel that there's only one right answer, or that they have to stay quiet instead of asking a question.

I joke that if you come into a kindergarten and it's too quiet, there's no way that learning is happening, because the kids are not naturally quiet while they're learning. Sure, you want a reasonable level of quiet, but I feel that the best times of learning are when the children are excited and talking to each other about what's going on, or they're asking each other questions, or they're asking me questions, so it's very alive.

Q: Shawn Achor, the author of *The Happiness Advantage*, found that the most successful Harvard freshmen were not those who spent all their time trying to grind out good grades. The most successful Harvard students were engaged with each other, asking questions and forming study groups. They were social and knew how to get the help they needed. They were the kids who talked about everything, and knew how to enjoy what they were doing, and how to connect with it. It sounds rather eerily similar to what you're teaching your kindergarten students.

Mahita: It's so important for these kids to learn the skills of cooperating and problem-solving. I wish you could see how they grow throughout the year. At the start of the year there are always a few months where it's just constant conflict resolution, and constant learning to use the right words, and constantly giving them the sentences and words that will help them be successful.

Then, after a few months, they've gained enough skills that I'll be able to sit and observe them for extended periods during the day, and they'll be completely, one-hundred percent able to navigate and cooperate. And it's not because I've solved their problems for them, but because I've challenged them, "How can you solve that problem?" And they start to become thinkers. "Oh, we both want to play this game, but we want to play it differently, and how can we do

that?” Or they start to figure out the right way to ask their friends for help, and how to make requests of each other, instead of grabbing.

It’s very rewarding to me as a teacher to see the transformation, and to think, “Wow, most adults can’t even do this.” Can you put twelve adults in a room all day, and they’ll get along? Most likely not, and these kids can do it beautifully.

Q: Do you talk to the other teachers about how your students are doing after they leave kindergarten?

Mahita: Definitely, yes. I wrote an email to a parent today, and I said, “As a teacher, you really love these children and care about them, and you can’t just switch it off.” It’s not like it switches off on the weekend, or when you go home. And for me it’s a big deal and very important to talk to the teachers that they’ll be going to, because I want the next teacher to have all of the information that enabled me to help each child during their kindergarten year. I’ll talk about the reading level they’re on, and what I’ve found that can help the child in a variety of situations, and I’ll let the first-grade teacher know I’m always available if they have questions.

Teaching isn’t just about academics. It’s about having a sense of who each child is, and what’s important to them. And I’ll want to have a conversation with their next teacher about that, too.

With an individualized curriculum, you basically have twelve curriculums going on at the same time. And as teachers our job is to make sure that each child is getting his or her individual needs met every day.

4. THE 5 STAGES OF A CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

by Living Wisdom School staff member George Beinborn

I don't read the papers much, but I came across an article in the *Sacramento Bee* some years ago that fairly begged to be disbelieved. Here's an excerpt:

In a *Journal of Medical Ethics* article titled "A Proposal to Classify Happiness as a Psychiatric Disorder," Liverpool University psychologist Richard P. Bentall argues that the so-called syndrome of happiness is a diagnosable mood disturbance that should be included in standard taxonomies of mental illness such as the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Happiness, as Bentall states in his abstract, is "statistically abnormal, consists of a discrete cluster of symptoms, is associated with a range of cognitive abnormalities and probably reflects the abnormal functioning of the central nervous system." (In this regard, as Bentall later notes, happiness resembles other psychiatric disorders such as depression and schizophrenia.)

The author of the *Bee* article, Maggie Scarf, a *New Republic* contributing editor, related Dr. Bentall's suggestion "that the term 'happiness' be removed from future editions of the major diagnostic manuals, to be replaced by the formal description 'major affective disorder, pleasant type.'"

The Practice of Happiness

When I read the article aloud to a friend, she promptly doubled over with major affective disorder. "That's such amazing

cock-a-doo!” she howled. “It’s so carefully reasoned – yet it’s completely incredible!”

It is nutty-cakes. And yet, is there anything actually wrong with using scientific methods to study happiness? After all, it’s what the spiritual explorers of all ages have done – they’ve studied happiness in the laboratory of their own bodies, hearts, and minds, and kept tidy notes on what worked and what didn’t.

For most of us, happiness isn’t a “mood disturbance” to be resolved by taking a pill; it’s the answer that we’re all seeking. And if we can get a bit more happiness with the help of scientific orderliness and method, so much the better.

The spiritual researchers of all cultures and times realized that the single underlying desire that drives our actions is a longing to experience greater happiness, and to escape from sorrow.

Albert Einstein, ever a perceptive observer of the human scene, confirmed this truth:

Everything that the human race has done and thought is concerned with the satisfaction of deeply felt needs and the assuagement of pain. One has to keep this constantly in mind if one wishes to understand spiritual movements and their development. Feeling and longing are the motive force behind all human endeavor and human creation, in however exalted a guise the latter may present themselves. (From the essay, “Cosmic Religious Feeling.”)

Because the world’s spiritual traditions have made a study of happiness, what they say may be worth hearing, in these times of pandemic discontent.

After all, their approach is practical. They tell us, for example, that we’ve been given five instruments through which we can experience happiness: body, heart, will, mind, and soul. And they explain that as we grow into adulthood, we pass through five six-year

stages, during which each of the happiness “tools,” in the order listed, becomes the primary developmental focus.

Happiness, they say, increases when we learn to use these tools “expansively.” (More on expansion later.) Thus, the most important time of our lives for learning how to be happy is when we’re growing up, passing through the six-year stages.

From birth to age 6, an infant’s primary developmental focus is on becoming familiar with its body and senses.

From 6 to 12, the child’s feelings come to the fore – these are the elementary school years, when children are particularly receptive to learning through the arts – the “media of feeling,” including stories, music, theater, art, and dance.

From 12 to 18, teenagers embrace challenges to their will power, in preparation for independent adult life. And at around 18, young people become fascinated with the life of the mind, engaging in long discussions of politics, science, the arts, and philosophy.

Finally, at about age 24, many people experience life events that may herald a spiritual awakening.

As each tool takes center stage, the others don’t simply fade away. Thus, while a toddler is primarily concerned with its body and senses, it will not hesitate to express its feelings – with the volume turned up! Nor do the stages begin precisely on our 6th, 12th, 18th, and 24th birthdays. The transitions are gradual.

Why did nature decide upon this particular scheme? In his insightful book, *Education for Life*, J. Donald Walters explains how each stage prepares the child for the ones that follow. Thus, feeling comes before will power, because feeling is the faculty that enables us to tell right from wrong. Before we can use our will power appropriately, with awareness of others’ realities, we need to develop the ability to *feel* their realities. Walters laments the ruinous consequences of cramming children’s minds with facts, as is common in schools today, at the expense of developing their capacity to feel.

Similarly, each stage fulfills the preceding one. Thus, feeling motivates us to action, and will power provides the energy and focus to act upon our feelings. Unless we *want* something strongly enough, we will not exert the energy to achieve it. And refined feelings tell us which actions will lead to happiness, and which will only bring us suffering.

Will power, in turn, finds its fulfillment in wisdom, which helps us understand how to use our will power efficiently and appropriately. And wisdom is fulfilled in Spirit. In Self-realization, we realize that wisdom and joy come from a higher Source that we can discover within.

The history of education reveals that in ancient Greece and Rome, and throughout the Middle Ages and Enlightenment, the six-year stages were recognized as natural phases of a child's growth. Thus appropriate teaching methods were devised for each stage, and schools were roughly divided into the equivalents of our modern elementary school (ages 6-12), junior and senior high (12-18), and college (18-24)..

Expanding Awareness Equals Joy

As I hinted earlier, the spiritual teachings of the ages tell us that our happiness increases as we learn to use our five human tools “expansively.”

Like most abstractions, “expansion” is best understood with examples.

Let's look at what happens when we begin an exercise program.

After the first two or three weeks, we find that we're feeling happier and more alive. Why? Because the exercising body has begun to generate more energy, which spills over to nourish our feelings, will, and mind, expanding their range and force. By expanding our awareness through one “tool,” the body, we've beneficially influenced

all of the others. Positive actions spread their effects – as do negative ones.

People tend to specialize in one, or perhaps two, of the “tools of expansion.” Thus, some people go more by feeling, while others tend to “lead” with their will power or mind. The spiritual teachings encourage us to go with our strengths, while working to correct any imbalances. During our school years, we can learn most effectively if our teachers are given the freedom to adapt the curriculum to accommodate our particular learning “style.”

In many natural processes, the “tools of happiness” tend to appear in the same sequence as a child’s development. When we fall in love, for example, the first attraction is often, though not invariably, physical. We see a person across the room whose appearance attracts us, and our feelings become aroused. We form a volition to act on our feelings, and we walk over and strike up a conversation. The mind probes for information: *Is she married? Does he like children?* And if we’re wise, we’ll consult a higher guidance before venturing upon this important life venture. We’ve passed through the five “tools” in order: body, feeling, will, mind, soul.

Similarly, in starting a new business, the first stage is for the “body” – acquiring capital, and setting up a physical plant. Once the business is up and running, our enthusiasm provides the energy and motivation to make it succeed. Will power helps us overcome obstacles and stay the course; and wisdom helps us make astute decisions that will keep the business on the right track and preserve it from danger. Finally, an expansive, spiritual vision will persuade us that the greatest success and happiness come by including others’ happiness in our own.

In school, wise teachers understand that each child is a whole being, with needs that go far beyond simply educating the mind. If we can bring the whole child – body, heart, will, mind, and soul – into the learning process, we find that learning can become a series of

wonderful success experiences, and a source of happiness for the child. Just as when we start a fitness program, our body, feelings, and will feed the mind with energy, expanding its scope and force.

The System Is Rigged

It all sounds so simple and straightforward – just use the tools expansively, and happiness will be ours, rather like remembering to brush our teeth in the morning. But in real life, cultivating expansive attitudes turns out to be a challenge. That’s because, as I mentioned earlier, the urge to contract our awareness competes for our attention.

Life places essentially the same choice continually before us: will we use our bodies wisely, or self-destructively? Our hearts, to love or to hate? Our minds, to be wise or merely clever? Our spiritual instincts, to aspire to the heights, or to succumb to narrow attitudes of religious exclusivity and prejudice? History, ours and the world’s, is the story of the eternal struggle between these opposing forces in human nature.

Also, the theory is simple, but the details are not. We’ve been given all of the tools we need to achieve happiness and success, or so it seems. The trouble is, relying exclusively on our purely human toolbox, we find ourselves sooner or later bumping against its limitations.

The five tools of expansion embody wonderful expertise, yet their very specialization can trip us. When this happens, we can find answers by looking beyond the tools. Happily, we can use the same instruments to commune with a higher awareness that is fathomlessly wise and loving, and that has our best interests at heart.

This is what expansive education is about: educating the whole child, and fine-tuning the children’s environment and activities to teach them how to find the greatest success and joy.

5. A VISIT TO THIRD GRADE



We spoke with Ruth Rabin, who teaches third grade at Living Wisdom School.

Q: Ruth, did you always know that you would be a teacher?

Ruth: I think I did. When I was in elementary school I would stay after school and help the teacher erase the blackboard and get the classroom in order. And I loved playing teacher with my friends.

After college, I worked in France for a year, teaching in a public junior high. Then I worked in Israel for a couple of years, and when I came back I taught for several years at schools in Foster City and Palo Alto.

I loved teaching, but then I got married, and when my kids grew up I thought about exploring a new field. I said to a friend, “I wish

there were something that I loved, and that I was really good at.” He said, “There is – it’s teaching.” And I thought, “It’s true, I love teaching.”

I found a job at a private school in San Jose where it was wonderful to work with the children, but the school closed in mid-year, and the kids were left without a school, and the teachers found themselves suddenly without a job.

I had a friend who taught at Living Wisdom School, and she said, “Send me your resume, and I’ll give it to Helen.” Two weeks later, a position opened and I was hired. It was a miracle how I landed at this glorious place, after a scary experience of losing my job, and it touches me whenever I think about it.

I love this school. It’s a very joyful place, and I wish my children had been able to come here, and that I’d come to a place like this as a child.

I’ll wander into Erica’s second-grade classroom next door, and I’ll look around and think, “Oh my gosh.” And Erica will visit my classroom and say, “Oh my gosh.”

There’s a unique camaraderie and friendship with the other teachers. If we have a question – like “How can I set up this lesson so it will help the students in the best possible way?” – I can go to any of the teachers, and we’ll work on it with our combined experience and find a solution.

It’s a wonderful aspect of our school that the teachers are free to learn from each other, and that we can go into the other classrooms and observe. Many amazing things have come out of those conversations.

For the students, an incredible amount of learning goes on here, with amazing creativity and joy along the way. I love coming to work every day, and I don’t think many people can say that.

Q: One of the things I’ve observed is how you interact with the children. On one occasion, the seamstress for the theater production

was being a little bossy, and a girl in your class was afraid to go and get her costume adjusted. You counseled her, and you were able to help her with compassion and wisdom. I thought it exemplified something that I've heard the teachers say, that it's essential to create a relationship with each child, so that you can understand who they are and what their needs are.

Ruth: It's one of the things I love here, the familiarity that you develop with each child. It's a relationship of respect and trust – we know each other, and if something's going on, I'll know about it, and I can help them.

I'll say, "I'm noticing that your energy's a little off today. Tell me what's happening." Because we know them well enough to recognize when something's out of their norm.

We'll talk about it, instead of ignoring it, or assuming that it will just go away, or that their parents will deal with it, or even worse, that we might try to discipline them for their "off" behavior without understanding what's actually going on.

Yesterday, I was saying to the kids, "Some of you haven't made art for our class poetry book. Come on, let's get this done!" And one of these little eight-year-olds said, "You're really frantic today!" (laughs)

I took a deep breath and said, "Yes, I am, I'm feeling frantic." And the little girl said, with so much confidence, "Well, don't worry, we'll get it done." I said, "You're right. I was feeling frenetic." And it was funny, because they jumped right in and said, "We know that word!"

But she said it so kindly – it wasn't that she was scolding me – "What's wrong with you?!" She noticed that I was feeling frantic, and she was free, in this environment, to try to help. It's a natural part of the culture, to talk about issues that are getting in the way, and it has a very positive effect on their development and their learning.

Q: In a traditional school where the children are focused almost entirely on academics, they can sometimes miss the experience of having their hearts educated, which Education for Life says is extremely important at all ages, but especially from six to twelve. Is that something you emphasize? If you're doing academics, for example, do you find that those attitudes of kindness and cooperation are helping the children in their studies?

Ruth: Without question. I feel that where there's laughter and joy, there are much greater possibilities for learning. If you walk into any of the classrooms here, you'll see that they're working very hard, but the reason there's so much learning, and why the kids are so deeply engaged, is because they feel that it's theirs.

We're continually adjusting the curriculum to meet each child's needs, so that the learning is always on their level. And because it's so individually focused, we're able to raise the bar in a way that lets each child experience the satisfaction of rising to it. As they discover that they can face a challenge and overcome it, their enthusiasm for learning grows exponentially, and it's a huge step for their all-around development.

Soon after I came here, a little boy stood up at our year-end ceremony and said, "At first it was hard, but now I know that I can always ask for help. And if I need to know how to spell 'ampersand,' I can ask."

They aren't afraid to ask, because the culture isn't about who's best or who's ahead. "What page are you on? I'm ten pages farther." That never gets talked about here, because they know that it simply doesn't matter.

In math, the children are free to ask each other for help, even before they ask me. They're constantly teaching each other, and they're learning to solve problems by finding the resources they need.

A child will say, "Can somebody help me?" And you'll always hear, "I will! I will!" They're competing to go and help each other,

and they discover that teaching is a wonderful way to review and reinforce what they've learned. Imagine how great a child feels when they help another child with a math problem.

We're doing Menu Math, which is very challenging. One of the problems is, "How much is the restaurant bill with an eighteen-percent tip?" It's quite advanced for third grade math. We were getting close to the end of math class the other day, and I hadn't covered the problem, so I said, "Let's come back to it tomorrow." But one of the girls said, "I know how to do it – my mom showed me." And she got up and taught the class how to calculate an eighteen-percent tip. It was marvelous, because the kids were going, "Oh, yeah! I get it!"

They said, "Ruth, can we go to the board and try to figure it out by ourselves?" And I just had to laugh. I said, "Well – yeah!!" Because I was delighted.

The learning is natural and joyful, and we always monitor their comfort level. I tell them, "Let me know if it's too easy, because it'll be boring, or if it's too hard, because it'll be frustrating." And the kids will say, "Ruth, this is a really good comfort level for me. It's really challenging, but I can do it."

I had a child in my class who used to say, "This is so hard!" And now he's saying, "This is challenging." He's learned to work through the challenges and master them. I'll say, "Is it a good comfort level for you?" And he'll say, "Yeah, but it's pretty challenging."

Or they'll say, "Ruth, this is too easy." And I'll find out if they've truly mastered the lesson, and then I'll move them along, because there's no point in staying on something that they've already mastered.

It's very important that they feel comfortable saying, "This is too hard." Because it means that they aren't intimidated by the teacher, and they can ask for help when they're stuck. In this culture, they

don't have to feel afraid that they'll be teased if they admit that they're having trouble.

I'll say, "Okay, what part is hard?" And they're perfectly free to say, "I'm stuck on this part." And maybe I'll say, "Okay, let's go back a few pages." But the point is, they're completely comfortable acknowledging where they need help, because there's no shame attached to saying, "It's too hard for me right now. Can you come over and help?"

How much are you going to learn if you're stuck, and you're afraid to say to the teacher, "I can't do it"? It's the natural thing to say. Why should you pretend to be farther along, when you haven't built a foundation? And these kids completely understand that.

So they monitor their comfort level, and they're happy to challenge themselves because they know they can get help when they need it. Not because they have to prove that they're better, but because they've learned, over and over, how wonderful it feels to master a challenge.

In every classroom here, the teachers are helping the children understand that the greatest joy comes from their own learning, and not from measuring themselves against an artificial standard. It's why they love the challenge of learning new things, because they enjoy that inner feeling of accomplishment.

We do some very sophisticated language arts learning in our third-grade classroom, and the kids love it. They love the challenge of learning big words. They'll say, "Ruth, I was reading a book, and it said the guy was 'cantankerous.'" And I'll say, "And you knew what it meant!" And they'll say, "And I knew how to spell it!" (laughs)

There's such pride in their learning. When I compare the years I taught in a number of very good academically oriented schools, I think we have a very rigorous academic program here. Very, very rigorous. But it's done with love, and with confidence. Because it's done with very high goals, and realistic expectations.

Q: It sounds different from a school where the teacher has to hustle the students through a state-mandated curriculum on a rigid schedule.

Ruth: My son was bored in public school. He's quite smart, and his high school teachers were saying, "If you want to motivate your son, put him in Advanced Placement classes, because they'll challenge him."

I said, "But he won't really learn anything. It will just be more homework, and what he wants is *depth*."

He wanted to be able to explore his school subjects in depth, and it wasn't happening, because it was all about getting through the material on schedule and studying to the test.

I don't blame the teachers, because they aren't given the freedom to truly teach a subject. "We have to get through the chapter. There's no time for questions. Let's keep moving. Let's not go too deep, because you have to be ready for the test."

It's very liberating for the teachers and students when you don't have to teach that way. In social studies the other day, we were talking about the Central Valley of California. The children were looking at a map, and someone said, "What's the San Andreas Fault?" And all of a sudden the lesson changed to earthquakes and plate tectonics, and we watched some YouTube videos about the science of plate tectonics and earthquakes and the San Andreas Fault.

Then we talked about how we're living just a few miles from this gigantic geologic fault, and we went outside and looked for cracks in the sidewalk and tried to decide if they were created by trees or by the earthquakes in this area.

So the lesson shifted from social studies to the geology of the California mountain ranges, and the fact that there are volcanoes in the mountains. And the discovery that there are volcanoes in California got them very excited, and it shot off and became a lesson in the science of vulcanology.

As a teacher, having the freedom to take a lesson wherever the children's enthusiasm leads them is marvelous. It makes the learning very real for the children, where it's not just looking at the pages of a book – "Oh, there are some mountains in California, and here's a map and some dry facts."

If you start with the strange and shocking and exciting fact that there are volcanoes in California, it unfolds naturally into the science of how mountain ranges are formed, and how the earth's crust is shifting, and what it looks like in California, quite near to where we're living.

I feel very blessed to teach in a school where I have the freedom and autonomy to teach in a way that engages the children and gives them a genuine learning experience.

Q: A friend of mine teaches honors chemistry at a high school in Illinois. He's also the freshman football coach, and his teams have won thirty-nine games in a row. He's completely at odds with the state-mandated curriculum. He wrote an article, [*10 Ways to Improve Schools Using Coaching Principles*](#), the point of which was that teachers should be free to help the individual child, in the same way that any competent sports coach would do.

Ruth: It's the only way to bring out the very best in each child. And you need to know the child well enough to know what their best is.

In math class we have a Multiplication Sundae game. As the children gradually master the multiplication table, they earn part of an ice cream sundae. But the key point is that the whole class has to master the table. It's fine if you know your sixes and sevens, but if the whole class hasn't got them, they'll have to help each other.

Q: Do they tutor each other?

Ruth: Very definitely. They work together and they help each other. There's a tremendous amount of partner learning and peer teaching in the classroom. This year's class learned their

multiplication tables perfectly, and at the Multiplication Sundae party they'll have ice cream with all the trimmings including sprinkles and chocolate chips. But it's really about the learning experience, and the joy of learning together, and not setting yourself apart from others and competing against them in a shallow way.

Which is not to say that we don't encourage the ones who can learn really fast. But it's never a bragging thing, where they're trying to make the others feel inferior. Never.

It's taking pride in what you've done. It's being able to say, "I've studied hard, and I know this." Because why should they hide it, even if the others are still working on it?

When we do our multiplication drills, there are three students who can rattle them off without a hitch. They'll just shoot them off, and we all know who they are, but there's no comparing. There's a feeling that it's wonderful for them, and we're proud of them.

Q: The kindergarten teacher, Mahita, talked about how it's important to praise the children in the right way.

Ruth: Acknowledging them for who they are, and for their accomplishments and their mastery, and not just because they've jumped over a stick that you're holding at some arbitrary height.

There's a popular idea in education today that you shouldn't take pride in something you're good at, because someone else's feelings might get hurt. But I don't believe in that idea for a moment. I don't believe in lowering yourself so that other people won't feel inferior. I feel that everyone should be proud of their accomplishments, and proud of each other, and very proud of their friends.

When one of the children was assigned her lines for the school play, she received fewer lines than she'd hoped for. Her mom told me that her daughter came home and said, "I'm a little disappointed, but my friend got lots of lines, and I'm so proud of her."

Can you imagine? There was no envy or resentment. She thought, “This is what I have, and it’s really good, but my best friend got this, and I’m so happy for her.”

Q: It’s a principle of the world’s spiritual teachings that our happiness grows when we expand our awareness to include other people’s realities. I would imagine it’s an important lesson for young children, for their happiness now and in the future.

Ruth: Yes, and it happens a lot in our class, where the kids will go, “Yay! Good for you!”

Q: What about kids who are extremely advanced in math? Are they allowed to flourish at their level?

Ruth: Yes. Everyone needs to be where they are, because each every child will be at a different level. In our third-grade classroom we say, “Nobody’s good at everything, but everybody’s good at something.” And why should you expect to excel at absolutely everything? It’s only in public schools where they expect that.

Q: In the high school where my friend teaches, there’s a requirement that every student has to take chemistry and physics. And the result is that those classes get watered-down for the less-qualified students who don’t want to be there in the first place.

Ruth: Nobody expects that in real life. If something’s wrong with my car, I’ll take it to a mechanic, instead of thinking that I should be able to fix it myself. But in public high schools everyone’s expected to take Advanced Placement courses, and they might not be allowed to excel at what they’re really good at, if it happens to be music, painting, or auto repair, because those things are no longer honored in public school.

Here, it’s about everybody being where they need to be. We’re very careful to observe the children and keep the curriculum individualized and fluid, so that each child can go ahead at their own pace. It’s very clearly understood that the kids need to move at a pace

where they'll be challenged and able to grow and thrive. They might need to move forward or back, and it's adjusted all the time.

On Fridays we have math games, and some of the kids will say, "Can we work on Menu Math instead?" which is a lot harder, just because they love the challenge.

I love it here. And it's partly because we embrace every aspect of the individual child, including the spiritual.

I'll occasionally bring in my Jewish culture. In our tradition we have something called a mezuzah. It's a parchment scroll that's inscribed with the most important prayer in Judaism, and it can be ornate and fancy, or very simple.

The prayer says, "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to affix a mezuzah." Jewish homes will have a mezuzah on the door, and the reason is that when you go in and out you're reminded of how to live your life as a good person. As you go out, it reminds you that this is how you live as a righteous person. And when you come in, you remember to do the right thing – to have integrity, and to think about what you're doing, and always try to be in alignment with right action.

I explained that to the children, and they made mezuzahs and wrote poems about how they want to live their lives. And when I send them home they'll roll them up and put them outside their bedroom door.

We also made something called a Chamsa, which is a Middle Eastern symbol that's shared by the Jewish and Islamic traditions. It's the hand of God that's offering blessing and protection. We made Chamsas out of heavy copper foil that the children tooled and decorated, and then they wrote poetry about the times when they feel the hand of God.

Q: Is it something you have to nag them to do?

Ruth: Not at all. We talk about what God is, and they write about it in their poetry. What is God to other people? What is God to me? When do they feel that energy? When do they feel that protection? When do they feel that love? Do they feel it when they're in nature? Do they feel it when they're with their family? When they're playing? When they're laughing? They understand that feeling, and they always know what I'm talking about, because it's a universal experience, and children live more in their hearts and souls than adults generally do.

It's been a really great year. This time of year is always bittersweet, because your connection with the children is so deep, and then they have to leave. I love every class that I've had, and every one is very special.

6. MEANING AT AN EARLY AGE

A conversation with LWS director Helen Purcell

Q: Helen, Living Wisdom School nurtures children's sense of life's joyous possibilities. How do you counteract the widespread belief today that life is meaningless?

Helen: In our school, we feel that the relationship between the child and the teacher needs to be based on an authentic commitment to live life in alignment with high spiritual principles.

Our teachers are "heart people." They teach from the heart, and it's a wonderful quality, because if the children sense that your heart is closed or judgmental, they will shut you out.

True learning begins when you encourage children to have an open heart that is can embrace ever-wider realities. You do that most effectively when they feel safe, and they feel safe when you're supporting them, and when you're giving them a strong, clear sense of life's positive meaning.

Our philosophy is so central to the children's experience that it's impossible to talk about how we approach the "crisis of meaning" without mentioning it.

I can think of two examples that happened in just the last couple of days.

A little boy in our school had cousins visiting from India. One of the cousins spent a day in our first-grade class, and the other cousin visited my language arts class.

After school, they told their parents that they really wanted to come back to our school the next day. The boy's mother said to me

later, “We had offered to take them anywhere in the Bay Area, and we told them they could do anything they liked, but they said they really had to come back to your school.” So they spent their vacation in school with us, because they couldn’t believe the feeling of it.

They said to their mother, “The teachers are kind, and the children are friendly.” And it’s not just that the children in our school are taught good manners, or that they memorize a set of rules that they have to follow for getting along. It’s the result of something that runs much deeper in our school, and that supports the children by giving them a solid sense of meaning. It’s a culture that’s embedded in the school, based on our commitment to living life consciously.

Let me explain what I mean by living “consciously.” I’m tempted to say that “it’s all about joy.” And, yes, that’s part of it, because children have tremendous energy and a natural wakefulness and an ability to be very present in the moment. And if we can guide that enthusiasm in the right direction, they’ll experience a sense of security and happiness.

So the children’s natural energy and awareness is something we treasure and nurture in them, because it’s the foundation for helping them find a lifelong sense of meaning, including a love of learning.

But we also find that when we nurture the children’s natural ability to be present in the moment, tremendous learning can happen, so long as you’re presenting the curriculum in a way that stimulates their natural enthusiasm.

It means that, as teachers, we aren’t just imparting a fixed curriculum, plodding through the book. We’re noticing how each child is responding – where their awareness is, in each moment, and how we can guide them through the curriculum in a way that builds on their native enthusiasm.

Naturally, the teacher is at the center of the energy in the classroom, and this is particularly important for the younger children, because the teacher notices what’s going on in their lives and their

hearts and minds. And then, with a little guidance, you can help them feel very, very happy and secure in the classroom, and they can go happily from one activity to the next.

Let me share another story. A little girl visited our school yesterday because she wants to enter next year. When her mother and I met, said, “If we enroll her, I’ll have to come and stay with her in the classroom because she’s very shy, and she can’t possibly come by herself.”

I said, “That’s actually not a good idea. She needs to come visit us, and we’ll give her an experience of the school.”

The mother wasn’t convinced, so I said, “You can come in for a few minutes, but then you’ll really need to leave.”

The girl was eleven, and when we met her she was literally hiding behind her mother, the way a kindergartener might behave. But five minutes later she had completely forgotten that her mother was there, because the students understood how to open their hearts, and they drew her in.

When she got in the car to go home, her mother said, “How did it go?”

She said, “Mom, I want to start tomorrow!”

It was a huge transformation. And that’s the power of a culture that celebrates the positives and makes people feel safe and included.

Q: You’re creating a special atmosphere in the classroom?

Helen: I wouldn’t call it an atmosphere exactly, because it suggests a mood that might change from one day to the next. It’s really a culture that is deeply engrained in how we think and feel and behave. It expresses in many ways, and because it’s highly attractive to the kids, they internalize it and duplicate it, so it grows.

Q: What does it require to create a culture of meaning, purpose, and hope for the children?

Helen: There's a large amount of classroom instruction, of course, but in an intimate setting such as ours, with our very favorable teacher-student ratio, a tremendous amount of individualization becomes possible.

Q: Based on discovering each child's unique needs?

Helen: Yes, and in our school it would be impossible not to. Our middle school teacher, Gary McSweeney, and I often laugh, because we went to Catholic schools where there were fifty children in a classroom, ten in a row, all lined up with the nun in front. And, well, it's not that my school was all that bad, but certainly there was no individualization, because it just wasn't possible. But it would be almost impossible in our school *not* to individualize the curriculum, since we're so accessible to the children, and because we're always relating to them one-on-one.

When I taught in public school, I had an interesting experience. At the end of the year, I praised each student's good qualities. And do you know what they said? "That can't possibly be true, because you haven't said a single negative thing about anybody!"

I said, "Of course, it's true." (laughs) You see, it's a question of where you're coming from. Are you focused on ensuring that the children complete the state-mandated curriculum on time? Or are you wholly and entirely concerned about helping each individual child succeed?

Q: In her book, *The Argument Culture*, Barbara Tannen describes how in our culture we tend to put every issue, whether it's politics, religion, or education, in the context of an argument. For every pro there has to be a con, and if you don't bring out the negative and dwell on it in loving detail, people are programmed to suspect that you're hiding something.

Helen: They think you're looking at life through rose-colored glasses. But it's a completely false view of reality to think that the negative defines us. Certainly there's negativity in the world, but our

happiness depends on expanding the positive aspects of our nature – and that’s a firmly engrained feature of the culture of this school.

In our circle time with the children this morning, we sang a chant, “Oh life is sweet, and death is only a dream, when Thy song flows through me.” Afterward, one of the girls said, “That isn’t true. Death isn’t a dream – death is real!”

So we talked about it. We talked about how when you’re aware of spirit, you can see that the physical plane that we’re so familiar with is clearly less real. It’s a very common experience of people who’ve had near-death experiences and returned to talk about the nature of this material plane which we think is so real. It’s why the chant says that death is a dream. Because, as the saints of all paths tell us, in our soul nature we never die.

I told them about Saint Francis, how he was on his deathbed and singing joyously because he was so filled with joy. One of Francis’ fellow monks, Brother Elias, was overly concerned with the proprieties. He felt that it would be more seemly for a person to be sad and grave when they die. So he scolded Francis for singing. (laughs) And Francis said, “Oh, Brother Elias, but everything is so beautiful!” – even though he was blind at that point and couldn’t actually see.

The children understood the story, but then a little boy said, “Do you mean that when I go to my mother’s funeral, I have to be joyful?”

I said, “Absolutely not!” And we talked about the human heart, and how our feelings, too, are very real.

The point is, children will demand that kind of thoroughness and realness, and if you don’t give it to them they’ll feel poorly served, and they’ll tune you out.

So we make time to address these questions in our classrooms, and not gloss them over because we’re hell-bent on keeping up with some fixed-in-stone, government-mandated curriculum schedule.

We make it a point to pursue those conversations. It can be challenging to explain to parents and educators why it's so terribly important, but it comes down to our basic philosophy, which says that if you support and engage the whole child in the learning process, heart, soul, and mind, it creates tremendous enthusiasm for learning. We find that being authentic in this way contributes tremendously to the children's academic success, which is a major concern our parents have.

Q: Reading the news about high school students who've become alienated and shot up their schools, one wonders if their rose-colored glasses were ripped away. They weren't taught to nurture their dreams and deal with life's big questions in a realistic and positive way.

Helen: A classroom is as complex as the most complex relationship, multiplied by however many kids are in the class. And we're never simply "delivering a curriculum," because we're always addressing a number of very individual young people. It's why we absolutely need to very carefully develop a rapport between the teacher and the child. When you consider that there are many individual learning styles and learning disabilities and differences in temperament and intelligence, you can see that it's a multi-layered process.

The *science* of teaching is about knowing how to explain the various components of knowledge. But the *art* of teaching is about knowing how to do it in an individual, detailed, and creatively choreographed way that evokes enthusiasm and joy. If a teacher with little experience walked into one of our classrooms, they wouldn't understand what they were seeing.

I walked into a classroom yesterday morning and found a little girl with tears streaming down her face. She tends to cry a lot, so you don't always want to take it too seriously. But she was upset because she'd gotten braces and they were hurting her. Also, somebody had

put yogurt in her lunch, and she hates yogurt, so she was mourning that she didn't have a good lunch. She was really crying, and I took one look at her, and I knew that the proper way to help her was to acknowledge her feelings but not get involved in a way that would encourage her to fall deeper into negativity.

So I acknowledged her feelings, and I said, "Did you know that it's Gary's birthday?" Because she loves birthdays. I said, "You've been busy making a birthday gift for him, haven't you? And it's not finished, right? Why don't you work on that?"

The tears stopped immediately, and for the rest of the day she was fine. But do you know how much time and energy went into that simple interaction with the student? There were many, many times when I had to figure out why she tended to do such-and-such, and why so-and-so worked for her. And that's how we develop a deep, intuitive awareness of what will help each child break free of negativity and find a positive sense of engagement and enthusiasm and meaning.

It's very, very complex. With that little girl, I happened to hit the nail on the head. But some days you won't find the "nail" right away, because you haven't known the student very long, and you don't know how to work with them.

Q: You're dealing with the children as whole people, and not just brains to be filled with facts?

Helen: Oh, yes. They are just as much people as we are, but they aren't able to hide their feelings as well as we can. So their feelings tend to be laid out there for you to look at, and then you can figure out how to help them.

Q: Does relating to the children on an individual basis help them avoid becoming disenchanted?

Helen: Imagine a school that teaches children how to be kind, and to understand that their enjoyment depends on others'

enjoyment, and where no child, to a person, would ever be able to say, "Somebody picked on me and nobody helped."

That's our culture. It isn't as if the children in our school are saints. They're normal kids, and they can get into it with each other. But because our culture is so well-defined, and we're all very clear about our values, these things are addressed immediately, as soon as they occur. If a child says something sarcastic to another child, we don't dismiss it as insignificant and something to be brushed aside. "Get over it, Johnny!" We consider it an opportunity for both children to learn: the one child to learn to be more kind, the other perhaps to learn to assert himself.

Q: Are these the things that nurture a child from inside, so that he or she doesn't feel isolated or lonely?

Helen: Yes. There's a sense of family that extends from the kernel of the classroom outward to the whole school. It doesn't stop at the classroom door – it plays out on the playground, and between the children and the teachers outside the classroom.

Our children feel comfortable with us. They approach us, not as peers, because there's a definite level of respect, but they are not uneasy around us. They aren't put off by our authority or our roles, because they have a good sense of themselves, and they know that we have their best interests at heart.

When the children feel good about themselves, and they feel that their teachers are accessible, you have a situation where almost anything can be worked out. But if there's a group of kids who feel closed off, alienated, and marginalized, that's where you get the problems with depression, rejection, and meaninglessness.

Q: Let me bore you with a research study, and then I'll ask my next question. ABCNEWS.com on April 1, 2001 reported a nationwide survey of more than 15,000 teenagers conducted by the California-based Institute of Ethics. Of those teenagers, 21 percent of the high-school boys and 15 percent of the middle-school boys

had taken a weapon to school at least once in the past year. Sixty percent of the high school boys and 31 percent of the middle-school boys said they could get a gun if they wanted to. And 16 percent of the high school students admitted to having been drunk at school.

It's amazing how many kids have violence in their backgrounds, and it seems that the kids who end up shooting up their schools are just the tip of the iceberg. There's a huge consciousness of violence in the schools.

Helen: There's also a culture of exclusion, and it's really at the heart of the problem. In middle and high schools, belonging to an in-group is assumed to be important, and no one is combating this completely false consciousness. But it's tremendously harmful to children, to have all this fear and anxiety around superficial things like status, and whether you're a jock or a geek or a rich kid or a gangbanger. Only in a culture where there's a generosity of heart can children blossom. And you're extremely unlikely to find it in any kind of structure that is hierarchical and compartmentalized.

To a surprising extent, you even find it among the teachers and administrators. I've heard the high school faculty lounge described as "the snake pit."

Someone told me that they're creating state and federal grants and funds to combat bullies in school. He said the governor of Colorado, acting through the state department of education, has outlawed the game of tag.

Q: Hurrah for hyper-rationalism.

Helen: Really, the solutions will never come by legislating them or thinking about them in lofty isolation. Because they're a matter of the heart. In our school, we assume that every child is perfect in his or her soul, and that the children need our help to manifest that perfection in the way their individual soul wants to. And that kind of progress isn't something you can measure with numbers. But if you can do it, the rewards are great. When you nurture children

individually, you create human racehorses who are confident and competent and happy in their academics, relationships, and life.

We look for the beauty of the individual child, even the most difficult. We're with them constantly, so we're able to see the glimmers of light behind the mask. You know it's there, and it's a question of bringing it out.

Q: It seems you have a unified understanding of what children should get out of school. If there's a keynote of the school, what would you say it is?

Helen: Again, my first impulse is to say "joy." But joy comes when you decide to take some very practical steps, and you work hard at them. For example, one of our school rules says that joy happens when we "choose happiness and practice kindness."

Now, this is a very practical rule, because it's easy to verify in our lives. We all know how it feels to choose to be happy and treat others with kindness. It's a simple, practical principle that wise people of all ages have taught. But they never said it would be easy!

We're very real in the way we guide the students. Maybe things aren't going well in your life all the time. So you have to choose to come at your life from a point of inner joy. That's the essence of our teaching.

Again, it's working with the human reality and the inner reality, because they are not separate. "We are our aspirations." But we need to build our dreams on a realistic foundation. A child can feel overwhelmed by a mood, but they'll be lifted by the other students who are managing to stay centered in attitudes of kindness, compassion, and happiness that are the core of the school culture.

We've recently had a cascade of kids who've gotten braces, complete with side effects, from cut gums, to headaches, to being unable to think, and not wanting to be at school.

They don't feel well, but they want to be good. And do you know what the class does? They pray for everybody who has braces.

We do healing prayers for them in the morning, and honestly, you can see the impact it has on the kids. Even if it doesn't take the pain away, they have an incredibly powerful sense of friendship and support from their classmates, and it transforms their day.

A little boy said to me the other day, "Helen, can we say a prayer for my sister? She's coming in on the plane." So we stopped in the middle of the lesson and said a prayer, because it was an okay thing to do.

It's one small thing, but when you multiply it by the countless other small positive things that happen, it adds up. A child can't figure out how to double-space on the computer, and someone will walk over and say, "I know how." They don't have to ask the teacher, because they know it's acceptable to help each other.

Q: You encourage them to help each other with schoolwork?

Helen: It's accepted, and we give them the freedom to act on it. When everybody's operating from that point of view – "I want to choose happiness, I want to be kind." – nobody has to take control in a rigid way that stifles their individuality.

7. ADDRESSING THE BEST IN EACH CHILD

By Living Wisdom School director Helen Purcell.

(Originally published in [*Clarity Magazine*](#).)



Photo: Each child has unique strengths. Understanding the child as an individual is the first step toward helping the child express their strong points. Thus the child acquires the confidence to face new challenges.

A mother visited our school recently to decide if it would be the best choice for her child. After walking around the school for several hours observing, she said, “Every private school in the San Francisco Bay Area promises to help children develop in body, mind, and spirit. They all promise to create moral, ethical people and to work with the students’ emotional and social challenges. But you’re the only school that seems to be doing it.”

It was probably an exaggeration, because I know of other schools that are making a genuine effort to develop well-rounded students. But I believe she had touched upon a unique quality of Living Wisdom School.

One of our parents was a professional educational psychologist who specialized in assessing children with learning challenges.

He told me, “I visit all the schools in the area to test the kids and talk to the teachers. I believe your school is providing the best learning environment.”

She couldn’t put her finger on exactly what it was about our school that inspired her, but she told me that she clearly saw the results. She saw happy children who were growing in every area of their lives, physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, academically, and spiritually.

I led a tour of the school for a group of prospective parents. One young woman asked me several unusually penetrating questions about important issues in early childhood education.

Later, after the other parents left, she said, “I have a confession – I’m not a parent. I’m really a spy!”

She laughed and explained that she was working on her doctoral dissertation in education and child psychology, and as part of her research she was visiting all of the schools in the area.

She said, “I knew this place was different from the moment I stepped on the grounds. But I didn’t know exactly why until I’d spent several hours watching the kids. Your kids smile a lot. They’re laughing. They’re exuding joy, and it’s something you just don’t find in other schools.”

What was it about our school that inspired these people? I believe it was a quality that lies at the heart of what we’re doing.

Our fundamental premise is that the purpose of life is to give children the mental, emotional, and spiritual skills that will enable them to experience increasing happiness and avoid suffering.

More deeply, we believe that, beneath the child’s body, mind, and personality, their deepest inner nature is the joy of their soul.

Our job is not to “fix” children

When I talk to parents who are thinking about enrolling their children at Living Wisdom School, I tell them, “What we’re doing

may appear to be routine classroom-based education, but it is a radical approach that will challenge your traditional notions about child-raising and education.

“It’s radical because we’re addressing the *original goodness* in children. And because we do that, the entire educational experience becomes positive and affirmative.”

We accept that the children who come to our school are souls. They are expressions of a divinity who carry within themselves the soul’s native perfection. Our job is therefore not to tinker with them in a superficial way – to “fix” their minds, or “prepare them for the new global economy,” or even to focus too narrowly on their academic success –although these things all happen in our school, very often spectacularly. But our main job is to give the children the tools that will enable them to express their unique gifts, and build on those strengths to succeed in their own unique way.

To accomplish that, we’ve had to redefine education in terms of the deepest goal of life, which as I said earlier, is to help them find happiness in every area: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

We’ve had forty years of experience with this approach, and it has more than amply proved its worth. The proof is that the children thrive under Education for Life.

I’ll share just one of innumerable examples. A boy came to us from a private school with a reputation for its high-powered academic focus. The emphasis was entirely on getting the students admitted to a premier high school and university, so that they could land a premier job and make lots of money, with the assumption was that they would then be happy.

But research tells us that this is a false equation. Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage*, found in his studies of Harvard students and business managers that the most successful were happy *before* they were successful, and that it gave them a tremendous

advantage that contributed greatly to their success. He eventually found that it was true also in every area of our lives, including our relationships – that the ability to know how to be happy contributes tremendously to our ability to achieve and succeed.

The general assumption has always been that the accumulation of money and prestige will bring us happiness. But Achor found that the opposite is true – that happiness brings success in its wake.

We see too many highly educated professionals who are still waiting for happiness to show up in their personal and professional lives. They've achieved the dream, but the dream has let them down.

The wise teachers of all ages tell us that the point of life is to find genuine, enduring happiness. And with that goal in mind, in our school we refuse to impose on children the false equation that happiness comes with outward success.

Instead, we get to know the children as they are, on a deep level, and we support them in finding success in their own way. It doesn't mean that we neglect their areas of weakness. It means that we never define the child by those weaknesses, as academically oriented schools can do.

I mentioned the boy who came to us from a school with a reputation as an academic pressure cooker. He had difficulties in several academic areas, but we quickly realized that he was exceptionally gifted, but just not in ordinary ways.

At our initial conference with his parents, it quickly became clear that they were entirely focused on his deficiencies. They described how he was failing in this and that, and all of their attention was on the problems, not on finding solutions.

I finally interrupted and said, "What do you see as his strengths?"

They slowly began to delineate them. But the solutions they suggested were all within the paradigm of what would work best for him when he entered college.

I knew that this boy's talents lay outside the standard academic conventions. He had a tremendous artistic sensibility that was very verbally advanced and profoundly comic. He had an amazing talent for making people laugh. We decided to work with his strengths, and see how it might empower him to correct his academic weaknesses.

We supported him in expressing his unique talents, and we give him a stage – within reason! And in the end he came into his own in the academic fields that he had formerly found so challenging.

The story has a sequel: this boy was accepted at Stanford, where he thrived in a very demanding, highly competitive academic environment.

When I help these people, I'm happy

A student in our school joined her classmates on a service trip to a San Francisco shelter that serves meals to the homeless.

The shelter's philosophy is to remind the guests of our shared humanity. The homeless are honored at a weekly sit-down dinner featuring multiple courses, all served by volunteers.

This girl was inclined toward a pessimistic outlook – her glass was always half-empty.

After serving at the shelter one night, she told her teacher, "My parents are trying to talk me into therapy, but I tell them that all I need to do is come here and help. When I'm helping these people, I don't even think about myself, and I'm really happy."

When the teacher shared the story with me, I thought, "There's no way in the world we could have taught her that lesson in the classroom, because she needed to experience it for herself."

This is a very large part of Education for Life. It's about giving children experiences that enable them to understand the thoughts, feelings, and actions that will give them the greatest happiness.

Teaching meditation

Meditation is a central practice in our school. The children see the fruits of daily meditation modeled by the teachers. And once they get a sense of the calmness, concentration, and joy of meditation in others, most of them want to experience it for themselves.

We start by helping the children experience how our breathing patterns affect our emotions. When a child becomes hyper-excited or emotionally upset, we show them how to calm their breathing, as a very powerful way to calm their hearts and minds.

Before they take a big test, play an important game, or rehearse their part in the annual school play, we teach them to calm their minds and focus their attention. These simple practices are tools that will serve them well throughout their school years and career.

An academic track record

The number-one question that parents have asked us over the years is: “I know this is a magical school, but the magic stops at fifth grade, doesn’t it? And then we have to get really serious about academics. We have to prepare the children for high school and the *real* world.”

My standard response is to tell the parents about our student’s forty-year record of academic success.

We’ve existed long enough to observe the careers of our graduates through high school, college, and careers. And the record shows very clearly that when a child is affirmed at the soul level, academic excellence and personal success naturally follow.

Our graduates who take the national entrance exams for private high schools score on average above the ninetieth percentile. Students with exceptional academic ability routinely test in the top first and second percentiles nationally.

Bringing the whole child into the learning process – body, heart, will, mind, and soul – is the best way to create highly motivated,

energized, enthusiastic, happy students. It helps the academically gifted child make the most of his or her gifts, and it helps the more academically challenged find their strengths and leverage them for success in academics and life.

Students with learning challenges leave Living Wisdom School with their self-worth enhanced and as accomplished artists, technical talents, athletes, and writers. Admissions officers at the Bay Area's premier private schools comment that our graduates are sublimely well-prepared for the challenges of a tough academic high school curriculum. Many of them call to tell us how impressed they are by our students, as independent thinkers who are poised, self-possessed, mature, positive, thoughtful, energetic, and creative.

Living Wisdom School is academically rigorous, but not in the same way as schools where academics are the *only* focus.

A parent remarked to me, "When my child entered Living Wisdom School, I was upset because I thought the kids weren't getting enough homework. Then I realized that my son was, in fact, doing *three hours* of homework every night, but he was so happy about it that I hadn't noticed."

Our teachers have discovered that *revolutionary* success becomes possible when the school's priorities are in the right place, putting the child's all-around well-being above everything else.

8. ACADEMICS AT LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL

A conversation with LWS director Helen Purcell



Photo: Science teacher Doug Andrews has the kids excited about biology.

Helen talks with parents about how we approach academics at Living Wisdom School.

Helen: Parents often ask us about “academic rigor” at Living Wisdom School. And I have to admit that when I hear those words, I think of “rigor mortis.”

Public and private schools generally try to measure academic rigor with standardized tests. And when colleges and universities evaluate applicants, they give high value to the child’s grade point average and how many advanced placement (AP) classes the student has taken in high school. Parents also judge a school’s academic rigor by the caliber of the high schools that have accepted its graduates.

A better approach to “rigor”

Parents’ concern with rigor connects to the idea that everything a school does should support the next step in the child’s education. Thus, in elementary school the curriculum should be planned so that child will be accepted by a prestigious high school, and high schools are expected to prepare students for acceptance by top-tier universities.

At Living Wisdom School, we take a very different approach.

First, we don’t give letter grades, which immediately knocks us out of the discussion of grade-point averages. Yet our graduates are accepted by the Bay Area’s finest high schools, where they do very well. They succeed in college, and they graduate and become successful adults.

Children’s confidence in their ability to overcome academic challenges grows by experiencing success in their daily classroom work. Our approach at LWS is far more helpful to a student’s academic success in math, science, and language arts than “studying to the test,” which promotes fact-cramming at the expense of gaining a deep, thorough understanding of concepts and problem-solving approaches, while taking into account the children’s learning styles and abilities.



We resist the notions of academic rigor that most other schools subscribe to – in fact, we do not want those concepts to enter into our thinking, because they are not focused on the learning process, and on developing the students’ ability to learn, and they can actually do great harm to the learning process.

Let’s imagine that you’re an elementary school student, and your teacher announces that you’ll have to take a test. You study for the test, and you focus on second-guessing the teacher so that you’ll do

well. Your teacher has told you the coursework that you'll be tested on, so you focus your efforts on learning those concepts. And that's where the learning stops. It's about learning just enough to pass the test, but not about becoming truly intelligent in the field of study.

Standardized tests or a “learning conversation” – which gets better results?

We give tests on a regular basis, and we continually measure our students' academic progress. But the motivation for learning that our teachers work hard to cultivate in the students is *intrinsic*. What this means is that we want our students to learn to approach their studies with an attitude that continually asks: “What's *exciting* about this?” “What's *wonderful* about this?” “How is this *useful*?” “How does it connect with *something else we know*? How great will I feel when I master this subject and truly understand it?”



Photo: The LWS year-end ceremony. A fourth-grader receives his “quality,” honoring a personal strength such as courage, creativity, humor, etc., in which he has made progress during the school year.

In our classrooms, there's a rich conversation about learning, and I have to say that it's rare in other schools.

I've been a teacher for more than forty years. I've taught in public schools, and at every level from second grade to graduate school. Over the years, I've become acutely aware of what's happening in education. I've kept up with the latest trends, and I have many friends and relatives who teach in public schools and share their experiences with me.

The popularity of standardized testing, and the idea that “hard numbers” are the best way to measure learning have brought about

an unfortunate tightness and rigidity in the curriculum. My teacher friends tell me, “My principal wants us to be on this page in the history book on this day.” That’s how stringent the state-mandated public school curriculum has become. And the teachers tell me that they are extremely limited and hamstrung in their ability give children an in-depth education in math, science, and the humanities.

Gary McSweeney (LWS middle school teacher): I read about a teacher in Palo Alto recently who quit her job after thirty-plus years in the public school system because she was no longer allowed to teach her kindergarten children about butterflies, and because she was no longer permitted to let them play.

The school authorities were imposing whiteboards and technology on the kindergartners, and for a while she tried to work within the system. But then she decided that she could not in good conscience continue to teach in that system, because she felt it was severely short-changing the students.



Photo: Constant, daily, personal help from the teachers and other students helps the children at Living Wisdom School relax, laugh, and find the inspiration in a rigorous curriculum that emphasizes concepts instead of isolated facts.

When she quit, several parents of students in her classes came to talk with us. They were deeply upset that Palo Alto had lost this wonderful teacher because the system insisted on imposing its will on every moment of her time in the classroom. Here was a fine teacher who quit because she was forced to meet the rigid state testing standards, in a school culture that had decided to stop letting the kindergartners be children.

Helen: Our school is infused with a philosophy that allows spontaneity and encourages it as a key part of learning. It allows children to go much deeper into a subject, and as a result they learn more, retain more, and they learn how to learn, with the indispensable benefits of enthusiasm and delight.

When testing and learning collide

Classroom teachers have described the California public school curriculum standards as “a mile wide and an inch deep.”

At Living Wisdom School, we aren’t interested in forcing kids to plow through a long textbook simply to ensure that when they take a test at the end of the semester, they’ll score seventy percent or higher.

We want our kids to be involved in the wonder and joy of learning. We want kids who are eager to come to school. We want them to be able to go home and have an intelligent conversation with their parents about what’s happening at school and what they’re learning, where they’ll have something genuine and enthusiastic to share.

If a child resists talking about school at the end of the day, we want the parents to be able to look at a portfolio of the child’s work and realize how deeply engaged they are in something wonderful and valuable, something that will support them at every step of their personal journey.

Later, I’ll say more about our system of portfolio assessment, because it’s an important alternative to standardized testing, and it’s much more engaging and productive of genuine learning than simply taking a test, getting a grade, and forgetting what you’ve memorized.

We’re interested in a curriculum that gives the child a love of learning and develops their ability to learn. We offer a curriculum that is rich and relevant because it makes learning alive and fun.

To make such a curriculum work, the teacher needs to be fresh. You cannot be glued to a mandated lesson plan that you've taught for five years.

A parent told me about a school where they have a full-time advisor whose sole purpose is to develop the curriculum. There's nothing wrong with that, as long as it doesn't prevent the classroom teachers from fluidly adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of the students sitting in front of them.

Can students be standardized?

Is it possible to standardize a group of people and get the best out of them?

As I look at you, I see that you are all very different and unique. And when I speak to you, I see that you are filtering my thoughts in unique ways.

Why is this? Because your personality, circumstances, character, and concerns are completely individual. And when I look at a group of children, I see a group of unique individuals with unique needs.

I *never* come into a class without a lesson plan, but I know that I can never assume that I'll be able to stick rigidly to my plan. After forty years of teaching, I wouldn't dream of "winging it," because I always have a plan. But I'm free to wing it in this learning environment – to go slightly off-topic if it's what will help the children.

As a teacher, you spend a great deal of time thinking about your lesson plan. You prepare it and get excited about it. But the moment you come face to face with the students, you have to be able to say "Aha, these students are itching to look at this side of the subject today, and it's a very valid way to get into the lesson and help them learn." So you start adjusting the plan.



Photo: Learning that is dry and boring bears little fruit. True academic accomplishment is born of enthusiasm arising from intense, focused concentration on concepts. Helen teaches a language arts class at LWS.

If a child asks a thoughtful question, the teacher must be free to deviate from the curriculum and follow the energy. You talk straightforwardly with the students and make a connection with the part of the curriculum that's bringing out their curiosity and enthusiasm. Then another student chimes in, and all of a sudden you have an incredibly valuable dialogue with depth and breadth, always guided by the teacher, but where the teacher isn't standing there with one eye on the clock and the other on the book.

The curriculum straitjacket

A prescribed curriculum puts the teacher in a straitjacket. That approach doesn't work nearly as well as when the teacher has the freedom to tune in to the individual student and utilize the opportunities that occur in the moment, and to mine those moments for all they're worth.

True learning doesn't happen by memorizing the nuts-and-bolts of the curriculum. It happens when you ask big questions about the subject and invite the children to relate to them in their own authentic way.



Photo: Academics start early at LWS. Learning is a long-term project, with the students challenged to move forward at their own pace. The long view allows the teachers to gradually turn weaknesses into strengths.

Parents sometimes ask me, “Helen, how can you teach a language arts class with sixth, seventh, and eighth graders?”

They imagine it must be difficult, but it’s really a piece of cake. It doesn’t bother me in the least that the sixth graders don’t know as much as the seventh or eighth graders, and it doesn’t bother me if a sixth grader knows more than the eighth graders. And the reason is that we don’t look at our students as hierarchical groups sorted by age. We look at them as groups of individuals.

When you standardize the curriculum, you risk losing sight of the child’s individuality, including their unique motivation, enthusiasm, and abilities. They respond joyfully to the curriculum when they feel seen, heard, cared for, and supported, each in their own way.

A child is a person first, a student second

I know it’s a cliché to say that every child has unique needs. But it isn’t a cliché when it comes to finding out the best way to teach each child.

I have a student in language arts who slouches and tries to hide behind the person in front of him. Now, it’s my job to notice that – not to embarrass him, but to find the moments when a flicker crosses his face that tells me he has something to say. He probably won’t say it unless I ask him a question and start a conversation.



Photo: Erica helps a student learn a new word. Even in second grade, the emphasis is not “pass or fail” but “succeed in small ways every day, and you’ll succeed in big ways often.”

Another student never volunteers, but she's *always* thinking, and I know she's the one who'll give a deep answer if I take the time to notice her – "Would you mind telling us what you think?"

There's no pat formula for this kind of learning conversation – you can't standardize it, but it is very rich and effective.

How LWS creates great teachers

Parent: Can you tell us how you coach other teachers?

Helen: In a school such as ours, with such a unique classroom philosophy, it's essential that the teacher be in tune with what we're doing.

We call our philosophy Education for Life, and it informs how we relate to every student, and how we adjust the curriculum for each child.

In a nutshell, we choose our faculty by evaluating how deeply the teacher is in tune with our approach. (See Chapter 15, "How Living Wisdom School Trains Teachers.")

Our school's philosophy is built on happiness and success

The core of our philosophy is that we help children understand how to be successful and happy, as opposed to a curriculum that just drills them endlessly and can risk setting them up for learning difficulties, conflict, burnout, and failure.

I've interviewed prospective teachers who had impressive resumes and held state credentials and had many years of experience in other systems, but who could not make the leap to what we're doing.

In contrast, there are people who may not have an advanced degree or decades of experience, but who instinctively "get" what Education for Life is about.

An excellent example is Craig Kellogg, who started teaching fourth grade several years ago.

Craig didn't have a lot of classroom teaching experience, so he started out as a full-time intern for a year, mentored by a very experienced teacher. Equally important, we all realized that he had a deep attunement with our philosophy. It was clear in the way he was able to form bonds with the students and understand their needs and guide them accordingly. He has become a wonderful full-time fourth-grade teacher.

9. MATURITY AND THE QUALITIES AWARD CEREMONY

By LWS director Helen Purcell

In *Education for Life*, our founder writes: “A growing child requires faith almost as much as he requires air to breathe.”

One of our highest priorities at Living Wisdom School is to give our students faith in life, faith in themselves, and faith in their future. We are upbeat, optimistic, and affirmative, and yet we have our feet planted firmly on the ground.

We teach what we call “success attitudes.” We are upbeat, but authentically so. We don’t link our philosophy to the self-esteem movement, which has students repeat lots of affirmations that generally have little connection to reality. Proponents of the self-esteem movement believe that if you tell children how good they are, and repeat it often enough, they’ll gain faith in their goodness and express it. But we feel that it’s an insult to the child’s uniqueness, and that it neglects their needs, which are always unique and individual.

In our school, we’re extremely interested in creating moments when the child can experience a success, whether large or small. We notice when they’re trying hard, and when they’re being mature, and we foster it with encouragement and enthusiasm.

They love to receive that kind of genuine earned attention, because they know that it is real. It isn’t a vapid statement about a goodness that the teacher imagines for them. We’re encouraging the children to build on the real successes that they achieve. They are highly motivated to replicate those success experiences that are so internally rewarding.

True education is a long-term affair

We often talk about “helping children express their best.” But we have to accept that achieving their best isn’t something they will achieve overnight.

It’s a long process, and we don’t chop the curriculum into small bits where we test them and tell them they’ve “passed” or “failed.” Instead, we guide each child through the curriculum at their own speed, with a focus on making it a series of success experiences at every step of the way.



Photo: Middle-school teacher Gary McSweeney helps a student. The teachers get to know each student’s personal and academic strengths, so that they can adjust the curriculum to help the student progress at their own pace.

When the children feel that we’re acting in their long-term best interests, they’re able to relax and be themselves, instead of forcing themselves to conform to some image that the teacher is holding out to them. And when they feel relaxed and free to be themselves, they are able to immerse themselves in the moment with creativity and focus. Instead of being nervous and stressed and forced to conform to a mold, they can apply their complete energy and creativity to overcoming challenges and accomplishing satisfying goals, without fear of soul-crushing criticism.

Early lessons in maturity

The author of *Education for Life* describes maturity as “the ability to relate to realities other than one’s own.” It’s a simple formula that implies a great deal about the best kind of education.

Before we can relate to realities outside our own, we must have a firm sense of who we are. We must be able to stand strong in our own reality and learn to expand and embrace other realities.



Photo: Did you have this much poise and maturity when you were five years old?

This is a basic principle for success in many areas, including schoolwork, relationships, science, sports, and running a business. And learning it at a young age gives us a tremendous advantage.

When we know how to behave with self-control, we’re able to give others the space to be themselves, and to understand them. Self-control helps us avoid getting lost in our own emotions and remain open enough to understand them. It’s a skill that’s rare among adults, and in our school the students start learning it on the day they enter kindergarten.

It’s why we devote great energy to helping each child develop a sense of their self-worth. When children have self-confidence, they will surprise us by what they can achieve.

This is evident than in the speeches the children give at the end of the school year. Each child stands up before an audience of more than two hundred parents, relatives, and students and talks about the quality that the teachers have chosen to celebrate in them.

I wonder how many of us could have walked on stage when we were five years old and spoken to a large audience with poise and confidence.

Learning and self-worth go hand in hand

In her graduation speech last year, eighth grader Mariah Stewart said, “I used to be afraid of everything. I was even afraid to get up in front of the class and give little presentations, and now I’m not afraid of anything or anybody.”

A child’s sense of self-worth is deeply related to their ability to learn. Children who are strong and confident are more free to accept difficult challenges in learning, and they aren’t threatened by the fact that mistakes are a natural and inevitable part of the process.



Photo: Young children are not “learning machines,” as some contemporary educational methods seem to imply.

You cannot divorce a child’s inner life and attitudes from the curriculum.

When the children give their year-end speeches, all of them, without exception, demonstrate a maturity born of inner strength and an expanded heart. It’s evident even in the short speeches of the kindergarteners.

Let me describe how the “Qualities” ceremony works.

A kindergarten teacher gives her student the quality of Friendship. Well in advance of the award ceremony, she talks with the child about what friendship means, and why she has received the

quality. The teacher may explain that friendship is about being able to extend our hearts to others.

Once the teacher feels that the child understands her quality, and that she has truly appreciated it in herself, she knows that the child is ready to give her speech with understanding and enthusiasm. After sharing and celebrating this deeply personal value with two hundred people, she will remember it for the rest of her life.

When my daughter was twenty-one, I pulled out her old school projects and Qualities certificates and put them in a scrapbook. When she opened the book and saw her Qualities awards, she was so excited. She said, “Mom, I never forgot this! I remember it so clearly!”

In our school we want each child to be so aware of their strengths that they will always be working enthusiastically at the outer edges of their growth.

LWS builds on what each child *can do*, instead of filling them with a dread of failure

We don’t ask children to do things they aren’t prepared for. We celebrate what they *can* do. The qualities we give them at the end of the year reflect the successes they’ve achieved.



Photo: The students of Living Wisdom School learn personal skills of “absorption with enthusiasm,” calm mental concentration, and a joyous approach to solving problems and learning new things.

For example, a child might spend the entire school year working on two or three important attitudes. We’ve given qualities of Courage, Clear Thinking, Artistic Expression, Perseverance,

Independent Thinking, Self-Confidence and Poise in Performance, Humor, Sincerity, Vitality, Luminosity, and Artistic Imagination, to name a few.

The quality a child receives is not chosen by a single teacher. The faculty choose the qualities together, because a special feature of our school is that every teacher gets to know every child.

The child's teacher will suggest a quality, and another teacher might say, "Oh, but I had this interaction with him, and it makes me wonder if this quality would be good for him, too."

The Qualities meeting is one of our best faculty get-togethers, because we are focusing on the best in each child, and the progress they've made.

Last year, a new student entered our school as a fourth grader. For young children, entering a new school is a major challenge. But he adapted wonderfully, and we decided to honor him with the quality of Courage.

Our commitment to noticing, supporting, encouraging, and celebrating each child's strengths and helping them develop positive personal faith in themselves translates as academic success in many powerful ways. (You can watch videos of the Qualities ceremony on the LWS website: www.livingwisdomschool.org.)

Every child can succeed

When I taught in a big public high school, I was assigned to teach two senior language arts classes. The first class was advanced placement, and the second was the lowest-level English class.

I walked into the low-level English class, and one of the girls let out a big sigh and exclaimed, "Ugh – I'm gonna flunk again!"

I said, "No! You are not! This is senior year, and we're going to do something different."

The kids had been subjected to four years of relentless affirmation that they were stupid, and I decided it was time to challenge their self-image.

I said, “I’m teaching AP English down the hall, and I’m going to teach you the same curriculum.”

They were terrified!

“No! We can’t do it!”

I said, “Yes, you can!”



Photo: Gary McSweeney helps a special-needs student with guidance and encouragement. At LWS, the student-teacher ratio of 9 to 1 means the teachers are free to truly educate each child, and not simply cram their heads with quickly forgotten facts.

And we did. We read Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Chaucer. They wrote a modern prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* – in verse! And they had fun.

Instead of framing every assignment as pass-fail or tagging them with a judgmental grade, we took one small step at a time, while supporting each other along the way.

I said, “You can re-write your essays as many times as it takes, until you and I are both happy.” And they were amazed. It was a novel idea that they could work on something until they liked it and were satisfied and felt successful.

At the end of the semester, I gave them individual qualities that were beautifully inscribed on elaborate certificates, just as we do at Living Wisdom School. And, as I mentioned earlier, I vividly

remember one girl's reaction. She said, "This can't be true. You're giving us these qualities, and they're all positive!"

It couldn't be true, because the old system was based on noticing what was wrong, and what a person *couldn't* do, and judging them by how far they were falling short.

And just think what that would mean to you as a young person. If you define people in terms of what they *can't* do, it's bound to become their self-image. And when you believe you can't do something, you will never try.

In middle school at LWS, we challenge the old paradigm the same way I did with those high schoolers in Oregon. I'll step aside now, and let Gary, our middle school teacher, tell how he and the math aides react when a student gets something wrong on a test.

At LWS, learning continues after the test

Gary: We grade the test and give them their scores, then Eric and I will sit with them and go through every single problem they got wrong. We'll make sure they understand the concepts and how to do the math. We work with them individually on every single concept until they get it right.



Photo: School director Helen helps a student in language arts. Individual attention is a constant, defining feature of academics at Living Wisdom School.

We set up the tests so that sixty percent of the questions are a review of concepts that they've already learned and been tested on. So they're continually reviewing concepts, and when they graduate

they're really, really solid in math, because they haven't skipped along the surface, just taking tests for a grade.

We see the results when they graduate and enter high school. For example, Mariah Stewart "tested out" on the high school math entrance exam.

Helen: What does that mean, "testing out"?

Gary: The high schools recognize that an A grade in one elementary school isn't the same as an A in another, so they test the entering students to find out what level of math they've actually achieved. The high schools ask for recommendations from Eric and me, but the students still have to take the placement test.

Mariah tested out of Algebra I. She didn't finish the geometry book at LWS, but the high school entrance exam proctor asked if she would like to take the geometry test, and she said, "Sure." She tested out of geometry, and she was placed in Algebra II and Trig as a high school freshman.

Now, because Mariah and her mom are very conscientious, she's working on geometry over the summer so she'll be solid when school starts in the fall.

In public school, there's a tendency for students to want to "just get through the course." But our four middle school math teachers – Richard, Eric, Leslie, and I – stress content, understanding, and mastery. It's why Percy finished the geometry book in eighth grade and tested out of geometry as a high school freshman.

Kieran had an entrance appointment at Mid-Peninsula High School, a highly regarded private school in Menlo Park. The interviewer spent two-and-a-half hours talking with him one-on-one, and after the interview she told Percy's father, "He's really solid in math." The children get a solid education here, and they really know the content.

We're fortunate to be able to interface with the top high schools while we're helping our students prepare for the transition. This fall,

I'll give a class for the middle schoolers where I'll introduce them to the high school entry process, so they'll be aware of the entrance requirements at each school and how to submit their applications and transcripts.

10. CRASH AND BURN — A TWISTED PICTURE OF SUCCESS

A conversation with LWS director Helen Purcell and middle school teacher Gary McSweeney

Gary: A local newspaper, the *Palo Alto Weekly*, printed an article recently by a girl who had been student body president at Palo Alto High School in her senior year.

It was based on her graduation speech, where she explained how she had played four sports, achieved a 4.0 grade-point average, and received early acceptance at Stanford, and how she had hit a wall at the end of her senior year.

She described how she stayed home for three weeks toward the end of the year because she was crying uncontrollably all the time. She had pushed herself so hard that she simply broke down.

When she dropped out, the other kids teased her, “You got early acceptance, so you stopped coming to school.” But she explained that she’d become thoroughly burned-out and depressed because she had pushed so hard that she collapsed. She advised high school kids to lead a balanced life, and she said she planned to take a year off before entering Stanford.

Balance is crucial for a child’s mental and emotional health. The stresses kids feel to succeed today are *not* healthy. The young girl who wrote the article learned an important life lesson. But as I read the article, I was thinking that no child at Living Wisdom School would ever have to learn about balance in such a harsh and brutal way.

Four false notions about academic rigor

Helen: Let me address several myths about academic rigor that I suspect contributed to that young girl's collapse.

1. The first myth is that homework is a measure of academic rigor. In fact, it very much depends on the homework. If it's purely rote memorization, we really have to ask how valuable it will be for the student in the long term.



Photo: Freedom from stress is not incompatible with academic excellence. The students at LWS find freedom from external pressures by learning to enjoy their studies, through constant support, step-by-step learning, and individual adaptation of the curriculum.

Does rote memorization develop the child's learning skills, or their ability to think clearly and creatively? Or is it a mechanical, passionless exercise that's no more meaningful than sharpening a pencil?

Homework is a fact of life, and our kids learn to handle it. But the amount that's given to the kindergarteners today in many schools is difficult to fathom. We need to ask *why*, and whether it's being given under the false assumption that quantity can ever truly replace quality.

2. A second, similar myth is that academic rigor equates with "doing more" – that is, giving the students more subject matter in every lesson, more books to read, and more writing assignments.

But this is demonstrably not true, once again because quantity has very little to do with quality, and with developing the abilities that will enable the child to be successful in high school, college, and life.

3. “Rigor isn’t for everyone.” This is a myth that many people believe. They mistakenly think there are special people who have a special ability to do anything that’s rigorous, demanding, challenging, and deep, and that other people can’t do it. But this is completely false. While there are exceptional individuals in every field, we believe, and we’ve routinely proved, that every single student is capable of receiving a rigorous education.

4. “Providing support decreases academic rigor.” This is part of the current myth that forcing children to “tough it out” on their own will develop their ability to “adapt and survive.”

But quite the opposite is true. When Gary, Eric, Leslie, and Richard teach math, all four of them are working with the students in the classroom at the same time. In this way, they offer the students a tremendous amount of support. And when I return the students’ writing assignments in my language arts classes, I do the same – I give them a ton of personal instruction and feedback and encouragement.

A study hall that works

Gary: In middle school, we offer an after-school study hall for two hours, three days a week. The students can roam about and relax, but the agreement is that they’re working on homework. The kids and parents appreciate it, because it means that by 5 o’clock the students are done with their homework, and they can come home and have dinner and spend time with their family without the stress of homework looming in the background.

The after-school homework club has been a very, very successful, eye-opening program. The kids will take a wide spectrum of approaches to finishing their homework. Some will sit for two hours solid and work in silence, and others are naturally more social and gregarious, and they may need some guidance to remember that they’re here for a purpose, and the purpose is homework. (laughs)



Photo: Students work together on an assignment. The culture at LWS encourages the children to help each other — it's a system where everyone wins.

But it's fun, and the kids love it. It's a great thing for them, because it gives them structure, and all of the necessary resources — computers, textbooks, a teacher to answer their questions, and other students for companionship and help.

Plus, they get tons of support and feedback. “What’s that concept, again?” And someone will explain it. “No — Helen said she wanted the first draft tomorrow.” So it’s gentle support.

One of our parents told us that some of the younger kids will come around to her place after school and do their homework together. She said she was impressed, because even the little boys are very straightforward about it — “We’ve got to do our homework.” She said they’ll say, “Let’s sit together,” even if they aren’t doing the same lesson. They’ll be spelling different words, and they’ll quiz each other. It’s all very self-motivated, and she loves it.



Photo: Two boys help each other with homework. Few adults educated in traditional schools remember their learning years as fun. At LWS, many factors contribute to awaken the children's love of learning. As a

result, scenes like this are common.

Helen: The idea of “self-motivation” is key. It’s a fundamental principle of Education for Life that you can never force a child to

learn, but you can make it so enticing, magnetic and engaging that they want to learn.

We are “invitational.” Gary doesn’t have to stand over the students with a frown on his face and a ruler in his hand during study hall. You develop a curriculum that gets them excited and engaged. (For evidence, you can watch [videos of students presenting their science fair exhibits.](#))

On the topic of children as individuals, there’s a book that has greatly influenced my teaching. It’s called *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, by Howard Gardner, a Harvard professor of cognition and education.

Gardner has shown that people have unique and different strengths – our common sense tells us it’s so, but he gives hard evidence that our uniqueness is wired into our brains.

He isolated seven “intelligences” that are neurologically independent of each other, and he’s since added others.

The first intelligences he talks about are linguistic and mathematical/logical. They are the intelligences that the SATs and STAR tests are designed to measure. They’re essentially the rational-linguistic intelligences that run our society today.

The other intelligences that Gardner researched include musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence.

When I read Gardner’s book for the first time, I thought, “I’ll try this in the classroom.” It’s one of the beauties of LWS that if something strikes us as valid, and if it’s compatible with our philosophy, we’re free to apply it. If you’re grounded in the philosophy and what makes it exciting for the children, you can choose any methods that will help them.

I talked with the children about multiple intelligences, and they immediately recognized the truth of it. They found it very freeing, because they realized, “I don’t have to be intelligent in every way. I have my own way of being intelligent.”

Nobody has all of the intelligences perfectly integrated and balanced. As Gardner says, we have unique personal strengths for interfacing with the world, and we can piggy-back our less-developed intelligences onto our main strengths.

It's a wonderful insight for teachers and parents who want to understand the child's unique strengths, and how to help them build upon them.

LWS encourages children to “lead with their strengths”

At LWS, we ask, “What are this child's strengths? How can we help them use those strengths to develop in other areas?”

Gary and Eric do this constantly in their math and science classes. For example, if a child's strengths are in language, they'll choose a textbook that's more linguistically oriented.

Gary: You get to know the children so well that you end up individualizing every child's curriculum in math, based on the child's special strengths, and then you help them use their strengths to start developing their weaker areas.

For example, you might change the problems for a time, to allow them to exercise their strengths and build confidence. Once they're comfortable with that approach, you can bring it into the regular curriculum and challenge them with the problems that would formerly stump them.

We can't overemphasize the importance of building a relationship with the student. When they're open to what you're saying to them, you can help them learn much more effectively. With kids who've recently entered our school, I'll sometimes notice that they are holding their shoulders high and tight in math class. After a few months, you see their shoulders relax, because the teachers aren't taking a pass-fail approach but they're coming over and saying, “Can I help you?”

Helen: Some of our kindergarteners already know how to read when they enter our school, but others can't. Now, do you force them all into the same curriculum? No, you give them what they need, and by the time they reach third grade they're reading beautifully, except in very rare cases.



Photo: Former math teacher Dharmaraj Iyer graduated from MIT. Highly educated teachers know the value of imparting their enthusiasm to young students.

You're calibrating the lessons continually, and you're making time for every student, arranging the curriculum so they feel good about what they're doing, because they're having success experiences and *understanding* what they're doing and not simply memorizing everything and spitting it back. And that's when they become happily engaged and enjoy working at their own farthest edges academically.

Another book that's central to our approach is [*Authentic Assessment*](#). The Authentic Assessment process gives students, parents, and teachers a much more accurate gauge of each student's academic progress than testing.

Do the children take tests at LWS?

So, yes, certainly we give tests, and we give them often, because we need to be sure that when they leave eighth grade, they'll know how to take multiple-choice tests, matching tests, short ID tests, and long essay tests. We give them those experiences to ensure that when they enter high school they won't be at a loss when they're confronted with midterms and finals.

The students take tests all the way through Living Wisdom School – spelling tests, history tests, math tests, language arts tests, and science tests.

Testing is a way to measure learning, but it's the way we test that makes a major difference.

I remember taking tests in high school where we were asked to spit out information that we were expected to memorize word for word. Once I passed the test, I quickly forgot what I'd memorized. There was nothing I could take from the test that would make me a better student, person, or learner.

When we create an objective test, we are *very* careful to construct questions that are meaningful, relevant, and fun. (Humor is an amazing tool for learning.) Then we assess the results with a focus on helping the student grow and achieve their best.

Testing or assessment — which produces the best gains?

To truly assess a student's progress, you need to observe the student as a person, and not just as a mathematician, writer, scientist, or artist.

During the school year, we have three conferences with each child's parents. The conferences are a wonderful way to create a very important partnership.

There's a rich dialogue with the parents. The teacher might ask, "What are you saying to the child at home?" Or a parent will tell us something about the child that we couldn't see at school.

"He was really upset about this." "He was so stressed-out about that." And as soon as we know it, we take action to address what's happening with the child.

The core feature of the parent-teacher conference is the portfolio. Throughout the school year, we collect samples of the child's work in an accordion folder. In language arts, I'll ask the students to keep every draft of everything they write, because I want

them to see the stages of their writing, and I want to sit down with the parents and show them the trajectory of the child's improvement.

Portfolio assessment avoids the fuzziness of letter grades. What does it really mean to get an A, B, or C? Did the child actually learn something? Did they improve their ability to learn? Did they become enthusiastic and self-motivated to continue to learn? Or did they simply study to the test and forget most of the facts they've crammed?

Years ago, researchers asked a group of teachers to grade the same packet of essays. The grades ranged from 99% to 2%. Several months later, they asked the same teachers to grade the same essays, and some of the teachers who had given A's now gave F's, completely reversing their grades!

The study verified the meaninglessness of traditional grading, when the grades are assigned subjectively.

We want our students to develop abilities that extend beyond anything we can measure with a letter grade.



Photo: The Living Wisdom School Science Fair is held in a beautiful outdoor setting in June. Children who develop exceptional strengths in one dimension are generally better equipped to succeed in other dimensions as well.

We want them to look at their own work and see how far they've come. At the end of the year, I'll insist that they put several pieces in their portfolio that I've judged as their best – the work that shows they can write an essay, exercise higher-level thinking, be creative, and engage the reader. When they leave eighth grade, they'll have two or three fat portfolios of their best work.

You can review many of the students' language arts portfolio selections in our LWS [literary magazine](#). If you read it from start to

finish, I think you'll see that the arc of development is mind-boggling.

If you give children wonderful curriculum opportunities, where the teachers are in continual communication, developing and sharing ideas, you get a level of learning that is deep, engaging, creative, and enduring.

It gives the students experiences that they will never forget, because it goes far beyond the shallow results of "studying to the test." It prepares the children for the challenges of high school, and the greater challenges of a university education.

I meet with the teachers on Friday to discuss how we can bring our philosophy into our teaching practices. We read and discuss graduate-level books on education that have inspired us, and that are compatible with Education for Life. We are careful to choose books that will help us help the children in the classroom.

Our first-grade teacher leads another weekly meeting for the primary teachers to address issues specific to grades K-5.

We call the all-teachers meeting a *practicum*, because it's focused on specific issues that come up at ground level in our daily classroom teaching.

We may talk about classroom management, or issues that have come up with specific students. It's a wonderful opportunity for the interns and new teachers to learn from the teachers who have a great deal more experience.

Our teachers receive training and continuing education that is exceptional for its range and frequency. It demands a very high level of dedication and energy from us all, because we feel that teaching is much more than a "job" – it's a calling and a mission.

We are creating a new template for education, which we hope will spread beyond our school to benefit children everywhere.

11. CHOOSING THE RIGHT SCHOOL: A TEACHER'S SUGGESTIONS

By Robert Freeman, public school teacher and private school parent



Robert Freeman is a history and economics teacher in the Mountain View-Los Altos Union High School District.

Choosing the right school for your child may be one of the most important choices you'll make for his or her future. It is surprising, therefore, that so few tools are available to help.

Many parents simply cede the decision to convenience or cost: they send their child to the local public school. And in most cases, this is more than adequate. Ritualized hysteria notwithstanding, most of our public schools are very good.

However, for parents who choose not to go with their local public school, choosing a private school can be confusing or even overwhelming.

As a public school teacher with two children in private school, I believe there is a fairly simple method for determining which school is right for your child.

I call it "The Embodiment Test."

The Embodiment Test directs that you should choose the school that best “embodies” those character traits you want your children to develop. Its efficacy rests on three foundations.

First, *character is more important than knowledge* in determining the ultimate success of your child.

Second, *character cannot be conveyed by teaching, only by modeling.*

And third, *once character is set, it is very difficult to change.*

Let’s look at these foundations and how they play out in choosing a school.

Most parents will readily understand the idea that character is more important than knowledge. It is character that parents are inculcating when they remind their child, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” But while multiplication tables fall to mechanical repetition, developing character is not nearly so easy or routine. This is why nobility of character is so much more rare – and prized – than mathematical dexterity.

A child with strong character – embracing honesty, discipline, compassion, perseverance, and self-respect – will find the way to whatever knowledge he or she desires or needs. The reverse, unfortunately, is not always true: knowledge without character is at best impotent, and at worst, malevolent.

The second foundation is equally important: *character cannot be conveyed by teaching alone* (though it can be reinforced). It can only be conveyed by “modeling.” It is not what I say that speaks to the child, it is what I do.

This is the same as in parenting, isn’t it? If I am an engaged teacher, interested in each student’s welfare, curious about the world, passionate about my subject, and embodying integrity and dignity in my actions, the children will see it. They will know it, they will esteem it, and they will do all they can to emulate it. It is not so much what I teach that they learn, it is what I *am*.

Once set, character is difficult to change. This increases the urgency of the other two rules. Weak or conflicted character becomes its own worst enemy. Rather than searching within him- or herself for the solution to difficulties, the child with weak character will blame the world.

With these foundations, how should parents apply them in evaluating a school for their children? At this point, the process is fairly simple, although not necessarily easy. First, decide on what kind of character traits you want your children to develop. Then look to see how different schools “embody” these traits – how they manifest in the behavior of the teachers, administrators, students, and parents.

Observe the teachers for more than just a few minutes. Spend a few hours.

Look beneath their credentials and degrees. Do they *embody* the kind of character you want your child to be tutored in? Do they honor the individuality of each child? Are they passionate about teaching – holding it as a calling? And is their passion reinforced in the larger context of a guiding philosophy, administration, and community?

Talk with parents who have children at the school. Why did they choose this school? What is working for them and their children? What is not? What is it like to work with the administration? Are they the kind of people you want to work with on a PTA committee? That is, as parents, do they *embody* values and aspirations for their children that are similar to yours? This is important.

And, of course, observe the students. Are they happy (not just playful) on the playground? Do they appear to be able to resolve problems on their own? Do they show confidence in expressing their individuality? Do they exhibit competence in the classroom – no matter what grade they’re in? Do they show patience in their studies – a certainty, borne first of faith and only later of experience, that the world *will* yield rewards for their diligent explorations?

These are the true tests of a school: does it help you deliver the kind of “whole” child you’ve intended to raise? For, make no mistake, it really does “take a village” – an entire school – to educate a child well. And it is only a “whole” child that is happy, successful, and fulfilled.

Information? Knowledge? Intellect? These are, of course, critical in today’s competitive world. No sane parent or teacher would overlook them. But they are the easiest things to teach and measure. The deeper elements of character are more elusive, harder to cultivate: How do you discern good information from bad? What knowledge do you aspire to? How can you use your intellect *wisely*?

These are the components of a good education that will stand the test of time. They will enable your child to adapt to the tumultuous, frenetically changing world that we live in. These are the foundations of true happiness, of true attainment, of true meaning for a life well lived.

Private schools are private businesses. They all want your patronage. Most have genuinely good intentions for your child, and most are genuinely able to impart the basics of a good education. But they all embody the elements of character in different measures and proportions. This is precisely their virtue, their strength, and their appeal to demanding parents and deserving children.

Know what is really important to you. Know how to find it. Maintain your own high standards. And your children will do well.

12. CREATING A CARING COMMUNITY AT SCHOOL

Michael S. Katz, PhD, professor of philosophy and education at San Jose State, has written extensively on childhood development and ethics in education. He received his doctorate from Stanford University. Prof. Katz spoke at a breakfast for Living Wisdom School parents and teachers.



I would like to thank Helen for inviting me to speak with you about my impressions of Living Wisdom School and its relationship to the area I am most interested in as a philosopher of education, namely the ethical development of children. That is to say, the development of their ethical sensibilities and their social and moral character, and their capacity as persons to treat others well and to live satisfying, fulfilling lives as social persons.

This is what I have been thinking and writing about since 1983, when I taught my first course in the ethics of education at the University of Nebraska.

I come here also as a former teacher and a friend of Living Wisdom School, a truly remarkable school that deserves all of our support, and our full appreciation for what it has become: a caring community that embraces the visionary ideal that students can grow creatively, spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually by being allowed to exercise their minds fully and develop their personalities freely in a family-type environment, one that prizes their individuality, nurtures their spirituality, and honors their common humanity as persons.

My son broke a rule

I'll start with a personal anecdote. I'm a parent, married for 35 years with two beautiful grown children and a gorgeous 14-month-old grandchild, Gabriella.

In my second academic position, I found myself in Omaha, Nebraska, where my five-year-old son, Alan, was about to enter kindergarten.

We had placed Alan in a Montessori school when he was three, and it went fine until he was four and brought cookies to school on his birthday. He apparently broke a school rule about not "sitting on the line," and his punishment was that he was not allowed to have any of his own cookies when they were distributed.

This seemed very harsh indeed, a clear case where rules were elevated to a higher place than persons and their feelings.

My son was emotionally and spiritually crushed by this simple misjudgment, and it called into question for us the practical wisdom of the school's leaders and teachers.

Parents depend mightily on the wisdom of teachers and their sensitivity to respond appropriately to our children in all their complexity.

This is not to say that we adults aren't entitled to make mistakes in judgment. We all do, even the wisest of us, but our relationships with our children's teachers must be based on a thoroughgoing level of trust that they will act regularly and systematically with the best interests of our children at heart.

Our trust in their wisdom, their caring attitudes, and their ability to know what our children need in order to grow and flourish must be built slowly over time. It can also be easily destroyed by a single case of poor judgment, or a single case of remarkable insensitivity.

This is what happened with our son at his Montessori school. When he turned four, we did not put him back in the school but placed him in a preschool at the Jewish community center. We then

had the painful experience of watching him in the classroom through a one-way mirror and noticing that he had no friends, interacted with virtually none of the other children during playtime, and looked rather sad and forlorn.

We made good efforts to overcome his social isolation by inviting kids over to the house. And, little by little, our son seemed to relax and make friends at school.

Kindergarten boot camp

Then it was time to go to kindergarten. There were few alternatives to the public schools, but we wanted to consider all of the options.

My precocious little son had already developed his own strong point of view. At one point, he summarily told us, “I want to go to the Millard Public Schools. I am five, and I think I know what is best for my own education.”

Be careful about cultivating the intellects of your little children! Here was our little five-year-old existentialist son telling us to keep our noses out of his educational affairs because he could make his own rational decisions.

The problem was that he had no idea what kind of kindergarten he would find himself part of in the Millard Public Schools.

He had a kindergarten teacher who ran her class like a sergeant in a U.S. Marine boot camp. She suffered no disobedience, and she showed little warmth toward my son. At one point, when he coughed, she reminded him that there “were better ways to get the attention of an adult than coughing.”

Before receiving his first report card, he told me that his kindergarten teacher had not once spoken to him as a person outside the formal class setting, and that she had showed no interest in him or what he paid attention to.

The teacher and I talked on the phone, and I indicated that Alan seemed to have little interest in school. She listened, told me that he did not participate much, and we hung up.

Three weeks later, we got Alan's first report card. It consisted of four pages of items, and there wasn't a single thing on the report card that was positive – just a lot of “satisfactory” checks and a few “unsatisfactories.” No indication of who he was as an individual with a rich private world and an active imagination of his own, someone who loved to be read to and was very warm and affectionate with his parents.

We asked for a parent-teacher conference, and unsurprisingly, the school organized the conference the same way the western settlers organized their camps. They circled their wagons in full defense against an attack by the Native Americans whose land they were stealing.

The principal was there, along with the school psychologist, the teacher, and us.

When I informed them that my son had indicated that his teacher had shown no personal interest in him and had had no conversations with him outside of class, this was categorically denied.

“I show an interest in all of my children,” the teacher flatly stated. (No examples, of course.)

When I indicated that he seemed to have no interest in school, I was told that he would “do better if he showed interest.”

The dialogue was absolutely useless. No strategies were suggested for improving my son's attitude. We were made to look like we were the bad guys for questioning how the school experience was affecting our son. And all of the blame was laid at his feet.

When I informed my son that his teacher had said that he would do better if he would show more interest in his classroom activities, he looked at me incredulously and said, “What am I supposed to do, Dad – pretend that I'm interested when I am not?”

Words of wisdom from a five-year-old! But that is what alienated, high-achieving kids learn to do in public schools – pretend to be interested, when they are not.

Establishing a private school

Toward the end of the academic year, I was invited to help start a private Jewish day school. I threw myself into the project, not because I was particularly interested in my son's Jewish identity – we had not even joined a synagogue in Omaha and were one of the few families who had not done so.

But I was *completely* committed to not having first grade be a repeat of kindergarten for my son. I wanted him to love school, to love learning, and to be excited about going to school.

So we established our private Jewish day school, and the first thing we did was to steal one of the most creative, wonderful teachers in Omaha, a woman named Lucille Saunders who had over forty years of teaching experience in five or six states, and who was an ex-nun who believed in the freedom and creativity of the British primary schools. She had taught at a Catholic School where they paid her about \$12,500 a year, and we increased her salary by something like \$1,500 and gave her complete autonomy in setting up her kindergarten and first grade.

We opened with twelve or thirteen kids, and there were five kids in my son's first-grade class.

Now, I must say one thing. Had I not experienced firsthand my son's painful kindergarten experience, there is no way I would ever have done such a rash thing in 1980.

Forming a private school with almost no funding is a prescription for migraine headaches. For starters, every parent who is involved wants to run the school, and no one knows the first thing about developing and building a quality school.

The lines of authority between the teachers, administrator (if you are lucky enough to have one), and parents are blurred beyond belief. In short, it's a total mess.

So, when one finds a school like Living Wisdom School that has flourished for some time, I must say that it is a remarkable achievement. First of all, because building an effective private school from the ground up is an incredible achievement – as I well know.

I suspect that during the first three years of the Jewish Day School of Omaha, I put in an extra 20-25 hours a week. It was like holding down another full-time job, and psychologically it was filled with frustrations.

We had to get rid of our first two administrators, one of whom thankfully left and took another job, and the second of whom we had to fire. And that is just awful: to bring someone in to run your private school and then have to fire them because they cannot do the job well – it was painful stuff.

Living Wisdom School

Let me say some things about Living Wisdom School that most of you already know.

What I will say is not earthshaking. But I hope that some of it will hit home and awaken your sense of appreciation and gratitude for the great gift that you have been given with this school, with its remarkable culture, its talented, dedicated, creative teachers, and its splendid leadership.

First of all, a school is not composed merely of classes, teachers, and academic instruction, no matter how critical those are.

It is primarily a normative culture where the value commitments infuse the air that your children breathe, a culture that your students interact with every day, in ways that affect the cultivation of their habits, attitudes, and values.

A culture can be unified or fragmented, but one thing that a culture embodies, as you all know, is a way of life. The school culture is defined by its core beliefs and values, it is embodied in its most sacred rituals, it is lived by its members, and it is passed on by its adherents.

So, what makes the culture of the Living Wisdom School so special?

We can take the yearly play as an embodiment of the culture. What does the play tell us about the school? First of all, it speaks volumes about what the school represents symbolically. It represents a commitment to the creation of “a caring community.”

What is a caring community?

Let’s break this notion down into its two components: community and caring.

What is a community? For John Dewey, one of my favorite philosophers, a community is a group of people who are united by a set of core values and goals.

The community of Living Wisdom School is unified by its goals: the goal of fostering the creative spirit and creative impulses of each and every child, and the goal of helping each child learn how to get along and cooperate with his/her fellow classmates, and not just those in the same class, but also those older and younger in the school.

How inspiring it is to see a play where all of the children in the school are contributing at their fullest level of skill: reciting poems, enacting dialogue, playing multiple roles, singing, dancing, reciting, and acting – and doing so in creative unison to dramatize the life of an inspiring spiritual figure whose words and deeds embody the highest ideals of the human spirit.

My wife and I have been to only the last two plays, but there is an expression in Yiddish that summarizes how we felt as we watched

the plays – and, remember, we don’t have any children in the school. We don’t even know any of the children in the school.

The word that summarizes how we felt is “we *qvelled* when we watched this play.” To *qvell* is to be swollen with pride, to be filled up with joyful pride, filled up to the point of bursting with pleasure.

That is how we felt when my daughter was married, and the evening ceremony went like clockwork and she looked radiant in her wedding gown.

That is how we felt when we watched the kindergartners and first graders, second graders, third graders, all the way to the eighth graders, performing their parts.

There was a sense of wonderment and awe. *How could these kids do this?* Well, the answer is simple: they were directed, inspired, helped, guided, encouraged, and led by wonderful teachers, parents, and friends. They were allowed to do it, supported in doing it. And the result was a celebration of their creativity, and an embodiment of what a caring community can achieve when it commits itself totally.

So, a certain kind of community is a place that unifies two complementary features into one whole: a commitment to the welfare of the group, and a simultaneous commitment to the individuality of each person. Neither the group’s well-being nor the individual’s uniqueness is sacrificed to the other. And this requires a very special kind of wisdom on the part of the school’s leadership and all of the teachers. And all of you have seen this wisdom being practiced here virtually every day.

Caring

Now let me turn to the concept of caring.

A community is really the social expression of “caring.” But “caring” can also be conceived by understanding the idea of a “caring encounter” and a “caring relationship.”

The educational psychologist and philosopher Nel Noddings defines a “caring encounter” (something your children experience every day in this school) as having several critical dimensions.

The most important dimension is an openness to receive the other person as “a unique individual.”

When we care, we open ourselves up to accept and receive the other in his/her full “otherness,” in his/her full individuality. We accept and receive the other’s thoughts and feelings without critical judgment, because understanding and accepting the other is more important than judging him or her.

To be “cared for” in a caring encounter is to be fully received, fully accepted, and fully appreciated. It is to be validated in one’s essential humanness. It is to be affirmed in one’s basic value as a person with worth and dignity. There is no substitute for this kind of “caring” in the process of becoming a healthy person who can go on to live a flourishing life.

Before I began my efforts to establish a Jewish day school, I did not fully appreciate the role that caring teachers can play in a young person’s life.

I was worried above all about my son’s cognitive development. But it did not take long for me to see the light.

A child who is not cared for by his teacher is a child who suffers great pain, a child whose spirit can begin to shrivel, a child whose vulnerability is threatened.

One can make the analogy of a flower’s need for sunlight. A child who is not cared for is like a flower that does not receive enough sunlight, and withers as a consequence.

A child who is properly cared for is like a flower coming into bloom. So, be grateful that your children are having daily “caring encounters” in the Living Wisdom School. They are like flowers coming into bloom. Be thankful for that!

Caring relationships

Now, a caring relationship is something more than a “caring encounter,” or even a set of caring encounters.

It is exactly what it sounds like: a reciprocal relationship between the one caring and the one cared for.

I can only speak of the Living Wisdom School teachers I know best, but I’m sure that what I say applies to the others. I would experience not one iota of doubt in turning my children over to them for the several years that they are bringing up your children.

Why? Because every one of the children will be in a “caring relationship” with them. At the core of a caring relationship is one thing: a complete, unqualified dedication to the well-being of the one being cared for. I repeat: a complete, unqualified dedication to the well-being of the one being cared for.

How could one ask for more? But one gets even more with these remarkable persons. One gets the incredible compassion and wisdom that each of them brings to the task of nurturing your children’s growth.

One could conceivably be dedicated to the well-being of the other and still lack good judgment. Or one could lack inner psychological security, and so try to meet one’s needs through one’s students.



Photo: Mariah helps a fellow middle-school student understand a lesson at Living Wisdom School.

In my Ethics of Teaching unit for secondary teachers, I have them read a novel and see a film. The film is *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, with Maggie Smith in the starring role.

Miss Jean Brodie is “dedicated to her students,” but she doesn’t know how to care for them because her own narcissistic needs are too great, and her self-deception is too powerful. She does not want them to flourish as independent, creative spirits but seeks to make them over into little Miss Jean Brodie clones.

This is not what you want for your children. And what you get from these wonderful teachers and from others in the school is the cultivation of creative, caring children, children who are coming to understand, in powerful ways, what all students need to understand to become effective social persons: how to care for and appreciate their classmates, how to cooperate with them, how to work with them to produce something that is larger than themselves (for example, the fabulous school plays), and how to be the best person they can be.

Standardized tests in public schools

I want to conclude with a reminder of how special this school is, in light of what is going on in America’s K-12 schools today.

What is being talked about today in discussions about education?

“How do we improve students’ test scores?”

“How do we punish schools and teachers and administrators whose students do not perform well on these tests?”

In the present climate, if less than ninety-five percent of the kids show up for school, those schools are stigmatized.

Consider the vision of schooling that is embodied in this climate. Schooling is reduced to cognitive achievement. And cognitive achievement is reduced to scoring well on high-stakes tests.

Now, one does not want to diminish the importance of teaching kids to do well on pressurized tests. But is that *all* you want for your child’s growth as a young person?

Where is the cultivation of creativity, cultural understanding, and the capacity to care for others and relate productively with them?

Where is music, art, drama, and philosophy in these standardized tests and the paranoia surrounding their outcomes?

The public schools are now massively regulated, not by an ideal of developing an educated person but by what even the society at large considers intolerable: producing kids with diplomas who cannot read or do basic math.

This is why we are regulating the public schools to focus on test scores: because we are producing so many students whose diplomas do not represent even minimal achievement in literacy.

Conclusion

Compare two rituals. First, massive numbers of kids in California's public schools will be assembled next week to take their standardized tests.

Second, Living Wisdom School's community just dramatized the incredible life of a compassionate Chinese sage, after months of remarkable cooperative effort.

In which environment would a child flourish and develop his or her full human potential to live a joyful, creative life?

The answer, for me, is quite clear. Let's change the name around a bit and call it the "School of Living Wisdom" – a school that represents a precious, far too-uncelebrated accomplishment by dedicated, wise, caring teachers, inspired leadership, wonderful parental participation, and beautiful children.

I feel honored to speak with you this morning. I feel honored to be connected, however indirectly, to the School of Living Wisdom. And in turn, I marvel at its spirit, I embrace its visionary ideal, and I celebrate its remarkable accomplishments. I urge us all to spread the word on how special a place it really is. Thank you for listening.

Michael S. Katz Biography

Professor Michael S. Katz, Professor of Philosophy and Education at San Jose State University, teaches courses in applied

philosophy, including moral issues and the philosophy of education. His present area of research is the ethics of teaching.

Dr. Katz has served on the Executive Council of the San Jose State Senate, recently as chair of the policy committee on Professional Standards. He recently co-authored two articles with Dr. Michael Miller on democracy and academic governance, one of which was published as a chapter in the *NEA Almanac*. His most recent academic paper presentations have been on the topics of trust and trustworthiness in teacher-student relationships, and a philosophical analysis of the “right to an education.”

Dr. Katz received his B.A. from Amherst College, and an M.A. and Ph.D. (1974) from Stanford University. He is the author of over thirty articles in journals such as *Educational Theory*, *Interchange*, *The Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *The Journal of Teacher Education*, *Planning and Changing*, and *Philosophy of Education*.

He is the co-editor, with Nel Noddings and Kenneth Strike, of a recent book on ethics and education: *Justice and Caring: The Search for Common Ground in Education* (Teachers College Press, 1999).

Dr. Katz has also taught at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, San Francisco State University, Stanford University, and American University (Washington, D.C.), where he chaired the doctoral program in higher education.

He has served as Secretary/Treasurer of The Philosophy of Education Society of North America and the Executive Board of the Society. He also chairs an ad-hoc task force on the Ethics of Education for the Philosophy of Education Society. He presently serves on the editorial board for educational theory of a journal produced in England, the *Journal of Ethics and Education*.

13. INCLUSIVENESS TRAINING AT LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL

Eric Munro is a retired technology CEO who received his BS in electrical engineering from MIT. Both of Eric's sons attended LWS from kindergarten through eighth grade. His older son, Zachary, is now working toward his doctorate in Space Technology and Microgravity at the University of Bremen, Germany. Eric tells how inclusiveness training at LWS helped his boys.

At the annual LWS family campout, I sat by the campfire and watched my older son Zachary playing.

The man seated next to me said he'd been impressed to see Zachary playing Frisbee with the younger kids earlier in the day. He said, "he made sure everyone got a chance to play. I thought it was remarkable."



*Photo: Lucas and Zachary Munro
with Dad.*

Naturally, I felt some parental pride, but the feeling turned to gratitude for Living Wisdom School. I knew that Zachary's expansive heart wasn't solely a credit to my parenting skills, but that it was

developed most powerfully during the eight years he spent in the school.

Ever since my sons entered LWS many years ago, I've been aware that one of the most important influences the school has had on their lives is how it developed their sense of inclusiveness. As parents, it has made our lives much easier, and I'm sure it will help them in high school, college, and their adult lives.

Starting in kindergarten, the children at LWS learn to play and work together. They learn that it feels better to include others and not exclude anyone. The remarkable part is that these "rules" aren't enforced as rigid principles to be obeyed under threat of punishment. Instead, the teachers help the children realize that *they* are happiest when they expand their hearts to include the other students.

Three of the LWS "School Rules" tell the story. "Practice Kindness." "Be a loving friend." "Use your will to create good energy."

On the playground, the single most important rule is "You can't say 'You can't play.'"

How do the kids learn to practice these important life principles naturally, without adult nagging?

The first step is affirming the rules in the classroom. But what makes a far bigger impact is that the teachers model the rules constantly by their own behavior.

Recently, when I served as a volunteer during snack and lunch breaks. I was aware of the training the kids receive in inclusiveness and conflict resolution. But seeing it in action was amazing.

One day during snack time, two kindergarten girls got into a disagreement. When the teacher saw that one of the girls was crying, she sent all the other kids to another teacher's class and spent ten minutes leading the girls through a conflict resolution.

First, she had them take turns talking about what happened, and how they felt. As they talked, she made sure they looked into each other's eyes.

Then she said, "What is a way that you can both play with this toy that will make you both happy?"

After talking about it for a while, the girls arrived at a plan to share the toy. The teacher said, "Good! Then next time let's do that!"

Later in the day, I visited a public library where some small children were playing outside. Some of the kids were arguing, and one child was crying.

The teacher walked over and said, "Be nice to your friends!" And then she walked away.

I thought, "What a difference!" It struck me that the teacher's non-lesson would negatively affect the children's future development, their personalities, and the adults they would become.

No amount of verbal instructions can turn a person into a saint. But I'm struck by how much happier children are when they receive the direct, hands-on, experiential training in inclusiveness that LWS gives them.



Photo: Shubha tries to take the basketball away. Middle schoolers at recess, Living Wisdom School. (Teacher Eric Munro in background.)

I'm also struck by the maturity they show when relating to adults and each other, thanks to the guidance of the LWS teachers.

I've had several roles at LWS. I've been a parent, a classroom teacher, and a math and science volunteer. Being around the school for so long, I've often heard visitors and new parents remark, "There's such a strong feeling of camaraderie between the kids in this school!"

You can see it every day on the playground, especially among the children who've been at LWS for several years. This tells me that the LWS experience deepens that quality in them. An older child lifts a young one to help him shoot a basket. The older kids give the younger kids extra turns so they won't be excluded from a ballgame. Throughout the school, there's an awareness of other people's realities, and of the joy of helping.

The other day I eavesdropped on two fourth-graders, Shubha and Sam, who were organizing a "theater play" at lunchtime. They were talking to their classmates, and I overheard Shubha say, "This is how we can include everyone...."

No teacher was present and steering the conversation. It was just one of countless "wow!" moments at LWS.

My first *wow* happened when my older son was in second grade. His brother was in kindergarten, and my wife helped them make cards for their teachers. She suggested they tell the teacher something they were thankful for.

Zachary thought for a moment and said, "Thank you for helping us work out our problems on the playground." My younger son dictated the same message.

I was stunned. The previous summer, my older son had gotten into fights on the playground at his daycare camp. As punishment, the teachers made him sit on the bench at lunch. There was no instruction, no discussion, no individual guidance. It's questionable if anything was learned.

I'm aware how much energy it takes to "work out the kids' problems." It's easy to hope that the problems will simply go away, or to abruptly order the kids to "share and be nice."

In view of what I've seen at LWS, I think, "What a lost opportunity!"



Photo: Mariah lends a helping hand. Inclusiveness means being aware of others' realities. The impulse to help becomes a natural extension of the heart.

The LWS teachers are committed not only to *changing behaviors* but to helping children develop a more expansive outlook. And they're able to actually do it, day in and day out, because the teacher-student ratio is so low.

I've heard parents say, "This kind of schooling won't make my child strong enough for the real world. It's too nice!"

They would rather send their child to a school where their children can become "tough-minded" enough to deal with "real life."

As an LWS parent, I believe this is a tragic failure to grasp what it means for a child to achieve true maturity.

Parents don't realize that the ability to "play nice" demands character and inner strength. It's *much* easier to retreat into selfish behavior than it is to exert self-control and stretch one's awareness to include the other person's point of view.

The inclusiveness training that the children receive at LWS makes them strong. It gives them the ability to take positive action in the face of upset feelings and negative emotions – it's a skill that many adults lack. It gives them the maturity to be successful in life.

The most successful people in the workforce are those who can keep working positively despite upsets and setbacks, and who can work well with others and motivate people to work well together. The children at LWS begin to learn these lessons very actively at age five! Thus they become an integral part of who they are and how they behave.

Instead of becoming weak or “soft,” these kids acquire strengths that will give them a big competitive advantage over young people who only receive a traditional, academically focused education that’s conducted precariously in a “tough” environment.

Inclusiveness training is just one of the many techniques that help students develop their inner strengths at LWS. Here is a partial list of the others:

- “Energization exercises,” accompanied by powerful affirmations, such as: “I am positive! Energetic! Enthusiastic!”
- “Confidence stances” before their classmates (younger grades).
- “Rocks in the basket.”
- Learning the school rules and discussing them in class.
- Meditation.
- Circle time (includes songs and chanting).
- Ongoing group projects in the classroom.
- Presenting projects before the class.
- The annual all-school Theater Magic production – a professional-quality event performed to standing-room-only audiences, where every child in the school plays a role.
- Camping trips (middle school).
- Daily playground inclusiveness guidance.
- Annual end-of-year “Quality Speeches.”

The year-end speeches deserve special attention. Every student receives an award for a “quality” that they’ve worked on during the previous year. The student speaks to an audience of several hundred parents, teachers, and fellow students, explaining what the quality means to them personally.

The most important character-building element at LWS is the teachers who are carefully chosen and trained to serve as worthy role models for what it means to be a mature, well-adjusted, and happy human being.

These “tools and techniques of maturity” have a profound effect on the children, because they are applied very consistently in a genuine and natural way, every day in the classroom, at recess, and during sports and field trips.

When I think of the priceless gifts my kids received at LWS, I confess to feeling not a little jealous. I’m sure I would have enjoyed a happier childhood, found greater fulfillment as an adult, and been better able to understand and meet life’s challenges if I had attended LWS.

I believe that enrolling your child in LWS is the wisest, most valuable gift you can give them, for their school years and beyond.

14. EDUCATING MIDDLE SCHOOLERS AT LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL

**A conversation with LWS middle school teacher
Gary McSweeney**



Q: You spend a tremendous number of your waking hours with the middle school children at Living Wisdom School. What kind of relationship do you try to establish with them?

Gary: It's very individual. As a general rule, I try not to be "palsy-walsy" with them. I'm definitely an authority figure, because I'll have to ask them to do many things. But I do try to be friendly. I genuinely like kids, even though in middle school they can be a little exasperating at times. (laughs)

Q: Because they're starting to flex their independence?

Gary: Yes. In [*Education for Life*](#), which our school's philosophy is based on, J. Donald Walters describes the six-year stages of a child's growth. The years from 12 to 18 are what he calls the "Willful Years," when kids are establishing their sense of identity and developing their inner strength of will.

Q: Do you try to teach the middle schoolers about adult life, since it won't be long before they'll be getting ready to leave the nest?

Gary: To return to *Education for Life*, the teen years are a time when children need people they can look up to. They want heroes, and I'm not sure our culture is offering them enough people who meet that standard.

In our school, we introduce them to hero-figures early, primarily through our annual all-school play, where every child has a role. We've put on plays about Martin Luther King, Jr., Buddha, Christ, Krishna, the Dalai Lama, Moses, Joan of Arc, and many other great individuals.

When I work directly with the students, I try to give them a positive outlook on the future. I would love to see them never become cynical, so I try to inspire them with a sense of hope and optimism.

For example, we're currently doing a science unit about energy. They're researching alternative energy sources, including geothermal and solar, and they've heard all the bad news about global warming and climate change. You don't want to sugar-coat the news and pretend that everything is all right. But I like to give them something to be hopeful about, by pointing out the many ways the future is bright.

The media messages are all-pervading, especially through the Internet, and the kids are being bombarded with negative images. They hear about Darfur, and the extinction of species, hate crimes, war – it's endless. So I try to get them to be realistic, but hopeful and engaged in being part of the solution, as opposed to taking a passive approach where they're sitting there feeling increasingly hopeless.

Q: The school takes the middle schoolers on field trips. How do those trips fit into the school's philosophy?

Gary: We take them on lots of one-day outings, and three times a year we go away for a week. These experiences are absolutely pivotal. The first long trip is to Point Reyes, where my family has a

cabin. We go early in the year, when we're just getting to know one another.

The second trip is to a meditation retreat in the foothills of the Sierra, where we stay in cabins.

The third is generally a camping trip. This year, we'll probably go to Yosemite. It gives the students a chance to live in nature for a week, and it's an amazing adventure. It's less structured than the other trips, and for the kids who aren't experienced campers, it's an entirely new experience.

The learning that takes place on the trips is difficult to quantify, but it cannot be exaggerated.

My first goal is to help them be more aware, more conscious, and more responsible for themselves and each other. The field trips are laboratories for that kind of learning, which is an important ingredient of building their enthusiasm for learning in the classroom.

The longer field trips are modeled after the way a spiritual teacher would work with people. He'll work with each one individually, and encourage them to learn not just from his words but from their own experiences. The field trips are about learning to behave while being themselves, and having fun and being safe, and exploring and learning. We give them lots of freedom, but with very definite and clearly expressed boundaries.

We take them to amazing places and challenge them. We camp outdoors, fix our meals, and clean up. They have chores and responsibilities. At this point in the school year, they know what to expect, and they pitch in and help.

When you work with middle school kids, their learning needs to be *experiential*. It's much more difficult to get them to learn if you're just pushing words at them. You can't say, "Here's a book about a great person. Go home and read it, and we'll analyze why this person was great." In the teen years, kids are looking to have their own experiences and make up their own mind.

They also learn great lessons when you take them into new situations and let them learn for themselves. During our trips I give them tremendous freedom, but the major theme is harmony. Before anything else, they have to keep harmony. We set firm boundaries, and if there's friction the teachers will immediately step in. But otherwise it's very hands-off.

A high point of the middle school field trip is a "day of independence" when they're on their own. We give them a clear structure with basic rules: "Don't hurt yourself. Don't go past Bald Mountain." But we give them free time to go out and explore in small groups, and they love it at that age.

Again, it's experiential. They experience a freedom that comes with responsibility. Last year, they spent an entire day in silence. Or we might incorporate short periods of silence and reflection. We might visit Mirror Lake in the Tenaya Creek Valley at Yosemite and write poetry for an afternoon. Or we'll maintain silence from two to four and then we'll prepare dinner.

The idea is to build bonds that will carry over into the classroom. It also tells them a lot about the culture they'll be part of in school. The most basic thing we want them to learn is: "When your energy is right, and you're showing me that you're responsible, I'll give you more freedom." It's one of the most important lessons they need to learn before they can become adults in the truest meaning of the word.

They're at an age when they like to take risks – they like to climb rocks and do all kinds of things that challenge their will power. This year, we visited Malakoff Diggings, a big Gold Rush excavation near Nevada City. We joined the students and teachers from the local Living Wisdom School, and they decided to play a massive game of Capture the Flag in the diggings, which are a huge natural area to run around in. It was wonderful, and they had a great time.

Educating the whole child is a hundred-percent about energy. We try to guide their energy toward wholesome choices. At the same time, we give them freedom to make mistakes, but never to the point where they'll hurt themselves.

We want them to experience consequences. We take them out in nature, and maybe it's cold, and we'll let them experience what it's like to be responsible. "Oh, you forgot your jacket – we mentioned it to you three times at the campsite, but now you're on the hike and you forgot your jacket." Real-life consequences help them understand how important it is to be aware and responsible. It's one of the many reasons it's wonderful to take them out in nature. And it translates directly to the classroom, where they have to be aware of others, and help each other, and be supportive and responsible enough to help others and focus on the task at hand.

We're compassionate. We'll say, "You forgot your snack. Okay, have some of mine." And they'll say, "No, it's okay." But they're learning to face the consequences of their actions. "I said bring a snack, and now we're on the trail and there isn't a store in twenty miles, and you're going to miss a meal."

We never take it to the point of pain. They can learn a great deal without actually suffering. But it always has to be experiential, because there are some things they'll never understand if you're just talking at them or reading books. It's better when it's real life and they can try different attitudes and decide, "That didn't make me happy. I'll try something else next time."

In 2005, we took them to Tomales Bay when the weather forecast was predicting the worst storm in forty years.

In two days we had four inches of rain, with forty-mile-per-hour winds. The canoes were blowing off the beach, and it was one of our best field trips ever.

When they got home, it was six or eight months before they decided they'd had a great time. But the trip came up vividly in lots of

their year-end speeches, and that's because it was a real experience – the howling wind, the difficulty of tramping around in the rain, and how we all pitched in and helped each other.

The middle schoolers love the sweet taste of freedom, when they're in nature and facing new situations with their buddies. At that age, their friends are hugely important to them.

Q: Does giving them freedom to learn from their own experiences translate to the classroom?

Gary: It's very clear how much it helps when we're preparing our big all-school play.

The students learn about the life of a great soul such as Buddha, Christ, Krishna, Moses, Kwan Yin, Rumi, or St. Francis. As the play approaches, we dive into the history, art, culture, and philosophy of the period, and the teachings of the person who's the subject of the play. The students' lines are the actual words spoken by these great souls. So, again, it's a very experiential way of learning.

While we're preparing for the play, the students have many hours of instruction in acting their part, and a tremendous amount of support. But the bottom line is that, come performance, I won't be standing at their side, nor will our drama coach be there. So it's very real and experiential, and it's an intense learning experience. They have to draw on their inner strength to get through four performances with standing-room-only audiences of several hundred adults, teachers, and students and teachers from other schools.

It's important to point out that these are not your usual school plays. We consider drama an extremely helpful learning tool, because the students become deeply immersed in studying, writing, and talking about the historical period. But the plays have a very special added benefit, in that these are among the greatest people who ever lived.

They're people who did not choose an average life. St. Francis abandoned wealth to follow a higher path. Buddha abandoned wealth

and family. Christ went through great trials. The plays are about the tests and triumphs of great souls, and the guidelines that they've left us for leading a happy and successful life. And because they're acting out the parts, they aren't mentally learning this wisdom out of a book. They're experiencing it with their bodies and hearts and minds, in a way that they will remember for a long time.

In math and their other classroom subjects, we try to get them to dig deep within and do their best. And it takes time to develop a relationship where we can engage them that closely, where they're eager to do their best and have many success experiences.



Photo: Gary teaches middle school math.

It takes figuring out what works for each child. And this is a cornerstone of our school – that the focus is on the individual child.

To give an example: I was teaching math to the middle schoolers one day, and I said, “As a rule of thumb, we should do a half-hour of math homework every night.” I was laying out a broad guideline for all the children, because I thought it would accommodate those who could go faster and those who learned more slowly, if I gave them a fixed time to aim for.

Later, one of the mothers said, “I think my son would do better if you broke it down into a number of problems instead of a half-hour. For some reason, a half-hour isn't working for him.”

I calculated that if he did ten problems a day throughout the school year, he would be challenged but not overwhelmed. It worked amazingly well, because he would do ten problems come hell or high water. I would say, “You don't have to do ten problems tonight, because we had play practice today.” “No! No! I'm gonna do ten!”

You have to tune in to each child and figure out what works for them. That's the great bulk of what teaching here is about – finding what motivates each child for each subject. Then you have to work with their moods, and whatever they're going through in their lives. We've created an intense, wonderful environment where we can nurture and care for our kids.

An important part of the answer is to challenge them constantly on the level of their own energy, because that's what brings out the best in them. The field trips accomplish this, and the play does it, too. And in the normal course of the year in the classroom, we constantly challenge them to do better, at their level.

Each child comes to us with a unique set of issues. Are they strong in math? Will they ever be strong in math? Because, in the beginning, who knows? For lots of kids, math isn't their strongest suit, so you try to find ways to support them individually and help them be successful.

Some of our most inspiring success stories are about kids who never saw themselves as particularly good artists or mathematicians. At one point, we invited a world-class mathematician, Keith Devlin, to visit our school and talk to the kids. He's the "Math Guy" on NPR Radio. Our former math and science director, Dharmaraj Iyer, knew Keith and got him to come to our school. And the first thing he said to the kids was that he didn't like math in high school. It really meant nothing to him at all. But when he entered college and had to study biology, he realized that he needed to shore up his math skills, and that's when he got excited about it.

We all know people for whom school wasn't terribly relevant, but they were bright and achieved a great deal in their lives. Then there are people for whom academics come easily, but they aren't positive, strongly motivated people. At our school, we emphasize both – being a successful person and a successful student. We help the students cultivate expansive values such as kindness and

compassion, and we challenge them to put out energy in academics, whether the results are impressive right away or not.



Photo: Middle schoolers on a field trip at Tomales Bay.

The most important lessons we try to teach the kids involve putting out lots of energy. You'll have a child for whom academics are easy, but he isn't trying, and he's sitting next to a student who's trying hard but isn't getting it. Which student would you rather work with? You'd much rather work with the one who's trying.

You'll have kids who are solid in academics, and who may even be academic superstars, but there's something going on in the emotional side of the child's development – they're having trouble learning how to behave, or how to balance their intellect with the heart, and with compassionate feeling for others.

We work on both sides continually, and it's something that all our teachers do, because teaching, to a tremendous degree, is about working with the student's energy in this moment. It's why it can be hard to articulate the 'method' we practice. You end up saying, over and over, "It depends on the child. It depends on the situation." And it's true.

You can work with each child more effectively as you get to know them, and as you build a relationship with them. It can sometimes take a year or longer to develop the right bond, where they truly begin to trust you and let their guard down. It's about helping them find the energy in themselves to do what they set out to do, and it's about giving them lots of success experiences along the

way. Once they've had many positive experiences in their schoolwork, there's no question that they'll be motivated to work hard so they can have more of them, because they are enjoyable and fulfilling.

There's no simple formula that seems to work for every child. So it's much more about finding ways to support them individually, and keep it real.

A group of educators undertook a study where they asked first-graders, "How many of you are artists?" And every hand went up. But when they reached sixth grade, very few hands went up.

They had acquired too many limiting self-definitions — "I'm not good at math. I'm not good at art. I'm good in history." But we encourage the kids to put those definitions aside, because at age twelve, you don't really know what you're good at.

They need to have an inner experience of what you're trying to teach them. You can preach it at them verbally a thousand times, but until the knowing comes from inside, and they get some real success in math or art, it won't work. It has to be more than just words. What counts for them is having their own success experiences.



Photo: LWS middle schoolers enjoy a canoe outing on Tomales Bay.

So it takes building a relationship with them, where you can guide them into many success experiences. But the key is that you have to get their energy involved, so the learning becomes a direct, positive personal experience.

Q: In *Education for Life*, the author says that engaging children's feelings is a first step toward awakening their interest.

Gary: The best teachers can get children to feel enthusiastic about the subject. It's all depends on how you lay the groundwork for an assignment, or a field trip, or the annual play. When you can get them enthused, they'll put out a ton of energy, and then they can have a full personal experience of whatever they're doing or learning.

If you aren't putting out lots of energy, you aren't going to fully experience math, history, or literature. Shakespeare is wonderful, but if you aren't listening with attention and energy, he isn't going to be great for you. So you have to find ways to get the students to put out energy.

That's why the school play is so rich for the kids. When you're on stage acting the story of Martin Luther King, Jr., and you're playing the role of Sheriff Bull Connor, ordering the police to beat up black people, or you're acting the part of a black person who's getting beaten, it goes beyond a lecture. It goes beyond watching a video. It becomes "Oh, my God, that must have been terrible, to have fierce dogs charging at you. And look how Dr. King overcame that level of prejudice."

When history becomes alive in that moment of their lives, it's a turning point for the children. Then it becomes a question that's personally meaningful: "Why did Buddha give up a palace?" The plays use the words of great people from many traditions. So the children get a touch of that person's consciousness. "Wow, this was real to the person when they said it – this isn't just talk. They were speaking from their own experience." So they can experience that particular spark of divinity, a spark of the real purpose of life, and those very real answers to the question "What are we doing here in this life?"

Much of education today is about getting into a good high school so you can get into a good college and get a good job and then you'll be happy. It's all about financial security, and it's all posited on some future happiness.

J. Donald Walters starts *Education for Life* with a very basic question: “How do we define success?” Because when you talk about education, that’s really what you’re asking. And our definition of success at Living Wisdom School is that a student who might want to go the route of science or business or finance or the law should start off with a sense of their place in the world.

We’re trying to help kids feel that they belong in the world, and that there’s a context for what they’re doing and what they’re seeing all around them. I often think how crazy it is to grow up today. It was crazy enough when I grew up, witnessing the assassination of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Vietnam War, and riots in the streets. It was very unsettling for us as children. And now you’ve got terrible tragedies happening with frightening frequency. The senseless violence is crazy; and how are you going to make heads or tails of it, when you’re twelve?

Another concern I have is the influence of technology. A boy in my class was a very good student, but then he starting doing terrible work, turning in sloppy assignments, to a point where I thought he might actually be on drugs.

Later in the year, he pulled out of it. I said, “What happened?” I had a really good relationship with him – it was the third year I had him in my class, and now he had actually been rude to me for the first time.

I said, “What’s the story?” And he said, “Oh, I was addicted to a video game.” He was playing the game during all his waking hours. It was a very real addiction, every bit as harmful as a drug, without the slightest shadow of a doubt.

Q: Research has shown that watching TV or a video screen stimulates the back part of the brain. It’s why you can sit in front of the TV and zone-out for hours. The hours pass, and it’s time that you haven’t spent in the forebrain, where qualities such as ambition, concentration, planning, and perseverance are localized. Children’s

prefrontal cortices don't develop fully until their mid-twenties, and if you're spending all your free time in some other part of the brain, you're not developing essential tools of a mature adult.

Gary: I have a student who's addicted to computers. He's very bright, and he's into programming. You can see where it might work out very well for him as a career, but something is completely missing in the equation. The tech side is interesting, but it's in the forebrain where he would find real inspiration, or expansion of his awareness, by developing the "human tools" he'll need to be truly successful in whatever field he chooses.

"Clever" is held up as the highest goal in our culture today. Many kids who do well in school are actually just very clever. As far as I can see, it isn't the crying need of the world, to have more clever people. It's to have people who have tremendous energy and will power and a deep commitment to doing good.

It's the same with people who become true experts in any field. We brought in an expert in yoga who showed us various postures. I asked him, "How many hours a day do you work at this?" and he said, "Oh, about six."

A virtuoso violinist came to our school, and I asked her, "Oh, by the way, how many hours do you practice a day?" She said, "About six hours if I'm lucky. But I don't really see it as practice. I just love doing it!"

When these people come to our school and the kids see what they're like, whether they're artists, business executives, or engineers from Silicon Valley, the kids invariably see a model of being very bright, heart-oriented, forward-thinking, positive, cheerful, and expansive people. Success is inseparably tied to high energy and positive, optimistic attitudes, and being able to martial energy and keep your energy straight.

There's a magic in our school, but without the spiritual dimension, I don't think you can be truly happy, even if you're doing

wonderful things externally, such as designing software that will help people do their jobs. What if you suddenly get a brain aneurysm, or someone you love dies? And then there's the huge question of where they went. What happened to them? Where are they now?



Photo: A quiet moment during an LWS middle school field trip to Tomales Bay.

There's a wonderful scene in our Buddha play, where the young Buddha rides through the city in his father's chariot and sees suffering for the first time. "That person is sick? What do you mean, sick? Can that happen to me?" And then he sees someone who's growing old, and someone who's dying.

Our culture seems to think that you cannot answer these questions. "Oh, well, that's religion – that's way far over there." But, really, it's everyone's most fundamental question. And the answer is a matter of discovering the universal principles of life that apply to everyone, regardless of their creed.

We're arriving at a point where you no longer need to be dogmatic about your religious beliefs, and you can talk to kids very openly about these big, universal human questions.

Many people have said to me, "Private schools are selective, so you don't get the problems we have in public school." But that's just a bias born of ignorance of who we are and what we're doing. "All

the kids are wealthy, and all the kids are happy.” And all I say is, “If only!”

If you can give children hope, then you’re giving them a very great deal. Regardless of their native abilities, to give them hope and a sense of their place in the world is a priceless gift that will be of tremendous practical value to them.

Q: Do the students who’ve been at Living Wisdom School for a while help the others who are coming in?

Gary: We have a wonderful school culture, as far as accepting new kids and making them feel at home. When children leave elementary school and enter a public school with 1200 students, it’s a big shift for them, and some of them just don’t do well with the transition. So the kids who are new here appreciate our school, because of the contrast with these big, impersonal schools. And the kids who’ve been here longer are versed in how things are done, so they do help the newcomers.

I’m amazed at how kids will come into our school and how they’ll behave. Then I realize, “They aren’t used to Living Wisdom School; they’re acting the way they’re accustomed to.” They’ll tease the other kids, or they’ll be mean on the playground, and when I call them on it, I see the response in their eyes: “This is what we all do...” But I say, “I don’t know about other schools, but we don’t do it here.”

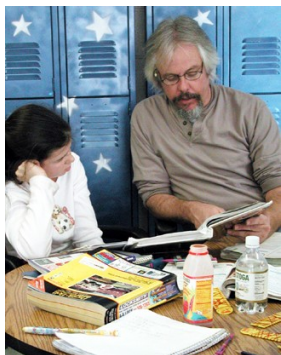


Photo: Gary helps a middle school student with a math assignment.

The older kids also help the newer kids by their personal example. Usually, there are one or two kids in the class that I can reliably count on. Hadley, right now, is dynamite. She can be very quiet and still set a strong example.

One girl, Rose, did eighth grade over,

because she wanted to spend an extra year in our school. Another girl stayed an extra year because she said she needed to get more mature before she went on to high school. Neither of these kids needed it from an academic standpoint – they weren't being held back, but it served them beautifully. One of them, Sinead, is now at UC Berkeley, and Rose is at The Bay School of San Francisco. But they intuitively knew that another year at our school would serve them.

Several years ago, we had a boy who just took to everything we offered – the academics, the spiritual side, everything, and he loved it all. We had him for a year until the family moved to Texas. His mom wrote us and said, “Elliot’s year at Living Wisdom was a godsend to him.” He’d been beaten up at a public school, to the point where they broke his collar bone, and the school administration brushed it off, saying, “Well, these things happen.”

When he came to us, and we heard about his history, we wondered, what will this kid be like? But he was wonderful, very engaged and bright and high-energy. Public school works for some kids, so it isn't an issue of black or white, but for a lot of kids, they die in that environment, and when they get to our school they feel like they're respected, and that they can be freer about their expression. Some kids just blossom in our school environment. It's so expansive for them, and it's so much more inclusive and broadening.

That's what we're trying to create, a place of inclusiveness, with an understanding of the whole picture of educating each child, and an expansive environment where the children have a chance to grow in all ways.

15. HOW LWS TRAINS TEACHERS

A conversation with LWS director Helen Purcell and middle-school teacher Gary McSweeney

Q: The school culture and curriculum here are very different from other schools, and this naturally raises a question – what are the teachers like? What qualities does Living Wisdom School look for in a teacher?

Helen: We look for someone who has demonstrated an attunement with, or has the ability to learn to be in tune with, our school's philosophy. We also look for teachers who have a solid grasp of the curriculum, and an ability to deliver it to each student individually.



Photo: Teachers Helen, Gary, and Ruth confer during recess at Living Wisdom School.

Our teachers need to be able to understand the individual child at a deep, insightful level.

Our philosophy is based on the self-evident fact that every child is unique, and that the curriculum needs to be taught in a way that honors the child's unique abilities and nature.

If a teacher doesn't have the ability to understand the uniqueness of the child and their unique needs, they won't be able to deliver the curriculum in the way we've found most effective.

Q: How can you tell if someone has that level of awareness of the individual children and their needs?

Helen: We hire teachers with whom we've had long experience. Our novice teachers are required to serve an internship of at least a year, so that we can observe them and train them to help each child in every possible situation.

If a teacher falls ill or otherwise becomes unavailable, and we need to hire an experienced classroom teacher as a replacement, we will only look at candidates who are very well known to us.

Q: Do you require the teachers to have a personal spiritual practice of some kind, to help them be intuitively aware of the students' needs?



Helen: It's a fundamental requirement that our teachers have a basic spiritual practice, although there's obviously no requirement that they follow a particular spiritual path. This applies to all of our full-time teachers who define the quality of the energy in the classroom, which in turn informs the school culture.

Q: As part of the hiring process, do you ask your full-time teachers and interns about their spiritual practices?

Helen: We do, and it's not enough to say "I'm Catholic" or "I'm Jewish." We want to know that they have a consistent practice that informs their life.

Gary: We understand that *spirituality* includes many things. We hired Craig Kellogg to teach fourth and fifth grade because our teachers had observed him for an entire school year as an intern. We had an entire school year to watch how he related to the children in many settings – on the playground, after school, during play rehearsals, in math class, as well as by talking with him at faculty meetings. We looked for an openness to learn, and an ability to accept advice from Helen and the other senior teachers.

Craig basically said yes to everything, whether we asked him to take on the after-school care program, or to play a larger role in helping prepare the students for the school play. He's very willing, he has dynamic energy, and he has the right consciousness, which includes spiritual qualities such as kindness, compassion, and inner strength. It wouldn't matter a bit which particular path a teacher was following, if they were able to bring those qualities to our school.

These are the qualities we look for in a teacher. There are people who have a wonderfully expansive consciousness and a strong spiritual practice, yet we know they'll never be good classroom teachers here, because they don't know how to relate well with children. We've had a small number of interns who didn't become teachers despite their many outstanding qualities, because they were weak in some of the qualities that we consider essential.

We've also had teachers who were trained in public schools and were highly motivated to teach here, but who didn't have the right consciousness for this school.

What do we look for in a teacher's consciousness? In one case, the teacher had taught for a very long time in public school, and

she'd become fixated on a "boxed" curriculum. She didn't take into account, at least to our satisfaction, the individuality of each student.

One of our students had trouble talking about math concepts, although he actually understood them quite well, and the teacher didn't realize that she was frustrating him by insisting that he articulate math in the way she expected. He had an intuitive approach that worked well, and that was an expression of his unique nature. He could get the answers using his approach, but she tried to impose a system that wasn't appropriate for him, instead of drawing on his unique gifts.

We evaluate teachers primarily during the one-year internship. We are willing to stick our neck out financially to hire people for a long evaluation period, even if we might not need teachers at the moment. We don't know of any other schools that will go this far to ensure that a new teacher will be ready to benefit the students.

If one of our teachers suddenly left and we needed somebody to step in, it would have to be the right person. And where better to evaluate them than in our own classrooms for a year?

Swami Kriyananda, the founder of the Living Wisdom Schools, said that when you're operating one of our schools, you probably need to develop your own teacher training program, because nobody can do it as thoroughly and with as much care as we can. So that's what we've done.

Craig is an outstanding example. As I mentioned, we observed him in countless situations, and all of the teachers observed him, not just his supervising teacher.

We don't do "observation" in the traditional way, where the supervising teacher sits in the back of the class with a clipboard. We observed Craig in a huge variety of settings. I observed how he handled an infinite variety of situations in the after-school care program and during PE. We observed him with the children at circle

time. And of course we watched him work with individual children in the classroom.

Our interns are operating in a fishbowl, because our school is small and we can observe them easily and often. In fact, the observation isn't limited to the interns, because we're continually observing each other, and it's a constant process of supportive peer review.

Q: How do you help new teachers improve their skills? How can you tell if a teacher is becoming more capable?

Helen: The teachers from K to fifth grade have lunch once a week in my office, and we discuss a graduate-level book on education. We choose books that are based on solid research and that we feel could help us achieve our goals in serving the kids.

The broad topic at the meeting is "What are we doing, and how can we do it better, and how can we help this individual child?" And then talk about how we can adopt the best concepts from the book.

Everyone weighs in. They might describe a situation they're dealing with, and how the author's ideas could help. "Did you pick up on this concept? How do you think it might help this child in my class?" So there's continual, ongoing communication between the teachers about classroom practices, curriculum development, and the needs of the individual child.

The teachers choose the books. A former teacher chose a book that she was reading in graduate school, just before she left us to become a professor of education. This summer, the teachers will read a book that I suggested, *And With a Light Touch: Learning About Reading, Writing, and Teaching with First Graders*, by Carol Avery and Donald Graves.

The weekly meeting is directed at novice teachers who want to learn how to set up a classroom, and it combines philosophy, curriculum, and practice.

Q: The teachers learn from each other's practice, as well as from books?

Helen: Our teachers are hungry for continuing education, and a beautiful part of our school is that our continuing education program is based on actual classroom experience. Our staff development model gives our teachers a wonderful way to have ongoing training that's alive and fresh, because it deals with what's actually going on in their classrooms.

A teacher will ask about something that happened in class that's related to something in the book. Another teacher will say, "I know what you mean." And they'll talk about something that happened in their class. Or they'll say, "But what do you think about doing it this way?"

You end up with an extremely rich workshop for teachers, and a very deep, hands-on continuing education program. It's as good as it gets, because it creates a graduate-level seminar that feeds on the daily experiences of the teachers.

Those two elements – books and practice – would usually be kept separate. In grad school, the coursework is heavily oriented toward theory. You take a course, and you read many wonderful books, but it's not until you leave school that you get a chance to try the ideas with hands-on student teaching. So it's very limited compared to what we offer. Our intern program offers a much deeper, more effective training experience than the graduate-level courses teachers take nowadays. I've taken those courses, and I know how graduate programs work.

We take a laboratory approach to teacher development and extended study. It has an immediacy that you could never get in graduate school. It isn't just theoretical and philosophical, because you're dealing with the child in front of you, and everyone in the seminar knows the child.

So it's far more dynamic than the usual system for preparing new teachers, where something happens in the class you're student-teaching, and you go and talk to the professor and the other graduate students, none of whom actually know the individual child and the situation.

You can't get better teacher training than this, where you're interning with deeply experienced teachers in real-life situations, in an environment where the individual child's long-term welfare always comes first.

Gary: It's a terribly important feature of our school, this constant interaction between the teachers. This year, I coached kindergarten and first-grade PE. The first-grade intern had middle-school PE, and we talked constantly. We have a dynamic, daily, continual cross-pollination where every teacher is exposed to all the other classes, far more than in any other school I'm aware of.

It allows Helen to speak from a perspective of real insights about any individual child in a particular situation, because she not only knows the theory, but she knows the child, the parents, and the teachers who've worked with the child over the years.

There's tremendous individual attention paid to the child, and whenever an issue arises, help comes in a variety of ways, not just from the child's teacher, but from Helen and all the other teachers.

Q: Is there a process where several teachers evaluate each child, so that no child falls through the cracks?

Helen: It's very common for the teachers to come to a meeting, even if it's just the weekly faculty meeting where the focus is on routine school business. Someone will say, "By the way, this happened on the playground today, and so-and-so was upset." Or, "By the way, I saw this happen with this child from your class." Or, "I've come to understand that this is going on with this child, and everybody needs to know about it and be on deck to help."

It's an exchange of information that is *very* regular and ongoing. And it's all about helping the individual child who may have certain requirements, needs, or challenges. This happens every day, so if a teacher notices that a child has a situation, or if a parent calls about something that's happening in the child's life that might be impacting the child's school experience, the teacher will tell all the other teachers who work with that child, on the playground and in class.

We hold a faculty meeting on Wednesday afternoon for two hours. We meditate for fifteen minutes and do healing prayers for all the children in the school and their families, and then we have the meeting.

Gary: A teacher can ask us to pray for a particular child if there's a special need, but we also offer general prayers for the school family.

As Helen mentioned, it's also a time when the teachers can share about a student who's struggling. It's a time for the teachers to get together and share about anything in the school that needs our attention. The interns and new teachers are required to attend, and for them it's teacher training. The teachers who come here from other schools invariably praise our faculty meetings and the collegiality we have, because we work together on every issue.

Helen: The Friday meeting has a different focus. It's the practicum that I talked about earlier. It's about the primary grades, K through third, and unlike the Monday meeting, the discussion is focused entirely on what's happening in the classroom. So we aren't talking about books.

We meet at lunch, and we hone in on the curriculum. There might be a discussion of the textbooks we'll use in math or Spanish next year. This year, we did a great deal of work on refining our integrated curriculum. But anyone can present an idea. If a teacher discovers something that she feels is beautifully addressing her students' needs, and it supports our philosophy, she'll bring it up. "I'd like to do this in my class."

Our first-grade teacher had an idea for an arts and crafts project, and after we talked about it at our Friday meeting, Ruth Rabin filtered it into her third-grade class.

Sometimes we'll hammer out ideas for science or Writer's Studio. The Writer's Studio curriculum has a well-defined format, and if a teacher isn't clear about it, she can ask the other teachers for help.

The teachers are always exchanging ideas, and our teacher training is structured to encourage the interns to be part of the exchange. I'm teaching literary figures of speech to the middle school students, and Ruth is teaching figures of speech in third grade. When I found a book on haiku that employs lovely literary figures, I mentioned it to Ruth, and that kind of sharing is common.

It's an unstructured but focused exchange of information and resources. Instead of discussing educational theories, we'll say, "This happened in my classroom – I'm facing this challenge. What do you think?" And the focus is always on the needs of the individual child.

The discussion comes out of what's happening in the classroom. So the interns learn a lot, and the teachers learn from each other, and the children who may be having a problem receive the best of the accumulated insights and experience of the teachers in the school.

Here's an example. One of our teachers described a project that she's working on with her kids. The teacher in the grade before hers said, "Oh my gosh, that's what I'm doing – is it appropriate for us both to be doing that?"

She wasn't sure if she should be teaching the same subject before the children enter the other teacher's class. As it turned out, it was perfect, because it prepared the children for what they'd be working on the next fall. It's an example of how the teachers and children benefit from the constant cross-filtering of ideas in the faculty meeting. It ensures that there's no chance a child will ever have an issue that won't be immediately addressed and resolved.

Those two teachers got together after the meeting, and they ended up working on some ideas for helping the children who are very advanced for their age. They worked out how a teacher of the more advanced younger kids can accommodate them so they can keep progressing and not be held back.

As we never tire of saying, it all boils down to a focus on helping the individual child. We're never limited by academic theory; we're free to focus on ensuring that each child gets the benefit of the gathered experience of everyone in the school.

Gary: It's informal but very effective. I recently met with the teacher of the kids who'll be in my class next year, and he gave me a "scouting report" on every kid in his class and their special needs. So I have a clear idea of how I'll need to work with the kids when school starts. It's an example of the collaboration that goes on all the time among the teachers in the school. Whether we call it "teacher training" or "teacher enrichment," it's powerful, and it's a hundred-percent focused on helping each child.

If a student has an issue, and you have questions about how to help them, you can go to a teacher who knows the child, or who has special insights about the issue. You can say, "I'm noticing this about this student. What did you find that worked with them?" As Helen mentioned, the Friday meeting very often leads to an informal get-together between the teachers to discuss a particular student.

Helen: In other schools, the teachers generally have the option to look up a child's records. But some teachers refuse, because they don't want to be prejudiced by anything negative that the other teachers might have said about the child.

Gary: It's very different here, because we hold the welfare and highest potential of each student as our uppermost priority, and we can be absolutely confident that another teacher would never tell us something negative about a child. It just doesn't happen.

The teacher will tell me how he works with the child to help the child achieve the best possible results personally and academically. Or he'll give me a heads-up – “This child tends to stress out over this, and here's how I deal with it.” Or, “You might think he's this way, but he's actually coming from here, and I find it helps if I address him this way.”

But it's always directed toward the positive. When the teachers talk, it's with exactly the same positive voice as the narrative reports we write about the child. It's always toward the positive, and our hopes for the child.

Q: Do you require teachers to be credentialed by the state?

Helen: We joke that if you want to teach math and science in kindergarten and first grade here, you need to have an advanced degree from MIT. That's because our most recent math and science teachers, Dharmaraj and Eric, graduated from there.

But, seriously, we feel that our new teachers are far better prepared than the average new-hire teacher in public or private school. They go through a much longer and more rigorous internship, and they're observed much more intensively, and our standards are much higher.

Erica, our second-grade teacher, has a certificate in Education for Life teaching, which she earned by interning for a year in our school, and by taking the Education for Life training.

Our interns qualify to receive the EFL certification, but it isn't automatic. They have to be recommended by the senior teachers and the school director. It may take a year, or it might take three years.

We feel our credential is a lot more difficult to earn than a state certificate. Most people who come out of a typical graduate program in education have no classroom experience, beyond one or two brief segments of student teaching. Our interns are in the classroom from beginning to end of the school day for at least a year, in addition to attending the weekly Friday practicum and Wednesday teachers'

meeting, which is basically a graduate seminar with a combined academic and practical focus. They also attend the school's development meetings, which gives them insights on how the school operates.

After they've been trained and observed for several months, they begin to deliver lessons. For example, while Craig was interning he was responsible for teaching math, and he did a marvelous job.

Q: Do the senior teachers and administrators have a chance to observe the newer teachers as much as the other teachers do?

Gary: We observe them constantly.

Helen: I'm in every classroom multiple times every week, often multiple times a day. Also, I'm always coming through with parents who want to observe in the classroom before they decide to enroll their child. Or I'll come in and observe just to see how things are going, or if there's an issue the teacher has mentioned and asked me to help with.

While I'm observing, sometimes I'll see something that needs to be addressed with the teacher. I remember a new teacher who changed the physical layout of her classroom in a way that wasn't optimal for giving the students an Education for Life experience. Erica and I got together with her and helped her understand why a different arrangement would be better.

It's all part of our intern training, to be observed and receive the suggestions of the senior teachers. For example, we taught Craig how to set up an EFL classroom, which might sound like a small thing, but it's very, very important to the quality of experience that we want to give the children.

Gary: I have a friend who holds California state high school and junior college teaching credentials, and he told me about his student teaching experience, which the state felt was adequate to award him certificates for teaching full-time in high school and JC.

He did his student teaching at two big schools in Los Angeles. He said that one of his supervising teachers requested a student teacher because she'd been assigned to teach seventh and eighth graders in the same hour, and she got the idea that she could split the class and let the student teacher take one of the grades. My friend said that during the entire semester, she consulted with him just once, and it wasn't about teaching methods. In fact, she didn't observe him at all.

His other supervising teacher expected him to learn to teach by sitting passively in class and watching. The supervising teacher didn't confer with him a single time, and gave him just one hour of hands-on teaching experience the entire semester.

By the standards of Living Wisdom School, it was staggeringly insufficient. In one class, he was teaching solo for an hour a day, without supervision or consultation, and in the other class he barely taught or received any instruction at all.

I suspect the situation in public schools hasn't changed much since my friend was a student teacher. If anything, it's probably worse. The fact is, in an overcrowded public school, the supervising teacher simply has little time or energy to give a student teacher the kind of rigorous, year-long training they would receive here, or anything remotely like it.

In our school, our approach to training teachers and interns gives them the same level of attention and energy we give the students. We find that if you begin with a teacher who's highly motivated and enthusiastic, you don't have to spend a lot of energy trying to raise them to a baseline.

Craig is a great example. He wants very much to be a teacher, he's a terrific role model for these young kids, and his energy is wonderful. It's the same for our second-grade teacher, Erica, who wants to be a really good teacher and sets very high standards for herself. They're both extremely dedicated, so training them is

basically a process of giving them practice in our philosophy and methods, and offering them feedback and help when they need it.

Q: You mentioned the classroom environment. Helen, is it your role as the school director to make sure the classrooms are set up appropriately? How would you describe the physical arrangement?

Helen: We have very definite expectations, because the classroom environment is extremely important. First and foremost, it must be child-friendly. It has to be creative and imaginative, with plenty of room to show off the children's work. I visited a classroom in India where every piece of art on the wall was exactly the same as all the others. If you walk into a LWS classroom and look at the art and essays and poetry on the walls, you'll find that it's an accurate reflection of the curriculum, but it's very, very individual, creative, and imaginative.

Gary: Teacher training doesn't stop at the end of the school year. We're winding up the year, and I've already started meeting with Craig to mentor him about teaching history when he starts teaching full-time in the fall. And Helen will mentor him in Language Arts.

Helen: Before the school year ended, Craig and I had already met for the first of several curriculum get-togethers to plan what he'll teach next year. He has already created an outline for the curriculum from September to January. So he's receiving ongoing mentoring well ahead of when he'll start teaching in the classroom.

Gary: In our spring meetings with the interns, a lot more is involved than just ensuring that they have a solid curriculum plan before we turn them loose with the students. We continue to work with them intensively during the school year, after they start teaching.

Helen: We interact with the teachers throughout the year. Craig comes to every Friday practicum meeting, and like all our interns, he's actively involved in our meetings, because as a young teacher he needs to hear the experienced teachers talk, and he needs to be able to bounce his ideas off them and ask questions. You'll almost never

find this level of ongoing training for interns and new teachers in other schools, particularly public schools where the teachers are dealing with much larger classes.

Gary: We also mentor the teachers when the whole school comes together, at the weekly all-school circle, the play rehearsals, and at lunch and recess. As Helen pointed out, we're observing the interns and younger teachers throughout each day.

I observe them both during PE and as a mentor teacher. An intern will receive frequent, regular feedback on their teaching, including constructive suggestions. We'll also look at how they're handling the input they receive from the other teachers. Do they absorb and incorporate it? In the fall, there will be more observation, to make sure they've assimilated the guidance they've been given.

Q: When an intern or young teacher needs a correction, do you give them immediate feedback?

Gary: Not necessarily. We work with them more or less the same way we work with the children. When Helen observes in the classroom and sees something that needs correcting, she'll make sure to offer her suggestions in a constructive way. It wouldn't serve the teacher if she interrupted and said something brutally direct like, "Your classroom is all wrong."

We work with an awareness of the individual teacher. A teacher might be highly intuitive and able to pick up on what's needed with little verbal explanation, but another teacher may need more of the details.

We offer guidance in the same spirit as we work with our children. We work with the individual. We remember the positive goals we want to achieve for the welfare of the children, and we help the teacher understand how it all fits together, and how it will help them become better teachers.

We're always assessing whether an intern will ever qualify to become a full-time teacher in our school. In Erica's and Craig's case,

they were so impressive that when an opening occurred we had no doubts at all, because we knew they were on the fast track to becoming standout teachers. Even so, the senior teachers evaluated them separately, and when Helen finally said, “Really, I think we should hire Craig,” none of us were in the dark about him, because we all knew him very well. I said, “I agree a hundred percent.”

If I had had doubts, or if I’d had experiences with Craig that caused me to wonder if perhaps he wasn’t right for the children, I would have voiced them unhesitatingly.

The less-experienced teachers are being observed at every opportunity by at least one teacher with greater experience. For example, our current theater arts choreographer, Marguerite, has worked with us for seventeen years, and she wouldn’t hesitate to consult Helen if she noticed a problem with a teacher.

The result is that by the time a teacher is fully trained and hired, they’ve been observed by the senior faculty for no less than a year. Again, Erica is a fine example. Not only was she trained as an Education for Life teacher, but she grew up in the Living Wisdom Schools. Her parents started her in kindergarten at LWS, and except for two years when she attended a public school in Italy, she spent her elementary years in our system.

Not only does she interact daily with the other teachers about our methods, philosophy, and curriculum, she’s in close contact with Toby Moorhouse, who was her teacher in third and fourth grade at the Living Wisdom School in Nevada City. Toby has many years of experience bringing Education for Life into the classroom. So not only has Erica been thoroughly vetted by us, she’s very proactive about learning from the other teachers. Erica has so much content, so much care, and so much dedication in her teaching that our senior faculty have the greatest admiration for her.

It's natural for parents to ask how we evaluate and train our teachers. But while we can describe the process, the standard by which we feel parents should really judge us is the results.

Every year, we have parents who enroll their children at LWS with unvoiced reservations. "We'll enroll our child in this magical school for a year, and then maybe we'll transfer him to a rigorous academic college-prep school."

They'll take a stance of "wait-and-see." But when they start to see how their child is progressing academically and how happy they are, and how they're learning to be mature, well-behaved, thoughtful, and caring, the parents realize that the results are speaking for themselves.

We can talk educational theory until we're blue in the face, and it might all be very interesting and convincing. But the abstract theories tend to be lifeless and one-dimensional until they're tested "in the cold light of day." We can only measure their worth if a teacher learns to apply them in creative ways to help the individual child, as our teachers are trained to do.

I'm not surprised when parents express doubts about what we're doing, because it's so different. But I've seen, over and over, how the parents who initially had reservations were delighted when their child entered high school and did extremely well. We've come to expect that our parents will have questions, because we're teaching in a way that's at the vanguard of educational theory today. But it's very gratifying when they tell us, "My daughter's doing beautifully in her academically challenging private high school. You actually knew what you were doing."

16. ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND EDUCATION FOR LIFE

The philosophy of Living Wisdom School, Education for Life (EFL), is based on helping children achieve academic and personal success by a balanced development of their personal “Tools of Maturity”: their body, feelings, will, and mind.

Mainstream education, with its emphasis on test scores, focuses on training just one of these developmental tools – the intellect – at the expense of the child’s growth in other areas.

Let’s compare the results of these two very different approaches.

Education for Life and Testing

While Education for Life doesn’t emphasize academic testing for young children, we’re very interested in knowing how our older students are doing compared to other students their age.

When the original EFL high school near Nevada City, California applied for accreditation in 2005, the process required that the students take a nationally recognized standardized test which is administered annually.

The results have been remarkable. Every year the students *as a group* have placed in the top 10 percent of schools nationwide on average, reaching the top 1 percent on one occasion.

Their SAT scores have been equally impressive, with the average EFL student scoring 1691, compared to the national average of approximately 1500.

How is it that LWS can compete so well against students from elite academic schools, when our focus includes significant time spent on the arts, outdoor activities, service projects, and travel?

Current research offers some insights.

The Body and the Intellect

It would seem obvious that a healthy body provides a sound foundation for a healthy mind. Disease, stress, poor diet, and a lack of hygiene can diminish the energy available for focusing the mind and doing hard work in academics. This relationship was clearly established by a study published by the [National Academy of Sciences](#) in 2013:

State-mandated academic achievement testing has had the unintended consequence of reducing opportunities for children to be physically active during the school day and beyond.... Yet little evidence supports the notion that more time allocated to subject matter will translate into better test scores. Indeed, 11 of 14 correlational studies of physical activity during the school day demonstrate a positive relationship to academic performance. Overall, a rapidly growing body of work suggests that time spent engaged in physical activity is related not only to a healthier body but also to a healthier mind.

Feelings and the Intellect

Similarly, the ability to manage one's feelings and channel their energy in constructive ways can be a tremendous factor for maintaining mental focus in the face of interpersonal tensions or inner turmoil.

The advent of the concept of “emotional intelligence” in 1995 stimulated a wave of research that has authenticated the importance of social and emotional growth.

A key report by [J. Payton et al.](#) surveyed data from 317 studies involving 324,303 students. The authors concluded:

SEL [Social and Emotional Learning] programming improved students' academic performance by 11 to 17 percentile points across the three reviews, indicating that they offer students a practical educational benefit.... Although some educators argue against implementing this type of holistic programming because it takes valuable time away from core academic material, our findings suggest that SEL programming not only does not detract from academic performance but actually increases students' performance on standardized tests and grades.

Will Power and Intellect

The connection between will power and the intellect is evident in qualities such as perseverance, concentration, and initiative. In [*The Willpower Instinct*](#), Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D surveyed the results of over 200 studies.

People who have strong will power are better off – i.e., [they have] better control of their attention, emotions, and actions. They are happier and healthier. Their relationships are more satisfying and last longer. They make more money and go further in their careers. They are better able to manage stress, deal with conflict, and overcome adversity. They live longer. Self-control is a better predictor of academic success than IQ. It's a stronger determinant of effective leadership than charisma. It's more important for marital harmony than empathy.

Conclusion and Prediction

It may take a while, but educators are acknowledging that too much one-sided emphasis on the intellect is counterproductive.

Even the “winners” with this approach are adversely affected. In a nationally televised interview in November 2011, an NBC reporter talked with an administrator at Peking University High School in Shanghai, the top school worldwide as measured by the Organization

for Economic Cooperation and Development, where the students put in twelve hours of study per day, including weekends. The school administrator lamented:

Test taking is damaging to students' creativity, critical thinking skills and, in general, China's ability to compete in the world. It can make students very narrow-minded. In the 21st century, China needs the creative types its education system isn't producing.

For more than forty years, the Living Wisdom Schools have pioneered an approach that cultivates the child's intellect without neglecting other important contributors to the student's academic success, namely the body, feelings, and will.

Modern research shows that the future of education will favor schools that can implement an integrated, holistic approach, along the lines of the thoroughly tested model of Education for Life and the Living Wisdom Schools.

This article [originally appeared](http://www.edforlife.org) on the Education for Life website (www.edforlife.org).

17. AN MIT GRAD REFLECTS ON TEACHING AT LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL



Dharmaraj Iyer taught math and science at the Living Wisdom Schools in Palo Alto and Nevada City, California. This is his farewell talk to the students, teachers, and parents of the Palo Alto school, where he taught for six years.

Thank you, children. Thank you, friends. Thank you, students, and thank you, Helen and everyone.

Today marks six years to the day that I have been at the school. My first experience of Living Wisdom School was the end-of-year ceremony six years ago. I want to say a little bit about the journey that got me there.

I was a graduate student at MIT in computer science. I had been offered a summer job at Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center), just a few blocks from the school. My main interest in taking the job was so that I could live in the Ananda Community in Mountain View.

I had been a member of Ananda for three years, and I had always wanted to live in a spiritual community.

I arrived at the community, and soon after starting my job I had a conversation with Asha Praver, one of the leaders of the community. She said, “Have you ever had an interest in teaching children?”

I said, “Well...”

I mean, I was doing research in Bayesian feedback algorithms for automatic text categorization. And along comes Asha and asks me, “Do you want to teach elementary children?”

I had to pause, because it was one of those moments when your mind just stops.

I said, “Yes, I would be interested in teaching children.” It was a moment of inspiration, and it felt right.

Later, my mind kicked in, and I said to Asha, “Well, you know, I’m not as experienced in science as I am in math. I’ve only taken biology and chemistry in high school, and I only did physics through college. So I’m not sure I could teach science as well.”

She said, “You’d be talking to kindergartners about the weather.” (laughter)

So it was a bit hard to beg out of my promise.

Asha invited me to the end-of-year ceremony. This was in 1999.

I was amazed. I didn’t know any of the children, and I didn’t know any of the teachers when I came to the ceremony, which we’re having again today.

I simply couldn’t believe the teachers – their poise, and their obvious caring nature. But what impressed me even more was the students.

Each of the children, from age five to fourteen, talked about a special “quality” that the teachers had given them at the year’s end. I thought it was inspiring that every child receives a certificate of appreciation for a special quality that the teachers saw in them, and that the student had been trying to develop during the year.

The students' presence on stage bowled me over. Their ability to speak with poise, and the maturity of their talks, and the feeling they projected – I was moved to tears several times by the sincerity and clarity with which the children spoke.

I said to myself, "I don't know the philosophy of this school, but I know that it works."

Because you can't fake those qualities. And that's what made me sign up to teach here. Now we – Asha and I – just needed to ask the school if they would be interested in hiring me.

After the ceremony, Asha introduced me to one of the teachers.

She said, "This is Dharmaraj, and he's interested in teaching at the school."

And this very experienced teacher, with wise caution, said, "Well, that's nice." (laughter)

She said, "Many people are interested in teaching at our school, and we don't necessarily have a whole lot of openings right now. But we'll keep you in mind. What is your area of expertise?"

I said, "Math, science, and computers."

Her head swiveled on her shoulders and she lasered-in on me and said, "*Really...*?" (laughter)

It turned out that both of the science teachers planned to spend just one more year at the school before moving on. So I came at the right time.

I visited the school over the summer. I observed the Selfish Giant theater workshop, and I came to a classroom and saw these beautiful children concentrating on their fantastic artwork.

Three of the regular teachers were present, and they were guiding the children, and the children were clearly very enthusiastic and inspired.

I saw a little boy named Max who was deeply focused on his drawing. And I thought, “What a perfect little saint! How hard could it be to teach these children? They must certainly teach themselves.”

Little Max was working away, and then finally he completed his drawing, and as he finished it, he held it up and gazed at it for a moment in wonder. And then he said, “CLARE, I’LL SELL YOU THIS FOR A MILLION DOLLARS!!!! A MILLION DOLLARS!!!!” (laughter)

So I thought maybe there was something that we adults could teach the children.



Photo: Dharmaraj teaches a lively math class.

But that day began a long journey of discovery. My friends would ask me, “How do you like teaching?” And I would say, “It’s really fun. And it’s really, really hard.”

It was hard to have all of these thoughts about math, science, and computer science as I understood them, and then to have to struggle to find ways to make them crystal clear to someone else.

I tended to learn abstractly, at least in recent years. And my students didn’t always take to abstraction right away. They might

prefer a visual or auditory or written way of learning. And they might like to write about their experiences with math, linking their language and math minds together.

While I was struggling to learn how to be a good teacher, I had a conversation with Swami Kriyananda. I told him what I was doing, and he said to me, “You need to make the abstract concepts clear by concrete examples.”

So whenever I taught science, I would try to give the children a hands-on experience, and concrete examples drawn from their lives. Because otherwise it was just words and abstract concepts for them, and that’s a very cold and impersonal way of learning, and it’s not very interesting, and it’s easy to forget what you learn.

But the real challenge, as every teacher knows, is not the content, when you’re starting out. It’s what we call “classroom management.” (laughter)

Classroom management, in the beginning, means, as a young teacher, trying not to cry. (laughter)

Then, as you progress, it evolves into trying not to yell. (laughter)

And then finally you get to the point of being able to try to inspire the children through your calm, quiet words.

For example, I would be doing my job as a teacher and thinking that it was completely impossible, and all of a sudden I would see the example of one of the great teachers we have here. One of them would say, at the end of active playtime, very quietly, “Children.” (laughter) And all of the heads, all of the desks, all of the chairs, and all of the pencils in the room would move and point to her. (laughter)

So I knew it was possible to learn that skill.

During my first year, Helen was my supervising teacher. She trained me during the first year I taught in fifth through seventh grade.

She was immensely valuable to me, first by the example of how she was with the children, and the way she spoke to them.

And also, she gave me feedback, as I would stand up in front of the firing squad and deliver a few words before I went down in flames. She would give me feedback about what went wrong, and why. And she made it all very clear, and she tolerated my many woes.

There was a time, about halfway through the first year, when I said, “Does it get any easier?”

Helen said, “The first three years are awful, but then...”

And I couldn’t get past that. “The first three years!??” Because I was just trying to make it through the next week. (laughter)

But, of course, it was with a certain relish that I reached the third year and found out that she was right.

What made teaching hard, of course, was not the students. It was me having to face my own self, as we all have to. When you ask seven students to do something, and they don’t want to, what are you going to do? Are you going to cry, yell – or calmly inspire?

That’s what makes teaching hard for every one of us. And when it comes to leading people, the hardest thing is the way you have to face yourself – and change.

Before I came to LWS, I wasn’t convinced that it was possible to teach children the right way. In fact, I didn’t know what the right way was. I just knew that some of my teachers had done it the right way as I grew up, and some of them had not.

And, again, I wasn’t sure how to explain what the right way was. You would have a gifted teacher now and then. But I didn’t know if it was a skill that you could learn.

Then I met the wonderful teachers at Living Wisdom School, and I had the opportunity to watch them for several years.

I met Helen, and saw the way she taught. I saw all of the teachers, all of them teaching the right way. And again, I wasn’t sure

what it was, but I knew it was right because I saw that it worked beautifully, and it felt right. And the children showed it.

Then Gary came along, and Ghislaine, and Megan, and I saw that they all taught the right way, too. And I began to wonder, “What is it that’s so special about our experience here?”

Because it wasn’t just the gifted teachers, or the wonderful students, or the dedicated parents.



Photo: Dharmaraj and Dharmini Iyer.

I realized that a great part of the power of the school, and what made it work, was our philosophy of Education for Life.

It was the power of small classrooms. The power of Circle Time. The power of meditation and prayer and chanting.

It was the spiritual lives of the teachers and the students and their families. And the plays, through which all of the children have the opportunity to act out the life of some great person, by living that life on the stage, experiencing it, and trying to understand it. Because they’re the ones who will be telling the story to three or four standing-room-only audiences of several hundred adults and children.

And, of course, it is the active blessings of Swami Kriyananda and Paramhansa Yogananda, the founders of our educational philosophy.

These are things that some might say, and some do say, “Do they interfere with the students becoming really good at academics?”

In actual fact, as we’ve come to see, they not only *don’t* interfere with excellence in academics, they support and enhance it.

The proof is evident in the top-level high schools and universities that accept our graduates, where they thrive. Our graduates are accepted at the most competitive high schools in this area and beyond.

Students who can go extremely fast with the academic curriculum are allowed to do so. They take it as fast as we can give it to them, and we give it as fast as they can take it.

We've had students who enter high school and place out of algebra through the entrance exams. So they do very well on standardized tests.

This year, Rose placed out of first-year science, and she's moved directly into sophomore biology. The students have had their poetry published. They've registered so many outward accomplishments that support the claim that academics are enhanced by all of the cross-curricular enrichment programs at our school.

But what of the students who have to move through the curriculum more slowly?

I'm very glad to say that the students who need more time are not left behind. Keith Devlin, a famous mathematician at Stanford, visited our school last year. Afterward he said to me, "This is a wonderful school. Do all of your students excel in math?"

I said, "Well, all of the students in the school, through the efforts of the teachers, may not excel in math, but they all *like* math." And he was very impressed and surprised, and I was proud to be able to say it.

Now, Samantha and Sarah are looking at each other. (laughter) But I'm saying this because I feel it's very true. And it was something I could be proud of, and that we can all be proud of.

It's six years later now, and Dharmini and I have felt the call to move on. We've wanted to move to Ananda Village, and now the time is finally right. She will work at the guest retreat, and possibly

with some music students, and I'll teach in the fourth through sixth grade, and I'll help with high school math and computers.

Good-bys are hard. There's no shortcut around the sorrow of parting. I'll just say that I'm very grateful for my time in service to you all. The teachers are my friends. And my dear students, and all you dear, dedicated parents and friends, it has truly been a tremendous blessing in my life. Thank you.

18. MATHEMATICS COMPETITIONS AT LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL

LWS Takes a Unique Approach to National and International Math contests

Living Wisdom School has participated in two prestigious national and international mathematics competitions for more than ten years: The American Mathematics Competitions, and the International Mathematical Olympiads.

In our school, we take a very different approach to these challenging tests.

The official description of the Mathematical Olympiads says:

“Most of those participating in our contests rank among the best mathematics students in their schools. Therefore, if you earned an individual award, **you rank among the best of the best internationally.**”

Note that, in most schools, only the most gifted and academically advanced students take the Olympiads. In these schools, the students receive a great deal of special preparation for the tests, including weekly practice tests and intensive individual mentoring. Preparing for the Math Olympiads is often a central focus of the after-school math club.

Many schools devote major effort to ensure that their top students will do well in these contests, believing that high scores will attract talented students to their schools and enhance the school's reputation.

(A few schools go so far as to lodge protests when their students are stumped by the deliberately complex verbal test questions.)

Our approach to these contests is based on a central principle of our school's philosophy: ***We do not believe in “studying to the test!”***

We believe that our students are better served by helping them individually develop the enthusiasm and skills that will enable them to be successful in their academic subjects, including math. We strive to help them each make the greatest possible gains at their own level.

In sharp distinction to the approach of other schools, at LWS all of our students in grades 4-8 take the tests without any special preparation, as part of the normal daily flow of the school year.

Our students take the tests not to gauge themselves against the brightest young students in the world, but as a fun way to challenge themselves and measure their own individual progress.

At LWS, our overriding concern is how our students' math skills are *improving individually over the years*. This is in keeping with our philosophy of helping each child experience the joy and satisfaction of overcoming academic challenges *at their own level*. This is why we focus on *improving math skills rather than improving test performance*. ***We have found that focusing on skills improves test results naturally and enjoyably.***

The positive results of this approach are reflected in our students' performance when they enter high school. Many of our students test out of freshman math. Occasionally, they may test out of algebra, geometry, and even trigonometry.

A Greater Challenge

A unique aspect of our approach to the Olympiads and the AMC is that our students take the tests that are designed for older students in the later grades.

For example, our 4th through 6th graders take the Olympiad E, which is designed to challenge 6th graders, and **all of our 4th through**

8th graders take the Olympiad M, which is designed to challenge 8th graders.

Our approach to these prestigious tests is: “It’s all in a day’s work.” As mentioned, we do no special preparation. For example, some of the tests fall during the week just before the all-school theater production, which is an *extremely* busy time of the year for the children, when there is little time for last-minute test “cramming.”

We feel this is, by far, a healthier approach for the children. The academic training that we offer them is very rigorous, without subjecting them to a high-pressure testing atmosphere that would have no real purpose other than to use their test scores to enhance the reputation of our school. Thus, we conduct the tests in an atmosphere of relaxed challenge where their self-esteem is not at stake.

As an example of how our approach works, during the 2015-16 academic year ***some of our youngest students who took the tests (4th graders) scored in the top 30% on the 8th grade test. Very impressive! And two students scored in the top 5% internationally. Extremely impressive!***

The fact that an unusually high proportion of our students are performing far above grade level is reflected in their results on these tests, and in the fact that many of our students test well ahead of grade level upon entering high school.

It’s natural that some of our LWS students perform exceptionally well in math, given the amazing Silicon Valley parental “math gene pool.” But a more important question is: are the gifted students being challenged in our school? Are they being trained to be enthusiastic students who will challenge themselves in high school and beyond?

The answer again, we feel, is reflected in our students’ progress as they enter high school and college. As mentioned, many of our graduates test out of high school freshman algebra, and some test out

of geometry and even trigonometry. Moreover, our graduates have been accepted at prestigious universities, including Stanford, UC Berkeley (physics major), University of Michigan (Ross School of Business), Cornell (mathematics major), the University of Bremen, Germany (PhD program in Space Technology and Microgravity), and other top schools.

LWS Students Comment on the Tests

“It’s nice to do a challenge.”

“The tests make us take math more seriously. It is big and hard, but fun!”

“The tests help us use the other side of our brains.”

Two Kinds of Test Atmosphere – Healthy and Unhealthy

Over the years, our middle school teacher, Gary McSweeney, has carefully monitored the atmosphere in the classroom while the students take these challenging tests. Gary has been pleased to notice that it is much more relaxed than the stereotypical test scenario where the teachers are pressuring the students to do well, and where the students often feel that their self-worth is on the line.

Gary says, “I would say that they enjoy the concentrated effort of taking a timed test in silence. The questions require the students to employ creative, out-of-the-box strategies to solve problems. These are not multiple-choice tests, so there is no possibility of them guessing the correct answer! In part, they are reading-comprehension problems. They challenge the students to carefully analyze the question and understand what is being asked. Our students enjoy taking the tests as a way to demonstrate their skills, and to see where they can improve their understanding and knowledge.”

What Are the Mathematical Olympiads?

Nearly 150,000 students participate on nearly 5100 teams every year in the global Math Olympiads.

The Math Olympiads are a series of five timed tests, given monthly throughout the year, with five problems in each.

The goals of the Math Olympiads are: (1) to develop mathematical flexibility in problem solving, (2) to strengthen mathematical intuition, and (3) to foster mathematical creativity and ingenuity.

What are the American Mathematics Competitions (AMC 8 and 10)?

The AMC competitions are sponsored by the Mathematical Association of America, which has held the contests for sixty years.

The competitions include the AMC 8, designed for eighth graders, and the AMC 10, designed for advanced high school sophomores.

These timed tests are intended to challenge students by offering them problem-solving experiences beyond those provided in most junior high and high school math classrooms.

The AMC 8 has 150,000 participants nationwide, and the AMC 10 has 31,000.

LWS Math Awards Through the Years

LWS Math Awards 2015/2016

2015-16 Math Olympiads – Division E (Grades 4-6)

LWS Students in top 50%: 2 (Grade 6)

Top 40%: 2 (Grades 5, 6)

Top 30%: 1 (Grade 4)

Top 25%: 1 (Grade 5)

Top 20%: 4 (Grades 5, 5, 6, 6)

Top 2%: 1 (Gold Pin; Grade 6)

Team Score: 153

Participants: 23

2015-16 Math Olympiads – Division M (Grades 6-8)

Living Wisdom School Statistics:

Top 10%: 1

Top 30%: 1

Top 40%: 3

Top 50%: 6

Participants: 33

LWS Math Awards 2013/2014

The AMC 8

The AMC 8 for junior-high students includes many problems that demand math skills and experience far beyond those provided in most junior high math classes.

Congratulations to Freya Edholm of LWS, who achieved a perfect score of 25 – the only perfect score by a sixth-grader in the state of California on this very challenging test for eighth-graders. Of the 20,571 sixth-graders who took the AMC 8 worldwide, only 6 achieved a perfect 25. And of the 152,691 students in grades 5-8 worldwide who took the AMC 8, only 225 students achieved a perfect score. The average score was 10.67.

The Math Olympiads

In 2013, 103,592 students participated in the Olympiads from 49 states, 9 American territories, and 25 foreign countries. In most schools, only the best math students participate, but at LWS all

students take the Olympiad M exam for 8th grade and below and the Olympiad E for 6th grade and below.

Of the 19,541 students who took the Olympiad M exam for 8th grade and below, **Freya Edholm of Living Wisdom School** was the only 6th-grade girl in the state of California to achieve a perfect score of 25. Congratulations, Freya!

Elizabeth Peters and Andrew Dollente won the silver pin for scoring 17 and 19 points respectively.

LWS Math Awards 2011/2012

Living Wisdom School celebrates the following students.

Olympiad E (Elementary)

Freya Edholm (5th grade) earned a gold pin with a score of 24 out of 25, placing her in the top 2% of students taking the test internationally.

Pongsa Tayjasanant (4th grade, score 18 out of 25) and **Jason Fu** (4th grade, score 20 out of 25) were awarded silver pins, placing them in the top 10% of students taking the test worldwide.

Placing in the top 50% and earning a Felt Patch were **Kalyan Narayanan, Tyler Keen, Andrew Dollente, Divya Thekkath, and Emma Farley.**

Olympiad M (Middle School)

Fifth-grader Freya Edholm's score of 22 out of 25 earned her a gold pin and placed her in the top 2% in this test for 6th to 8th graders.

Percy Jiang scored 16 out of 25, earning a silver pin, placing him in the top 10%.

Scoring in the top 50% and earning a Felt Patch were Mariah Stewart, Jason Fu, Kelly Olivier, Sita Chandraekaran, Kalyan Narayanan, Kieran Rege, and Pongsa Tayjasanant.

The American Mathematics Competitions (AMC 8)

The AMC8 has over 150,000 student contestants from more than 2,400 U.S. schools.

Freya Edholm (5th grade) scored 20, which placed her in the top 5% of students on the Olympiad M which is for students in grades 6-8.

Jason Fu's score of 15 qualified him for a Certificate of Achievement for 5th grade students.

LWS Math Awards 2010/2011

The American Mathematics Competitions(AMC 8)

Sahana Narayana, in 7th grade, scored 24 correct for the 99.3 percentile overall. Incredible job, Sahana!

Freya Edholm, in 4th grade, scored 18 correct for the 93.3 percentile overall. Another incredible result. Well done, Freya!

Sergey Gasparyan, 7th grade, scored 14 correct for the 82.2 percentile overall. Well done, Sergey!

Alex Tuharsky, 8th grade, chose not to take the AMC 8 this year. Instead, Alex focused his efforts on the online Calculus B class that he is taking through the Gifted Children Program at Stanford University. He is receiving an A grade in this class! Great job, Alex!

The American Mathematics Competitions(AMC 10)

Sergey Gasparyan, 7th grade, was awarded a "Young Student Certificate of Achievement" for his score of 112 on the AMC10, designed for advanced high school sophomores. Well done, Sergey!

LWS Math Awards 2009/2010

The American Mathematics Competitions (AMC 8)

Congratulations to the LWS students who completed the AMC 8! Notable scores were achieved by many students for their age group:

Lucas Munro, 7th grade, 93.8 percentile

Alex Tuharsky, 7th grade, 91.1 percentile

Sahana Narayana, 6th grade, 94.7 percentile

Sergey Gasparian, 6th grade, 88.8 percentile

LWS Math Awards 2008/2009

Recent LWS Graduates Test into Advanced High School Courses

Zachary Munro, now a freshman at Woodside Priory, tested out of Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II/Trig, and began his freshman year in Pre-Calculus with the advanced 11th and 12th grade students. **Shortly after, he was placed in the Calculus Class, becoming the first student in Woodside Priory's history to achieve this honor! (Update in 2016: Zachary is a PhD student in Space Technology and Microgravity at the University of Bremen, Germany.)**

Zachary Munro, now a freshman at Gunn High, placed into Algebra II/Trig, the most advanced sophomore math class, which is a weighted course for the UC system. Gunn High waived Zachary's placement test based on his ISEE (Independent School Entrance Exam) and SAT scores.

LWS Students Score well in the AMC

The American Mathematics Competitions(AMC 8)

Zachary Munro, now a freshman at Gunn High, came in third place, scoring 18 (92nd percentile worldwide). George Selley (5th grade) and Alex Tuharsky (6th grade) tied for second place and earned

a place on the Honor Roll for their scores, and on the Achievement Roll for their scores for their grade level. They both scored 20 (96th percentile of all grades worldwide). Zachary Munro, now a freshman at Woodside Priory, came in first place and made the International Honor Roll, scoring 21 (97th percentile worldwide).

The American Mathematics Competitions(AMC 10)

The AMC 10 is designed for advanced high school sophomores. Alex Tuharsky (6th grade, score 73.5) came in third place. Zachary Munro (8th grade, score 84) came in second, and George Selley (5th grade) earned a Certificate of Achievement with a score of 90!

Living Wisdom School received a Certificate of Merit for our overall performance in the AMC 8.

Results: Surya Thekkath (now a freshman at Pinewood), **Sahana Narayana** (5th grade), **Sergey Gasparayan** (5th grade), **Zachary Munro** (now a freshman at Gunn High), and **Alex Ewan** (now a freshman at Everest High) earned patches by scoring in the 50-89 percentile.

Zachary Munro (now a Freshman at Woodside Priory) and **Alex Tuharsky** (6th grade) scored 17 (top 10%) to earn a silver pin. **George Selley** (5th grade) scored an impressive 22 out of 25 for a Gold Pin. Congratulations, one and all!

LWS Math Awards 2006/2007

The American Mathematics Competitions (AMC 8)

The American Mathematics Contest for 8th graders (AMC 8) was held on November 6, 2006. Participating in the event were 180,000 students from approximately 2400 schools nationwide.

Congratulations to Rewa Bush (7th grade) and Jessica Wallace (8th grade) who tied for first place at LWS! They qualified for the AMC 8 National Honor Roll by scoring in the top 5% of all students who participated.

William Prince (7th grade) received the second-place award at LWS, and Amy Hahn (7th grade) received the third-place award.

LWS Math Awards 2005/2006

The American Mathematics Competitions (AMC 8)

During a recent all-school circle we celebrated the results of the American Mathematics Contest 8. Targeted at 8th graders, the AMC 8 offers very challenging problems (click [here](#) for examples). It includes 25 questions; to get even six answers correct is considered a laudable achievement.

Over 100,000 students from 2,500 U.S. schools took the AMC 8. Students from Living Wisdom School were among the best!

Brian Wallace (7th grade) scored 18 and received the prized Honor Roll Certificate of Distinction for placing in the top 2% of all participants! This award honors both the student and the school.

Within our school, **Brian Wallace** placed first, followed by **Ben Madison** and **Ethan Toolis-Byrd**, each with a score of 17. Ethan also received an award for improving the most on the AMC 8 from last year to this year.

Our third-place winner was **Nicolas Hahn** with a score of 16.

Finally, 6th graders **Jessica Wallace** and **Johanna Molina Barajas** received awards for having the highest score of 14 within their grade.

Congratulations to all the students who took the test. Our class average was 12.8, up two points from last year, a significant accomplishment! Special congratulations to middle school math teachers **Dharmaraj Iyer** and **Gary McSweeney**, who communicate enthusiasm and love for math to their students.

19. LWS GRADUATES' HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE GRADES 2011-2014

Presentation High (San Jose)	4.7
Mountain View High	4.5
Los Altos High	4.5
Harker School (San Jose)	4.18
Carlmont High (Belmont)	4.1
Summit Prep (Redwood City)	4.1
Loyola Marymount University (Westchester, Los Angeles)	4.1
Los Altos High	4.0
Menlo College Prep (Menlo Park)	4.0
Mid-Peninsula High (Menlo Park)	4.0
Palo Alto High	4.0
Harker School (San Jose)	3.9
Woodside Priory School, Bowdoin College	3.825
Menlo College Prep	3.706
San Lorenzo High	3.7
Gunn High (Palo Alto)	3.6
Gunn High, Cornell University	3.5
Summit Prep (Redwood City)	3.5
Bay High School (San Francisco)	3.23
Mid-Peninsula High (Menlo Park)	2.7

20. STANDARDIZED TEST RESULTS

The staff of the original Living Wisdom School near Nevada City, California have traced their students' scores on standardized tests. The following summary is from the school's website (www.livingwisdom.org).

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is the principal tool commonly used to judge high school achievement in the United States. The following table shows the average scores of our graduating students compared to the national averages.

SAT Scores 2005-16

	National Averages	LWS Averages
Critical Reading	497	578
Mathematics	514	610
Writing	489	578
Total	1500	1766

The SAT has withstood the misguided notion, current in many educational circles, that student achievement can be measured by the number of facts and formulas that have been retained. For example, high scores on the current STAR test in California depend on a student's knowledge of the Schlieffen Plan, the Tennis Court Oath, and other obscure data that require a fixed curriculum and massive amounts of spirit-deadening memorization. Students in an EFL

school with an expansive, student-centered curriculum would not do well on these tests.

Other tests, such as the SAT, approach achievement from the more plausible perspective that student progress is better measured in such areas as reading comprehension, mathematical reasoning, and writing skills. We have utilized one of these tests, The Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED), with our students. The results are listed below in percentile ranks that show how our students compare with other schools. A ranking in the 90th percentile means that they scored in the top 10 percent nationally.

Standardized Testing 2005-15: Average EFL Student Percentile

Vocabulary	92
Reading Comprehension	93
Language	91
Math Concepts & Problems	93
Computation	81
Total Percentile	93

These scores demonstrate the effectiveness of a holistic approach as offered by Education for Life, even in more traditional areas of student achievement.

21. TEN QUESTIONS PARENTS ASK ABOUT LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL

Question 1:

In traditional K-8 schools, the children spend most of the school day on academics. At LWS, there are so many other activities – field trips, theater, music, art, etc. How do you find time for “serious” learning?

Gary: Wow, you’ve asked the number-one question we receive from prospective parents! And it deserves a thoughtful answer. So, let’s jump in – but, forewarned, this will undoubtedly be the longest answer of these ten questions.



I’m aware that as parents, you may have little or no personal experience that would prepare you for what I’m about to say. But if you reflect on it, perhaps you’ll see that it simply makes sense. And, certainly, the results have proved that what we’re doing works.

The world is changing, and educators today have begun to realize that many of the old assumptions about schoolwork are no longer working.

For example, the assumption that if you put a child in the classroom for eight hours a day, he/she will be brighter than a child who sits for six hours. As it turns out, this fundamental “truth” simply isn’t supported by research or experience. That’s because education is ninety-five percent working with the child’s energy and *nurturing them at their own level.*

In our school, we start the day with “Circle Time.” Before we begin the serious business of academics, we go for a walk, do energization exercises, and meditate, and only then do we go straight into math class.

A parent might say “Wow, you could be doing vocabulary or some other academic subject instead of wasting time!”

But Circle Time is in fact the core of our day. On the few occasions when there’s an interruption in our schedule and we’re unable to have Circle Time, it changes the dynamic of the entire day.

Our approach to teaching is based to a very large extent based on managing energy and raising consciousness. There is plenty of hard research to suggest that effective education is not about piling on homework, or about grilling kids, or about making education stressful. It’s about students coming into a school environment where they are inspired to think and contribute, and to integrate the curriculum thoroughly in their minds, instead of merely memorizing facts, then spitting them out for a test and forgetting them.

Our approach is about teaching kids how to think – teaching them to “learn how to learn,” and to enjoy learning.

One of our mottos is “Where learning and joy come together.” And it permeates the curriculum. For more than twenty years here in Palo Alto, and more than forty years at the original Living Wisdom School, we’ve shown beyond the shadow of a doubt that when children are happy and feel cared for, they do extremely well academically. And, again, not only has it been our experience – it’s just common sense.

If you compare us with schools that stress academics, I would put our kids up against them any day on standardized testing, or any other measure of academic achievement. Because education is not just about cramming information into the child's mind. It's about training them to be enthusiastic thinkers and problem-solvers. It's about helping them learn: "How can I think about this problem?" "How can I manage my time?" "How can I find my center, so that I can perform efficiently?" "How can I focus my attention, and keep it focused until I finish what I'm doing?"

Our annual theater performance is very challenging for the students, in terms of managing their time and energy, finding the courage and poise to get up in front of a large audience and deliver their lines, and learning about the culture and histories of the figures the plays are based on.

The truth is that Living Wisdom School is every bit as rigorous as any of the schools that tout their academics. The difference is that there is a tremendous amount of support for the individual student here. Our classrooms are not competitive in the negative sense of students trying to beat each other down. We encourage the students to face their own challenges and overcome them. In doing so, they find an inner strength that they weren't aware of.

We strive for excellence in all our subjects, but we also strive for excellent behavior and citizenship. For example, we're deeply concerned with how the students relate to their teachers.

On the way home from a recent field trip, we stopped at a restaurant. As we were paying the bill, the manager came up to Helen and me and said, "You know, a lot of school groups come through here, and I want to compliment you on how well-behaved your kids are. Middle-school kids play with their food, and they leave a mess that we have to clean up, so we're used to it, and we don't even mind." He said, "But your kids are really, really well-behaved."

At the retreat center where we sometimes stay during our field trips, the staff routinely comment on how well-behaved our kids are. We think it's basic common courtesy, but we do instill it in the children, and we insist on it.

My experience is that when I'm really stern with them, and I'm asking a lot of them and challenging them, they thrive. Our drama coach does the same with the theater program. He treats the children like professional actors, and Helen does it in Language Arts.

When you ask a great deal of people, they respond and grow. It brings out the best in them, and they like it, even when you have to discipline them.

On our field trips, we're with the kids around the clock, and we have to set clear boundaries. But they love it. They enjoy it, because it brings out their best, and their best feels good.

Our yearly Theater Magic play is always about a great individual from history. This year, the play is about the Dalai Lama. The subjects are people who've faced great challenges with courage, clarity, and compassion. We're always trying to get our kids to be compassionate with one another, to be courageous in whatever they take on, and to have a mental clarity about the things they're learning. Enacting the lives of these great people is inspiring to them, in a way that has a lasting impact.

Bombarding them with information and cramming their heads with facts in the name of education – there's no research that backs it up. It may take courage on the part of our parents to begin to understand how our way might work. No doubt it takes imagination, and a bit of thinking outside the box.

I think the schools that boast about their academics are playing on parents' fears. Parents naturally want their children to be well-prepared, and that's as it should be, because we all know that life today is competitive, and the parents are working in that environment.

So the parents wonder – are we just a bit too soft and nice? And once the kids hit high school and real life, will they melt? But that hasn't been our experience at all.

Parents often assume that what their child needs to be a high-achiever in high school and college is to have a box of facts of a certain size, whereas we're proving that it doesn't work that way.

A former teacher at LWS pointed out that the body of available information just keeps growing. In every field, there's a flood of new breakthroughs and findings. And how can anyone keep up? What's needed is to train kids to navigate information. You don't need to know it all, but you need to know how to find what you need, and how to understand it and work with it.

One of our graduates was accepted at Stanford but turned them down to enroll at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, because music is her passion. She wrote to us, thanking us for training her. Again, here's a student thanking her elementary school for training her to navigate the real world. She particularly took time to thank us for training her in common sense. She said, "As a performer, once I have common sense up on stage, I always know what to do."

She's singing with the San Francisco Opera, and not just in roles that were set aside for young people. She auditioned and made it into the chorus. Her mom rolled her eyes – "I couldn't believe her turning down Stanford." But she had the courage to follow her convictions. It's inspiring that our kids are finding their way, and achieving success by figuring out what they need to do.

There are many signs in our culture today that the older model of education is no longer working. In Palo Alto, there have been recent tragedies, with four or five teenagers committing suicide on the railroad tracks. Suicide is now the fourth leading cause of death among teenagers, for the first time in recorded history.

So there are signs that the current system isn't working. And I would challenge the parents who express doubts about what we're

doing, to ask themselves: Is the other system working, truly? Are those kids turning out better than ours?

The *Education for Life* book begins with a question “What are your hopes for your child’s education?”

Of course, you want them to be able to read and write and be successful. And then the next question is, how can you prepare them in the best way? And the old model is tempting. Most LWS parents have had that model in their own education, and now we’re inviting them to offer their child an opportunity to do something very different. But once you understand what we’re doing, it’s very compelling, and in fact it’s not all that different. It’s simply common sense. It’s academics, but with the addition of teaching them the best way to excel in academics and life.

There’s a term that’s deeply embedded in modern education research: “integrated thematic curriculum.” It’s acknowledging that children learn best when they have more than one hook to grasp each new piece of learning. If they can form new connections in their brain by approaching a subject from different angles, their brains grow more dendrites than if they were doing rote “workbook memorization.”

The theater experience is a tree that bears rich fruits. It’s part of a learning landscape where the children are learning overlapping subjects.

While they prepare for the play, they’re learning about the art, poetry, geography, and history of the time, and they’re simultaneously acting it out on stage, placing it in three-dimensional space. It’s a completely vivid learning experience that makes countless fresh connections for them.

This is the deepest kind of learning, where it’s integrated with traditional academic class work, but it isn’t just rote memorization. It’s based on experience, and as a result the children love it.

It nurtures a wonderful attitude toward writing, starting in the early school years. Children love to write about what's real to them, and not just mental abstractions. The skill of making knowledge visceral becomes an important plus for them when they enter middle school, high school, and college.

In the early years, the youngest children's writing is highly personal. When they reach middle school, there's a shift toward a less personal kind of writing. Instead of just talking about their experiences, they're writing essays and book reports about ideas. They need to learn how to write an intelligent, thoughtful analytical essay. The ability to connect with knowledge and see it in a direct, experiential way gives them a tremendous advantage that was laid in the early grades.

If you're writing a paper about a Shakespeare play, and analyzing the motivations and personalities of the characters, you'll bring forward the experiential element that you've grown familiar with in the early grades.

We might read the play aloud as reader's theater, and then we'll see the play performed. And in these ways we try to get inside the characters, so that when the students start to write it's coming from a mental and emotional experience. Their essays are vivid, and this is a level of learning that stays with them, because they are connecting it to their feelings.

It gives them a level of familiarity with the technical skills of writing that they might not otherwise get until they are freshmen in college. When they leave us, they've learned about thesis statements, topic sentences, and so on. These are things I covered when I taught writing to college students. But we find that the kids in our school are ready for it.

With the large amount of writing they do in middle school, they're continually referencing their experiences and tastes – that is, what *they value*. So when they're asked to write a research paper in

high school or college, it won't be patched together from abstract, mind-born ideas that the teacher has dished out, but it will be based on their own burning questions about how life works.

Several years ago, one of our middle school students wrote a terrible research paper. We tried to help him improve it, but after a point we realized that it was beyond salvaging. (It might have been our fault, for not insisting that he choose a more manageable topic.)

The next year, I encouraged him to write about something he was personally interested in. He was from India, and he wrote a wonderful paper on the caste system. And because he was keenly interested, he caught fire when it came to learning the documentation skills he needed to write a credible paper. It was a great learning experience for him, to discover that he could trust his sense of what was important and interesting.

This is our approach to academics in all our subjects – that if you give children success experiences and set their enthusiasm ablaze, they will make tremendous strides without getting burned out or disengaged, as will happen if you're just treating their brains as storage bins for quickly forgotten facts.

Question 2:

In your school, do you prepare the children to look beyond the negative aspects of life?

Gary: That's exactly what we do. When people talk about school, they usually think of math, science, and writing, given the prominence of science in this culture. But in our school we broaden the meaning of education.

We're not just about the ABC's. While we do prepare them for high school Algebra 2 and Geometry, we are intensely focused on helping them develop the personal strengths and wisdom to navigate all kinds of situations related to their schoolwork, including working cooperatively.

We also give them a positive context and wisdom for dealing with the negative aspects of life, such as world politics, and the temptations of drugs and alcohol. The Education for Life philosophy includes giving children an in-depth understanding of the positive values that lead to happiness and success.

Question 3:

Living Wisdom School gives children personal skills that will help them be successful in their lives. How important are these skills to their academic success?

Helen: Helping them achieve the highest level of academic success of which they are capable requires bringing the whole child into the learning process – their energy, enthusiasm, commitment, and intensity.

If you're just engaging their minds, without the slightest effort to work on their enthusiasm, perseverance, and will power, your results are bound to be less than optimal. When you bring them into academics as whole persons, you give them a chance to learn how to fire on all eight cylinders in the classroom.

People are often tempted to categorize us as a “precious” school that might be good for kids up to about fourth grade. But then they often ask us what will happen when the students must deal with the “real world.”

In fact, there's an intensity of learning here that reflects the energy we bring to everything we do. Casual visitors might not be aware of it, if they just see these happy, enthusiastic children going about their business. They might be tempted to think, as one parent actually put it to us, that maybe these children are “too happy.”

Does learning to express kindness, compassion, and other expansive attitudes contribute to academic success? The results we've seen give us the answer – a resounding “Yes!”

Parents visit the school and comment about the “hum” in the classroom — the happy hum, and the intensity of focus in the

children. You won't always walk into a classroom that is totally quiet and subdued, because the children are very engaged and busy.

I may walk into a class while I'm touring the school with a prospective parent, and we'll find the children on the floor doing math games in quiet voices. And the parents are always struck by how the children barely notice us as we walk through, because they're deeply engaged.



When I bring the parents into the middle school classroom, it's a different kind of hum – you might find a group of children collaborating on a math chapter, or a math tutor working one-on-one with a student, or the kids might be working on their own. But there's a positive, productive level of energy in the classroom that's generated by their concentration and focus.

Also, they aren't intimidated by adults. I'll sometimes lead the parents on a tour of the school, and the children will come up and greet them. Or if I ask, "What are you working on?" they'll give the visitors a mini-lesson, without any thought of being intimidated.

I've had high school admissions directors make a point of calling me to let me know that one of our graduates "aced" the entrance interview, and that their ability to sit and engage with an adult was very impressive.

One of our graduates entered Gunn High this year. He and his brother were with us since kindergarten, and the parents naturally wondered what would happen when their boys left the safe environment of LWS. In this boy's case, he went from a school with sixty students to a high school with over 2000.

The first day, a friend of his mother called her and said, "Zachary met *a lot* of students today." They eventually unraveled the

story. When the boy thought about going into a new environment, he went out and bought lots of gum. At school the first day, he saw a boy he'd been in orchestra with, and he said, "Introduce me to your friends." So he did, and Zachary gave them a stick of gum. Whenever he would see one of the boys from that group, he would go over and do the same thing. He piggy-backed from one group to another all day and met over a hundred students.

His dad asked him, "Did you just come upon that?" He said, "No, Dad, I gave it some thought. It's why I had you get the gum for me." When he was little, he was very shy. But his experiences at our school taught him to relate to others in a natural and unselfish way.

Question 4:

In big schools with thirty or forty students in a classroom, the teachers usually find themselves teaching to the lowest common denominator. They have to spend a lot of time with the students who are slower. How do you deal with students who are less gifted, without holding back the advanced ones?

Helen: First of all, we don't judge. We aren't demanding that they jump over a bar that they're simply unable to. In every classroom, you're always going to find a broad variation of ability and effort. On the other hand, we are not interested in "dumbing-down" the pace and curriculum. Instead, there's a school-wide attitude of *welcoming* the differences. Because you can only help each child be truly successful if you start by recognizing, honestly and squarely, what's there.



The 1:9 teacher-student ratio here allows our teachers plenty of time to help every student individually. Also, we take a long-range perspective. If a first-grade student is not adding and subtracting as quickly as the rest of the class, our small classroom size allows us to give that child many small

success experiences, in an atmosphere of goodwill and relaxed encouragement that enables them to come along in time and achieve at their own best level.

Because we aren't harboring a desire to make everyone the same, we're able to help each child grow in the very best way that's realistic for them, given their gifts, and to encourage and inspire and support them to do their best.

Question 5:

Do you spend too much time developing the whole child, and giving each child a great deal of individual attention. Doesn't it use time that could more profitably be spent preparing the whole class for high school?

Gary: Parents ask us this regularly. "How well-prepared will my child be for high school when he or she graduates?"

Our graduates have been accepted, and have excelled at the Bay Area's most rigorous high schools, including Harker, Menlo, St. Francis, Bellarmine, and Woodside Priory. We have a wall of testimonial letters from our graduates, describing their successes and thanking us for preparing them well.

When they return for a visit, we always ask, "How are you doing? Did we prepare you well enough? Were you ready for high school?" And they invariably answer that they're doing wonderfully, thanks to the education they received at LWS.

Last year, one of our graduating boys was accepted by Woodside Priory, based to a great extent on his interview. The interviewer was extremely impressed by how the boy was able to conduct himself and talk to an adult in an intelligent, mature and natural way. We feel it was his theater training that gave him the poise and awareness to make such a favorable impression and be accepted by an extremely well-respected, academically focused high school.

We have dozens of similar stories of our graduates. We've also compiled statistics on our graduates' high-school grade point

averages. They're accepted in honors programs, they take AP courses, and they graduate from college. One of our girls who graduated five years ago is majoring in physics at UC Berkeley. Another is at Berkeley working on a double major in art and political science. Yet another is working for his PhD in Space Technology and Microgravity at the University of Bremen in Germany.

Another recent graduate is at Stanford, where he's thriving academically and playing on the baseball team. When he was accepted by Stanford, he made a point of calling to thank us for preparing him so well. LWS had such a deep impact on him that he called Helen four years later to thank her for her help. Our graduates often return and rave about how well Helen prepared them in language arts. They thank her for teaching them to write well, which gave them a major advantage in high school and college.

One of our recent graduates is exceptional – though he isn't too far outside the norm for our school. He was the first student in the history of Woodside Priory to be allowed to take calculus as a freshman, because he had finished Algebra 1, Geometry, Algebra 2, and Trigonometry as an eighth-grader. The math teacher at Woodside Priory recognized that this boy needed to take advanced calculus as a freshman. And even then he surprised them, because a little over halfway through the school year, in February, he had finished the year's math curriculum, and the school is wrestling with what they can do for him next.

Another graduate is at Gunn High in Palo Alto, where he's taking the most advanced math course they offer to freshmen, Algebra 2 and Trigonometry. He was allowed to take the class based on his SAT scores and his score on the entrance exam.

Aside from academics, I believe our school prepares the children in other extremely important ways, through our field trips, the theater program, and the overall school culture of kindness and cooperation.

We're constantly working with the students' energy, and we're deeply committed to making sure they learn to exercise their will power and perseverance in overcoming obstacles. There are many ways we hold them accountable, so that when they get to high school they're ready to work hard, engage with others, find their place, and be successful.

Some students struggle at first when they come here, because it takes them a while to adjust to the way we teach. But when they get to high school, they do superbly – they earn 4.0 grades at charter schools.

With some of our students, it isn't obvious right away that they're talented. They may not be spectacularly gifted students, but they do stellar things when they graduate, because of their personal qualities of perseverance, creativity, curiosity, enthusiasm, and their social skills. Our students' successes are real – they aren't the rare exception.

Helen: We understand the need for testing, but we've chosen to face it in a different way. We equip our children with a different model for learning, where they aren't just cramming to get a grade or a test score, but they're understanding the subject matter on a deep level.

We find that this approach works extremely well for them when they enter the “real world” of the Bay Area's most academically challenging high schools, because the best way to prepare for testing is to achieve a high level of competence in the subject, based on wanting to know the subject deeply, and having a genuine personal enthusiasm for it.

This touches on our school's culture. Our children transition from taking spelling, math, and reading tests in the early grades, to taking nationwide and international tests in middle school. In math, our middle schoolers participate in the American Mathematics Competition (AMC) and the Math Olympiads for Elementary and

Middle Schools. In Language Arts, they take the WordMasters Challenge.

While we can talk about how well the children do when they leave us, it's important to know that they do very well while they're here. For a small school, it's remarkable how many of our kids, every year, are operating in the 96th to 99th percentile on these very challenging competitive math tests.

The WordMasters Challenge requires children to solve verbal analogies. It's extremely difficult, and taking the tests is helpful to them when they leave us, because very similar analogies crop up in the entrance exams of most private high schools, and on the SATs. The test items are amazingly sophisticated – they would easily stump many adults. We teach the children strategies for solving the analogies, by not only understanding vocabulary but word roots, usage, and context.

Question 6:

When children graduate from LWS, with fewer than 100 children, how do they fare when they enter a high school that might have 1000 or 2000 students?

How well do LWS grads adjust to life in a mega-sized high school? Do the life skills the children learn here enable them to thrive in *any* school environment, large or small?



Helen: One of our graduates who's now in high school wrote us an unsolicited email expressing how astounded he was by what he

termed the lack of awareness among his friends, and their impact on other people.

He said, “They banter back and forth, and I can tell when somebody’s feelings are hurt, but when I bring it up to them, they haven’t even noticed.”

He said, “This is something you taught me.” And what he meant by “you” is the culture of the school, because we are seamless in our commitment to nurturing this kind of expanded awareness.

One of our students told us about her freshman orientation at Menlo. She said the teachers spent a great deal of time trying to reassure the freshmen that they didn’t have to be afraid of their teachers. And she said that she was thinking, “Why would a student be afraid of a teacher?” Because we’ve created a culture of tremendous respect and affection for one another. We have a very healthy environment.

Our students thrive in high schools large and small. They make the honor role, they succeed in sports, and they have friendships with like-minded people. The character development and life skills we teach are important tools that work anywhere.

Question 7:

How much individual attention are you realistically able to give to each child in the classroom?

Gary: Several years ago, a girl from our school transferred to a public school. With two weeks left in the school year, she transferred back to LWS. Later, she said she learned more in two weeks here than in her entire year of public school.

The teachers at LWS are very aware of the children’s individual differences. They know how to nurture each child’s strengths.

The curriculum at the public school was workbook learning. It might give a parent a good feeling that “things are okay, because they

have lots of homework.” But I would suggest that parents ask some basic questions.

What, exactly, are the kids learning? Are they enthusiastic about learning? Are they being challenged to apply their learning in creative ways? Or is it just grinding through the workbook?

This girl went to the teacher at the public school and said, “You know, I really understand this stuff, and I can prove it to you. Do I really have to do all these exercises?” Because it seemed so rote to her. And the best the teacher could do was to cut back a certain amount of rote work, even though she agreed that the student already knew it. That’s one of the big problems with a state-mandated curriculum – it gives the teacher almost no freedom to tailor the curriculum to the individual child.

In middle school math here, each child is working at his or her own pace. We correct their tests and go over what they don’t understand, and if they show real competence, they’re encouraged to go on. This is how we can accommodate kids who are at very different levels of math in the same classroom, all learning at the same time, and each one being supported at their own level.

We’re blessed to have an amazing student-teacher ratio. In middle school math class on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, we have three teachers for 15 students, or a 5:1 student-teacher ratio. And on Thursday we have two teachers, for a 7.5:1 ratio.

It’s a phenomenal program, and it works for all of the kids. It works for those who are struggling, it works for the kids who are doing well, and it works for the kids who can go really fast.

When my son was here, I intuitively knew that everything was fine. I knew it especially by watching Bryan’s energy. When he came home, and when school would begin after a vacation break, I always noticed that his energy would be high.

So, really, I think parents need to use their intuition. They know their children, and they need to ask, “Is my child happy?” and “Is my child learning?”

There will always be challenges, no matter where they go to school. A play date won’t work out, or they’ll argue with a friend. Those things happen at LWS, as they do anywhere. But if a parent takes a moment to reflect – “Is my child happy?” – I think that’s what counts.

When my son was here, I never had a doubt about his time at school, and the years have proven my judgment correct. Bryan did very well at St. Francis High School and in college, and his mother and I know it was the formative years at LWS that made a big difference.

I encourage parents to come see our play, and come to a concert, and talk to the kids at LWS about their field trips.

The teachers here accept the child who’s sitting in front of them. Not every child will be taking calculus their freshman year of high school, I can assure you. But we believe there’s not a child on the face of the earth who doesn’t have a gift. And if they’re allowed to be who they are, they can find themselves according to their gifts, whether it’s in academics, art, music, dance, theater, or the gift of making friends.

The education system in this country is wound a little tight now, and I encourage parents to remember: “These are children – they need time in nature, they need time on field trips, and they need time to do math. But they also need time to sort through things.”

I think if parents keep asking that question – “Am I doing the best for my child?” – I believe they’ll find that their child would be very happy here at Living Wisdom.

Teachers in most schools, public or private, have to try to teach to the middle of the class. And in our math department, for example, we don’t have to teach to the middle. Teaching to the middle leaves

out the super-talented, and it doesn't serve the ones who need more support. In our school, the classes are small, and because of our very low student-teacher ratio the teachers can shoot high and still bring all the children along.

Question 8:

What about the spiritual aspects of Living Wisdom School? Is the instruction truly nonsectarian?

Helen: Our parents generally accept that we're nonsectarian, but occasionally they'll wonder what it really means. How do we infuse the school culture with spiritual principles, without taking sides with one path?

The answer is that we're sharing principles and direct experiences. If spiritual principles are real, then they must work scientifically, repeatably, and practically. So we aren't teaching spiritual rules, or the kinds of blanket judgments that come with religious dogma – "If you do this, you'll go to hell." We're focused on what works.

In our school, it's all about "Look how far I've come. Look at the successes I've had. Look at the direction I'm taking."

The most spiritual direction is that which takes you toward increasing happiness and away from suffering.



This is a deeply spiritual approach to understanding life that most parents would agree that their children should learn. Because they want the child to learn how to "choose happiness" by following the eternal nonsectarian spiritual

principles that are built into the very fabric of our lives.

Happiness is always directional – the fundamental truth of all spiritual paths is that we become happier as we cultivate thoughts, actions, feelings, and attitudes that expand our awareness – attitudes of kindness, compassion, friendship, generosity and support, and so on.

If an adult tries to “practice kindness” and “choose happiness,” they quickly discover that it can be quite a challenge. But we all know that these principles work. So these are the basic rules of our school, and really, they aren’t rigid rules to be memorized and followed blindly, so much as they are principles that the children can test for themselves. Our first two School Rules are: “Practice Kindness” and “Choose Happiness.” And these are simply qualities of successful people everywhere.

We also teach the students non-sectarian scientific breathing and concentration techniques for calming their bodies and minds and focusing attention. And these are skills that will help them overcome their challenges in school and life.

Question 9:

Is the student body skewed toward children from wealthy, highly educated families?

Helen: LWS welcomes students from a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Our goal is to help every child succeed.

Gary: I had a conversation with someone about how our students thrive academically at LWS. He objected, “Well, it’s a private school – you guys are all rich.”

I said, “I work on the budget, and I see people’s finances, because we do financial aid, and nothing could be further from the truth.”

One of our parents is a single mom who works two jobs to keep her son in LWS. We have parents who are CEOs and everything in between.

Our social and cultural diversity is a selling point for the school. At LWS, we aren't about status and adjusting our philosophy to cater to the children of the well-to-do. We're about helping children find happiness and be successful regardless of their background.

Question 10:

Parents are understandably anxious for their children to gain a good foundation in math and science. You've talked about the broad, enriched curriculum at LWS. But doesn't math strike more directly toward the intellect, and require more traditional teaching methods?



Photo: Individual instruction means every LWS student graduates with a strong grasp of math principles. At LWS, we don't merely "teach to the test."

Helen: I would have to say that the short answer is "no." Because our focus on understanding and helping the individual child works equally well in every subject. At least, that's been our experience, and as we've said, the results prove the method.

It's a core strength of our school that we can individualize instruction, thanks to our small class size. It would be a lot harder in a classroom with 25-35 students.

The question, as I understand it, is whether math isn't more strictly mastered by using the rational, intellectual mind, than perhaps other subjects might be. But even if we assume that it is so, the *child* is never simply a rational, intellectual being. And the enthusiasm, focus, and perseverance that we spend a great deal of time helping

the children develop give them a tremendous advantage in math as well.

In math, also, there is a tremendous natural variation of talent. And whether a child is very advanced or challenged, they will never be helped anywhere nearly as effectively by the “traditional” approach of rote memorization, “studying to the test,” and trying to march them through a fixed curriculum in lockstep, as they will be helped by a curriculum that takes account of the child’s special skills and needs.

If a child has a special talent, they can go as far and as fast as they’re able, as long as they show mastery. But we can still keep them with their age group, because our teaching philosophy allows us to advance all of the children in the same classroom at their own pace.

The same goes for students who might have particular challenges in academics. We’re able, thanks again to our small class size, to give the child one-hundred percent of the help they need to achieve at the upper end of their potential.

22. STUDENTS AND PARENTS TALK ABOUT LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL

Will your child be happy and successful at Living Wisdom School and beyond? Listen to what our parents and graduates say.



“I came across another big idea as soon as I entered Living Wisdom: *I can choose to be happy*. And it led up to another idea: that no one can make you unhappy, nor can you blame your unhappiness on other people, because it’s you who decides to be happy or not.” (*Rena Bush, class of 2008, graduate of Los Altos High School*)

“I don’t know what the exact statistic is, but most Americans’ number one fear is public speaking. The way I see it, public speaking is not restricted to speeches in front of large groups of people. Raising your hand and asking a question in class is public speaking. And sadly, some children are afraid to do this. They are afraid they will look stupid, or people will think they are dumb because they didn’t understand something. The LWS school plays taught me to get over the fear of public speaking when I was very young. Now I am much more comfortable speaking in front of large groups of people. Granted, I still sometimes get nervous, but I have the confidence to try. Also, LWS included everyone in the school plays, so everyone received this beneficial experience. No one was or felt left out.”

Genyana Greenfield August, Class of '06, graduate of Mid-Peninsula High School

“In sixth grade we started meditating every morning, more than before, and I found that it quieted the pools of my mind, which on some days were already boiling over by the time I arrived at school.”

Rewa Bush, class of 2008, graduate of Los Altos High School

Telephone conversation with Peter Abrams, (Class of 2004):

Peter: Hi, Helen. I just wanted to call and say thank you.

Helen: What's up, Peter?

Peter: I just received my acceptance to Stanford, and I know it would never have happened without you guys. Seriously, without LWS this never would have happened.

(Peter is now a sophomore at Stanford, majoring in history. He redshirted in varsity baseball last year and will try out for the team this year.)

“I am writing to say thank you. You taught me many things in my two years at Living Wisdom, but the most important, by far, was how to use common sense. In the theater business (and, frankly, in any business), there is always a delicate balance between doing what you're told and acting instantly upon your own judgment. We memorize our lines and blocking, but if something goes wrong, we have to ad lib...we have to think on our feet and act accordingly. I owe my ability to do these things almost entirely to you, and for that I am most grateful.” *Rose Frazier, Class of 2006*, is studying at San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She sings in the San Francisco Opera Chorus, and performs with the Gilbert and Sullivan Lamplighters.

Email to teacher Gary McSweeney:

“When I was at Living Wisdom, I never really understood what you and the school were doing for me, and how incredibly fortunate I was to be in that situation. Looking back, I can see how much I took the entire thing for granted, your teaching style, the philosophy of the school, and the whole environment that surrounded it. In a way I think I really didn’t take advantage of all the help you were trying to give me, but even through all the troubles I gave you (even though they were all somebody else’s fault!), you managed to impart upon me the secrets of life, and indeed, the universe itself!

“In all seriousness though, it is especially easy for me to notice the difference in myself now because I am surrounded by people who are still in the state of mind that I was in when I came to Living Wisdom. Now, that’s not to say I don’t get in trouble anymore, or that I am a perfect child or anything (I am), but the way I view the world around me and other people in it has changed dramatically. Where other people are teasing or making fun of somebody in a joking way, I can really easily tell how that person is feeling about it, even more than just seeing the look on their face.

“I can tell if they are not finding it funny, or they are actually hurt by it, even if they are acting as if they are fine. It doesn’t sound like much, but none of my friends understand when something like that is happening, and when I talk to them about it, they will look confused and say that they had no idea, or that they didn’t mean for it to be hurting the person. And I believe them. I don’t think they were doing it on purpose or anything, but it just shows that for some reason I am more aware about other people and my surroundings than most of the kids my age.

“It shows itself in other ways too, but that is the most obvious at least to me.

“Another one is the way I think about my actions before I do them. I spend a lot of time worrying about causing somebody else a

lot of unnecessary trouble, and when I do (I never do), I spend the next few nights lying awake thinking about it and regretting it. I think basically what it boils down to is that I am just more aware about the world outside of myself, and I think that you are the one who showed me how to look at the world that way. And for that, I am forever grateful.” *William Prince, Class of 08, graduate of Mid-Peninsula High School*

“Throughout my time at Living Wisdom, I was constantly exposed to the ideas and truths behind all religions.” *Rewa Bush, class of 2008, graduate of Los Altos High School*

“Before I came to Living Wisdom School, I used to have long philosophical conversations with my mom on the way to school every morning, and I feel it educated me more than filling in bubbles on worksheets in second grade. But at Living Wisdom, school and education were one, like they should be.” *Rewa Bush, Class of 2008, graduate of Los Altos High School*

“LWS gave me the confidence to be able to handle the outside world. Because I had teachers who always believed in me, I learned to believe in myself. They pushed me to always do my best. This increased my capacity to do well, in school and in life. Basically ‘my best’ got better.” *Genyana Greenfield August, Class of 2006, graduate of Mid-Peninsula High School*

“One of the things I think is great about the math department at LWS is that everyone gets to work at their own pace. The children who are ahead learn to help the children who are behind them. And no judgment is passed about where a child is in her or his math book. Everyone is very supportive of each other. Now, in high school it seems natural to me to help others when they are behind me or need

help.” *Genyana Greenfield August, Class of 2006, graduate of Mid-Peninsula High School*

“St. Stephen’s strives for excellence in the arts, athletics, and academics. Of course, with everything there is to do at school, I am challenged and busy. The teachers are fun and encouraging. I have slowly started making friends. Friendships take time to occur. Unlike at Living Wisdom School, it has taken a long time to meet people who easily accept you. Through my short experience at St. Stephen’s, I have realized what an incredible learning environment was provided at Living Wisdom School. Going to school at LWS was like going to your extended family every day.” *Elliot Sakatch, Class of 2005 (Elliot moved to Austin, Texas with his family and enrolled at St. Stephen’s Episcopal School).*

Peggy Sakatch, mother of Elliot, Class of ‘06, writes about Elliot’s new school after the family moved to Austin, Texas: “We both miss LWS. There is something intangibly better about LWS, period. It’s stuff that’s all well described on the website (kids can be themselves, and wow, does that ever open them up to all that they can possibly accomplish and enjoy, etc.”

“As I was acting out the lives of great people on stage, I was developing life skills like confidence, while wrapping my mind around the fantastic ideas and words of Buddha or Hafiz.” *Rewa Bush, Class of 2008, graduate of Los Altos High School*

“To me we are doing more than acting. We are telling a story of a legend. This year, the play was on the life of St. Francis, with whom I am familiar. It was very beautiful and moving. But last year’s play on the life of Buddha, about whom I knew nothing, was really interesting for me, because I had to act a story and culture I knew

nothing about. I learned so much from Buddha. What a beautiful legend and story! Living Wisdom plays are a true treasure to me.” *Lea Buonocore, Class of 2008, graduate of Palo Alto Preparatory High School*

“I love being on stage. I love the feeling I get when I am up there dancing or reciting my lines. I loved this play because I loved learning about the wonderful and interesting life of Buddha. I learned to be more compassionate and understanding of others.” *Joy Barajas, Class of 2007, graduate of Notre Dame High School, Belmont*

“Gary (Gary McSweeney, middle school teacher) says he honestly believes LWS students have successful interviews for high school, talk more easily in public, and relate more readily to adults because of the Living Wisdom Theater program. He knows firsthand because he has seen a huge transformation in his son, Bryan, who attended LWS from kindergarten through 8th grade.

“In kindergarten, Bryan refused to participate in the play at all. The next year he had a small part and the next year a little bigger part, and soon he had worked his way to the lead role. He would get very nervous, but he faced his fears and went on with the show. Later, as a high school freshman, he knew only one other person in the whole school, but he also knew that he liked performing, so he went to the drama department. There, he made many friends. Now in college, he has no problem at all talking in front of groups. As one of the speakers at a Living Wisdom School fundraiser last year, he cracked one joke after another! Gary attributes Bryan’s growth as an individual in large part to the theater program.”

(Excerpt from “Rules of the Theater,” an essay in the school literary magazine, Living Wisdom School Angels Have a Lot to Say, June, 2007, by Rewa Bush, Class of 2008 and a graduate of Los Altos High, and Hadley Sheppard, graduate of Notre Dame High School, Belmont.)

“Sinead scored exactly 1500 out of 1600 on the SAT for Math and English. The SAT now has three parts, and out of a total of 2400, she scored 2150. She had a perfect score on the PSAT in Math. She has also been recommended for enrollment as a National Merit Scholar and has a four-point GPA.

“Sinead also chided fellow students as they mocked their teacher who had his back to them. ‘That would never fly in my old school,’ she said. And they stopped.” (*Ria Toolis, mother of Sinead Toolis-Byrd, Class of 2003, who attended high school at Harker Academy and is a junior at U. C. Berkeley, majoring in Art.*)

“During Freshman Orientation (at Menlo School), I observed that I noticed things other kids did not. I think I have a different level of awareness. I was also taken aback when teachers strongly encouraged freshmen not to be afraid of them. I thought, ‘Why would anyone be afraid of teachers?’” (*Mara Schleck, Class of 2003, graduated from Menlo School and is a junior at Georgetown University majoring in Economics.*)

“When I went to India on a school trip, I realized that my experience performing the lives of Buddha and Krishna left me much more prepared than many of the other kids to get the most out of the experience.” (*Mara Schleck, Class of 2003, now a junior at Georgetown University majoring in Economics*)

“We asked Drew if there was anything he missed about LWS now that he is in high school. He said the one thing he misses is how much the teachers care about the students at LWS. He has great teachers at Menlo, but the level of caring is not the same. He is doing very well – he has only had a month of school. He was pleased to get an A on a physics test. He said he was well prepared by LWS for high

school. (*Suzanne Schleck. Her son, Drew, Class of 2006, is a senior at Menlo School.*)

“Hey! Wow, high school really is different. But you and Helen prepared me REALLY well. I’m sure you said something like this when I wasn’t listening, but it really seems like high school is about the people you meet. The school can push academics all they want, but having teachers who are unique and students who are, too, really seems to be important, which I guess is why I remember LWS being so ‘cool.’ It gives a good idea of what to look for in a school and hopefully in life.” (*Drew Schleck, Class of 2006, now a senior at Menlo School. Drew wrote this note to LWS middle school teacher Gary McSweeney as a high school freshman.*)

High School Freshman Report Card Comments:

English: “Anjali has an upbeat attitude, good cheer, is meticulously prepared. A lively voice emerged throughout her writing. Thoughtful insights. She used language in a lively fashion.”

World Religions: “Rare student who has correct answers and thoughtful comments. Puts thought and effort into her homework consistently.”

Algebra: “Unfailingly polite and cheerful, does all the work, and seems to have a good grasp of the subject. I have at this point little concern about her doing well; I am more concerned about making sure that this class stays challenging enough to be interesting.”

Physics: “Anjali has been doing very well in physics this quarter. She’s a very responsible student, and I really enjoy having her in class.”

Jazz Dance: “Wonderful in class. Participates all the time. Stays focused and on task. A lovely dancer.”

(Anjali Madison, class of 2006, graduate of Menlo School.)

High School Freshman Report Card Comments:

Chemistry: “Rose continues to shine. I hope that she considers advanced study in one of the sciences; she’s good at them and really seems to enjoy herself as she learns.”

Humanities: “Through her frequent participation in class discussions, as well as the superb quality of her written work, Rose has once again demonstrated a solid command of the subject matter for Humanities.”

Mandarin I: “Your performance in this class is unimpeachable. You set extraordinary standards for all of us.”

Writing Workshop: “Rose has had a stellar trimester. She is a remarkably focused and diligent young woman. Two observations on Rose’s performance stand out: the consistency and seriousness of purpose she brings to her work, and her range and versatility. While she sees herself as most able in creative and imaginative work, I found her discipline and acuity in expository and analytical assignments to be equally impressive.”

Rose Frazier, Class of 2005, attended high school at The Bay School in San Francisco. Although accepted by Stanford University, Rose chose to enroll at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Catching up with *Peter Abrams, Class of 2004*, at Herbst Theater in San Francisco.

Peter has maintained a 4.0 GPA throughout high school. As a freshman, he received the achievement award in both his Algebra and English classes. As a sophomore, he repeated that accomplishment in Math and Japanese. His natural athletic talent and great work ethic paid off in sports as well. He was slated to play for the varsity baseball team in spring, having overcome an earlier football injury. (*Peter was accepted at Stanford, where he is thriving.*)

“The teachers are what made LWS even more special. My teacher, Gary, was also one of the most special people in my life. He helped me grow as a person so much; he was very real and down to earth. Gary understood me and knew how he could help me grow. He would put faith in me and trust me to do things I didn’t think I could do. He was a great influence on me, and we are still good friends to this day. The motto of LWS, which is ‘Education for Life,’ really shone through when Gary taught because he applied everything we did to life and how to deal with it.” (*Ashim Abuja, Class of 2003, a senior at San Francisco State University majoring in Film.*)

“This school did not just change me personally; it also inspired me in my goals in life. Every year we put on a play celebrating the life of a saint, sage, or guru, like Buddha, Joan of Arc, Krishna, Jesus, and of course, Yogananda. I was involved in the last three. [I played] a leper in the Life of Jesus, Shakuni, an evil uncle, in Krishna, and Yogananda as a teen in The Life of Yogananda. As Yogananda, I started to understand truly what a blessing this was. When I got on stage, I felt like I was in India, looking through his eyes, just as if they were my own. For those thirty minutes, I was Yogananda. This transformation I felt was like nothing else I had ever felt before...” (*Ashim Abuja, Class of 2003, is a senior at San Francisco State University majoring in Film.*)

Samantha Shireman writes in response to the news that the middle school had just returned from the Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon:

“I loved reading Macbeth (seven years ago at LWS)...and still love it.” (Samantha, Class of 2004, a sophomore at UC Berkeley majoring in Physics.)

23. HOW EDUCATING CHILDREN'S HEARTS IMPROVES ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Does working with children's feelings improve their academic performance?

Current research supports a core tenet of Living Wisdom School: that "children who are loved, and who learn to love, love to learn."

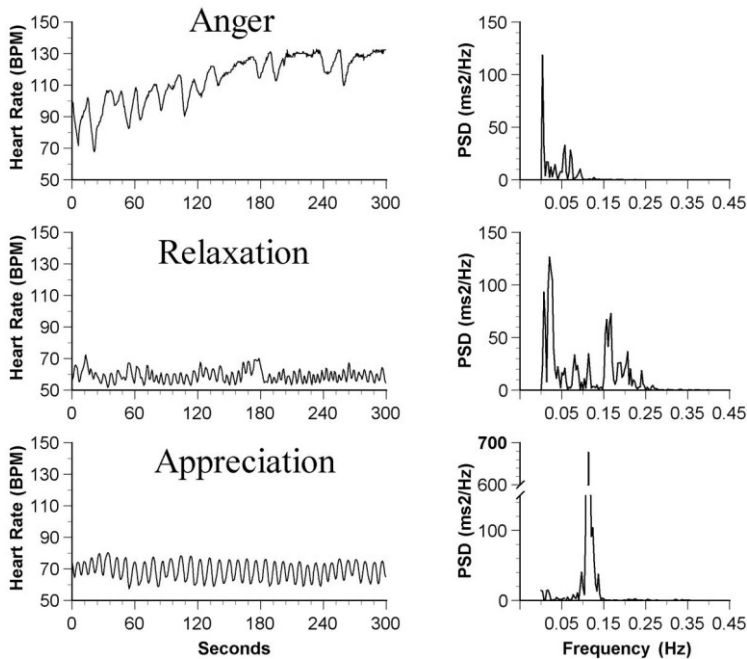
Scientists at the [Institute of HeartMath](#) (IHM) in Boulder Creek, California are studying the effects of positive feelings such as love, compassion, and kindness on our bodies and brains. Their findings suggest that mental performance improves in the presence of positive feelings.

Here are some of the IHM findings:

- Deliberately focusing attention in the heart while cultivating feelings of love, compassion, etc., leads to clearer thinking, calmer emotions, and improved physical performance and health.
- Positive feelings quiet the mind, generate a sense of "self-security, peace and love," and increase the frequency of reported feelings of "connectedness to God."
- Negative emotions such as anger, fear, and hatred make the heart change speeds erratically. The heartbeat literally speeds up and slows down chaotically between beats, like the random, jerky motion of a car that's running out of gas. In the figure below, the charts on the left show graphs of heart rate variability during positive, negative, and neutral emotions. The figures on the right show the heart's electrical power output

(“PSD” = Power Spectral Density). Note that the heart’s power output is approximately 380 percent higher during feelings of appreciation than during simple relaxation.

- The heart and brain communicate continually through the nervous system; thus, the heart’s powerful positive or negative, harmonizing or disruptive messages are carried instantly to the brain, where they enhance or interfere with our ability to focus and remain cool. (The heart is the body’s most powerful oscillator, emitting electrical signals roughly 60 times stronger than those generated by the brain.)



To summarize: positive, harmonious feelings enhance mental focus, calmness, health, performance, and the frequency of spiritual feelings. They increase relaxation, alpha-wave output in the brain (associated with a calm, meditative state), and synchronize heart-rhythm patterns, respiratory rhythms, and blood pressure oscillations.

Whether our goal is peak performance in the classroom or at work, it’s clear that cultivating positive feelings facilitates success.

Feeling and Reason: Opposites No Longer

Additional evidence suggests that feeling and reason work together, and that one without the other isn't trustworthy.

Roughly seventy years ago, researchers first became aware that the prefrontal cortex of the brain is the area where important human qualities are localized, such as mental concentration, positive attitudes, optimism, and the ability to form goals and persevere in attaining them.

The prefrontal cortex is also the "control center" where raw emotions are restrained and modulated. In a number of spiritual paths, the primary meditative practices include holding attention gently in the prefrontal cortex, at the point between the eyebrows, a technique that these traditions claim has a harmonizing effect on the emotions, and helps to calm and focus the mind.

In his bestselling book, *Emotional Intelligence*, New York Times science reporter Daniel Goleman writes:

A. R. Luria, the brilliant Russian neuropsychologist, proposed as long ago as the 1930s that the prefrontal cortex was key for self-control and constraining emotional outbursts; patients who had damage to this area, he noted, were impulsive and prone to flare-ups of fear and anger. And a study of two dozen men and women who had been convicted of impulsive, heat-of-passion murders found, using PET scans for brain imaging, that they had a much lower than usual level of activity in these same sections of the prefrontal cortex. (*Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995. p. 314)

Richard J. Davidson, PhD, director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin, found that university students who had higher levels of activity in the prefrontal cortex had uniformly better grades, a better ability to create and attain goals, and less trouble with depression, drugs, and alcohol.

In 2002, scientists at Duke University used brain scans to verify that raw emotions interfere with concentration. A surprising finding was that mental focus and unrefined emotions exist in a mutually exclusive relationship. That is, not only does raw emotion distort our ability to focus, but deliberately focusing attention is an effective way to calm and “neutralize” disruptive emotions. As the Duke news release stated, “Surprisingly, an increase in one type of function is accompanied by a noticeable decrease in the other.”

“We’ve known for a long time that some people are more easily distracted and that emotions can play a big part in this,” said Kevin S. LaBarr, assistant professor at Duke’s Center for Cognitive Neuroscience and an author of the [above-mentioned] study. “Our study shows that two streams of processing take place in the brain, with attentional tasks and emotions moving in parallel before finally coming together.” The two streams are integrated in a region of the brain called the anterior cingulate, which is located between the right and left halves of the brain’s frontal portion and is involved in a wide range of thought processes and emotional responses.¹

People who meditate find that holding attention persistently but with relaxation in the area of the anterior cingulate (at the point between the eyebrows) more or less automatically helps soothe any troubling emotions they might be feeling, and helps them become more calm, positive, and concentrated.

Raw, reactive emotions have a very different mental and physiological impact than calm, positive feelings. At Living Wisdom School, the children are encouraged to be honest about their feelings, but they are also taught ways to transmute negative feelings into positive ones.

For example, one technique involves deliberately focusing attention as a way to calm upset emotions that can lead to painful

¹ Duke University press release, August 19, 2002.

disharmony and poor academic performance. As an aid to concentration, the children learn a simple meditation technique borrowed from yoga, which involves holding attention gently in the prefrontal cortex, as a way to help the mind become relaxed and one-pointed – an asset for helping the children be happy and do well in school.

Reason is Crippled Without Feeling

As noted above, researchers now know that feelings and reason work hand in hand. Contrary to a longstanding prejudice of western culture, which assumes that reason is the superior faculty, researchers have found that reason is deeply compromised unless it is balanced by the feelings of the heart.

Consider...the role of emotions in even the most “rational” decision-making. In work with far-reaching implications for understanding mental life, Dr. Antonio Damasio, a neurologist at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, has made careful studies of just what is impaired in patients with damage to the prefrontal/amygdala circuit [the link between the two most important brain centers of reason and emotion]. Their decision making is terribly flawed – and yet they show no deterioration at all in IQ or any cognitive ability. Despite their intact intelligence, they make disastrous choices in business and their personal lives, and can even obsess endlessly over a decision so simple as when to make an appointment. Dr. Damasio believes their decisions are so bad because they have lost access to their emotional learning.... Cut off from emotional memory in the amygdala, whatever the neocortex mulls over no longer triggers the emotional reactions that have been associated with it in the past – everything takes on a gray neutrality.... Evidence like this leads Dr. Damasio to the counter-intuitive position that feelings are

typically indispensable for rational decisions; they point us in the proper direction, where dry logic can then be of best use.²

Positive Feelings and Classroom Success

How closely do positive feelings correlate with academic performance? Public school students who were taught IHM methods for harmonizing their hearts' feelings experienced uniform improvement in their academic performance. (These studies are summarized on the Institute of HeartMath website [www.heartmath.org], in an article by Rollin McCraty, PhD, *The Scientific Role of the Heart in Learning and Performance*.) At the conclusion of a study of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in Miami, Florida, the researchers reported:

Results showed that students who learned and practiced the [Institute of Heartmath heart-harmonizing methods] exhibited significant improvements in nearly all areas of psychosocial functioning assessed, including stress and anger management, self-reliance, risky behavior, work management and focus, and relationships with teachers, family and peers Further, a follow-up analysis indicated that many of these improvements were sustained over the following six months.³

In summary, the Institute of Heartmath research suggests that teaching students how to cultivate positive feelings increases their nervous system harmony, thereby improving emotional stability, cognitive functioning, and academic performance.

In a *New York Times* op-ed article, columnist David Brooks remarks:

² Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997) 27–28.

³ McCraty R, Atkinson M, Tomasino D, Goelitz J, Mayrovitz HN. The impact of an emotional self-management skills course on psychosocial functioning and autonomic recovery to stress in middle school children. *Integrative Physiological and Behavioral Science* 1999;34(4):246-268.

It's crazy to have educational policies that, in effect, chop up children's brains into the rational cortex, which the government ministers to in schools, and the emotional limbic system, which the government ignores. In nature there is no neat division. Emotional engagement is the essence of information processing and learning.⁴

The results of these studies come as no surprise to the teachers at Living Wisdom School, where students have learned techniques for harmonizing their hearts' feelings for more than forty years.

⁴ <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/opinion/editorialsandoped/oped/columnists/davidbrooks/index.html?inline=nyt-per>

24. CAN THE ARTS HELP CHILDREN EXCEL ACADEMICALLY?

A Professional Cellist Shares His Thoughts



When David Eby isn't teaching music to the children at the Living Wisdom School in Portland, Oregon, he's a cellist with [The Bodhi Trio](#), the Oregon Symphony, and the [Portland Cello Project](#).

David teaches cello at [Lewis and Clark College](#); leads the Advanced Strings at Oregon Episcopal School; and is a Teaching Artist for the [BRAVO Youth Orchestra](#), an [El Sistema](#) program that brings classical music training to disadvantaged youth.

David lives in south Portland with his wife Madhavi, their daughter Caitlin, and their Manx cat, Maggie.

(Visit David's website, www.davidebysmusic.com, where you can learn about his insights on meditation for musicians, and the spiritual healing power of music in our lives.)

David has taught in the Living Wisdom Schools for more than sixteen years – initially for two years in Portland, then twelve years at

the original school at Ananda Village, near Nevada City, California, and now he's teaching in Portland again.

Q: David, let's have an informal conversation about the role of the arts in helping kids be happy and successful in school and in their lives. Have you given much thought to the positive role that the arts can play in a child's development, especially during the important "Feeling Years" from age 6 to 12? Has it been a theme in your life, and in your daughter's?

David: My daughter Caitlin is in sixth grade, and she's performing with the Pacific Youth Choir in Portland. They recently sang Mahler's Third Symphony with the Oregon Symphony. It was a spectacular, high-powered event – Mahler can be pretty heavy, but she was moved to tears by the beauty of it.

She gets a great deal of joy from music, theater, and writing – and she's passionate about the arts. She grew up in the Living Wisdom Schools and now attends the Arts and Communication Magnet Academy in Portland. I've taken her to choir practice since she was a little one, and as a result she knows our entire repertoire inside and out. (laughs)

In my life, the arts have been a constant theme. I picked up the cello when I was six, and I knew right away, with a solid intuition, "This is my instrument!" Music was something that stayed with me throughout my childhood, and playing cello and singing took me to some incredible experiences in my youth.

It was during those years from 6 to 12 that my heart was most open, and through music I was able to experience something greater than myself, whether we call it a higher inspiration, God, or our highest potential. The name we give it doesn't matter, so long as we recognize the amazing places where music can take us.

There are two aspects to music. There's the purely physical, sonic experience, and then there's the interior, subjective response.

The sonic experience is what the sound waves are doing to the brain. Many studies in recent years have shown that music, and especially playing an instrument, builds important connections between the two hemispheres of a child's brain, and that when the child is having a musical experience, many areas of the brain become engaged.

It's not just a single part of the brain. Music touches a number of brain areas simultaneously, and when we're performing, the whole brain lights up in a striking way that the scientists can observe on brain scans. The effect is there to a lesser degree when we passively listen to music, and even when we imagine music that inspires us.

So there's the purely physical level, and then there's an energetic level. And by "energetic" I mean the way the sound waves touch us in a deep way, and stimulate a certain kind of energy in us. It's what happens when we say, "That piece really moved me." Or, "It struck a chord with me – I really resonated with it."

It's something that we can safely say lies beyond our intellectual perception, or the simple effect of the sound waves on the physical body. There's something that music can awaken that is deeper than a collection of beats and sound waves and chords.

There's a lot of popular music nowadays that is simply that, unfortunately – it's just sounds and beats and rhythms and effects that are designed as ear candy. It gets our energy moving and excites our emotions, but when it's over it dumps us back out on the curb again.

I'm intrigued by a kind of music that does exactly the opposite, a music that bypasses the mind and draws us inward, into a oneness with something that's greater than the little ego, and that we recognize as being the highest part of ourselves.

Q: Are there levels upon levels of uplifting music – for example, music that can raise our spirits, and then music that can take us to an even higher plane?

David: Yes, I'm convinced of this. I coached at a music camp last week, where an amateur quartet played a Schubert piece, and it was lovely. Schubert wrote some incredibly inspired pieces. Some of his songs have a powerful ability to cheer us up and make us smile and feel that life is good.

But I believe there are even higher levels. Brahms said that he would contact a divine presence that was “superconscious” when he composed – he actually used that word – and that it was from there that he drew his inspiration.

For me, music is a road map, a kind of source code that can capture inspiration, and that captures the state of consciousness that the composers were able to enter and draw upon, and bring into their music.

We're given these dots on a page, and when we perform it, there's a big light that goes on somewhere on the scale of inspiration. And if you play the notes, and carefully tune in to the moment, and if you're focused and receptive, you can get a taste of, or become wholly immersed in what the composer experienced. And if the composer received it from a very high place, for example Handel's *Messiah*, you can feel it touching your soul.



It's like a prescription for lifting your consciousness onto a happier plane. It starts with the realm of pure ideas, and then it works through energy to create a sonic vibration that transmits those ideas to a place that's deep within us.

For me, it's one of the things in life, like nature, that can awaken a remembrance of a beauty that lies hidden in us all, and an understanding of where our greatest fulfillment comes from.

Our greatest fulfillments can never ultimately come from anything material. When you hear music, can you put your finger on it? Can you capture it? It's played and then it goes away. It's this thing that's completely immaterial, yet it's one of the greatest gifts that God has given us, because it can lead us to the inner kingdom where our universal birthright of happiness lies.

Q: As you were growing up, and in your career as a cellist, was there a point at which you felt there was a ceiling on the inspiration you could tap into through the kind of music you were playing?

David: Yes. First of all, I can tell you that when I was in the Feeling Years from 6 to 12, I was a complete music snob! (laughs) My teacher actually had to pull me aside and say, "David, I'm afraid I have to give you an unsatisfactory grade, because your attitude has been really, really bad in music class." And I wasn't quite sassy enough to say, "Well, yeah, because this music is *horrible!*" (laughs)

It was totally uninspiring. But, at the same time, I remember being deeply moved by the folk songs of the Seventies, especially the tunes from Godspell and others that were being sung at the time. My Dad is a Presbyterian pastor, and I grew up in those surroundings, with an awareness of the inspiration of Spirit.

So yes, I had many experiences that reassured me: "As long as I have the music, everything will be okay."

I had incredibly inspired experiences that carried me through high school. But then toward the end of college, after a great deal of formal training, I woke up one day in a kind of panic, wondering, "My gosh, what have I done?"

I thought, "I'll end up playing in an orchestra surrounded by miserable, cynical, jaded musicians, of whom there are great many, and

uninspired conductors, and an audience that's dwindling, and music that for the most part isn't inspiring at all.

There's a lot of music that is inspired, but orchestras oftentimes have to program "new music" to win the grants that will support the more inspiring stuff. And it's very unfortunate that in contemporary music we have a great deal to learn about inspiration. Right now, it seems the more outrageous and atonal it is, the better the it's purported to be. It certainly can be powerful. But uplifting? – hmm, I don't think so.

So I put my career on hold when I was in my late twenties, and I went off in search of that lost inspiration. And, interestingly enough, I ended up finding it.

At first I was looking for a way to serve society through music, which I felt would be a heart-opening and fulfilling thing to do. My first attempt was when I joined a troupe of storytelling musicians who were addressing the needs of children in the Feeling Years that we've been talking about, from age 6 to 12. We would take stories and set them to music, and we would become the characters and act them out, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

One season I played the mayor of Hamlin – I would strap my cello to my body, and we would play and sing and enact the story. And for a long time I felt very inspired by it, because it truly was serving the needs of young children who desperately need upliftment through the arts.

But then it became too much an "art for art's sake" kind of thing. So I bowed out and began working with the Suzuki Method, which is founded on a beautiful philosophy of mentoring children who won't necessarily be professional musicians, but who will be human beings with beautiful hearts.

But I realized that I was wanting more. I wanted to be surrounded by people who not only practiced good teachings, but who were looking for Truth, spelled large. I knew there was a level of

music that could touch the soul, and that was the kind of music I was longing to explore.

It was then, thank goodness, that I found Ananda and I started working as a teacher at the Living Wisdom School in Portland.

At that point, I had quit professional music, and I dove headfirst into teaching, with these kids who were all in the age group of 6 to 12. It was the hardest job I've had, because of the tremendous energy I had to put out to manage the kids and connect with them. I had a class of all girls and one shy boy who was overwhelmed and wasn't able to put out much energy. So for the first two years, it was just the typical, terribly difficult, soul-searing experience of being a beginning teacher.

Then we moved to Ananda Village, where I taught music in the Living Wisdom School for twelve years, and it was an incredibly fulfilling experience, and very, very successful.

Q: Here in Palo Alto, Helen and Gary often have to explain to parents why we spend so much time on the arts. The parents wonder if we might be neglecting the kids' academic studies. It can be difficult to persuade them that forty years of experience have shown us, beyond any possibility of doubt, that engaging kids in the performing arts has a very positive effect on their academic performance. There's a strong component of feeling in the learning experience, and it needs to be cultivated, as an important keystone of the academic curriculum.

One of our students is a gifted young classical pianist. Arthur just finished third grade, and you can see that he's totally focused and engaged when he plays – and it's a quality that carries over to his studies, and his interactions with the other children and his teachers and other adults.

In your years of teaching, have you noticed that the children's lives are meaningfully enhanced as a result of the time they spend in the arts?

David: Without the slightest question. One of my first students in the Portland school was a boy named Keshava, who's now in his late twenties and living in Los Angeles, where he plays cello very inspiringly. Keshava realized early on that if he was feeling low, all he had to do was pick up the cello and play, and he would very quickly feel better. That's a huge gift – to have such a powerful tool to raise our consciousness. It's one of the most valuable skills we can learn.



I remember coming out of a horrible opera rehearsal one night. As I drove home in the rain, I was feeling drenched by the misery of it all. And then I decided to rehearse a solo that I had volunteered to sing, from the oratorio “Christ Lives” by Swami Kriyananda. It was just a way to pass the time on what would otherwise be a miserable drive. I wasn’t expecting any great change in my consciousness, but then, *whammo!* – I suddenly felt a tremendous current of joy. It was so powerful that I had to pull over to the side of the road.

I wondered, “What in the world just happened?! I don’t understand this – how did this happen?” (laughs)

The song that I’d started to sing was a very simple piece. It stayed within the octave, and it wasn’t sophisticated at all. Yet it left me wondering, “How did this move me so powerfully? How was it able to change me in an instant?”

Swami Kriyananda talked about this force in music. He said that music, like architecture, can hold a vibration and a state of consciousness, and when we walk into an inspired piece of music, it’s like walking into a beautiful building. We walk into a holy place and we feel uplifted, and we walk into a holy song, and the same thing can happen.

For me, it's an awe-inspiring responsibility to provide uplifting music for children. I'm teaching music at the school in Portland now, and for the children to walk into these pieces, it changes them. It's very important to provide opportunities for them to explore those higher places in themselves.

You can't force it. It's not something you can ever hope to drive into them – “Now, I want you to *feel!*” (laughs) And it's the same with adults. There are adults who love the music, but they have a hard time tuning in to the inner experience of it. And it's a joy to help them find that happiness in themselves.

I'm working with a music education program called [El Sistema](#) that was started in 1975 by a Venezuelan educator, musician, and activist, José Antonio Abreu.

It brought intense classical music training into the slums, the *barrios*, and it transformed the whole society, to the point where eighty percent of the doctors and lawyers and educators came up through this system as children. That's just an amazing, powerful statistic!

We're working with children in an impoverished area of north Portland. It's hard to measure the changes in the last three years, because how can you compare where a child is today, compared to some other potential for that child? But we've seen an incredibly positive development of personal skills and confidence and social maturity.

Q: These inner changes are starting to be documented by science. It's been shown, for example, that in the presence of expansive feelings like love, compassion, kindness, and so on, the heart's rhythms change from relatively chaotic to extremely harmonious. The scientists studying these changes have shown that those harmonious vibrations have a powerful effect on the body and brain. They've found, for example, that in school districts where

they've taught their heart-harmonizing methods, including methods that employ music, the children's grades improve uniformly.

David: A wonderful thing about music therapy is that it brings the children into an uplifted, happy place in themselves, without your having to nag them into changing.

There doesn't have to be a teacher or parent yelling at them, "Change your energy!" And the kid is cringing, "I don't know how..." But if you have them perform uplifting music, it puts them in the right cycle automatically, and it does it effortlessly.

It's been really fun for me, over the years, to have the children perform only Swami Kriyananda's music for a time. It was amazing how the kids never tired of it. And if they wanted to learn some new songs, we were fortunate to have more than four hundred pieces to choose from.

Through music, children are able to tap into a higher awareness that's always with them, without having to struggle to quiet the mind, or to get past the intellect. We would do these positive, uplifting songs, and they loved them – like "Mañana, Friends," or "A New Tomorrow" or "If You're Seeking Freedom." And it was amazing how it would change their mood.

Q: Thank you, David. At Living Wisdom School, we're inspired by the streams of energy and joy and consciousness that flow through our school, both in academics and the arts.

APPENDIX 1.

LIVING WISDOM SCHOOL RULES

1. ***Enjoy yourself.*** Discover that true happiness includes the happiness of others on their long journey to awareness of the unity of all things.
2. ***Practice kindness.*** Learn to practice kindness with one another and to recognize that in doing so you help create a loving and safe atmosphere.
3. ***Choose happiness.*** Learn that you have the power to choose *how* you will respond to life's challenges. Learn to focus on the positive rather than the negative. Learn to control your moods and raise your energy to meet difficulties that arise.
4. ***Be a loving friend*** to everyone—both children and teachers. Play together across the grades. Enjoy helping younger children. Share your knowledge and receive it from others—both students and teachers.
5. ***Laugh often.*** Laughter and lively exchanges in the classroom help make learning a joyful process.
6. ***Be a life-long learner.*** Discover the love and joy of learning for its own sake.
7. ***Trust yourself.*** Learn to consult your own knowledge and intuition rather than succumb to peer pressure as you confront life's challenges.
8. ***Use your will to create good energy.*** Prize perseverance and courage in the face of challenges. Embrace life moment to moment in the lessons learned, songs sung, plays performed, etc.
9. ***Find the joy within.*** Become aware that happiness resides within, not without. Learn to use the breath to center and calm yourself. Look to the lives of the saints and sages of all religions as models in your search for true happiness.

APPENDIX 2.

THE EDUCATION FOR LIFE CURRICULUM

The Education for Life curriculum embraces six areas, each of which aims to develop an essential body of learning, skills, and essential personal qualities and attitudes for a happy and successful life.

1. Our Earth/Our Universe

These activities help children expand their awareness of the physical world. We foster a vision of the orderliness of the universe, accompanied by a sense of appreciation and reverence, and helping the children gain an awareness of their place in the world, and their responsibilities for the well-being of the planet and all creatures.

Our Earth / Our Universe helps children understand that all of life is linked. The students move from hands-on observation to immersion in the subject matter, while understanding how the parts are interconnected.

Our Earth / Our Universe develops positive qualities:

Attitudes of care. The great Japanese conservationist Tanaka Shozo said: “The question of rivers is not a question of rivers, but of the human heart.”

We help our students feel their place in nature, and their connection with all living things. Feelings of connectedness engender attitudes of caring.

Appreciation for the wonders of the universe, from the smallest to the largest

We encourage each student to interact with the physical world with appreciation. We help them understand the underlying structures of the physical world, and we carefully arrange the curriculum to elicit their enthusiasm, with guided discussions and activities, field trips, and science fair projects. We teach them to apply their scientific knowledge in creative ways that express their understanding of fundamental principles.

Curriculum for Our Earth / Our Universe:

Interdisciplinary science (overview)

- Biology
- Botany
- Geology
- Anatomy
- Physics
- Astronomy
- Chemistry
- Ecology and sustainability

2. Personal Development

We nurture three key areas of each child's growth: the physical, mental, and spiritual. We help each child to grow toward their highest potential in each area.

We give our students tools for personal growth: we help them understand their unique learning style, and we tailor the curriculum for each child to stimulate their enthusiasm and motivation to keep striving for success.

Perseverance

We help each child experience the joy of overcoming challenges – by analyzing the challenges objectively and embracing tools to

improve their results, so that they learn to welcome challenges as opportunities for growth.

Self-control and joyful self-discipline

Control of our energy opens space to understand the realities of others. In a climate of self-restraint, attitudes of kindness and compassion can grow.

We help students develop joyful self-discipline by teaching them how to be calmly focused while doing academic work and while interacting with others.

Subjects that foster growth in Personal Development:

- Physical education
- Sports
- Health and hygiene
- Mental skills such as concentration, memory development and organization
- Mathematics computation skills
- Beginning reading skills
- Spelling
- Any subject matter involving memorization
- Long-term projects
- Learning new tasks such as handwriting, CPR, typing, etc.
- Developing and using positive qualities such as gratitude, contentment, honesty, servicefulness, and responsibility

Self-Expression and Communication

Self-expression and communication are essential for success in academics, and in our interactions with others.

Our students begin developing clarity of mind and creativity in self-expression and communication from the first day they enter kindergarten. The goal is to help each student express ideas and feelings clearly and creatively, verbally and in their written work.

Our middle school students develop writing skills that give them a tremendous advantage in high school and college. Our graduates thank us for giving them a big head start in the skills required for writing term papers and research reports.

Language Arts instruction at Living Wisdom School follows our school's core theme of teaching the students how to be enjoyably immersed, enthusiastic, and creatively insightful in their academic studies.

The students receive intensive help with vocabulary development, starting at age four and five and throughout their years at LWS. Through constant feedback, encouragement, and hands-on instruction in copyediting and rewriting, we teach the students to write and speak in ways that communicate clearly to the reader or listener – a very rare skill in business, technology, and academia.

Lessons in Self-Expression and Communication foster the following:

- Honest, objective introspection
- Clarity of thinking
- Clarity of expression
- Creativity

We measure the students' growth in this area by the clarity of their written and oral communications, by the originality of their work, and the degree to which it reflects their honest thinking and enthusiastic engagement.

Subjects that foster growth in Self-expression and Communication:

- Mathematics
- Writing mechanics
- Creative writing
- Interpretive dance
- Music composition
- Music interpretation

- Computer programming
- Creative problem-solving
- Engineering
- The use of the voice as a means of self-expression in singing and speaking
- Public speaking
- How to develop creativity
- Visual arts
- Drama
- Vocabulary development

3. Understanding People

The K-8 years are the prime time of a young person's life for developing the ability to feel. The quality of instruction at this age therefore has huge consequences for the person's whole life, since feeling, not reason, is the faculty that enables us to tell right from wrong, and to understand, and respect and empathize with the realities of others.

Our practical approach to helping children develop these very important life skills permeates every moment that the student spends at Living Wisdom School.

The prime media for children to learn to be aware of their feelings and direct them in positive, expansive ways are the arts. We encourage the honest expansion of the children's calm, perceptive feelings through our theater program, through music instruction, and by observing and guiding students in learning to interact and communicate with respect and awareness of how their words and actions affect others.

We employ highly effective conflict resolution methods that transform disagreements and arguments into experiences of personal expansion, starting at the earliest ages.

We help the students discover what all human beings everywhere want most deeply from their lives, and which actions and

attitudes lead to lasting happiness and freedom from suffering, for themselves and others.

By understanding others, we can gain insights into our ourselves. As the students participate in our all-school theater program, they learn from the successes and mistakes of others. Through the theater process, they learn these lessons up close and in three dimensions, with lasting positive effects for their character formation and their ability to develop a strong sense of values. As understanding grows, it leads to deepening empathy and compassion for others and oneself.

Lessons in Understanding People foster the following development in the students:

- The ability to discern the underlying reasons and motivations behind the actions of others
- The ability to recognize similarities between the motivations and actions of others and ourselves
- The ability to translate the experiences of others into wise lessons for our own lives
- The ability to enjoy positive interactions with others, by drawing on our understanding of their realities, and the behaviors that create harmony, cooperation, and happiness for all

Growth in this area is seen in the manner in which the students interact with others, and the choices they make. We can also witness growth in this area through the insights that the student share in class discussions and in their schoolwork.

Subjects that foster growth in Understanding People:

- The study of other cultures, and their customs and beliefs
- Foreign languages
- History
- Geography
- Psychology
- World religions
- The study of the lives of great people
- Travel

4. Cooperation

We teach our students practical, down-to-earth skills for cooperating with others. They learn that cooperation is a highly enjoyable and very productive way to work. The ability to cooperate comes more naturally to some students than others; but in the environment and culture of LWS all of the students soon experience the joys of working and playing expansively, harmoniously, and inclusively.

The children have countless opportunities to practice the cooperative attitudes and skills that will be extremely important in every area of their lives – career, personal relationships, and raising their own children.

We have mentioned that our instruction is practical and down-to-earth. All of our teachers give extremely careful attention to observe and, as needed, help raise each student's level of mental flexibility, willingness to compromise, and to respect others.

Almost everything we do in our lives as students, employees, and parents involves other people. Harmonious relationships lead to happiness and a greater measure of success in every endeavor. A lack of harmony diminishes our happiness and satisfaction, regardless of the level of our outward success. Our home life, friendships, school, work, and everyday encounters with strangers, all involve other

people. Skills in cooperation make all of these interactions more enjoyable and harmonious.

Lessons in Cooperation foster the following development in the students:

- Non-attachment to our own desires
- Genuine caring for the well-being of others as much as for our own
- The ability to compromise without violating our principles
- The ability to learn from others
- Flexibility of thinking

We can observe our students' growth in this area most obviously in the quality and harmony of their interactions with others.

Subjects that foster growth in Cooperation:

- Academic study of the human realities in political science, economics, history, and business
- Supportive leadership
- Listening skills
- Etiquette
- People and events in history where cooperation played an important role

5. Wholeness

Wholeness is the art of finding an increasing expansion of awareness, with an accompanying increase in happiness and inner satisfaction. Wholeness gives cohesion and meaning to the entire person, and the entire system of Education for Life.

This area of the curriculum focuses not on a single developmental aspect, but on all of the ways the various curriculum areas work together, and how each one enhances the others. Speaking of the individual child, Wholeness means how the child's entire experience of an Education for Life fosters the development of his or her whole being.

Lessons in Wholeness foster the following development in the students:

- When facing challenges, Wholeness is the ability to draw on many personal qualities and skills and external resources to solve the issues at hand.
- Wholeness is being able to view every situation from many different perspectives and discern which response is the most appropriate and useful.
- Wholeness is the ability to look beyond the separate, small fragments of a situation or a person, and see the “big picture.”

We can observe the child’s growth in this area by the results of their actions. When facing a challenge, and when interacting with others, are they able to respond in ways that bring about positive change? Do they habitually use the skills that are appropriate for the people and situations confronting them? Do they demonstrate a commitment to living according to their highest principles and ideals?

Subjects that foster growth in Wholeness:

The following subjects influence the student in ways that cross any isolated categories. They will frequently, even routinely, uplift the student’s consciousness, helping them be more energetic, insightful, sensitively aware, and happy. These subjects have the power to effect positive changes and new insights.

- Music
- Meditation and other centering techniques
- Art
- Literature
- Philosophy
- Religion
- Nature studies

6. “Our Earth — Our Universe”

“The Sciences.” Surely, it’s a boring name for one of the most potentially interesting, engaging, and fruitful of the standard fields of study.

Stated abstractly, as a rational category, it’s a lifeless label. It is words without poetry, music without melody. It conjures images of test tubes in a laboratory, rather than the endless wonders of nature.

Why not create a new name for this part of the curriculum? Let’s call it “Our Earth – Our Universe.”

This name covers everything that is taught under the arid rubric of “The Sciences,” but it suggests the orderliness of the entire created cosmos – with an appropriate appreciation for the beautiful balance of planetary life, and that sense of awe before the universal mysteries which, as Einstein famously said, is the essence of great scientific discovery.

It invites the students to learn how to relate harmoniously to the universe, to feel themselves a part of everything instead of merely participating as intellectual secondhand observers of whatever the universe is doing around them.

“Our Earth – Our Universe” suggests an expansive approach to studying the physical reality in which we live. It encourages the students to think of the universe as a great wholeness – to see the particular and universal in relation to each other.

It might even suggest a comparison between physical laws and higher principles.

Newton’s law of motion, for example, might suggest laws of action and reaction on other levels of reality.

Gravity and electromagnetism might be examined for their connections to subtler forms of magnetism – even, if the teacher dares take the step, to such high principles as divine love.

In various ways, it suggests a view of the universe as not something inert, but pulsating with life. Thus, from a lifeless catalogue of facts, “Our Earth – Our Universe” makes the sciences themselves (customarily the most intellectual of studies) something heartfelt and inspiring.

The separate sciences can be taught not as compartmentalized disciplines, but as a totality revealed through its different aspects.

Thus, nature assumes a coherence that mirrors the goal of education itself: maturity. It is easier to relate to diverse realities when we can see them in meaningful relationship to one another, and finally to ourselves.

“Our Earth – Our Universe” includes all of the branches of science: physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, general science, botany, geology, and anatomy.

APPENDIX 3. EDUCATION FOR LIFE RESOURCES

Education for Life (the book). You can read the book online, or order a copy. Education for Life presents a revolutionary system that teaches children, and adults as well, how to flower into full maturity as human beings, and not merely how to function competently in a technological age. (<https://livingwisdomschool.org/education-for-life-the-book/>)

Education for Life Website. Comprehensive information about the Education for Life approach to transforming education; course offerings, store, events. (<http://www.edforlife.org/>)

Sister Schools

Nevada City, CA

<http://www.livingwisdom.org/>

Portland

<http://livingwisdomportland.org/>

Seattle

<http://livingwisdomschoolseattle.org/>

Assisi, Italy

<http://www.livingwisdomschoolassisi.com/>

Ljubljana, Slovenia

<http://www.sola-lila.si/>

APPENDIX 4. RESEARCH THAT SUPPORTS EDUCATION FOR LIFE

To obtain a PDF copy of the book with clickable hyperlinks, visit the website of the Palo Alto Living Wisdom School: www.livingwisdomschool.org. Follow the links to review the articles summarized in this chapter, which support the principles and practices of Education for Life and the Living Wisdom Schools.

Most education research focuses on how teaching methods affect academic performance. But our forty-plus years of experience have persuaded us that practices that enhance a child's inner development can contribute very powerfully to their academic success.

(If you come across supportive research, please let us know. You can send us a message through the contact form on our website: www.livingwisdomschool.org.)

Teaching/Academics

[Active Focused Learning Approach](#). *Quotes*: "I'm not really held back anymore, just sitting in class waiting." "There's not a lot of lecturing, which makes it easier to stay focused." "I really like working with other students." Students spend more time working in groups. The strategy is getting more students to achieve better in class.

[Longer school day and year failed to improve test scores](#)

[Task to Aid Self-Esteem Lifts Grades for Some](#)

[Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play In School](#)

(PDF)

[The Heart in Holistic Education](#). (PDF) Educational programs based on new scientific discoveries about the heart lead to improved emotional stability, cognitive functioning, and academic performance.

[Tutoring Tots](#). MSNBC News feature.

[10 Ways to Improve Schools Using Coaching Principles](#). An important article by Tony Holler, a public high school honors chemistry teacher and football and track and field coach (Plainfield North HS, IL). Significantly, Living Wisdom School has followed Tony's 10 recommendations throughout its 40-plus-year history. And because we're very clear that they've played a large part in our success, the principles are engrained in our school's philosophy. (By the way, Tony's freshman football team has won 39 games in a row. Tony is a member of the hall of fame of the U.S. national track and field and cross country coaches' association.)

[We're destroying our kids — for nothing: Too much homework, too many tests, too much needless pressure](#). A *Salon* article argues that we've gone overboard on academics, destroying the enthusiasm in kids that's essential for academic success. The result? "Children are born curious, and it's pretty easy to facilitate that, to groom it," says Vassar College neuropsychologist Abigail Baird. "We're doing the opposite. We're squishing their desire to learn new things. And I think that's a crisis."

[Impact of Homework on Academic Achievement](#) (PDF)

[Going in circles puts students on path to better choices](#). *Quotes*: "The goal is not so much to punish as to get students on paths to make better choices, to understand the impact of what they do, to deal with people better"... "We've become more like a family and not just kids who go to school together," said freshman Leah Brito. "We've grown up big time in the last few months." "One result of the new approach is that kids are giving more thought to the effect what they do and say can have on others," she said. "In eighth grade, the he said/she said stuff was horrible when many of the students

were together at Audubon middle school,” Brito said. “This year, there is much less of that.”

[Is Test Prep Educational Malpractice?](#) In many elementary schools there is little or no time for non-tested subjects such as art, music, even science and history.

[Preschool Controversy – Academics or Play?](#) *Quotes:* People who attended play-based preschools were *eight times* less likely to need treatment for emotional disturbances than those who went to preschools where direct instruction prevailed. Graduates of the play-based preschools were three times less likely to be arrested for committing a felony.

[Why I pulled my son out of a school for ‘gifted’ kids.](#) In this *Mashable* article, a mother tells how her son thrived after she transferred him out of an elite academically oriented elementary school in New York City. “If you are privileged enough to be selective about what schools your children attend, please consider how they are learning and not just what they are learning. School isn’t only about cramming as much as possible as quickly as possible into their little brains.”

[Pressure Cooker Kindergarten.](#) *Quotes:* Kindergarten has changed radically in the last two decades in ways that few Americans are aware of. Children now spend far more time being taught and tested on literacy and math skills than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations. Many kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula geared to new state standards and linked to standardized tests. In an increasing number of kindergartens, teachers must follow scripts from which they may not deviate. These practices, which are not well grounded in research, violate long-established principles of child development and good teaching. It is increasingly clear that they are compromising both children’s health and their long-term prospects for success in school. . Kindergarten has ceased to be a garden of delight and has

become a place of stress and distress.... Blindly pursuing educational policies that could well damage the intellectual, social and physical development of an entire generation.... There's ongoing concern about American children catching up with their counterparts in countries such as Japan and China. Specifically in areas such as science, math and technology, schooling in those countries before second grade is “playful and experiential.” And youngsters in Finland, where teens consistently score high academically, also attend play-based kindergarten and start first grade at age 7 rather than age 6.

[School starting age: the evidence.](#) An article on the website of Cambridge University. “In England children now start formal schooling, and the formal teaching of literacy and numeracy at the age of four. A recent letter signed by around 130 early childhood education experts, including myself, published in the *Daily Telegraph* (11 Sept 2013) advocated an extension of informal, play-based pre-school provision and a delay to the start of formal ‘schooling’ in England from the current effective start until the age of seven (in line with a number of other European countries who currently have higher levels of academic achievement and child well-being).”

[What Americans Keep Ignoring About Finland's School Success.](#) The Scandinavian country is an education superpower because it values equality more than excellence.

[One in Five Girls in Upper Secondary School Suffers From School Burnout.](#) *Quotes:* A sense of optimism during university studies along with high self-esteem tend to predict job engagement ten years later on, while an avoidance strategy tends to predict work-related burnout.... The more encouragement the students got from their teachers, the less likely they were to experience school burnout.

[Explaining Math Concepts Improves Learning.](#) *Quotes:* “Teaching children the basic concept behind math problems was more useful than teaching children a procedure for solving the

problems – these children gave better explanations and learned more,” Rittle-Johnson said. “This adds to a growing body of research illustrating the importance of teaching children concepts as well as having them practice solving problems.”

[Social Skills, Extracurricular Activities In High School Pay Off Later In Life.](#) *Quotes:* High school sophomores who ... [had] good social skills and work habits, and who participated in extracurricular activities in high school, made more money and completed higher levels of education 10 years later than their classmates who had similar standardized test scores but were less socially adroit and participated in fewer extracurricular activities.... “Soft skills” such as sociability, punctuality, conscientiousness and an ability to get along well with others, along with participation in extracurricular activities, are better predictors of earnings and higher educational achievement later in life than having good grades and high standardized test scores.... Schools are increasingly cutting...activities that foster soft skills in order to focus almost exclusively on achieving adequate yearly progress on state-mandated standardized tests.

[Students Benefit From Depth Rather Than Breadth.](#) *Quotes:* Teaching fewer topics in greater depth is a better way to prepare students for success in college science. Teachers who “teach to the [standardized] test” may not be optimizing their students’ chances of success in college science.

[Task to Aid Self-Esteem Lifts Grades for Some](#)

[Teacher Teaming.](#) (Teachers routinely engage in “teaming” at Living Wisdom School, thanks to the integrated curriculum and school environment that encourages teacher collaboration.)

[Teaching Resilience With Positive Education](#)

[Ten Steps to Better Student Engagement.](#) *Quotes:* Students who have been shamed or belittled by the teacher or another student will not effectively engage in challenging tasks. To learn and grow, one

must take risks, but most people will not take risks in an emotionally unsafe environment.

[Creating Positive Classroom Management](#). (A teacher developed creative ways to encourage positive attitudes and behaviors in younger students. The method and theory are very similar to the “Rocks in the Basket” game used at LWS and described in [this video](#).) *Quotes*: “I’d spent years offering students rewards (stickers, tickets, tangibles, intangibles) for good behavior and I’d come to realize how they were often self-defeating.... One change I had already made was ... I would celebrate ‘great work’ by reading aloud the child’s name and stating what they had done well. Often their classmates would give an actual round of applause – which was lovely.”

[Learning and Motivation Strategies Course Increases Odds of College Graduation](#)

[Recess Makes for Better Students](#). *Quotes*: Study finds getting enough of it [recess] each day helps kids perform better in classroom.... Children learn as much on breaks as they do in the traditional classroom, experimenting with creativity and imagination and learning how to interact socially.... Conflict resolution is solved on the playground, not in the classroom.... The more physical fitness tests children passed, the better they did on academic tests.... Walks outdoors appeared to improve scores on tests of attention and concentration.

[Algebra-for-All Policy Found to Raise Rates Of Failure](#)

[Lectures Didn't Work in 1350—and They Still Don't Work Today](#). A conversation with David Thornburg about designing a better classroom.

Physical Education

[Physically fit students do better on tests.](#) *Quotes:* “Physically fit students ... are more likely to do well on ... tests and have better attendance.... Fit students are less likely to have disciplinary problems.”

[Schools use mind-body relaxation techniques to help kids fight anxiety.](#) *Quotes:* “Mind-body relaxation, including yoga, can improve self-esteem and boost grades and test scores.... Regular exposure to the [relaxation] training boosted students’ work habits, attendance, and academic performance.”

[Physical Activity May Strengthen Children’s Ability To Pay Attention.](#) *Quotes:* “Following the acute bout of walking, children performed better on the flanker task. . Following acute bouts of walking, children had a larger P3 amplitude, suggesting that they are better able to allocate attentional resources.... The increase in reading comprehension following exercise equated to approximately a full grade level.”

[A Fit Body Means a Fit Mind.](#) *Quotes:* “Cardiovascular exercise was related to higher academic performance.... Regular exercise benefits the brain, improves attention span, memory, and learning ... reduces stress and the effects of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.... Aerobic exercise pumps more blood throughout the body, including to the brain. More blood means more oxygen and, therefore, better-nourished brain tissue. Exercise also spurs the brain to produce more of a protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF, which Ratey calls “Miracle-Gro for the brain.” This powerful protein encourages brain cells to grow, interconnect, and communicate in new ways. Studies also suggest exercise plays a big part in the production of new brain cells, particularly in the dentate gyrus, a part of the brain heavily involved in learning and memory skills.... [Many] schools are cutting back on PE and reducing recess

hours. It's a huge challenge with budget restraints and No Child Left Behind.”

[Fish may be brain food for teenage boys](#)

Joy in Learning

[The Joyful, Illiterate Kindergartners of Finland](#) (*The Atlantic*), by Tim Walker, a former teacher based in Finland. He now cares for his two young children and writes regularly at [Taught by Finland](#) and [Papa on the Playground](#). Research and school experience show that play time is crucial for children's academic and social development.

[How to Parent Like a German](#). German students excel, yet in German schools academics are balanced by other kinds of learning.

[Stay Focused: New research on how to close the achievement gap](#) (*The Economist*, UK). A review of [How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character](#), by journalist Paul Tough, a former editor at *New York Times Magazine*.

[Psychologist explores how childhood play influences adult creativity](#). Sandra Russ's new book, *Pretend Play in Childhood: Foundation of Adult Creativity* reveals how high-achieving innovative adults use methods learned in childhood play to help them achieve success.

[Most 1st Grade Classes Not High Quality](#). *Quotes*: “Only 23 percent of classrooms could be judged to be of ‘high quality’ in both their instructional practices and social and emotional climate.”

[Happiness Contagious as the Flu](#). (At Living Wisdom School, we create a joyful, caring environment among the students. When a new student arrives, he or she immediately feels supported and positively affected. Parents routinely comment that soon after their children enter LWS they seem happier than at their former school.)

[The Love Plant: A Ramble on Sports and Good Feelings](#). Describes a powerful experiment conducted by the children at the

original Living Wisdom School, with deep implications for education, sports, and life.

Meditation, Breathing, Yoga, Affirmations

[Meditation Program in the College Curriculum.](#) *Quotes:* “[Meditation] produced significant freshman-senior increases in intelligence and increased social self-confidence, sociability, general psychological health, and social maturity.”

[Self-Affirmation Can Break Cycle of Negative Thoughts.](#) A report from the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

[Meditation in the Treatment of ADHD.](#) Meditation-training showed significant decreases in levels of impulsivity [and significant improvements in] selective deployment of attention and freedom from distractibility in the behavior of the children.

[How Meditation Can Give Our Kids an Academic Edge](#)

[Meditation seen promising as ADHD therapy.](#) *Quotes:* “The effect was much greater than we expected.” – lead researcher Sarina J. Grosswald, a cognitive learning specialist in Arlington, Virginia.... The children also showed improvements in attention, working memory, organization, and behavior regulation.

[Faith rites boost brains.](#) Even 10 to 15 minutes of meditation appear to have significant positive effects on cognition, relaxation, and psychological health.

[Schools use mind-body relaxation techniques to help kids fight anxiety.](#) *Quotes:* “Mind-body relaxation, including yoga, can improve self-esteem and boost grades and test scores. Regular exposure to the [relaxation] training boosted students’ work habits, attendance, and academic performance.”

[Silence is Golden Mindfulness Meditation study\)](#)

[Smacking Hits Kids’ IQ](#)

[Smiles Predict Marriage Success.](#) (Many parents report their children smile more after attending Living Wisdom School.)

[Vedic Science based Education and Non-verbal Intelligence.](#) (An increase in student problem-solving ability was found.)

[Meditation and Assertive Training in the Treatment of Social Anxiety.](#)

[Meditation Effects on Cognitive Function.](#) Meditation practice produced significant positive effects.

[Meditation Program in the College Curriculum.](#) *Quotes:* “[Meditation] produced significant freshman-senior increases on intelligence and increased social self-confidence, sociability, general psychological health, and social maturity.”

[Meditation Improves Leadership Behaviors.](#) *Quotes:* “Subjects who learned [meditation]... as a self-development technique improved their leadership behaviors.”

Social Skills

[UCLA neuroscientist's book explains why social connection is as important as food and shelter](#)

[Psychosocial stress reversibly disrupts prefrontal processing and attentional control](#)

Music

[Adolescents Involved With Music Do Better In School.](#) Music participation has a positive effect on reading and mathematics achievement for both elementary and high school students.

[Adolescents Involved With Music Do Better In School](#)

[Music Education Can Help Children Improve Reading Skills.](#) *Quotes:* “Children exposed to a multi-year programme of music ...

display superior cognitive performance in reading skills compared with their non-musically trained peers.”

[Music Training Linked To Enhanced Verbal Skills](#). *Quotes*: “Music training ... may be more important for enhancing verbal communication skills than learning phonics.... potential of music to tune our neural response to the world around us.... Music training may have considerable benefits for engendering literacy skills.... (Musicians have enhanced subcortical auditory and audiovisual processing of speech and music.)”

Other Articles and Papers

[It's Official: To Protect Baby's Brain, Turn Off TV](#) (from *Wired* online). *Quote*: “A decade ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggested that parents limit TV consumption by children under two years of age. The recommendations were based as much on common sense as science, because studies of media consumption and infant development were themselves in their infancy. The research has finally grown up. And though it's still ongoing, it's mature enough for the AAP to release a new, science-heavy policy statement on babies watching television, videos or any other passive media form. Their verdict: It's not good, and probably bad.”

[The Human Brain: Wired for Values?](#) This article was published as a sidebar to an article in *Mothering* magazine that strongly praised Living Wisdom School.

[Lack of Playtime Killing Joy of Learning](#)

[Smart and Good High Schools](#). A “Report to the Nation” from the State University of New York)

[The Heart in Holistic Education](#). (PDF) *Quotes*: “Educational programs based on new scientific discoveries about the heart lead to improved emotional stability, cognitive functioning, and academic performance.”

[After Abuse, Changes In the Brain.](#) *Quotes:* “Affectionate mothering alters the expression of genes in animals, allowing them to dampen their physiological response to stress. These biological buffers are then passed on to the next generation. [There is] direct evidence that the same system is at work in humans.”

[Loneliness Spreads Like a Virus.](#) (At Living Wisdom School, feelings of connectedness and joy spread like a virus.)

[Positive Action Program.](#) (The program focuses on helping students be aware of which behaviors are positive and will increase their happiness in the long term.)

[National education standards can end up hurting students](#)

[Self-Control Is Contagious](#)

[Nature Makes Us More Caring](#)

[College prep math failure full study.](#) (PDF) *Quotes:* “This study indicates that artificially pushing children beyond their current capability is counter-productive.”

[Studies Reveal Why Kids Get Bullied and Rejected.](#) The researchers’ recommendations for teaching children social skills uncannily reflect how LWS teachers practice conflict resolution during playground time.

[Mothering magazine praises Living Wisdom School.](#)

[Education in the Age of Energy.](#) Human awareness is becoming less materialistic and more energy-aware. How will schools adapt? Living Wisdom leads the way.

[National education standards can end up hurting students](#)

[Nature Makes Us More Caring, Study Says](#)

[When Friends Make You Poorer.](#) *Quotes:* “Students tend to gravitate to a major chosen by more of their peers. And the students whose choice was driven by their peers were then more likely to end up in lower-paying jobs that they didn’t like.”

[Kids Get Worst SAT Scores in a Decade](#)

[APA review confirms link between playing violent video games and aggression](#)

[Exposure to TV violence related to irregular attention and brain structure](#)

[School Starting Age: The Evidence.](#)