

# Happiness & Success in High School

A Magnificent Synergy:  
Educating Teenagers for Life

Answering parents' questions about the surprising links between happiness and high performance in the classroom. How positive feelings and individual attention nurture success for high school, college, and all of life.

Based on the 50-year experience of the Living Wisdom  
Schools

STORIES • SCIENCE • METHODS • RESULTS

George Beinhorn

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Printed in the United States of America

# CONTENTS

1. Introduction .....	1
2. What Do You Want for Your Teen? .....	3

## **HAPPINESS & SUCCESS IN THE REAL WORLD**

3. Happiness and Success at Google .....	9
4. Ancient Secrets of Happiness And Success .....	11
5. Happiness and Success at Harvard .....	13
6. Happiness and Success at Stanford and MIT.....	15
7. Happiness and Success in Math Class .....	19
8. Happiness and Success in the History of Education .....	23
9. Happiness, Success, and the 5 Stages of Child Development .....	25
10. Happiness & Success: the Love Plant Approach.....	31
11. Happiness, Success, and Academic Achievement .....	37
12. Happiness, Success, and Education for Life: Grades Tell the Story.....	41
13. Bill Aris’s Truth: Happiness and Success in Sports & the Military .....	45
14. How to Improve Schools Using Coaching Principles .....	55
15. Sir Ken Robinson on Creativity at School .....	59

## **HAPPINESS & SUCCESS IN HIGH SCHOOL**

16. Bright Promise: Educating Teenagers for Life .....	65
17. School Stress and Education for Life .....	77
18. Seven Strengths of a Micro High School .....	83
19. It’s Time We Started Raising Organic Teens.....	95
20. How I Discovered Education for Life Principles While Teaching in a Public High School.....	99

## **THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS & SUCCESS**

21. Happiness, Success, & the Science of Positive Feelings .....	113
22. Happiness, Success, and the “Social Brain” .....	117
23. How Raw Emotions Interfere with Learning .....	119
24. Two Kinds of Feelings.....	123

## **ACADEMICS AT LIVING WISDOM HIGH SCHOOL**

25. The Super-Efficient Classroom .....	127
26. How We Started a High School, and How It Succeeded Beyond Our Wildest Expectations .....	135
27. Can the Arts Help Children Excel Academically? .....	141
28. Happiness, Success, and the Education For Life Curriculum.....	149

## **MEET THE LIVING WISDOM HIGH SCHOOL FAMILY**

29. Rose Atwell: LWHS Alumna, Teacher, Actor, Chef .....	159
30. Meet the Parents: Esther Peralez-Dieckmann .....	165
31. Meet the Parents: Jack Dieckmann.....	167
32. Meet the Parents: Baatcha .....	169
34. Living Wisdom Graduates Enjoy Varied and Exciting Careers.....	171
34. More Testimonials for the Living Wisdom Schools.....	177

## **MEET THE TEACHERS**

35. Meet Kshama Kellogg .....	191
36. Hazemach — the Education of a Living Wisdom High School Teacher .....	203

## **APPENDICES**

Appendix 1. Education for Life Resources.....	221
Appendix 2. Education for Life and the Living Wisdom Schools .....	223
Appendix 3. Research that Supports Education for Life .....	225

# 1. Introduction

For more than fifty years the Living Wisdom Schools have pioneered a radical approach to educating young people — an approach that empowers them to be happy, even as they excel in school and life.

In education today, there's a quiet but powerful groundswell, a grassroots rebellion against the government-mandated “No Child Left Behind” and Core Curriculum initiatives that have hamstrung teachers, alienated students, and distorted the true purpose of education by preventing children from receiving the best possible experience of school.

The Education for Life philosophy can be stated simply: *At school, the single factor that most assuredly promotes deep, engaged, lasting learning is happiness.*

Parents are often dumbfounded when they hear the Living Wisdom School teachers proclaim that a happy, arts-enriched, highly individualized curriculum promotes more *efficient* learning than the “academically rigorous” curricula offered by other schools.

They are nonplussed by the suggestion that the LWS curriculum gives children a *deeper* education because the teachers are encouraged to teach principles and review content with each student until they can grasp the concepts before moving on, instead of skimming the surface of the subject matter in an ill-considered rush to demonstrate good test scores.

Young people who are subjected to a one-sided, academically overloaded curriculum are at risk not only of receiving a relatively superficial education; they end up less well-prepared mentally and emotionally to succeed in college. Perhaps most troubling, they are less likely to acquire important personal qualities that are defining among successful people.

One prospective parent, during a visit to LWS, protested, “But these kids can't be learning — they're too happy!”

Yet groundbreaking research has confirmed beyond any possibility of doubt that happiness and school success are intimately connected.

What are some qualities that we, as parents and teachers, should encourage in our children to prepare them for success in high school, college, and life beyond?

Aside from the knowledge and skills required to succeed in a profession, surely it's fair to suggest that there also needs to be a deep wanting to do worthwhile and wonderful things.

There has to be a deep desire, confident self-knowledge, a positive expectation, and an ability to work well with others — and these qualities must be deliberately nurtured. They cannot be imposed from without, nor will they magically appear as a side-effect of good grades and test scores.

These personal qualities, which are highly predictive of career success, cannot be nurtured only by trying to motivate our kids to get good grades. Any motivation that grades and test scores provide will be superficial and will not touch their hearts. Worse, it may encourage a dependence on external recognition that can never be fully satisfied. After one test, there will always be another.

As will become clear in the chapters that follow, success and happiness come most reliably to those who are focused enthusiastically on the process — who are not postponing their happiness until some vaguely imagined future, but are able to rejoice in the expansion of their powers today.

## 2. What Do You Want for Your Teen?

What are your hopes and dreams for your teenager? Not just for high school, but for the whole of his or her life?

Financial security? A good job? A nice home?

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



We all want our children to acquire an awareness of positive, inspiring values and ideals, as well as a deep understanding of the ultimate meaning of life. No influence outside the home has a greater impact on young people than the countless hours they spend at school.

### **Education Reflects Parents' Goals**

Nowadays, little attention is paid to developing higher values. But what if your dreams for your child go beyond the material?

It's difficult in our culture to succeed without intellectual training. 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, how to focus our attention, how to cooperate, and how to be a good friend.

At Living Wisdom High School, we feel that teens should benefit from the storehouse of wisdom that humanity has gathered through the ages regarding the skills and understanding they will need to build a fulfilled and happy life. We feel that it's our duty to give young people these essential life skills, beginning at a young age.

For more than fifty years, we have found that students who learn how to be happy are far more likely to love learning and be successful in their academic studies.

At Living Wisdom High School, the students learn to be balanced, mature, effective, happy, and harmonious. We call our philosophy Education for Life, because it relates the lessons young people learn in school to their lives as a whole. At LWHS, we study not only the great things people have accomplished, but the human qualities that enabled them to achieve greatness.

### **The Secrets of Success**

Before we can be happy and 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 will seldom mold itself to our 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 students prepare for maturity on all levels – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual.

### **More Than Natural Talent**

At Living Wisdom High School, the teachers are constantly focused on guiding the individual student in developing their five universal human “tools of maturity”: body, feelings, will, mind, and soul. With health and high energy, sensitive feeling, dynamic will power, and mental clarity, young people are able to expand their awareness and find a deep sense of meaning and joy.



In our school, we gauge each student’s success not only by test results, but by the quality of their attitudes, effort, and interactions with others.

### **The Best Teaching is Highly Individual**

Young people reveal a far broader array of individual traits than adults do. Instead of forcing them to conform to the rigid mold of a “standardized” curriculum, we feel it makes more sense to discover their unique strengths and help them build on those positive qualities to acquire the knowledge and skills they will need in later years.

Students in our schools develop self-confidence and enthusiasm for learning, because encouraging their strengths releases a positive flow of energy and enthusiasm that carries over into their coursework.

Our class sizes are deliberately kept small so that the teachers can develop a close relationship with the individual student. The teachers are trained to assess each student’s physical, mental, and emotional development, and to guide the individual along the lines of their strengths. They relate to them much as their parents do, recognizing and helping them meet their ever-changing unique challenges.

### **Joy in the Classroom**

We feel it is our responsibility to help make each teen’s school years a joyful experience and lay a strong foundation for success and happiness in school and beyond. In a Living Wisdom classroom, the atmosphere is happy, relaxed, and family-like, although at the same time there is order, appropriate discipline, and a clear sense that the teacher is in charge.



The teachers win the students’ respect by awakening their enthusiasm and energy for the tasks at hand. The students learn that they are expected to behave with consideration and respect for others, and that they can always approach the teacher for individual guidance.

A positive learning environment doesn’t automatically transform young people into angels. In our classrooms we find the same issues, interactions, and challenging transitions as in other schools. What’s different is that the

students are given the tools and the opportunity to deal with the challenges in effective, enlightened ways.

### **The Inner Life**

At Living Wisdom High School, each student's natural spirituality is acknowledged and encouraged. Spirituality isn't defined as a system of narrow dogmas. The focus is on the student's own experience of universal spiritual truths. We make time for meditation, yoga postures, and other uplifting activities. Teens can experience for themselves what it feels like to be in harmony with their own higher consciousness.

Students discover that expansive feelings, thoughts, and actions increase their own sense of well-being, whereas contractive attitudes and actions take their happiness away. "Right and wrong" become personal experiences of the consequences of specific behaviors, rather than abstract rules. The students become deeply interested in changing their behavior when they realize that there are effective ways to increase their own happiness and joy.



### **The Importance of Good Teachers**

Living examples can inspire us more effectively than books or rigid rules. A teacher who deeply understands and loves the subject matter is more likely to awaken a love and commitment in the students. Living Wisdom High School is built around the teachers' open-hearted sensitivity to the students in their charge. We consider it essential that the teachers express through their lives and personal demeanor the positive attitudes and spiritual and moral values and maturity that we seek to impart to the students.

Our teachers participate in Education for Life as a lifelong process. Each teacher is deeply involved in personal development, and we offer our teachers ongoing support and training to keep them fresh, enthusiastic, and expansive.

# Happiness & Success in the Real World



### 3. Happiness and Success at Google

Does the happiness principle work outside of school? Does it work in the adult world of job and career – in the daily grind?

When Sergey Brin and Larry Page founded Google in 1998, they set a policy of hiring only the most brilliant applicants in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math).

Fifteen years later, Google decided it might be a good idea to evaluate the results of this policy.

A *Washington Post* article, “The surprising thing Google learned about its employees – and what it means for today’s students” (December 27, 2017), summarized what Google learned from Project Oxygen, the in-depth examination of its hiring practices.

Project Oxygen completely overturned the company’s understanding of the qualities that best predict success in a high-tech business environment. Most notably, among the eight standout qualities of Google’s top employees, STEM expertise was *dead last*.

The top qualities that augured success at Google were “soft” skills. The researchers found that the most successful Google employees:

- Are good coaches

- Empower the team and do not micromanage

- Express interest in and concern for the other team members’ success and personal well-being

- Are productive and results-oriented

- Are good communicators – they listen and share information

- Help others with their career development

- Have a clear vision and strategy for the team

- Have key technical skills that help them advise the team

A follow-up study by Google, on the defining qualities of its most productive research teams (Project Aristotle, 2016), confirmed these

results. In the *Post* article, Cathy N. Davidson, a professor in the graduate school at CUNY, described the findings:

“Project Aristotle shows that the best teams at Google exhibit a range of soft skills: equality, generosity, curiosity toward the ideas of your teammates, empathy, and emotional intelligence. And topping the list: emotional safety. No bullying. To succeed, each and every team member must feel confident speaking up and making mistakes. They must know they are being heard.”

Davidson cited a survey of 260 companies conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. The study, which included industry giants Chevron and IBM, found that recruiters ranked communication skills among the top three qualities companies look for in job applicants. “They prize both an ability to communicate with one’s fellow workers and an aptitude for conveying the company’s product and mission outside the organization.”

What conclusions can we draw from these studies about the best way to help our children be successful and happy?

A common feature of the qualities that set the top Google employees apart is that they are “expansive.” That is, they foster a work environment where the employees are encouraged to expand their awareness to include the needs of others.

The qualities that the researchers identified as furthering success at Google and other top companies are the same qualities that the teachers in the Living Wisdom Schools expend tremendous energy to cultivate in the classroom, considering them essential for creating a safe, nurturing, joyful learning environment for the children.

Oddly enough, the Google findings reflect the results of a vastly older body of studies conducted in the forest ashrams of ancient India.

## 4. Ancient Secrets of Happiness And Success

India's ancient sages were not, strictly speaking, philosophers — that is, those who love wisdom. (From the Greek *philo-* “loving” + *sophia* “knowledge, wisdom.”) They were scientists, interested in wisdom itself, and intent on discerning what works in people's lives.

They began their search for understanding by asking basic questions, the most fundamental of which was: “*What is it that all people are seeking?*”

By observing the human scene with calm scientific objectivity, the answer that they arrived at was: “*Beneath the colorful multiplicity of their stated motives, all people are seeking happiness, and freedom from suffering.*”

The obvious next question was: “What are those actions, thoughts, and feelings that most reliably give people an increase of happiness and lessen their experience of suffering and sorrow?”

From their further observations in the laboratory of human existence, they concluded that happiness reliably increases whenever people expand their awareness to include broader realities, and that every such expansion is rewarded by a corresponding increase in the person's sense of happiness, well-being, and joy.

Next, they investigated the human tools by which we can expand our awareness and experience increasing happiness and well-being. And they discovered that the tools are five in number: body, feelings, will, mind, and soul.

Thus the five branches of yoga were born, with each branch cataloguing the most effective means for expanding awareness using a particular human tool: Hatha Yoga for the body, Bhakti Yoga for the feelings, Karma Yoga for the will, Gyana Yoga for the mind, and Raja Yoga for the soul.

Of these tools, the “outliers” at either end are beyond the reach of human volition. The body is a lump — it sits there, inactive until acted upon. Similarly, the soul cannot be activated by human effort alone; its

qualities can only be invited, by cultivating expansive thoughts, feelings, and actions. But the three central tools – feeling, will, and mind – are under our control and are available for expanding our awareness.

Nature, in its wisdom, develops these five tools in children in a series of sequential stages, each of which lasts about six years. The three important “middle” tools become the primary areas of development during the school years from age 6 to 24.

From birth to age 6, the child is concerned primarily with gaining control of its body and senses. From 6 to 12, feelings come to the fore. And from 12 to 18, will power becomes the dominant focus. From 18 to 24, the intellect takes over, as evidenced by young people’s late-night discussions of philosophy, politics, science, and the arts. And at roughly age 24, many people may experience some form of spiritual awakening.

(Interestingly, the ancient scriptures always list the yoga branches in the same order, corresponding to the sequence in which they become the main focus in the life of a growing child.)

The Indian sages weren’t satisfied merely to scratch the surface of this greatest of all human sciences: the search for happiness. In time, they devised methods of meditation by which human awareness can be expanded infinitely, with infinite rewards.

Like the children at Living Wisdom School and the top Google scientists, we can increase our sense of happiness and security by expanding our awareness, starting at our own level. The beauty of the system is that our happiness will expand with each step we take, no matter how small, starting exactly where we are.

It’s a deceptively simple spiritual principle with profound implications. Our happiness increases whenever we expand our hearts in kindness, compassion, and sympathy; when we offer our support to others; when we cultivate a calm, focused, cheerful mind; and when we meditate on the blissful presence of Spirit within, in which expansive attitudes flower naturally in the human heart.



## 5. Happiness and Success at Harvard

When Shawn Achor was a graduate student in psychology at Harvard, he served as an academic proctor, a role that required him to have hundreds of conversations with incoming freshmen.

During their informal get-togethers, Achor began to notice traits that set the most successful young Harvard students apart. It was an insight that, in time, would completely overturn all his previous assumptions about success.

He realized that the Harvard freshmen who were most likely to excel were not those who buried themselves in the library stacks, grimly determined to grind out good grades. The most successful students were the happiest and most socially adept. They interacted with their peers, formed study groups, continually asked questions, and approached their studies in a spirit of joyous adventure. They were connected, engaged, and were skilled communicators.

Achor is the author of an influential book, *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work*.

Achor ended up teaching the most popular course at Harvard, on the principles of positive psychology. Today he applies his findings about the links between happiness and success to help corporate executives advance their careers and transform their companies' cultures.

Achor realized that when it comes to success and happiness, our traditional assumptions are backwards.

Most people assume that they will be happy *after* they have achieved material success. But Achor found that the opposite is true — that people who are happy from the outset are far more likely to be successful in their careers.

These findings confirm a discovery of neuroscientists, that people with high levels of activity in the prefrontal cortex of their brains — the brain area where happy attitudes, positive expectations, will power, and the ability to form and persevere in achieving long-term goals are localized — are more successful in their lives than those with weaker prefrontal cortex activation.

Neurophysiologist Richard J. Davidson, Ph.D., director of the Lab for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin, is one of the world's foremost experts on the prefrontal cortex. When Davidson studied the brain patterns of college students, he found that those with higher levels of prefrontal cortex activation were uniformly better at setting and achieving goals and had fewer problems with drugs and alcohol, compared to students with lower prefrontal activity.

To put it differently, our brains are wired so that happiness and success go together. Qualities that are essential for success — will power, planning, perseverance — are localized in the same brain area where upbeat, happy attitudes reside. The very structure of our brains tells us that happiness and success are inseparable.

Achor would eventually confirm that the happiness principle is true not only for Harvard students, but for successful people in many fields.

The traditional expectation that happiness is a reward that we can expect to enjoy *after* we've achieved success, defined as a good job, a beautiful home, an impressive income, and a shiny car, was simply wrong. The most successful people are those who are happy from the get-go; thus the title of Achor's book, *The Happiness Advantage*.

If you were to ask school administrators to name the most important factor for school success, many would probably say: "Good study habits." But a mounting body of evidence suggests that this is only a small part of the school success equation, albeit an important one.

The Living Wisdom Schools have shown that the best determinants of school success more closely reflect Achor's findings: a happy learning environment, permeated by a spirit of joyful exploration, where each student can be challenged to learn at his or her own pace.

## 6. Happiness and Success at Stanford and MIT

How well do students educated in today's schools perform when they enter the nation's most prestigious universities?

How well do test scores and the state-mandated, standardized curriculum predict college success?

Merilee Jones, Director of Admissions at MIT, says, "We're raising a generation of kids trained to please adults.... That's the big difference with this generation. They're being judged and graded and analyzed and assessed at every turn. It's too much pressure for them."

The MIT faculty tell Jones that many of their students today aren't as much fun to teach. They no longer come to MIT with the kinds of wildly creative ideas and research projects that were once more common. The faculty report that the current generation of students "want to do everything right, they want to know exactly what's on the test. They're so afraid of failing or stepping out of line that they're not really good students."

The child who learns that his self-worth is attached to an external test result or grade is at risk of becoming emotionally dependent on outward affirmation, over-focused on test scores and adult approval as measures of his or her self-worth. That child risks becoming fixated on grades to the detriment of other important well-rounded factors that contribute to success and happiness in school and life, including an enthusiasm for pursuing wildly creative ideas that may not fall strictly within the boundaries of the curriculum.

Because educators have begun to recognize this, a 4.4 GPA may no longer guarantee admission to a top-flight university. A source in the Stanford admissions office confided that the university now prefers to accept applicants with a 3.9 or 4.0 GPA who are well-rounded as people, having realized that the test-taking superstars are too often deficient in human qualities that more accurately foretell success in school and adult life.

From an article in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, “Perfect scores alone don’t make grade for admission to college of choice” (May 16, 2013):

A Stanford admissions official said the university considers college board scores, grades, the difficulty of courses, extracurricular activities and achievement outside of school. But it’s the personal essay that differentiates one top student from the next, she said. Princeton asks applicants to “tell us your story. Show us what’s special about you.....”

Stanford had a school record 38,828 applications this year and will admit 1,700 freshmen, including legacy applicants and scholarship athletes. Minneapolis attorney Fred Bruno, a Stanford alumnus and local recruiter for the school, said Stanford could completely fill its freshman class with valedictorians.

“When I meet with an applicant, I look for interaction, for presence,” Bruno said. “We assume they have huge credentials. I don’t even ask them about grades. We’re looking at the human side of these kids.”

Parental praise for grades and test scores may motivate the child, as is, of course, perfectly natural. But if it becomes an obsessive source of affirmation for the child, it risks sacrificing the development of self-confidence, independence, initiative, and a sure inner sense of his or her goals and purpose in life.

Schools today are training children to be afraid to make mistakes. And as Sir Ken Robinson pointed out in his TED Talk, “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” far from enhancing their creative initiative, it may only guarantee that they will never come up with an original idea.

“Kids will take a chance. If they don’t know, they’ll have a go. Am I right? They’re not frightened of being wrong. I don’t mean to say that being wrong is the same thing as being creative. What we do know is, if you’re not prepared to be wrong, you’ll never come up with anything original.... And by the time they get to be adults, most kids have lost that capacity. They have become frightened of being wrong. And we run our companies like this. We stigmatize mistakes. And we’re now running national education systems where mistakes are the worst thing you can make. And the result is that we are educating people out of their creative capacities.”

Robinson’s ideas reflect the thinking of Seymour Papert, a South African-born American mathematician, computer scientist, and educator who spent most of his career teaching and researching at MIT. In his

famous book, *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas*, Papert proposed that a key benefit of teaching kids to program computers is that it teaches them “a bug-fixing approach to life.” They learn that mistakes are an unavoidable and perfectly natural part of the creative process, and should be welcomed gratefully and joyfully as milestones on the path to discovering solutions.

Robinson points out that colleges today are inundated with applications from kids with outstanding grades, and that businesses can now take their pick of applicants with high college GPAs and advanced degrees. Jobs that formerly required a bachelor’s now require an MS/MA, and jobs that once demanded a master’s now require a Ph.D.

The key differentiators for admission to an elite university today, and for employment at a prestigious company, have shifted; they now include such “soft” factors as proven communication skills, high energy, personal magnetism, and an ability to cooperate and work harmoniously with others.

The approach of the teachers in the Living Wisdom Schools to motivating the children in their academic studies reaches deep into their hearts and encourages the development of these personal qualities. The Education for Life methods have proved highly successful in eliciting the child’s natural enthusiasm for learning. The results are evidenced by the children’s test scores, their grades in high school and college, their admission to elite schools, and their careers.

The Living Wisdom teachers are trained and expected to take the time to become intimately familiar with each child, to gain a deep and full awareness of the child’s natural inclinations and enthusiasms, so that they can understand the internal motivations that the child brings to the classroom.

The teachers build upon these motivators to tailor the child’s education individually. If the child is artistic, the arts may provide a portal through which the teacher can introduce the standard curriculum in math, history, English, and science. If the child is good with his hands but relatively uninterested in academics, the teachers will use the child’s strengths to motivate him/her to learn – perhaps by showing them the indispensable applications of math, science, history, and English to the kind of work the child is inclined to pursue.

The same is true for the child who is inspired by business, science, the arts, math, or a trade – the LWS teachers will help the student understand that these fields all are intimately related; that a person cannot be a first-

class mathematician without a strong ability to communicate his or her ideas and without knowing something of the history of mathematics and its applications to other fields such as engineering and the physical sciences. The child may someday find fulfillment in using his or her math skills to help researchers find solutions to deeply meaningful problems.

Perhaps most important for children is to teach them that the highest success in every field — as a stunning study of Google’s top employees revealed (see Ch. 3, “Happiness & Success at Google”) — comes to those who can cooperate, who understand and support the needs of others, and who relish the joy of working together to accomplish worthwhile goals.

Children who have a sure sense of themselves, with positive feelings about their strengths and clear, positive images of what they most deeply desire to accomplish, will be able to enter college better equipped to succeed than those whose brains have been stuffed with quickly forgotten facts, to the detriment of the feelings of the heart and the strength of will that give life its motive power, and its meaning and value.

## 7. Happiness and Success in Math Class

Jo Boaler's revolutionary work in math education has brought her worldwide attention and acclaim. A professor in the Stanford University Graduate School of Education, Boaler was the subject of a feature article in *Stanford* magazine, "Jo Boaler Wants Everyone to Love Math: Yes, even you." (Posted April 27, 2018. The excerpts that follow are used with Prof. Boaler's permission.)

Boaler has repeatedly demonstrated that amazing things happen when we adjust math instruction to the student's individual mindset:



By adopting richer, more open teaching methods and encouraging kids to adopt a growth mindset, Boaler believes, educators can help students make strides. In 2015, she and her associates brought 81 middle schoolers — many of them underachievers — to [the Stanford] campus for a four-week math camp centered on activities taken from the Week of Inspirational Math. The students began the camp convinced they were “not math people,” Boaler says. But they were soon engaged. After four weeks of morning classes and afternoon enrichment, the students had improved their scores on standardized math tests by an average of 50 percent, or 2.7 school years.

Granted, the results were achieved in a university research environment, under focused conditions, with multiple expert instructors, using state-of-the-art methods. But Boaler found that when math instruction in public schools is adapted to each student's unique mental and emotional makeup, successes like these are common.

The article relates the experiences of Marc Petrie, a middle school math teacher in Orange County, California. Petrie teaches in a district where 98 percent of the students qualify for free or low-cost lunches. When he

began teaching, the students were deeply demotivated – traditional “test-and-drill” methods had let them down, leaving most of the students behind.

A decade later, the students sit in groups, “working together to come up with varying approaches to problems, while Petrie cruises the room as a coach, more likely to ask guiding questions than to give answers.”

The results have been dramatic, with math test scores rising 60 to 90 percent. Other district schools have since adopted Petrie’s methods.

Petrie’s classes closely resemble how math is taught in the Living Wisdom Schools – with the exception that adult math aides will wander the classroom at LWS, responding to questions and working with the students individually.

The value of this non-traditional approach is evidenced by the LWS students’ success in fields that demand high levels of math proficiency. Living Wisdom graduates have thrived at Stanford, UC Berkeley (physics), the University of Michigan (Ross School of Business), Cornell (mathematics), the University of Bremen, Germany (doctoral program in Space Technology and Microgravity), and other top schools.

From a companion volume to this book, *Head & Heart: How a Balanced Education Nurtures Happy Children Who Excel in School and Life* (<http://bit.ly/2wJ4TqX>):

Over the years, our middle school teacher, Gary McSweeney, has carefully monitored the atmosphere in the classroom while the students take the challenging American Mathematics Competition and the International Math Olympiads test. Gary has been pleased to note 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.

“I would say that my students enjoy the concentrated effort of taking a timed test in silence. The questions require the students to employ creative, out-of-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 analyze the question carefully 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.”

Jo Boaler believes high-pressure testing impairs math performance:



For Boaler, the test — with its focus on speed, volume and performance — is a big part of why math crushes spirits like no other subject. To her, it represents shallow learning with debilitating consequences. Students who work slowly are often left convinced of their own inability, although they may be the deeper kind of thinkers who make the best mathematicians. And even those who calculate speedily — not a skill Boaler thinks is particularly valuable in the digital age — may end up shrugging off math as a high-pressure hamster wheel.

As a researcher, teacher and evangelist, Boaler is a leading voice for a wholly different pedagogy where speed is out, depth is in, and the journey to an answer can be as important as the destination. It's an approach where sense-making matters more than memorization, and retaining "math facts" matters less than understanding how such facts interconnect.

It's the approach that has been adopted with seamless success for fifty years in the Living Wisdom Schools. How well does it work? A *Head & Heart* chapter, "Mathematics Competitions at Living Wisdom School," outlines the method and describes the results:

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 results are reflected in our students' performance when they enter high school. Many LWS graduates test out of freshman math; occasionally, they test out of algebra, geometry, and even trigonometry....

During the 2015-16 academic year some of our youngest students (4<sup>th</sup> graders) who took the International Math Olympiads tests scored in the top 30% on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade test. Very impressive! And two students scored in the top 5% internationally. Extremely impressive!

Individualized math instruction is highly effective for students at all levels of ability, not only the math-challenged. From *Head & Heart*:

The [American Mathematics Competition] AMC 8 for junior high students includes many problems that demand math skills and experience far beyond those required in most junior high math classes.

Congratulations to Freya Edholm of LWS, who [in 2013] 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 six 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.

## 8. Happiness and Success in the History of Education

In ancient Greece and Rome and throughout the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Enlightenment, schools were divided into the approximate equivalents of our modern elementary school, middle school and high school, and college, corresponding to age 6 to 12, 12 to 18, and 18 to 24.

It was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the Industrial Revolution, that government officials and factory owners decided that schools should be entirely focused on training children to become good laborers and managers. Thus, math and science and other “objective” subjects were to be given highest priority in all grades. Other matters, such as the child’s emotional, moral, and spiritual development, were to be eliminated from the classroom as impediments to the “practical” curriculum. It was assumed that these areas would be sufficiently addressed in church and at home.

The result of this system is the public school system of today, with its government-mandated curriculum and its heavy emphasis on academics to the exclusion of nearly everything else.

The mission of the Living Wisdom Schools is to rescue children from this system, whose weaknesses have become abundantly clear in recent years, in the form of an alarming number of student suicides and significant numbers of children acting out their frustration through drugs and violence. The Living Wisdom Schools have shown that educating the whole child — body, mind, heart, and spirit — doesn’t leave the children’s intellectual potential neglected; rather

the opposite is true: by engaging the whole child in the learning process, vast reserves of energy and enthusiasm are released to fuel the highest accomplishment, leading to first-class test scores and exceptional grades.



## 9. Happiness, Success, and the 5 Stages of Child Development

By George Beinhorn, Living Wisdom School of Palo Alto, California.

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.'"

When I read the article aloud to a friend, she promptly doubled over with major affective disorder, pleasant type. "That's such amazing cock-a-doo!" she howled. "It's so carefully reasoned — yet it's completely incredible!"

### **The Practice of Happiness**

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 — studying happiness in the laboratory of their bodies, hearts, and minds, and keeping tidy notes on what worked and what didn't.

For most of us, happiness isn't a "mood disturbance" — it's the answer we're seeking, and if we can get a little more with the help of scientific orderliness and method, all the better.

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 instance, 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 stages, each lasting six years, during which each of the "tools," in the order listed, becomes the primary developmental focus.

Our happiness, they say, increases as we learn to use each of the tools "expansively." (More on "expansion" later.) Thus the most important time in our lives for learning to be happy is when we are growing up, passing through the six-year stages.

From birth to age six, an infant's primary developmental focus is on becoming familiar with its body and senses. From six to twelve, the child's feelings come to the fore — it's a time when children are particularly receptive to learning through the arts — the "media of feeling," including stories, music, theater, art, and dance.

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

Finally, at about age twenty-four, many people experience life events that may precede 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 and end precisely on our sixth, twelfth, eighteenth, and twenty-fourth birthdays; the transitions are gradual.

Why did nature settle 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 wisely, with awareness of others' needs, we need to develop the ability to *feel* their realities. Walters laments the ruinous consequences of cramming young children's minds with facts, as is common in schools today, at the expense of developing their capacity to feel sensitively.

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, we won't exert the energy to achieve it.

Will power, in turn, finds its fulfillment in wisdom, which tells us which actions will make us happy and which will not. And wisdom is fulfilled in Spirit. In Self-realization, we realize that true wisdom and joy come from a higher Source 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 (age six to twelve), junior and senior high (twelve to eighteen), and college (eighteen to twenty-four).

### **Expanding Awareness Equals Joy**

As I hinted earlier, the spiritual teachings of the ages tell us that happiness increases as we learn to use our five human tools "expansively." Like most abstractions, "expansion" is more easily understood with examples.

Let's look at what happens when we begin a physical fitness program.

After the first two or three weeks, we find that we are feeling happier and more alive. Why? Because the exercising body has begun to generate energy that spills over to nourish our feelings, will, and mind, expanding their range and force. Expanding our awareness through one "tool," the body, has influenced the others. Good actions spread their effects – as do "bad" ones. It's now well-known that negative, contractive thoughts and feelings have adverse health consequences.

The spiritual researchers 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, stated it this way:

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 an essay, “Cosmic Religious Feeling.”)

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.

It’s fascinating to watch runners with a view to identifying their primary “tool” from their running style. Some runners “lead with their hearts” – chest out, smiling and confident. Others lead with their minds, heads thrust forward or lowered in thought, while others go more by willpower, bulling their way with their foreheads, as if to blast through obstacles.

In many natural processes, the “tools of happiness” tend to appear in the same sequence as in 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 entering into this important new life venture. We’ve passed through the five “tools” in order: body, feeling, will, mind, soul.

When I ran ultramarathons, I noticed that the tools tended to show up in the same natural order. The first hour or two were for the body, as my heart, legs, and lungs found a rhythm and began to generate a flow of energy. The next hour was for the heart – cheerful conversations would spring up among the runners. As my body tired, will power came to the fore – it was time to gather my forces, focus my attention, and not waste energy on distractions.

Farther along, it became important to apply the mind to resolve questions of logistics: How can I fuel my body and pace myself to make it to the next aid station? How can I deal with this blister? Finally, if I succeeded in using the tools wisely, I would enjoy a wonderful inner



freedom. I became a very simple person, free from distractions, worries, and restless thoughts, living wholly in the moment.

Talking with other runners, I found that many experienced a similar sequence in the longer rhythms of their careers.

At the start, the major issues tended to be about the body – how to train, which shoes to wear, how to treat an injury, what to eat and drink, and so on.

Later, as the body grew fit, feelings took center stage. The feeling phase is rich with the romance of running, as we explore longer distances, seek challenging courses, and absorb the inspiration of athletic role models.

Later, we crave challenges to our will power. We may take up speedwork, compete with ourselves to run faster times, and enter more difficult races. As we pass through the five phases, we find that the tools we need for the next stage tend to show up in uncanny ways.

After the will power phase, runners often become intrigued by the life of the mind. They learn to plan their training carefully, perhaps using a heart monitor.

Finally, there may be a period where the overriding concerns are spiritual, and all of the other tools are merged in a quest for inner harmony. We seek a fulfillment that comes by “running in beauty,” our activities balanced in a careful synchrony.

It helps to be aware of the five stages of a run, and the natural sequence of a runner’s career. It can help us make appropriate decisions at each stage, deliberately focusing on the “tool of the moment” as we prepare for the stage that follows.

More than we tend to realize, each of the tools is a world unto itself, with its own unique strengths and rewards. In my life, I’ve had the good fortune to enter two of these worlds as a relative newcomer. First, when I started an exercise program, and later when I spent several years working to open my heart.

In the first case, I was amazed to discover the world of the fit body. I had never been in good physical condition, and now, at age twenty-six, I could run for miles barefoot on the beach, probing with fingers of consciousness into the rich inner world of a body that glowed with health and energy. How fulfilling and expansive it was, to enter this spacious new world for the first time!

Later, as my heart began to open, I was delighted to discover the vast inner world of feeling. I became aware that there were issues in my life for which the heart held answers that were hidden to the rational mind. I gained a renewed respect for the world of feeling in which women spend much of their lives. Standing in line at the bank or supermarket, I could quietly enjoy watching women working together, appreciating their communion of feeling.

## **The System Is Rigged**

It all sounds so simple and straightforward — just use the tools expansively and happiness is sure to follow, 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 hinted earlier, the opposite urge, contraction, is a temptation for us also.

Life places essentially the same choice continually before us: will we use our bodies wisely, or abuse them? 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 dabble in psychic trivialities? 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 seldom are. We've been given all of the tools we need to achieve happiness and success — or so it seems. The trouble is, relying too exclusively on our purely human resources, we sooner or later find ourselves coming up against their limitations.

The five tools of expansion embody wonderful expertise, yet their specialization can trip us. When this happens, we can still find answers by looking beyond those merely human instruments. Happily, we can use those tools to tap into an awareness that is fathomlessly wise and loving, and that has our best interests always at heart.

That's what an expansive Education for Life is about: harmonizing the children's environment and guiding their activities in ways that will bring them the greatest success and joy.

George Beinhorn earned his B.A. and M.A. at Stanford University at a time when dinosaurs still roamed the Quad.

## 10. Happiness & Success: the Love Plant Approach

By George Beinhorn

In the late 1980s, I wrote about an experiment conducted by the children at the original Living Wisdom School near Nevada City, California.

Here is the complete forty-year-old article. I present it with two thoughts in mind: first, as an example of how the LWS teachers encourage young people's expansive feelings; and as a reminder that the ultimate key to helping children thrive, both personally and at school, is love.

### The Love Plant

The primary school children of teacher Kabir MacDow's classroom at Living Wisdom School, age five through eight, have applied the scientific method to investigate the power of love.

In an experiment suggested by Kabir, the children planted five seeds in each of four pots.

One pot, the "Dark Plant," received only water and was kept in a closet with no exposure to sunlight.

A second pot, the "Too Bad Plant," received sunlight and water, but no extra soil nutrients or special attention.

A third pot, the "Everything But Love Plant," got sunlight, water, and soil nutrients — the normal care a good gardener would give it.

The Love Plant received the same care as the Everything But Plant, plus the added ingredient of love.

It's 9:30 in the morning. The children are working quietly at their desks, when Kabir asks for their attention and invites them to bring the four plants to an open area on the rug. The children respond eagerly, smiling as they gather in a circle. It's obvious that this is something they've looked forward to.



First the plants are watered, and then the Dark Plant is returned to the closet and the children take the Too Bad Plant back to the window sill. The Everything But Love Plant is fussed over amid a discussion of the nutrients a plant needs to grow.

Kabir: "We're going to focus our attention on the Love Plant now. This is the one we want to give our attention to. I'd like someone to explain what this experiment is about — someone who's been

centered this morning. Tara, would you explain what the experiment is?"

Tara: "It's to watch the plants grow and see what they do when you put them in different places, like put them in the sun, and put them in different kinds of soil, and put them in the dark."

Kabir: None of us can really grow without all of those things — the water and the sun and the air and the good soil — and something special is there, too.

(Several children begin talking at once.)



Kabir: “Let’s sit up, please. Sit up nice and straight. Now look at the plants. Look at them closely. You can see how well they’ve done. We’ve started these plants from seeds, and they’ve depended on us to take care of them and help them grow. Now, the plants that we gave a little bit to, they grew a little bit. The plants that we’ve given a lot to, they’ve grown a lot, they’ve grown a lot more than the rest. What we give is what has helped this plant, and we’ve been giving our love, which is one of the most important things that it could have. So we want to give it some more right now.

“We can start by sitting up. Close your eyes. Inside of your mind, try to see the plant. Do this: Try to see the plant inside — it’s green and it’s leafy.

“As we sing, we’re going to try to feel that it’s pulling the plant up, making it great and big. All the leaves are spreading out and branching out and getting big. The blossoms are starting to come out on the plant, and the flowers.”

(The children sing to the plant with great enthusiasm while projecting loving feelings toward it.)

“The flowers this plant has are its gift to us. We give it love and it gives us its beauty. Ready? Have the plant in your mind. As we sing, we can feel that we’re bringing it up. We can even bring our hands over it. Here we go, just bringing our energy up as we sing.”

(The children sing again, then Kabir leads them in a prayer. The quality in their voices is startling — it’s as if they are praying with one voice, vibrant, rich, enthusiastic. No voice wanders or lags; the children’s full attention is on what they’re doing.)

Kabir (followed responsively by the children): “Bless this plant. Fill it with Your love. Help it to grow strong. And beautiful.”

## **The Love-Plant Model for School Success**

In education, the worst mistakes generally begin with a subtle, self-justifying thought. Instead of nourishing the Love Plant in children's hearts, we ignore its needs — we put it in the dark, in our feverish obsession with test scores and grades. We burn its joyful fronds with a deadly-boring standardized lockstep curriculum. Or we ignore the quiet instinct of our hearts that is separately telling us what each child in the class really needs in order to thrive.

There is a current that runs through the Living Wisdom Schools. It's a constant theme, that the right thing, in school and life, is to engage with love, and never limit the classroom instruction to force-feeding these young plants with barren ideas. The inborn excitement of math or science, history or English, beautifully taught by teachers who are free to be creative and independent and strong, infects the kids with a love and enthusiasm for learning that empowers them to blossom.

Our K-8 school's graduates do extremely well when they enter the San Francisco Bay Area's academically challenging public and private high schools, and our high school grads are accepted by first-tier universities or succeed in other post-secondary opportunities. Yet parents who inquire about our school are often skeptical.

They worry that the kids will fall behind academically because we spend so much time cultivating their hearts. Or they raise reasonable objections.

Surely we're successful because our students come from smart, successful families. Surely we accept only the top students. Surely our kids do well because of our fabulous nine-to-one student-teacher ratio. Surely our system, which spends so much time on "soft skills," will fail to help the kids compete when they enter the harsh, dog-eat-dog world of high school.

It's true that many of our students have highly educated parents. It's true that our student-teacher ratio is as low as six to one in middle-school math, where the teacher and two adult math aides are present in the classroom. But the truth is, we accept students across a broad spectrum of academic ability.

Our successes aren't due to those external factors, as some of our visitors suspect. They are the natural outcome of an approach to working with children that takes account of each child's individual hopes and dreams.

The high-pressure K-8 academic prep schools in the area don't evoke our envy. To put it kindly, their results are no better than ours, because our

philosophy is rooted in the Love Plant approach. A saying at our school is “Kids who are taught to love, love to learn.”

Our philosophy is based on the idea that life has meaning, that life’s meaning is reflected in school, and that the principles that work in life — at Harvard, MIT, and Stanford, on sports teams, in the military, and at Google and other top companies — are the same principles that help children thrive from kindergarten through college and beyond.

An education that instills these principles gives children two things that all people have craved since the dawn of time: continually increasing happiness, and regular, ongoing experiences of success.

If there is one core truth that we’ve learned in the fifty-year history of the Living Wisdom Schools, it’s that, at school and in life, expansive attitudes of love, kindness, compassion, and joy improve performance, while negative, contractive attitudes and feelings destroy happiness and impede success.





## 11. Happiness, Success, and Academic Achievement

This chapter is adapted from an article that appeared first on the website of Education for Life International ([edforlife.org](http://edforlife.org)).

Mainstream education, with its emphasis on test scores, emphasizes training just one of a student's developmental tools, the intellect, at the expense of their potential for growth in other areas.

Education for Life (EFL) is based on helping students succeed academically and personally through balanced development of their five "Tools of Maturity" – Body, Feelings, Will, Mind, and Spirit.

Let's compare the results of these two very different systems.

### Education for Life and Testing

While Education for Life doesn't emphasize academic testing for young children, our older students often express an interest in knowing how they are performing, compared to students their age in other schools.

When the original Living Wisdom High School applied for accreditation, the students were required to take a nationally recognized standardized test. The results were remarkable. The students placed in the top 10 percent of schools nationwide as a group, and over the next 10 years they scored consistently in the top 10 percent, placing in the top 1 percent one year.

Their SAT scores were equally impressive, averaging 1248 compared to the national average of roughly 1060. In recent years, an LWHS student earned a perfect score on the SATs.

#### Scholastic Aptitude Test Scores

	EFL Averages	National Averages
Language Arts	640	533
Mathematics	608	527

Total                      1248                      1060

How can EFL schools compete so well against elite academic schools, when the EFL schools spend significant time on the arts, outdoor activities, service projects, and adventure travel?

Current research offers some insights.

### **The Body and the Intellect**

Surely, it's obvious that disease, stress, and poor hygiene can erode the energy available for sustained mental concentration in academics. This relationship was demonstrated in a 2013 study by the National Academy of Sciences:

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 feelings constructively is a tremendous aid for maintaining a calm mental focus in challenging circumstances.

The advent of “emotional intelligence” in 1995 provoked a wave of research that authenticated the importance of social and emotional guidance.

A key survey by J. Payton, et al. examined 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 the Intellect**

The vital connection between will power and the intellect is evident in qualities such as perseverance, concentration, and personal initiative. In *The Willpower Instinct*, Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D surveyed the results of more than 200 studies in this area and concluded:

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 a Prediction**

It will take time to bring about widespread change, but educators are acknowledging that too much one-sided emphasis on the intellect is counterproductive.

For more than fifty years Education for Life has pioneered an approach that cultivates the child's intellect without neglecting other important factors that contribute to the student's success in academics, namely body, feelings, will, and spirit.

The research is telling us that the future of education will favor schools that can implement an integrated approach, along the lines of Education for Life and the Living Wisdom Schools.



## 12. Happiness, Success, and Education for Life: Grades Tell the Story

We present these academic achievements by graduates of the K-8 Living Wisdom School as evidence for the validity of the Education for Life approach to learning at LWHS. We do so because, as of this writing, the pool of graduates was much larger for the K-8 schools than for the relatively new Living Wisdom High Schools. The Palo Alto LWS opened more than 30 years ago, while the LWHS was started in 2015 and remains quite small. (See Ch.18, “7 Strengths of a Micro-High School.”)

We invited recent Palo Alto LWS graduates (2011-2014) to share their high school and college grade-point averages. The Palo Alto school has 70-75 students in nine grades, K-8. On average, 4-8 students graduate per year; thus these 20 responses over the last four years are representative.

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 (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

**LWS graduates’ average high school GPA (2011-18): 3.85**

**LWS alumni have graduated from these high schools:**

- |                             |                           |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Bay School in San Francisco | Mid-Peninsula High School |
| Carlmont High School        | Mountain View High School |
| Everest High School         | Palo Alto High School     |
| Gunn High School            | Pinewood School           |
| Harker School               | Presentation High School  |
| Los Altos High School       | San Lorenzo High School   |
| Menlo College Prep          | Summit Prep High School   |
| Menlo-Atherton High School  | Woodside Priory           |

**LWS alumni have graduated from these colleges:**

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Bowdoin College                 | San Francisco Art Institute                                  |
| Brooks Institute of Photography | San Francisco Conservatory of Music                          |
| Cal Poly                        | Santa Clara University                                       |
| Columbia University             | School of Visual Arts, New York                              |
| Cornell University              | Stanford University  |
| Dominican University            | UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC Davis, UC Santa Cruz, UC Santa Barbara |
| Dublin University, Ireland      | University of Bremen, Germany                                |
| Georgetown University           | University of Michigan,                                      |
| Humboldt State University       | University of San Francisco                                  |
| London College, UK              | University of Washington (Ross School of Business)           |
| Loyola Marymount University     |  |
| New York University             |  |
| Oberlin College                 |  |
| Portland State University       |  |

### **LWS graduates' college majors:**

Anthropology	Genetics
Art	Library Science
Computer Science	Marketing
Culinary Arts	Mathematics
Economics	Medicine
Education	Music
Engineering	Photography
Film	

### **Recent LWHS graduates:**

Cal Poly (Psychology)  
Chapman University (Computer Science, Cyber-Security)  
San Jose State University (Marine Biology)  
Santa Clara University (Political Science; Pre-Law)  
UC San Diego (Psychology)

### **LWHS graduates have been accepted (2018-2021):**

Bard College at Simon's Rock	Santa Clara University
Boston College	Sarah Lawrence College
Cal Poly	Simon Fraser University
Chapman University	UC Davis
Lewis & Clark College	UC San Diego
Muhlenberg College	University of Puget Sound
New York University	University of San Francisco
Redlands University	University of the Pacific
Saint Mary's College	Whittier College
San Jose State University	Willamette University





## 13. Bill Aris's Truth: Happiness and Success in Sports & the Military

In school, sports, and the Navy, respect for the uniqueness of the individual opens portals for breathtaking success.<sup>1</sup>

By George Beinhorn, Living Wisdom School of Palo Alto

Nobody believes Bill Aris.

People ask Bill, over and over, how his Fayetteville-Manlius High School (NY) girls' cross country teams have managed to win the Nike Cross Nationals (NXN) an amazing ten times.

(NXN, where the nation's forty best teams compete, is the de facto national high school cross country championship.)

Bill graciously shares his methods. He patiently explains how he trains his runners. And the other coaches suspect he's *signifyin'*, as they say in the Ozarks.

Surely, he's pulling their legs. At the very least, he's got to be holding something back.

Coaches fall off their chairs when Bill explains that he spends relatively little time designing his runners' training.....

"I spend 80 percent of my time on psychological and emotional considerations of each kid," Aris says. "I put 20 percent of my time into designing the training. I spend most of my time thinking about and trying to get to the heart and soul of each kid, to both inspire them and to

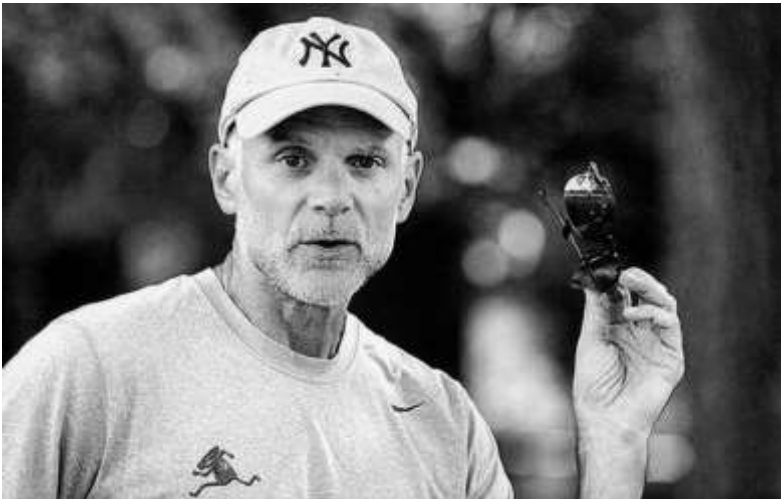
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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from *The Joyful Athlete: the Wisdom of the Heart in Exercise & Sports Training*, by George Beinhorn.

understand them. I'm always trying to figure out what keys unlock what doors to get them to maximize their potential."<sup>2</sup>

Other coaches believe there's no way Aris can produce national champions, year after year, without huge numbers of kids trying out for the team, and without recruiting.

In fact, Fayetteville-Manlius High School has 1,500-2,000 students, yet just 25 runners turn out each fall for cross country. And Aris doesn't need to recruit, because his methods turn talented kids into champions.



*Bill Aris. His methods are simple and profound.*

Aris's boys' teams won NXN in 2014 and 2017. They've placed second several times, plus a third and fourth. To put this in perspective, it's a tremendous achievement to be among the forty teams invited to race at NXN. Scoring consistently in the top five puts the F-M boys in the absolute stratosphere of high school cross country.

At the library recently, I picked up a wonderful book. At first glance, *It's Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy* would seem to have little to do with training high school runners. Yet Bill Aris and the book's author, former U.S. Navy Captain D. Michael Abrashoff, have a lot in common. They're both renegade thinkers, in professions where the safest path to career advancement is to keep one's head down and do things the way they've always been done.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Secret to F-M's Success: There Is No Secret," Tom Leo and Donnie Webb, Syracuse.com, December 10, 2010. <http://bit.ly/2JT3vnn>.

Abrashoff describes what happened when the Navy gave him command of a deeply troubled ship with bottom-scraping efficiency ratings.

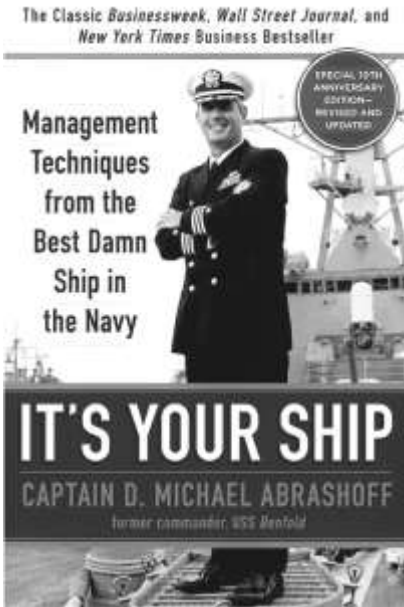
In the Navy, officers are expected either to get ahead or get out. If they aren't being regularly promoted, they risk being seen as damaged goods — losers — and shunted off to posts where they can't hurt other officers' careers.

It's a system that breeds a paranoid management style where the highest priority is to avoid looking bad. It encourages officers to micromanage their subordinates to get results that will look good on their resumes. It's an approach that ultimately produces mediocre results and has a terrible effect on a ship's morale. When Abrashoff took over *Benfold*, most of the crew

told him that they couldn't wait to leave the ship and get out of the Navy.

What Abrashoff did was amazing. As I read the book, I laughed, smiled, and occasionally wiped a tear. Abrashoff decided to apply the lessons he'd learned during a two-year stint as an aide to Secretary of Defense William J. Perry. He would put the individual crew members' welfare first — just as Bill Aris does with his cross-country runners.

Abrashoff spoke personally with every one of *Benfold's* 310 sailors, asking them about their backgrounds, their goals, what they hoped to get out of their time in the Navy, and what they felt was wrong with the Navy's



way of doing things.

Above all, he invited their suggestions for improving procedures in their own departments. And he implemented them, even if it meant bending the Navy's rules. Within six months, *Benfold* was winning at-sea exercises against ships with much stronger ratings.

How did Abrashoff turn *Benfold* around? By adopting a simple guiding principle.

“I decided that on just about everything I did, my standard should be simply whether or not it felt right. You can never go wrong if you do ‘the right thing.’....

“If it feels right, smells right, tastes right, it’s almost surely the right thing – and you will be on the right track.

“If that doesn’t sound very profound or sophisticated, in the Navy, in business, and in life, it really is as simple as that.”

Let’s add: “In sports training, and in the classroom.”

We *know* when we’re doing the right thing in sports, and when we’re truly reaching students in the classroom and helping each one improve at their own level – because it feels right. And we know just as surely when we’re screwing up – when we’re ignoring the child’s reality in a headlong pursuit of test scores – because it feels ever so subtly wrong.

It’s simple. Do the right thing as an athlete, and your training will go well, and you’ll enjoy it. Do the right thing for every child at school – get to know each student and work with their individual strengths – and you will quickly find them becoming amazingly enthusiastic and engaged and loving school, because they feel respected.

Few believed that Captain Abrashoff’s expansive leadership style would work, until *Benfold* began garnering a reputation as “the best damn ship in the Navy.”

Assigned to the Persian Gulf during the second Gulf War, *Benfold* became the go-to ship whenever commanders needed things done fast and correctly. When other captains wanted to improve their ships’ performance, they visited *Benfold* and talked with Abrashoff and his crew.

It’s an incredibly inspiring story, and the principles behind *Benfold*’s success are exactly the same as those that have brought the girls’ teams at Fayetteville-Manlius ten national championships.

In my working life, I occasionally help Donovan R. Greene, Ph.D., a highly regarded industrial psychologist. Companies hire Don to identify executive candidates who can strengthen their cultures and amplify their success. A habit that many of the best candidates share is “managing by walking around” (MBWA).

That’s what Mike Abrashoff did and what Bill Aris does. Abrashoff spent countless hours visiting each of *Benfold*’s departments, learning its functions and where they fit within the ship’s overall operations. He met with each crew member and invited their thoughts on how they could do

their jobs better, and he empowered them to make changes. He respected them and tapped their creativity, knowledge, and enthusiasm. Morale soared, and success came quickly.

It was uncannily similar to how Bill Aris guides his high school cross country teams.

Coaches don't believe Bill because he doesn't tell them what they want to hear. They want to hear: "I get results by hard-nosed methods. I work my kids' tails off, and I'm not above recruiting so long as I don't get caught. We do huge mileage in summer, and I won't tell you about our speedwork, because that would be revealing too much. But it's all in the numbers."



*Bill with his Manlius girls after winning Nike Cross Nationals.  
Bill's genius is that he creates happy, tightly bonded teams.*

Does that sound like schools today? The obsession with numbers. The "studying to the test." The government-imposed standard curriculum that leaves one-third of the kids bored out of their minds, another third unable to keep up, and only one-third challenged at their level.

When modern sports scientists from America and Europe travel to Africa to study the world-leading Kenyan elite runners, they bring along their little measuring sticks. They measure the Kenyans' leg lengths, muscle elasticity, and calf and thigh dimensions. They weigh and analyze what they eat — how much carbohydrate, fat, and protein. They study how many miles they run, and how hard. And they write it all down in a little notebook filled with numbers.

Few of them ask the Kenyans about their hopes and dreams. Yet if you invite the Kenyans to talk about what sets them apart from their American and European counterparts, they *never* mention numbers. They talk

instead about qualities of the heart — not heart volume and such-like science, but the heart's *feelings*.

They explain that they run based on inner feeling — they take joy in running together, and if their bodies don't feel up to running hard on a given day, they're perfectly willing to pack it up and go home; whereas an American runner would be more likely to force himself through the workout, haunted by a need to "make the numbers."

The Kenyans know that their bodies will tell them when it's okay to run hard, and when it's best to knock off. They've long since learned to do the right thing.

They talk about how the U.S. runners are so *serious* about their training, how obsessed they are with numbers and technology, and how it's all geared toward some feverishly imagined far-off future result. Meanwhile, the Kenyans are intent on maximizing the joys of *today*.

Captain Abrashoff did a very simple thing on *Benfold* — he created a happy ship. He gave his crew the freedom to enjoy doing their jobs well, and other ships' officers and crew members were soon seeking any excuse to visit *Benfold*, for the experience of being infected and inspired by its upbeat mood.

That's the secret of Bill Aris's success, and it isn't complicated. Aris creates happy teams. How? By getting to know his runners and helping them realize their dreams. That kind of caring creates loyalty, enthusiasm, and success — on a Navy missile destroyer, a cross country course, or in the classroom.

School administrators and politicians should take a lesson from Aris and Abrashoff. Instead of cramming the students into a lockstep curriculum, thereby demotivating all but the average few, they could empower teachers to institute an individualized curriculum that would take the measure of each one's hopes and dreams.

When Abrashoff left *Benfold*, he studied surveys conducted by the Navy to discover why people weren't re-enlisting. Surprisingly, low pay was far down the scale, in fifth place.

"The top reason was not being treated with respect or dignity; second was being prevented from making an impact on the organization; third, not being listened to; and fourth, not being rewarded with more responsibility."

Abrashoff worked tirelessly to reverse these trends. He would not tolerate attitudes in his officers that would risk creating a bossy, feudal

culture that would spread poisonous feelings of resentment throughout the ship.

Every crew member's contributions were to be considered important, and they were to be made aware of their value to the ship.

By treating his crew as if they mattered, and giving them freedom to shine, Abrashoff built the best damn ship in the Navy – just as Aris has built the nation's best high school cross country program.

Six months after Abrashoff's departure, *Benfold* earned *the highest grade in the history of the Pacific Fleet* on the Navy's Combat Systems Readiness Review.

Abrashoff tells story after story of how he transformed the culture of his ship, one detail at a time. It's a deeply moving account, and ultimately the "method" can be boiled down to a simple principle: the best approach to organizational change and individual excellence is the one that creates the greatest fulfillment and happiness for the individual.

"Every year, I look at every kid in our group," Aris said of his approach to training high school runners. "Number one, I try to find out what's in their mind and in their hearts. How high is up, in other words. From there I build a training program around that."

Speaking of the unique culture that Aris built, award-winning running journalist Marc Bloom said:

"In all my 40-plus years (of being involved with high school cross country), I don't think I've seen anything this extraordinary, at least on the high school level.... If you look at professionals it's like looking at the Kenyans and the Ethiopians. On the high school level, F-M is so far better than anyone else.

"You say how do they do it?" Bloom added. "You can look at the physiological aspect and the running, but there is also a cultural foundation to it. It's a different society. It's a different attitude."<sup>3</sup>

It's a culture that engenders good feelings within each runner and within the team. Aris persuades his runners to tap the joy of training for something larger than themselves. And it all sounds remarkably like the culture at Living Wisdom School.

"When our kids train or race, they do so for each other rather than competing against each other. When one releases themselves from the

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

limiting constraints of individual achievement alone, new worlds open up in terms of group AND individual potential and its fulfillment.... Each is capable of standing on their own, but when working together so much more is accomplished both for the group and individual. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts basically, nothing new here.”<sup>4</sup>

Why aren't people more receptive to these radical but exhaustively proven ideas? Why are so few listening – in school, in sports, and in business and the military?

Mark Allen, six-time winner of the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon, may have the answer. Before he began racing triathlons, Allen was a hard-charging All-American swimmer at UC San Diego. Swimmers do intensive interval workouts, and when Allen became a triathlete he trained full-out all the time, whether running, riding, or swimming. Yet year after year he fell just short of winning the Ironman.

Then Allen met coach Phil Maffetone, who had him do several months of easy aerobic training at the start of the season, followed by six weeks of very hard work. Maffetone understood Allen's individual needs and adapted his training accordingly. That's when the string of Ironman victories began.

In an interview with Allen, Tim Noakes, MD, author of the authoritative *Lore of Running*, asked him for his thoughts on why more triathletes hadn't adopted the methods that had brought him so much success.

“Allen answered that many athletes are too ego-driven. They can't wait to perform well and will not accept anyone else's ideas.”<sup>5</sup>

Why are our academically obsessed public and private schools not adopting the principles that work so well in sports and in the Navy, and that have created happiness and success for so many students for fifty years at Living Wisdom School, because they help each child learn more *efficiently* than the failed lockstep Core Curriculum, and the equally disastrous No Child Left Behind?

The answer is that politicians and school administrators are too heavily invested in their own ideas and obsessed with numbers – even when the numbers lie.

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<sup>4</sup> “Stotan: The Secret of Fayetteville Manlius,” XCNation/RunnerSpace, September 23, 2013. [http://www.runnerspace.com/news.php?news\\_id=180217](http://www.runnerspace.com/news.php?news_id=180217)

<sup>5</sup> *Lore of Running*, op. cit.



Bill Aris’s methods aren’t what the politicians and administrators want to hear. And that’s too bad, because there’s solid scientific evidence that the heart and brain can work harder, with less strain in the presence of happy feelings. In the classroom, research shows that the brain becomes a more efficient learning machine in the presence of harmonious, expansive feelings — as opposed to the stress and emotional toll of a needlessly competitive, test-focused atmosphere.

Teachers and coaches who support the individual child, intent on helping them become happy members of a happy team, aren’t just wasting the kids’ time. They’re amplifying the children’s ability to learn, empowering the young learners by tapping the power of positive feelings to make each child’s brain a champion.

Imagine if you were a teacher and there was a child in your classroom who clearly needed special attention and loving help — would you blithely ignore the child’s needs, prioritizing test preparation and grades? As parents and as a society, would we set up our entire school system so that teachers were forced to ignore that child’s unique circumstances?

Mass education is “dead-ucation.” Teachers who know how to elicit the individual child’s enthusiasm for learning, by giving them daily experiences of success, each at their own level, are able to educate them far more effectively than teachers who are required by government decree to cram a barely digestible load of facts into the students’ overworked and resisting brains.

*(Adapted from The Joyful Athlete: The Wisdom of the Heart in Exercise & Sports Training, by Living Wisdom School of Palo Alto web content manager George Beinhorn: [www.joyfulathlete.com](http://www.joyfulathlete.com))*



## 14. How to Improve Schools Using Coaching Principles

If teachers were allowed to be coaches, our schools would become centers of learning populated by happy, inspired students and their happy teachers.

In Tony Holler's thirty-eight years as a high school teacher, he's seen the best and worst of public education. Tony taught honors chemistry at Plainfield North High in the greater Chicago area.

Now retired, he laments the way teachers today are hamstrung by the mandate for a core curriculum, and by national policies such as "No Child Left Behind" that force them to give students a standardized, lock-step education that ignores their individual needs.

Tony says, "Schools force-feed the curriculum to students every single day. The political 'war on education' has forced schools into an all-consuming quest for higher ACT and SAT scores, disregarding the toll it takes on the students.

"I work at an excellent school. My principal asked the teachers what our school was doing well. My answer: 'The trains run on time.'

"This was not the answer my principal expected. I would give my school an A-plus for organization and discipline. It's the education that bothers me.... My own best teachers were artists. They didn't paint by the numbers."

Tony's views on education are biting, but they are fueled by a desire to see young people thrive and be successful and happy, and a distaste for the obstacles that politically motivated policies place in their way.

For Tony, the flipside is that he is intimately familiar with a side of public schools where happy, motivated students learn to perform at high levels of excellence every single day.

The methods used on that side of the high school campus look remarkably like the Education for Life principles of the Living Wisdom Schools. The problem is, you will rarely find these extremely successful, comprehensively proven methods practiced in the classroom.



*Tony Holler with nine-time Olympic gold medalist Carl Lewis during a training consortium where Tony and Carl were featured speakers. Tony's ideas on training sprinters reflect his beliefs about learning in the classroom – that it should be challenging and fun, and not grimly stressful or drearily mechanical.*

Besides teaching, Tony coached track and field. In sports, unlike academics as they are taught today, what matters isn't test scores but solid results. On the football field, the numbers that matter are clearly on display the scoreboard. Coaches must either adopt methods that bring out the best in every athlete, or risk being fired.

Tony believes that if teachers were allowed to adopt coaching methods, it would transform our public schools overnight into vibrant centers of learning, populated by motivated, happy students.

Those methods are on display every single day, right under the noses of the school administrators and government policy makers – yet nobody is paying attention.

When Tony coached freshman football from 2010 to 2015, his teams went 49-4, averaging 44-plus points per game. When he taught at Harrisburg (Illinois) High School, his track teams won the state title in the 4x100 a remarkable four times. In 2018, his Plainfield North High track team won the 4x100 title in an Illinois state record time of 41.29. An hour later, a 15-year-old PNHS sprinter ran a state record in the 100 meters (10.31). The team won four gold medals and placed third, close behind two much larger track powerhouse schools.

Tony knows what it takes to nurture winners on the track and in the classroom. What follows is his overview of the principles that earned him election to the Illinois Track and Cross Country Coaches Association Hall of Fame, and that he believes should be adopted in school classrooms everywhere.

1. Sports are not a graduation requirement. Kids play sports because they are challenging and fun. Advanced Placement courses should similarly “sell” themselves, and not be forced upon all of the students by government decree.
2. Coaches don’t spend 80 percent of their time with the 20 percent of kids who can’t do the work. Students should be helped to succeed at their own level. A one-size-fits-all definition of success is ridiculous, and is bound to fail.
3. Coaches aren’t told how to coach. Schools should give teachers the freedom to tailor the curriculum to the needs of the individual student.
4. Sports programs are promoted. Kids play sports because they hear rumors about the great team culture on a football, basketball, baseball, or track team. Teachers should be allowed to make their courses exciting and attractive to the students – whatever it takes.
5. You play to win the game. Too many schools are diploma mills. Schools should set themselves no lesser goal than to help every single student experience the greatest possible success at their own, individual level of ability.
6. All men are *not* created equal. Every student is talented, but not in the same way as other students. The obvious fact of individual differences should be given primary consideration in the classroom.

7. Coaches don't give grades. Grades are meaningful only as they measure each student's progress. Grades should not be held up as the goal, or used as a motivator — or, worse, as a punishment.
8. Failure is not an option. Great coaches make sure that every player has daily experiences of success. This is the way to create excitement and enthusiasm for learning. How to give each student daily success experiences? By challenging them daily at their own level.
9. Coaches are leaders, not bosses. Rigid, authoritarian teachers are obsolete. Teachers must be given the flexibility, skills, and experience to make learning exciting and to introduce every student to the thrill of overcoming challenges, again and again, every day.
10. Coaches don't need advanced degrees. The value of an advanced degree has been artificially inflated in the teaching profession. Good teachers know how to help kids succeed regardless of their academic credentials.

Tony concludes:

“I've spent thirty-eight of my fifty-nine years going to high school and hanging out with teenagers. As I enter the twilight of my teaching career, I dream of better schools. I dream of independent students who are bold and assertive. I dream of students who have the enthusiasm of athletes. I dream of teachers who run their classrooms like coaches, tailoring courses to the talents and interests of their students. If schools were more like sports, maybe kids would love school.”

*(Adapted with permission from “Ten Ways to Improve Schools Using Coaching Principles,” by Tony Holler: <https://www.freelapusa.com/ten-ways-to-improve-schools-using-coaching-principles/>.)*

## 15. Sir Ken Robinson on Creativity at School

Many parents simply don't believe that what's offered at LWS can possibly be valid, since everybody else is doing it differently.

And yet, a deeper look at those schools with more "traditional" curricula reveals troubling omissions.

The shortcomings were eloquently described by Sir Ken Robinson, an award-winning international educational consultant whose talk, "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" is the most-watched in TED's history, with more than 40 million views by 320 million people in 160 countries.

Robinson shares his thoughts on the need for change in education today:

"In place of curiosity, what we have is a culture of compliance. Our children and teachers are encouraged to follow routine algorithms rather than to excite the power of imagination and curiosity.... Human life is inherently creative. It's why we all have different résumés. We create our lives, and we can recreate them as we go through them. It's the common currency of being a human being. It's why human culture is so interesting and diverse and dynamic.... *(Photo: Sir Ken Robinson speaks at a Creative Company conference.)*



"We all create our own lives through this restless process of imagining alternatives and possibilities, and one of the roles of education is to awaken and develop these powers of creativity. Instead, what we have is a culture of standardization.

"Now, it doesn't have to be that way.... Finland regularly comes out on top in math, science and reading. Now, we only know that's what they do well at, because that's all that's being tested. That's one of the problems of the test. They don't look for other things that matter just as much. The

thing about [the] work in Finland is this: they don't obsess about those disciplines. They have a very broad approach to education, which includes humanities, physical education, the arts.

"Second, there is no standardized testing in Finland. I mean, there's a bit, but it's not what gets people up in the morning, what keeps them at their desks.

"The third thing — and I was at a meeting recently with some people from Finland, actual Finnish people, and somebody from the American system was saying to the people in Finland, 'What do you do about the drop-out rate in Finland?'

"And they all looked a bit bemused, and said, 'Well, we don't have one. Why would you drop out? If people are in trouble, we get to them quite quickly and we help and support them.'

"Now people always say, 'Well, you know, you can't compare Finland to America.' No. I think there's a population of around five million in Finland. But you can compare it to a state in America. Many states in America have fewer people in them than that...

"But what all the high-performing systems in the world do is currently what is not evident, sadly, across the systems in America — I mean, as a whole. One is this: they individualize teaching and learning. They recognize that it's students who are learning, and the system has to engage them, their curiosity, their individuality, and their creativity. That's how you get them to learn.

"The second is that they attribute a very high status to the teaching profession. They recognize that you can't improve education if you don't pick great people to teach and keep giving them constant support and professional development. Investing in professional development is not a cost. It's an investment, and every other country that's succeeding well knows that.... They know that to be the case.

"And the third is, they devolve responsibility to the school level for getting the job done. You see, there's a big difference here between going into a mode of command and control in education — that's what happens in some systems. Central or state governments decide they know best and they're going to tell you what to do. The trouble is that education doesn't go on in the committee rooms of our legislative buildings. It happens in classrooms and schools, and the people who do it are the teachers and the students, and if you remove their discretion, it stops working....



“Many of the current policies are based on mechanistic conceptions of education. It’s like education is an industrial process that can be improved just by having better data, and somewhere in the back of the minds of some policy makers is this idea that if we fine-tune it well enough, if we just get it right, it will all hum along perfectly into the future. It won’t, and it never did.

“The point is that education is not a mechanical system. It’s a human system....

“So I think we have to embrace a different metaphor. We have to recognize that it’s a human system, and there are conditions under which people thrive, and conditions under which they don’t. We are, after all, organic creatures, and the culture of the school is absolutely essential.”

(From Sir Ken Robinson’s TED Talk, “How to Escape Education’s Death Valley” (2013); used with permission. To watch the full talk, visit [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com).)



Happiness &  
Success  
in High School



## 16. Bright Promise: Educating Teenagers for Life

Nitai Deranja co-founded the first Living Wisdom School in 1972 with J. Donald Walters, author of *Education for Life: Preparing Children to Meet Today's Challenges*. Nitai now serves as President of Education for Life International. He also directs the international online Living Wisdom High School.



**Q:** As we begin our conversation, my thought is that adolescence is a very special time for young people. It's the time when they are transitioning from being little children who are living to a great extent in their heart quality, to young adults who will soon be responsible for their own lives. *(Photo: Nitai in the early 1970s.)*

Please tell us how Education for Life approaches adolescence, and how the Living Wisdom High Schools go about trying to provide an ideal environment and wise guidance for teenagers. Maybe you'd like to talk about what teenagers need most during these very important years, and the kind of education that will be most beneficial and fulfilling for them.

### What Teenagers Need

**Nitai:** In his book, *Education for Life*, J. Donald Walters talks about the stages of a child's development, and it's exactly as you said. Adolescence is a time of tremendous transition, and we as adults need to be on top of those important changes and ready to guide them appropriately — and it's unfortunately not all that common in our schools, because we tend to treat our teenagers the way we treat kids when they're nine or ten.

We force teens to sit at desks all day in a classroom, and maybe a few will be engaged in after-school activities, but they'll tend to be the few who are involved in an extracurricular area such as sports, the arts, or drama.

So lots of teens are missing out because they aren't being challenged to exercise their will power in meaningful ways, and our role as adults is to create those opportunities for them. Because what teenagers need, above all, is to be challenged to stretch their edges and explore areas that they aren't necessarily already comfortable with.

Ananda Village, where we started the first Living Wisdom School, is located in the beautiful Sierra foothills, about fifteen miles from the nearest town. It's an extremely idyllic place for children to grow up, with a pond for swimming, beautiful trails to explore, horses that the kids can ride, wild animals, and lots of space to roam. And yet, by the time they're twelve or thirteen, the kids are starting to get bored and restless. And unless the adults can offer them adventures that will challenge them to grow and learn the lessons their own nature is craving, they can start to become rebellious or cynical.

So even in those ideal surroundings, there's a challenge for the adults to create adventures that will invite them to discover the happiness of exercising their will power in positive ways.

### Helping Teens Grow

How can we help them?<sup>9</sup> There are lots of possibilities, and the first thing we tried was to create service adventures, where we would take the teens and travel to places where the dimensions of their world would be suddenly expanded.

It had to be a place where they were not going to be completely comfortable, where they couldn't just cruise along passively, and where they might not even know how people's lives worked.



*Leiah Mahoney during an LWHS service adventure trip to India.*

In the early years, we ended up taking them to Mexico once a year, where we would stay for two or three weeks at an orphanage. It was a completely new and different environment for the kids, where they didn't really know exactly how to behave. The orphanage kids would get up at six

o'clock in the morning to sweep the floors and do the laundry and perform other chores, and our kids quickly began to jump in and start helping.

It was a wonderful experience for them to face a challenge that could be self-expansive and rewarding, where they were completely baffled at first — “Wow, what is this?” But we found that they would very soon grow into the new reality and break down the walls of their habitual consciousness so that they could get oriented and participate, and have lots of fun and learn. And the fact that it was a different language helped, too.

We've continued to create adventures for the kids over the last twenty to twenty-five years, and it's been tremendously successful in terms of working with their own natural desire to stretch beyond their previous self-perceived limits.

Even though the trips happened just once a year, we found several ways to extend the experience. We told them that we were not going to hand them the experience on a silver platter, but that they would have to earn it. They would have to earn the money to pay for the trip, and it meant that they would need to find creative ways to make money, even though they were living way out there in the country.

The teachers worked with each student to help them figure out how they could start making a little money to contribute. They earned money by chopping kindling for people who had woodstoves, and they ran a thrift store for the community. And then the teachers would meet with each student once a week to ensure that they were making progress and to encourage them to explore various options.

So there was the trip itself, and there was the year-long adventure of earning the money to pay for it, which was quite a stretch in itself.

There's an extremely sad trend today that has had very unfortunate consequences for teenagers. Before the 1920s, there was an urgent need to create child labor laws to protect young children from being forced to work in factories and coal mines, but nowadays those laws are mostly outdated, to the extent that they just get in the way.

It's particularly unfortunate in countries where it's actually illegal for teenagers to work at all. Because a part-time job is an immensely rich arena where they can develop vital life skills such as self-discipline, punctuality, follow-through, perseverance, service, and other positive qualities that will serve them in their adult lives. And, just as important, it helps them feel that they can play a useful role in the grown-up world.

But nowadays that path is blocked to them, and they're treated like babies, where everybody wants to give them whatever they want.

At any rate, the travel adventures were a starting point for helping the teens transition from childhood by flexing their inner strength and pushing the boundaries of their awareness.

## **The Tools of Maturity**

Over the years, we've developed a number of tools that our teachers and parents can use to help teenagers grow in the area of personal development. For example, we created a Maturity Chart that maps approximately thirty qualities of body, feelings, will, and mind, to help us track their progress in those areas.

Starting at age twelve, we ask the teens to do a self-analysis twice a year and score themselves on these qualities. The teachers will score them, too, and if the parents are willing, we'll ask them to submit scores so that we can all look at the child's "tools of maturity" – their body, feelings, will, and intellect – and learn how they see themselves performing and growing in those areas. The idea is for us all to be aware of these areas of personal development, so that we can know what each student needs to work on in those dimensions.

For example, looking at the body, one of the things you can evaluate is posture. The students can rate their own posture on a scale from 1 to 12, so they can see "Oh, my posture isn't what I'd like it to be."

In my childhood, nobody talked to me about my posture, and as a result I developed some bad habits, and I would have benefited if somebody had pointed it out, because good posture is a positive trait – it reflects your self-confidence, self-worth, and personal integrity. Good posture tends to indicate a positive, optimistic approach to life, and you can work on it, if you're aware of the need.

## **Personal Excellence**

Aside from the Tools of Maturity – body, feelings, will, and mind – we look at Personal Excellence. And, again, this was a need that we became aware of through our own hands-on experience.

We realized that the teens who had the hardest time in high school were the ones who were letting themselves be pulled along by the fads of the day. They were nearly always the kids who didn't have anything positive going



for them — they weren't really good at anything, so they didn't have a strong inner self-identity that could stand up to the social pressures.

It's why we decided that it would be important, by age twelve or even earlier, to identify at least one area where each student could develop a special sense of skill and proficiency.

During adolescence, there's a need to develop a strong ego. We do guide the teens to understand that we are happiest when we're including others' happiness in our own, but before you can transcend the ego you have to have a strong, healthy ego to be able to function in the world. And a very effective way to help teens build that kind of inner strength is by helping them develop a feeling of proficiency. "I'm a good artist." "I'm an excellent cook." "I'm a good athlete." "I'm a scientist." "I excel in math."

Whatever it is, it becomes a pillar of your self-identity and your self-esteem, and it can help keep you from falling into the pit of going along with others because you want them to think well of you.

One of our core goals is to help the kids develop a certain independence, where they're capable of turning within and reflecting from their own strong center about whether they're doing the right thing.

### **Personal Expertise**

We track these strengths as part of what we call Co-Curricular Activities. One of the dimensions of that broad area is Personal Expertise, where for three to five hours a week we'll mentor them in putting out energy toward their own personal development, and then the teacher will track those qualities with the students individually from week to week to help them stay on course.

So those are the first three things that come to mind, when it comes to understanding how we help teenagers transition from childhood, by developing the strength, confidence, independence, and positive values to be able to function well as adults.

To summarize, we do it through the service adventures, by helping them develop their Tools of Maturity, and by mentoring them in their Personal Excellence skills.

### **Restoring the Youthful Excitement of Discovery**

**Q:** Before I ask the next question, I have a personal observation. It's about Kshama Kellogg, a former student of the original Living Wisdom

School who now serves as director of the Living Wisdom High School in Palo Alto, California.

Kshama was part of the first Mexico service adventures, and when she talks about her memories, it's clear that it was one of the most enduring and beautiful experiences of her life. She still corresponds with friends she met at the orphanage.

**Nitai:** Kshama was one of our superstars at that age.

Bear with me, but I'm thinking that if you watch a group of three-year-olds, you'll be struck by how they're excited about everything, because the world is completely new to them, and there's a sense of adventure and joy. And the point I want to make is that when they enter adolescence we've found that we can help them recover a great deal of that original joy and enthusiasm — except that of course they aren't going to be getting excited about flowers and animals in the same way as when they were three.

They've grown out of that small world of childhood, but the sense of wonder can still be there, and it's a shining part of our system that we're able to help teens regain a great deal of that pure curiosity and enthusiasm and adventure. We do it in the ways I've described, but also with the curriculum, and I'm sure I'll have more to say about that.

### Teachers Who Model a Strong Adult Identity

**Q:** When you're dealing with seven-year-olds, you're able to engage them at a heart level, and it's easier to form a relationship with them and get to know them so that you can help them develop their strengths. But when you're working with teenagers, I'm imagining the scenario changes, where you can still form those individual relationships, but you have to change your approach.

**Nitai:** Yes, and it will vary with the teacher's personality. For me, with my personality, the relationships tended to be a little more impersonal. I saw my role as modeling adult attitudes for them, and helping them direct their energies appropriately. So there wasn't going to be a lot of hugging. (laughs) But there was another teacher in our school who had a more heart-centered approach, and she was able to enjoy closer personal relationships with some of the kids.

I don't think you can make a blanket statement about what makes a good teacher, because to a great extent we'll be doing it in our own unique way. I see that as a very positive thing, because we're encouraging the kids to be independent in their own ways, so it's very helpful for them to have role

models of independent, self-confident adults whose personalities may be very different, but who are strong in their own center. However, I think that because teens are working to develop their independence and will power, they will need a little more of a father kind of energy.

### **A Unique Approach to Academics**

**Q:** How about the daily classroom instruction? Is there a difference in the way you offer them a solid academic curriculum, compared to other schools?

**Nitai:** Our approach is very different. Where most traditional schools will have a goal of teaching you to score well on a test, our aim is to help the students cultivate their consciousness. And because it's so different and unusual, it needs a bit of explaining.

Let's take a course like U.S. history. Every high school student in the country studies U.S. history, and when I was in school it was presented as a series of names, dates, and events that we were expected to memorize. So it was all very mechanical and external, and it didn't connect deeply with us as people, because it was just one more skill that you were supposed to master, to keep all of these things in your head so that you could check off the right answers on a test.

In our schools we see U.S. history as a marvelous opportunity to explore a broad range of human behaviors, and the gradual unfolding of the wonderful dream of the Founding Fathers, to include ever-larger cross-sections of people who could live together in freedom and pursue their goals in their individual ways.

What we've come to understand is that in every series of historical events there were courageous people who stepped forward to stretch the existing boundaries, even though it was nearly always unpopular and it could be dangerous, depending on which boundaries you were challenging.

By emphasizing these people's lives and putting them at the forefront of history, instead of the cold data of names, dates, and places, we're able to offer young people wonderful models for what it means to have integrity and courage and compassion. It brings history to life in a deeply personal way that they won't easily forget, and that they will remember and treasure.

Two of my favorite figures in American history are the Grimke sisters. They were born in Georgia in 1795 and 1805 when slavery was the predominant way of life. They were part of a family that held hundreds of slaves, yet even in their teens they had rejected the practice, and so when

one of the sisters was offered her personal slave at the age of twelve, she refused to be involved with the system. The Grimke sisters eventually had to leave the South, but they remained active in the anti-slavery movement, and they wrote a book about their experiences.

When we're teaching U.S. history, we focus on the heroic people who were able to influence events in positive ways. And even if some of the politicians and generals weren't terribly inspiring, they can serve us as a warning, and we can always find many admirable people who had a lasting influence.

Our purpose in approaching history from a human perspective is to awaken their idealism and show them examples of the very real possibilities for modeling their lives on high principles.

We want to show them that people do act in noble ways, with courage, compassion, and creative initiative. So we're always on the lookout for opportunities to bring those people to the fore in the curriculum.

A project that came out of our Palo Alto school was about homelessness. One of the students talked about how you'll see a homeless person who's asking for a handout, and maybe you don't have anything to give them, or maybe you don't want to just hand them some cash. So you end up driving by.

The students came up with the idea of creating homeless bags. They bought small, practical items like toothbrushes, and the bags weren't very big, but they gave them to their parents so that when they pulled up to a stop sign they could hand them a bag.

We want to show them the many opportunities there are to use their will power in positive ways, and to enjoy the satisfaction of acting on their expansive feelings with will power and creativity.

In English class, we're extremely careful to select books that offer them positive examples. There are many low-energy, low-consciousness books that are considered classics because the authors were able to write cleverly, and it's ridiculous, because those books are riddled with negativity and permeated by a philosophy of hopelessness, and if you look at the authors, you find that they were mostly people whose lives were falling apart.

When we choose books, we're looking for works that will give them a sense of life's meaning and joyful possibilities. We're looking for books that will have a certain light in them, and that will inspire them with feelings of hope and joyful optimism.

For example, there's a wonderful biography of Mahatma Gandhi, *Lead, Kindly Light*, that captures his extraordinary self-offering to help others, and over the years we've assembled a wonderful reading list of fine books to use in our classrooms.

We approach each subject with a view to figuring out how we can pick it up from the perspective of consciousness, as a way to support our students' inner growth.

In mathematics, for example, the traditional approach is to focus narrowly on the curriculum and tell the kids that they'll be expected to master a set of concepts in a fixed amount of time. And maybe it will work for the ten or fifteen percent of the students who are mathematically inclined, but then there will be lots of others who will develop a math phobia because they'll feel inept and inferior to the top math students.

But if you approach it in terms of personal qualities such as perseverance and concentration and creativity, you can help the students who are math-challenged, too.

If you're teaching each child at his or her own level, and you're helping them move ahead at their own most challenging pace, you're able to give them success experiences in math class every single day of the year. We've seen that it's a very powerful way to help them develop a personal sense of confidence and accomplishment.

Our approach is to teach math in such a way that every student can come out of math class feeling good about themselves. Of course, some kids will be able to fly faster and farther with the curriculum, but you want every student to come out of math class with the confidence that they can conquer a challenge and move ahead, and even if they aren't among the rare math wizards, they can feel good about their victories. "I was really good at solving problems." "I was really good at coming up with different ways of finding solutions." "I learned that by applying my will power and mental focus I can solve all kinds of problems in my life." I don't think those kinds of experiences are very common in most traditional schools.

### **Helping Teens Balance Their Strengths**

**Q:** Education for Life adapts its methods according to the age of the child and the developmental stage they are in, starting from birth to age six, when children are developing their ability to use their bodies.

Then, from six to twelve, the kids are dealing with their feelings. It's a time when they're doing lots of imaginative adventure play, and when they enjoy stories and music and drama and art — the media of feelings.

But then they come to the will power stage from twelve to eighteen, and you'll still have some children whose natures are oriented more toward their feelings, or toward the body or the intellect. And I'm wondering how you adjust your teaching for those students whose natures are individual and unique, and who might not be strongly oriented toward will power.

**Nitai:** I'll share a personal story from the early 1970s, when we were in the early stages of developing our first school.

I was looking for clues for how to get the school started, and I came across an article called "The Balanced Life" by Paramhansa Yogananda. In his book *Autobiography of a Yogi* he describes his early experiments with education in India, and his perspective is that if you want to find success and happiness, you're going to need to have a healthy balance between your body, feelings, will, and mind.

So, yes, people are going to have one or two areas where they're strongest, but you want to make sure they are able to function in all four areas, and a basic principle of Education for Life is that you can use your strengths to shore up any weaknesses.

For example, if someone is intellectual without a lot of feeling, you can have them use their mind to read books, or sing, or make art, or play an instrument, and you'll want to make sure they're playing music that will bring out their feeling quality, or reading stories that will show them examples of heart quality, so they'll know it exists and what it looks like. And then you can look for opportunities to have them work with animals or little kids, or whatever.

I'm thinking of a boy in my class who had a very strong intellect and lots of will power, but I was having trouble figuring out how to help him activate the feeling side of his nature.

We were doing service projects where we would go into town one morning a week, and everybody had a project they would do. This boy was working in a special needs classroom where he was assigned to work with a little girl who had Down Syndrome. So, unlike him, she was intellectually not terribly sharp, and I wasn't sure how it would work out. But week after week he would go and interact with the girl, and they would find things that they could do together, and it was beautiful to watch the softness come out

in him, to the point where he was looking forward to his times in town, and he was definitely building out that part of himself by being with her.

The joy of Education for Life is that you can get to know the kids, and you can take the time to relate to them as individuals, so that you can help shape their school experience according to what they need.

**Q:** That's a wonderful story. Now I'm wondering what happens to the Living Wisdom graduates after they leave high school, when you're releasing them into the wild and saying, "Okay, kids, you're on your own." I'm wondering if you're giving them a framework that they can take with them, and that will help them steer their own course. Where maybe they'll try certain things and they'll realize, "Well, this isn't making me happy," and they'll be able to figure out why. Perhaps it made their heart feel contracted instead of expanded, and I wonder if you're giving them a mental road map for values and a happy life.

I'm thinking of a book that the Education for Life founder wrote, *Out of the Labyrinth*, where he lays out a road map for values, based on simple principles that can help us know which actions will make us happy and help us avoid suffering.

**Nitai:** *Out of the Labyrinth* would certainly be over the heads of most seventeen- or eighteen-year-olds, because it was written for college students and adults, and it deals with the principal figures of Western intellectual history — people like Freud and Sartre and Kant and Marx.

There's a lot to be gained by being challenged to figure out some things for yourself. For example, one of our graduates was accepted at a respected college on the West Coast. She had been a straight-A student in our school, so she was shocked to receive a C on her first college paper.

When she asked the professor what she'd done wrong, he told her that her writing was fine, but he'd lowered her grade because she had included her own ideas, and he was only interested in a report on what she had read in the books he'd assigned.

She realized that the teacher's perspective was very different from the Education for Life classrooms she'd known in high school, where creativity was encouraged. So she deleted the original ideas from her paper and received an A, and she was able to adapt to the new reality. But she kept in touch with her creative side, and after graduation she found success and fulfillment working in a marketing leadership position at a company where the guiding philosophy is aligned with her creativity and goals.

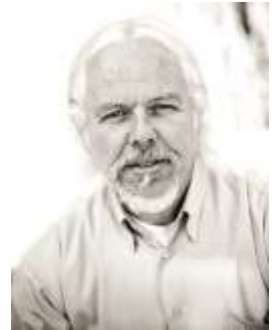
So I'm content with sending our graduates out with the tools we've given them to make sense of the world. After all these years, we have many wonderful examples of how they've applied EFL principles to create fulfilling lives and successful careers for themselves in business, government service, dance, scientific research, the military, and — most meaningful to me — as Education for Life teachers.



## 17. School Stress and Education for Life

A conversation with Living Wisdom High School of Palo Alto board members Helen Purcell and Gary McSweeney. Gary helped start the Palo Alto Living Wisdom TK-8 School in 1990, where he taught middle school (grades six to eight) for twenty years. Helen has taught at the elementary, high school, and college undergraduate and graduate levels. She currently serves as director of the Palo Alto TK-8 Living Wisdom School.

**Gary:** Our local newspaper, the Palo Alto Weekly, recently printed an article by a girl who'd been student body president at Palo Alto High School. The article was based on her graduation speech, where she told how she'd played four sports, achieved a 4.0 grade-point average, and received early acceptance at Stanford, and how she had hit the wall at the end of her senior year.



The article appeared at a time when there was serious concern in the community over a number of high school students who had committed suicide, overwhelmed by the pressures to perform in and beyond school, and agonized by a sense of the meaninglessness of it all.



Reflecting on the article, my thought was that it seems parents and teachers are holding out a fulfillment to kids that will come in some far-off imaginary golden future time, but that means very little to the kids right now, and that they are feeling utterly deprived of a sense of joyful purpose in their present lives.

**Helen:** One of the fundamental principles of Education for Life is that trying to force someone to learn never works — and worse, it's horribly demotivating. Yet there are extremely effective, proven ways to make learning enticing, magnetic,

engaging, and personally fulfilling for teens so that they will not only want to learn but will be eager lifelong learners. Our teachers have no need to stand over the students with a frown on their face and a ruler in their hand, because we've developed a curriculum that gets the kids engaged and excited.

A book that has powerfully influenced my thinking about school is *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, by Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard.

Gardner's research showed that people have unique strengths. Our common sense tells us that this is so, but Gardner was able to present hard evidence that our uniqueness is wired into our brains. He identified seven "intelligences" that are neurologically independent of each other, and he's since added several more.

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, and they are the rational-linguistic intelligences that run our society today.

The other intelligences he studied included spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence.

When I first read the book, I thought, "I'll try this in the classroom," because it's a particular beauty of Living Wisdom that we have the flexibility to adopt ideas that will help our students.

When I talked to the students about the multiple intelligences, they picked up on it immediately, because it felt right. They found the idea tremendously liberating, because it was saying: "You don't have to be intelligent in every way. You have your own way of being intelligent."

Nobody has all of the intelligences perfectly integrated and aligned. As Gardner pointed out, we have our own unique personal strengths for interfacing with the world, and we can use those strengths to bolster the less-developed intelligences.

It's been a wonderful way to help our teachers and parents understand how important it is to focus on the unique strengths of the individual student, and help them build on them.

### **Students Learn to Lead with Their Strengths**

At LWS, we ask, "What are this student's particular strengths, and how can we help them use those strengths to develop in other areas?"

In math or science class, for example, if a student's strengths are in language, the teachers will choose a textbook for the student that is more linguistically oriented.

**Gary:** We get to know the students so well that we end up giving each one a highly individualized math curriculum that's based on their special strengths, and then you find that you can show them how to leverage their strengths to develop their weaker areas. For example, you might change their assignments to allow them to build their self-confidence by working on problems that they can handle, and once they've developed some confidence you can challenge them with the problems that would have stumped them before.

I can't overemphasize the importance of building a relationship with the students. When they're receptive to what you're saying to them, you can help them learn much more efficiently.

With kids who've just enrolled at our school and are new to my classroom, I'll sometimes notice that they're holding their shoulders high and tight in math class, and after a few months I'll see that their shoulders are relaxed, because the teachers aren't judging them with an impersonal "pass-fail" approach, but they're coming over and asking, "Can I help?" and they'll spend as much time as it takes to help the student master the basic concepts.

**Helen:** Some of our new students will be ahead of grade level, but others will be behind, and what are you going to do with so many diverse abilities? Are you going to force them all into the same curriculum? No! You give each one exactly what they need, at their level, and soon they're performing beautifully.

You're always calibrating the lessons very individually, and you're making time for each student, and arranging the curriculum so that they can feel good about what they're doing, because they're having success experiences daily and understanding what they're doing, and they're not just memorizing it and spitting it back on a test. And this is why, when people visit the classroom, they're struck by how remarkably engaged and happy the students are, and how much they always enjoy working at the level of their own challenges.

### **Do LWHS Students Take Tests?**

An instrument that has been central to our approach is the Authentic Assessment series of books. Authentic Assessment gives students, parents,

and teachers a much more accurate gauge of each student's academic progress than test scores do.

Certainly, we test our students. We test them often, because we need to be sure that they know how to take multiple-choice tests, matching tests, and essay tests. So we give them those experiences to ensure that they won't be at a loss when they're confronted with midterms and finals in college.

Testing is a way to measure learning, but it's the way we test that makes a major difference. When I was in high school, we were given tests that required us to spit out information that we were expected to memorize word for word. The problem with that approach was that after I passed a test I immediately forgot what I had memorized, so there was nothing I took from the test that would make me a better student or person.

It's why, when we create an objective test, we're very careful to construct questions that are meaningful, relevant, and even fun, because humor is an amazing tool for learning, and we assess the test results with a focus on helping the student improve and achieve their best.

### **Testing or Assessment? Which Yields the Best Results?**

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

We have three conferences with each student's parents during the school year, because we find that it's a wonderful way to create a partnership between the school and the family. The teacher might ask them, "What are you saying to your son or daughter at home about this or that subject?" Or a parent might tell us something about the student that we couldn't be aware of at school.

"He was really upset about — ." "She was really stressed about — ." And as soon as we hear it, we take action immediately to address what's going on.

A core tool of the parent-teacher conferences is the student's portfolio. We collect samples of the student's work in an accordion folder — for example, in language arts I'll ask the students to keep every draft of everything they write, because I want them to see how their writing improves over time.

I'll sit with the parents at our conference and I'll show them the trajectory of the student's improvement. We believe that portfolio

assessment is a very clear measure of the students' progress, whereas letter grades leave lots of questions unanswered.

What does it really mean that my daughter received an A, B, or C? Did she actually learn something, or did she just “memorize-and-forget”? Did she improve her ability to learn? Did she become more enthusiastic and self-motivated to learn? Or did she simply study to the test and quickly forget the facts she crammed?

Years ago, when a group of education researchers asked teachers to grade the same packet of essays, they found that the grades varied from 99% to 2%. When they asked the same teachers to grade the same essays several months later, some of the teachers who had given A's now gave F's – a complete reversal! The study verified the meaninglessness of assigning letter grades for essay tests, where grades are given subjectively.

In our school, we want the students to develop skills far beyond what we can measure with a letter grade, and then we want them to be able to look at their 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 to be their best. These will be pieces that show how well they can write an essay, exercise higher-level thinking, be creative, and engage the reader. So when they leave us they'll have two or three fat portfolios of their very best work.

When you give young people a stimulating curriculum and teachers who are deeply caring and aware, you get a level of learning that is deep and enduring, and that gives the students experiences they won't forget. We believe learning should be based on lovingly giving them experiences of success every day, rather than subjecting them to the brutal judgments of an unrealistic “keep up or else” competitive ranking system.

Education for Life prepares the students to face the challenges they'll encounter after high school and college, with confidence, enthusiasm, and joyful appreciation.

Education for Life demands a very high level of dedication and energy, because teaching in our schools is more than a “job” – it's a calling, and a mission. We are creating a new template for education that we believe will spread beyond our schools to benefit young people everywhere.



## 18. Seven Strengths of a Micro High School

By Kshama Kellogg, Education for Life specialist and Director of Living Wisdom High School in Palo Alto, California. Kshama has taught in the Living Wisdom Schools since 2008.

I would like to talk about micro high schooling and its benefits both now and for the future, as people begin to find the courage and insights to make changes that are desperately needed in our educational system.

I'll talk specifically about the Living Wisdom High School here in Palo Alto, California. We are both an in-person, brick-and-mortar school and an online program. We offer our students full academic coursework through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, as well as a vast array of experiential life skills and values-based training.

I believe it's important to point out that we are part of a larger network of schools founded more than 50 years ago. The Living Wisdom and Education for Life Schools have established a remarkable record of educating happy, successful young people.

Currently there are four active Living Wisdom Schools in the U.S., and Education for Life schools in Italy, India, and Slovenia. Our high school is a seamless extension of the TK-8 Living Wisdom School in Palo Alto, which was founded a little over 30 years ago.

In 2015 we decided to expand to include the high school years, because we were aware of the dysfunctional nature of much of education for teenagers today. There were a number of teen suicides some years ago in the greater Palo Alto area, and for us, those tragic events highlighted the trauma and discontent and lack of effective solutions in the mainstream educational system.

We were deeply motivated to create a space for learning where the students would be truly cared for; where they could have a real connection with the positive meaning behind their education, and where they would

come to an understanding of the bright promise of their lives, and to experience the personal understandings and actions that would bring them true fulfillment and lasting happiness, both now and after their school years.

So we began putting together the steps to create an alternative secondary education, not only so that the students in our own TK-8 school would have access to a familiar, joy-filled school experience, but to open these thoroughly proven, joyful methods to others who would benefit from them.

I want to talk about the seven key strengths of micro high schools, and the first thing I want to highlight is the wide-ranging studies that have looked at what high school students' engagement with learning is like today. Shockingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, approximately 75 percent of the students said that the majority of their experience of learning in high school produced feelings not of excitement and hope, but of boredom, discontent, and overwhelming stress. So this was one important aspect of the situation that we wanted to help transform, and I am happy to report that our results so far have thoroughly justified our initial expectations.

The students who come here very quickly awaken to a joy in the learning process that has a profound effect on their success not only in high school but for their college experience, their careers, and their lives.

## **1. The University Model**

At Living Wisdom High School, we have what we call a university model of coursework, which means that each student works with a faculty mentor to design a personalized learning plan that will take appropriate account of their individual abilities, interests, and strengths, as well as their areas of challenge, and their long-term goals.



Together, we create a curriculum of coursework that is academically rigorous, that will challenge them appropriately at their own level, and that will give them a deep connection with their academic subjects that will prepare them to thrive in the college of their choice.

Our students complete all of the required courses for high school graduation and college acceptance. We have a wonderful team of teachers



who work one-on-one and in small groups with the students to help them discover the joy of diving into their studies, with a view not simply toward passing a test, but to gaining a deep understanding of essential principles, with a sense of engagement and adventure.

In addition, we offer a broad array of wonderful elective courses, advanced pathways, and experiential learning that I'll talk about momentarily.

We like to think of ourselves as a blended learning community, which means that the learning happens through one-on-one encounters with teachers, mentors, and other students, as well as in a small groups with the teachers. We've seen that the blended format generates amazingly vibrant, dynamic, lively discussions that greatly help them to internalize their learning.

Much of our work is project-based, where the students are not passively receiving information but are engaged in the processes of research, sharing, building, teaching, and creating, so that most of their learning happens through their own dynamic experience, rather than only from reading and memorization.

We partner with several online organizations so that our students can take asynchronous coursework which they can complete at their own pace and in their own time. They can work at an accelerated rate, or they can take the time to circle back and deepen what they've learned until they've reached a point of mastery, before they move forward.

We partner with our local community colleges so that students who have the maturity, intellectual capacity, drive, and personal interest to dive into subject areas they wouldn't otherwise have access to. The community college coursework can be taken online or in person.

We also offer honors courses for students who qualify and are interested.

As a micro high school, we are able to offer many pathways for the students to pursue their unique interests and be challenged at the level of their abilities. The university model is extremely rich, as it allows them to draw on a very broad range of resources in a highly personalized way.

We also spend a great deal of time working with the students to help them build personal skills in the areas of responsibility, time management, and study habits so that they will be ready to launch into their next learning path after high school.

## 2. Excellence

We are dedicated to helping each student achieve personal excellence. Instead of raising a fixed bar that every student must hurdle, where the bar would be either too high or too low for most of the students, we work with the individual to determine what their next step can be, based on their readiness.

The approach we take to coursework and the learning process is mastery-based. Instead of setting a fixed finishing line that everyone must cross together in the same amount of time, we support them individually in mastering fundamental concepts before they move on.

Our curriculum includes a great deal of self-reflection, with regular dialogue and feedback from the teachers. Again, these are things you can do in a micro school that are not possible in a mass-production educational system where the teachers are working with up to 150 students every day and are unable to devote time and personal attention to help each student achieve their academic potential, much less help them rise to excellence in the qualities of character that will help them in their lives.

## 3. Learning Through Experience

We believe very strongly that learning should not only be mental, but that it should engage all aspects of the student's being, including their bodies, hearts, will power, and souls. So the third strength of a micro high school is that we are able to give each student an education that involves the whole person and that is deeply experiential. Throughout the 50-year



history of the Living Wisdom Schools we have seen that experiential learning is enormously important for all our students, but especially in the high school years.

We approach experiential learning in a variety of ways. All of our students participate in what we call passion projects. There's a great deal of discussion in the popular culture today about passion, and what it means to pursue your passion. In working with high school students, we've discovered a wonderful process for identifying, developing, nurturing, and cultivating each student's particular passion.

The first point to understand is that our personal passion will not simply drop into our lap. Rather, it requires a process of striving for excellence, developing cooperative relationships, and finding our strengths in our areas of interest, with an understanding that our passion will emerge and grow as we develop an immersion in the area of study that will lead to mastery.

Our students can choose a passion project where they'll be working with a faculty mentor and a professional mentor in the area of their choosing. For example, the student might choose to explore literary publishing, computer science, neuroscience, photography, or music production.

Next, they will step through a process of imagining and planning the project, and designing a course of study that will take them deeply into that area, first by learning about the subject in general terms, and then by engaging with it experientially.



At the conclusion of the process, they will share their passion project with the school. They will reflect on their journey with their fellow students, showing them what they've accomplished and talking about the process and how they've grown.

The passion project will often lead to a next level of exploration and study. Sometimes, it may even lead to a partnership with the professional mentors with whom the student has been working.

For example, a student who's exploring a passion project in neuroscience, for example, might be paired with a medical professional, which may lead to hospital visits where they will observe medical procedures and discussions among teams of physicians. In this way, they will get real-life exposure and gain insights into a field that they might wish to enter. Sometimes the pairing process will catapult them into

opportunities for longer, deeper internships and other learning experiences.

We also work with experiential learning in the regular curriculum. If you're studying physics, for example, you might actually build a Newton's cradle (also called a Newton's pendulum, a device that demonstrates the conservation of momentum and energy with swinging metal spheres). Instead of merely reading about it, you'll be building all sorts of life skills and thinking of practical applications for the scientific principles involved.

We do a great deal of learning outside the classroom as part of our life skills training. It may include wilderness training or learning about the culinary arts, sustainability, organic farming, or community development and design. It's always with a purpose of igniting enthusiasm — not just passively absorbing information from books, but engaging in the processes we're learning about, and developing personal qualities of leadership and other skills that we can take into our lives after school.

#### **4. Cooperation**

We are a community of cooperation instead of competition. Here in Silicon Valley, we find many toxic school environments where the students are in fierce unrelenting competition with each other. At Living Wisdom, we've flipped that image to emphasize cooperation and personal excellence, so that our students are driven not by a need for external approval, or to be forever trying to be better than someone else, but by the internal satisfactions of "How can I improve? How can I become stronger? How can I offer my skills to the community to help us all raise ourselves individually to a higher level?"

The more we support each other in becoming better, and the more we come together in cooperation, the deeper the internal satisfactions we'll experience, and the more we will influence the culture to adopt more cooperative ways.



Being able to show up when conflicts and challenges arise, and to know how to work through them, is a tremendous contribution to creating the cooperative environment we treasure at Living Wisdom. Instead of devolving into yet another "us-versus-them" battlefield of cliques and

competition, we give our students the tools to create and sustain a community of cooperation, through constant discussion, and by bringing the students into the leadership of the school so that they can feel that they have a say about what’s working for them, and what might work better.

## 5. Self-Expansion

Self-expansion is at the heart of our efforts to help the individual student rise to their best potential.

We help them experience what it’s like to expand their awareness to include realities beyond their own. All of the areas I’ve discussed so far help them grow larger and more acutely aware. Achieving personal excellence, experiential learning, creating a community, and pursuing their pathway of interest — all of these help our students discover positive options, where they might otherwise be tempted to retreat and themselves close off from the world.

As our students join in local service projects, service travel adventures, and sports and athletics, we see that they come out of themselves in wonderful ways and open up to life, and we see how their high school experience becomes increasingly successful and happy.



The teen years are a time when young people instinctively want to flex their will power and discover how they can make an impact on the world and on the quality of their own lives. And this is one reason why we make service a central feature of every student’s experience.

It may take the form of mentoring a fellow student, teaching young students to read, helping them develop an artistic skill, or coaching them in a sport.

We also do a lot of travel, in a form that we call “service adventures,” where we’re committed to experiencing cultures where people live differently than we do, with an openness to learn from them and share in a mutual exchange.

At the heart of these travel adventures is service — thinking of what can we give, and not just coming into a new place to learn and receive and

experience and appreciate, but to explore what we can also offer. Sometimes it's as simple as giving the quality of graciousness, but there is always an act of service or engagement, and a giving back, wherever we are.

The trips may be domestic. Our sister programs have traveled across the U.S. to work in animal shelters or on sustainable organic farms. Or it might be serving in a national park.



Our service adventure travel is also international. Two years ago, our program attended a conference on climate change and consciousness in Scotland, where we were invited as youth delegates. We listened and learned and shared with a community of scientists, activists, and indigenous

wisdom leaders. It was a transformative experience for us all. *(Photo: Service adventure travel in India)*

Other countries our schools have visited include Mexico, Nepal, South Africa, Costa Rica, India, and Italy.

We empower our students not only to come along on these adventures, but to help plan them and earn the money to pay for the trips. The students fundraise throughout the school year — they take part-time jobs and develop creative sources of income. Our teens have started educational programs for younger students, and they've created online and in-person entrepreneurial startups.

There's a great deal of growth in experiencing what it means to be an employee or an employer, and in learning to work well with people, learning to have a good attitude and a good work ethic, and learning to budget and plan.

A faculty mentor helps the students decide how we will travel and where we'll stay, how we'll serve, and the overall focus for the trip. Many valuable lessons in cooperation and leadership are built into the experience.

Aside from the service adventure travel and local service opportunities, we offer athletics. We are part of a Bay Area small school athletic league, and the sports we offer are based on the students' interest. This year it

looks like we'll participate in basketball, volleyball, dodgeball, and cross country.

These are some of the ways we support our students to expand into their highest potential and find their self-identity.

## 6. Inner Growth

The seven advantages of a micro high school are important growth points for the students, and an important keystone for their growth is the meditation and centering practices the students experience every day.

There are regularly scheduled focus periods during the school day. We offer them many inner experiences also through their academic studies and the service adventures that reinforce and deepen their relationship with their inner self.

LWHS is inspired by universal spiritual principles, though it is not a religious school. We are a program that recognizes the spiritual core of life, and we respect the many traditions and pathways that people follow in their search for truth. The instruction we offer is nonsectarian — we support young people in their inner exploration of who they are, regardless of their path. We all need regular renewing experiences of calmness, happiness, compassion, clarity, wisdom, and intuitive insight.



We help our students develop these experiences through practices of quiet meditation, and also through yoga and other centering techniques. These practices strengthen the students' integration of body, heart, will, mind, and soul. They develop deep concentration, and they decrease stress and anxiety. Their positive effects are foundational for every aspect of our program.

## 7. The LWHS Environment

Our students enjoy learning in a community that is rooted in respect, cooperation, and kindness. They learn in small groups and through regular, individual mentoring that generates a connection between the student and the teachers. The teachers not only provide wise guidance and insights; they also learn from the students — the teacher-student relationships give us

valuable insights to help us adjust our guidance to the needs of the individual student.

Mentorship takes many forms in our school. The students meet individually with the core faculty members to discuss their learning and their personal growth-points, and to receive feedback on their work and discuss any personal issues and inner challenges they may be experiencing.



The teen years are very much about discovering who we are. Our core faculty help the students find their own unique self-definition by offering them strong, secure, mature – and very individual – adult role models that inspire the students as they develop their own strong self-identity.

Through the mentoring relationships, we help them improve their study habits and develop communication skills. We are always ready to offer our support in curriculum areas where there may be a need for special help.

People hear the word “micro,” and they think, “Oh – it’s small.” But, in truth, a micro high school is blessed to have the flexibility and freedom to amplify the opportunities and personal attention available to the individual student. Micro high schools are the answer for transforming the challenges of adolescence into wonderful opportunities to discover true happiness through academic excellence, personal maturity, and service.

LWHS and its sister schools have been able to demonstrate that teenagers can experience high school as a thoroughly engaging educational adventure filled with personal victories every day.



In another section of this book, “Meet the LWHS Family,” you’ll learn how our graduates have leveraged their experiences in our schools to achieve success in college and in their corporate and entrepreneurial pursuits.

A keynote of my years as an educator has been the joy of discovering that when we guide teenagers toward realizing their highest, most expanded potential, they develop an openness, an excitement about learning, and a powerful sense of who they are and how they can serve in the world. They discover what’s most truly meaningful to them, and they develop the wisdom and confidence to make choices that will lead to outward success and inner fulfillment.

In the last two years our school has graduated eight students who are now studying at Santa Clara University, San Jose State, Foothill College, Diablo Valley College, UC San Diego, Chapman University, and Cal Poly.

One student felt that she was ready for college after 10<sup>th</sup> grade, so she entered the early college enrollment program at Bard College at Simon’s Rock. Another student is taking a self-directed gap year with plans to enter a respected program in the arts. Schools that have accepted our students, but where they chose not to enroll, include New York University, Boston College, UC Davis, George Washington University, and others.

I’m sharing this information with you because many families feel that a change is needed in their children’s education, and they are inspired by the opportunities we offer at Living Wisdom High School, but they have questions. “Will this really work for us? Will this school prepare them to be successful? I know they’ll be happy in this school, but what will their opportunities be like after they graduate?”

This is simply to let you know that our students are able to pursue many first-rate learning opportunities after their micro high school experience.

The advantages of a micro school are well covered by the seven points I’ve discussed above. In summary, we feel that we are able to help our students far more effectively at this crucial stage of their lives than a larger institution can.



## 19. It's Time We Started Raising Organic Teens

Nitai Deranja founded the original Living Wisdom School in 1972. He is currently engaged in developing the teacher training program for Education for Life. Nitai holds a B.A. in Humanistic Psychology from UC Berkeley and an M.A. in Education from UC Davis. He is the author of two books: *For Goodness' Sake: Supporting Children & Teens in Discovering Life's Higher Values*, and *The Art of Joyful Education*.

About sixty years ago, a small but dedicated group of people began to challenge America's attitudes toward food production.

The prevailing view was that vegetables should be judged by their appearance. Bigger and redder tomatoes were deemed more desirable, so American agriculture adopted chemical fertilizers and pesticides that would support growing great-looking tomatoes.

But a tiny fringe group, which gradually became known as the organic farming movement, pointed out that the real value of tomatoes was not in their color, but their taste and nutritional value, which were being sacrificed to improve their appearance.

It took a while, but people began to listen. A recent study<sup>1</sup> found that seventy-five percent of Americans now buy at least some organic food.

Today we face a similar misconception about our children's education. We all want our kids to succeed, no doubt. The problem is how we define "success."

As with the misplaced emphasis on bigger, redder tomatoes, many people now assume that student success can be measured in numbers, using standardized tests.

These tests are mandated in almost all schools, and they exercise an enormous influence over our children's future.

With such important consequences, it seems appropriate to ask exactly what these tests are measuring.

Below are some topics covered in one of the most widely used standardized tests for fifth through eleventh graders.<sup>2</sup> As you scan the list, note the number of items you might be familiar with, and how important this information has been in your adult life. (These items are not taken from the more rigorous “advanced” level of the exam, but from the easier, “proficient” level.)

The function of the esophagus

The difference between a stereoscope and a laser light with holograph

The reason fossils are found in sedimentary rocks

The contributions of Hammurabi

The differences between metals and nonmetals

The form of energy released or absorbed in most chemical reactions

The Schlieffen Plan

The Tennis Court Oath.

The Social Gospel movement

The Reconstruction Finance Corporation

My point, of course, is not that the Schlieffen Plan, the Tennis Court Oath, or the Code of Hammurabi would not be useful in certain specialized fields. It’s that in using such relatively obscure data to measure the overall effectiveness of our schools, we’re making the same mistake people made in judging tomatoes — we’re focusing on superficial appearances at the expense of real substance, measured on a scale of the actual benefits to the individual child.

When we pressure teachers and administrators to make sure every student is exposed to the “right” facts, the end result is that creativity and enthusiasm are replaced by what’s been called “dead-ucation.”

In a *New York Times* article, a long-time teacher questioned the overwhelming emphasis on standardized testing:

“This push on tests is missing out on some serious parts of what it means to be a successful human. Whether it’s the pioneer in the Conestoga wagon or someone coming here in the 1920s from southern Italy, there was this idea in America that if you worked hard and you showed real grit, you could be successful. Strangely, we’ve now forgotten that. People who have an easy time of things, who get 800s on their SATs, I worry that those people get feedback that everything they’re doing is great. And I think as a result, we are actually setting them up for

long-term failure. When that person suddenly has to face up to a difficult moment, then I think they're screwed, to be honest. I don't think they've grown the capacities to be able to handle that."<sup>3</sup>

A parent lamented about her son's experience of dead-ucation:

"I saw the light in his eyes extinguishing.... These energetic, engaged, accomplished six-year-olds turned into 12-year-olds who ask, 'Are we getting graded on this?' or 'Is this going to be on the test?' That flame they had at age six didn't burn out on its own, we smothered it."<sup>4</sup>

The time has come to ask what an alternative, more "organic" approach to education might look like.

What if our schools shifted at least some of their focus from testing relatively useless facts to include the following measures:

How to take initiative and exercise creativity

How to concentrate

How to cultivate a passion for lifelong learning

How to be responsible

How to live healthfully

How to overcome negative moods

How to respect different points of view

How to discern the difference between right and wrong

How to find peace and contentment within yourself

How to know yourself and express your highest potential

How many of these items have proven useful to you in your adult life?

Which kind of knowledge would you deem more important for your child's success?

Certainly, turning around the battleship of public education would take enormous effort, but in the long run it probably won't take much more time or energy than the switch from chemical-based food production to organic farming.

The traditional school subjects — "Readin', Writin', 'Rithmetic" — will always be the foundation of a well-grounded education, but our approach needs to incorporate these broader, more nutritive ingredients.

Much work has been done. We just need to share our resources and insights, and support each other as we make the needed changes.

The fruits of this movement will give our children a useful, enjoyable education, and a much better assurance of success.

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## 20. How I Discovered Education for Life Principles While Teaching in a Public High School

Helen Purcell has served for more than 20 years as Director of the K-8 Living Wisdom School in Palo Alto, California. Throughout her career in education she has taught language arts at the elementary, high school, and university undergraduate levels.



**Q:** Our subject today is your life in education – what you’ve learned as a teacher, and the experiences that persuaded you that it might be possible to help young people in better ways.

### First Principles

**Helen:** As part of my studies in earning my credential, I student taught an English course at Santa Monica City College, and among the discoveries I made in that first teaching assignment was that the relationship between the student and teacher is golden.

There was a young man in the class who was extremely bright, but he confided, “I’m not sure I should be taking your class because I’ve been living on a Pacific island for many years, and I hardly know how to speak English anymore.”

I said, “I can tell by the way you’re speaking that you’ll do just fine, so hang in there, and I’ll help you.”

As it turned out, he didn’t need much help, but because I had been so willing to help him, he was wonderfully supportive of what I was doing, and it made me powerfully aware of the importance of the relationship between the student and teacher.

I then taught for several years at a community college near Chico, California. It was in a remote rural area, and it drew many adults who were

wanting to have an experience of college for the first time, as well as young people who were just stepping out into the world.

Because it was such a diverse group, I quickly realized that regardless of the subject you're teaching, you are *always* teaching to the individual, and you need to consider their individual needs, which may be very different from your own, because if you ignore those differences, you'll absolutely miss your goal of helping them, with their unique histories and their particular talents and graces.

This is a bedrock principle of the Living Wisdom Schools, where we are profoundly focused on getting to know each student so that we can help them move forward in the best way, starting where they are.

After teaching for several years at Chico, I taught at the University of Portland, and then at a community college in Oregon. I then decided to earn a high school teaching credential, because I felt that it would open a realm of teaching that was extremely interesting to me, and that had always been very dear to my heart. I knew that adolescence is an extremely important period in a young person's life, and I felt that there were better approaches to preparing teenagers than the common practices in high schools at the time.

### **The Magic of Mixed Classes**

The first high school where I taught was in a suburb of Portland, Oregon. Most of the students came from white middle-class families, and some were just waiting to leave school and get a job, while others were planning to enroll at a community college or a state university, and a handful had higher aspirations.

I taught a combined class that included freshmen and sophomore students, and it was a wonderful experience, not least because the freshmen were learning social skills from the sophomores, and it reduced the behavior problems in my class. I realized that the school had been extremely wise in combining the classes, because a great deal of learning was being transmitted between the age groups, completely aside from what they were learning from me.

Being able to count on the students to help each other was a revelation, and I spent a lot of time thinking about that approach and incorporating it into my teaching. The camaraderie between teacher and students and student and student infused the entire learning process.



In the Living Wisdom Schools, we find that it works extremely well to have mixed classes where students of different grades and ages are learning together, because it creates a sense of responsibility in the older students that helps them develop a mature, inclusive outlook, and it helps the younger students both socially and academically.

It also showed me the wonderful sense of family that can develop in a classroom where mixed ages are learning together, even in a high school with 2000 students.

### **Growing Together**

The high school administrators had been inspired to divide the school population into smaller elements, so that the same students would be learning together for the first two years. It made the transition to high school easier for the freshman, and it allowed the teachers to form closer bonds with and between the students. The older students developed a mentoring relationship with the younger ones.

The administrators were also intent on facilitating communication between the teachers, so that there would never be a student who was having trouble in math, for example, that I wouldn't know about it, even though I was teaching English. To that end, the high school administrators gave the teachers time to get together once a week to discuss what was working for each of the students, and a staff psychologist would come to the meetings to offer his insights as needed.

This is another extremely strong feature of the Living Wisdom Schools, that the teachers are constantly talking with each other so that we are all intimately aware of what's going on with every single student in the school.

### **Being Real**

Another lesson I learned while teaching in both college and high school was that the more human and real you are with the students, the less distance there will be between you, and that there's a quality of naturalness and friendship that is absolutely essential for a teacher to have, if you want to be as effective as possible.

When I was in graduate school, we were never taught how to form a unique relationship with each student, yet it was one of the most priceless lessons I gleaned from my years teaching in high school and college.

In my credential program we were taught about the sociological characteristics of various cultural groups, and so on, but they failed to teach

us the most important thing of all, which is how to help the individual student, regardless of the class size.

One of the first things I did to humanize the classroom environment and turn it into an incubator of good energy and open communication was to arrange the desks in a semi-circle instead of in rows. It meant that even though I remained the guiding presence, I was no longer the visual center, and because the students were facing each other it encouraged communication.

### **One Student, One Voice**

I made a special point of encouraging each student to have a voice, and that isn't something that happens unless the teacher actively encourages it. In most classes, you have the academic superstars who will be engaged and will talk a lot, and you'll have kids who are natural communicators who'll enjoy speaking up, but you'll also have lots of quiet ones — and you must find a way to reach them and give them the energy they deserve.

### **Going Deeper**

At about the time I began teaching high school, our founder published *Education for Life: Preparing Children to Meet Today's Challenges*, and I was thrilled to discover that he had put words to many of the lessons I was learning, and that he had built on those ideas and taken them even farther and deeper.

He suggested that, as a cornerstone of our educational philosophy, we should ask the most fundamental question of all: "What is the point of our lives?"

The answer that he offered was: "What all people are seeking, behind the colorful multiplicity of their stated motives, is to experience greater happiness, and to avoid suffering."

For high school students and for younger and older students as well, finding their own, unique way to be happy will never be exclusively about getting good grades. It needs to include the whole child and all of the ways they are uniquely relating to their lives and to the world. One of the major steps toward learning to be happy and mature is to learn to relate to the realities of others.

When you can help young students acquire those very important interpersonal skills, it changes everything, because being able to relate affects the child's ability to be happy and to do their best in school.

## **We Grow at Our Own Level**

It wasn't long before I began to notice that when the students felt that they were being seen and valued and included, the kids who weren't among the academic superstars began to shine.

When they entered my classroom, they quickly realized that the school equation had changed, and while I don't think they were always consciously aware of it, I made it a bedrock principle that I wanted to give them a great experience of school, and help them know how valued they were.

One of the ways I invited their participation was by asking the kids to give me their feedback at the end of the year.

I said, "What did you like during the year? What worked for you, and what would you suggest I could do differently that would work better for you?"

They could choose to write their thoughts, but because we were easy with each other by the end of the year, many of them chose to share their impressions verbally.

I would say, "Everything you tell me will be valuable, so go ahead and say it."

There was a girl in one of my classes who was autistic, and she had two areas that she loved — she knew all about Star Wars and the Bible. So I made her our go-to person whenever we needed information in those areas. It came up surprisingly often, and nobody ever teased or harassed her, whereas she had been treated brutally in the past.

After class, she was afraid to walk down the hall alone, so I would take her arm and we would walk together. In my class she had a special place.

Unlike her other courses, she didn't need an aide in my classroom, because she had learned to be more independent. I made whatever accommodations I could for her, but she felt thoroughly accepted, because the truth is that the other kids had learned to accept and value her. When I asked for their feedback at the end of the year, the autistic girl spoke up and said, "This is just the best class!"

When one young man in my senior class raised his hand, I said, "I'm so glad you want to contribute, because we don't hear your voice often enough." I said, "I know from reading your work that you have good ideas."

He said, “I would never speak up in any of my other classes.” And when I asked why, he said, “Because no one makes fun of anybody in this class, and in my other classes I wouldn’t get out more than two or three words before somebody would be putting me down.”

I said, “Is that true?” And the whole class nodded, yes, and it broke my heart, because I sadly realized that in four years he had never experienced the kind of acceptance that empowers kids to grow freely and go far.

## **Celebrating Successes**

Teaching in a public high school, I had many experiences that showed me the worth of the principles we practice every day in our Living Wisdom Schools, and how powerfully those principles can affect the students’ experience of school, and how they free them to do their best, academically and personally.

A prime example of how we recognize our students’ growth is the Qualities Ceremony during our year-end celebration. The teachers honor each student with a positive quality that they have developed over the previous nine months, a quality that reflects greater maturity.

For a child who genuinely understands right and wrong, for example, it might be the quality of Justice. Or it might be Friendship, Kindness, Courage, or any other quality you would wish for the child to develop as part of becoming a confident, happy person. Then at the End of the Year ceremony, the child – even the youngest ones – will say a few words about their quality – how they understand it, how they worked on it, and how they feel about it

I was still teaching in public high school when I decided to start celebrating the students’ successes at the end of the year with a quality. I asked the office staff to help me print the beautiful certificates, and they got into the spirit of it, too.

I gave my students individual qualities of Courage, Joy, and so on. Then, at the final class of the year, I explained what I was doing, and I handed them their certificates.

I vividly remember giving one girl the quality of Delight, and how vehemently she protested – “This isn’t true!”

I said, “But it is! You are absolutely delightful. I always love having you in my class.”

She said, “No, no! This is not true! I am not always delightful.”

I said, “Wait a second, I’m not saying that you’re always delightful. This is saying that you are mostly delightful, and even if you have your off-days, as we all do, I see you as delightful.”

I asked the class, “Am I right? Is she delightful?” And they shouted, “Yes, yes! You are!” And I could see that she was having to take that quality into herself and accept it as a defining part of who she was.

Of course, it was absolutely true, because from the moment she came into the class she had a way of making everything lighter and happier and funnier, and a way of including everybody and being responsive — all of the qualities that make a wonderful member of the community and a wonderful learner.

Later, as I reflected on that first informal Qualities Ceremony, I thought, “It’s such a simple thing, and it took so little time and effort on my part, but I think it was life-changing for her...and for who knows how many others.”

### **Does Education for Life Work?**

Now, some people might say, “These are soft skills, and they are not what’s going to get you through life,” but I would disagree very heartily, because everything I’ve learned as an Education for Life teacher tells me that when you approach children in a way that acknowledges them as whole persons and in their deepest essence as shining souls, they respond beautifully. This became the spirit behind every encounter I had with a new student. My first thought was always, “This is a shining soul.” We must acknowledge them as a unique light, and our job is to help them shine ever more brightly.

And how can we do that?

When a teacher is holding that thought uppermost in every encounter with a student, it gets communicated both subtly and overtly. Then the student feels that their experience of school is much deeper, and more personal.

When I was a little girl, the teacher would give us gold stars for good behavior or for penmanship. It was a formal system of external rewards. You can have a reward system in an Education for Life school, but it will take on a very different meaning, because it’s all about the individual relationship with each child.

One child needs to learn to believe in herself, and another needs to learn to respect and believe in others. Whatever the lesson is, it's always individual.

I believe this is another major point in favor of our system of education. It's so real, because it's based on helping them where they really are, and according to their own nature.

At the big high school where I taught, I was able to accomplish a great deal by teaching to the individual students in my classroom, and yet there were outside forces wanting us to march along in orderly rows.

There was a young girl in my class who was very popular and well-liked. She was a cheerleader and part of the homecoming queen's court, and she was also very bright. At the same time, her whole life was geared toward getting a super grade-point average and going to a great college. Because she was measuring her success entirely by grades, she didn't get nearly as much out of my class as the other kids.

For her final exam she wrote an essay which was okay but not great, and after a great deal of careful thought, I gave her a B-plus for the course, although I knew she would be disappointed. And, sure enough, she came to me and said, "I need an A! Why didn't you give me an A?"

I explained that an A is something you earn by going beyond simply regurgitating the information — it indicates that you've engaged with the subject, that you've taken it in and made it part of your awareness in a creative way.

But she wasn't convinced, and I wasn't surprised when I got a call from her father.

I felt a great deal of regret for her, not for the B grade, but because the other kids had grown so much more, each at their level.

### **Education for (Real) Life**

Our class included students from typical middle-class families and others who had come to America as refugees and immigrants. We were discussing immigration one day, and a boy from a white middle-class family made a negative remark about Asian people who were seeking refuge in this country and taking jobs, and so on.

There was a girl from Laos in the class, and I thought, "Oh my gosh, where am I going to go with this?" But before I could say a word, the

Laotian girl spoke up, which was remarkable in itself, because she had never spoken in class.

She said, “For your information, I am a refugee, and I have as much right to be here as you do!” The boy stammered out a response, but the class came together and confronted him with the flaws in his reasoning.

I was so proud of her, that she had felt free and courageous enough to take him on. She said, “By the way, if you go back far enough, you’re an immigrant, too!”

I believe that the freedom to engage with real-life issues is at the core of an Education for Life, because true education isn’t only about mastering information, it’s about mastering how you want to live your life, and how you can be a good person, and how you can be part of a family and part of a workforce.

Of course, it takes a great deal of hard work to master a professional field, but in the end I believe a successful life comes down to certain universal and indispensable principles – that if you want to be truly successful, you have to be honest with others and with yourself, and you have to value others and search for the highest in yourself and others and behave accordingly.

And when you fall down, you have to be able to pick yourself up and try again. And if somebody else falls, you don’t gang up on them, but you go over and say, “Let me help you.”

We see that behavior in our school every day, because the culture is based so completely on being able to tune in to each other’s reality. If a child skins a knee, everybody runs over to help. They use the tools we’ve given them. And then the teachers will come over, and the children will make way, because there’s tremendous respect that’s based on the caring and love the teachers have for the children.

I marvel at the good fortune of the children in this school, because they’re allowed to be who they are, and they are given every opportunity and support to grow into their own fullest nature.

The children in our school are very individual, and they will need this or that kind of special help. And while they don’t always live up to their highest potential, their highest is what we’re always holding out to them.

If children get into it with one another, as they will, we guide them to understand, “That person’s reality is different from mine, and it isn’t

necessarily bad.” And in that way they learn to navigate even very nuanced situations on their own.

The teachers have earned the students’ respect, so they are able to involve themselves at a deep level with them, because they are honest with them, and they love them.

If a child feels loved and seen by someone in authority, the defenses around the heart go down, and then that child can take any kind of correction, because s/he knows that it’s offered by a friend who wants to help.

### **Creating a Safe School Environment of Growth and Joy**

**Q:** I’ve been struck by the atmosphere in the school, and how it seems to harmonize lots of things.

**Helen:** I couldn’t agree more. When I started teaching here twenty-odd years ago, I met with a group of parents who wanted to learn more about the school. Afterward, a woman stayed behind. She said, “I have a confession. I’m not a parent, and I don’t have a child for your school. I’m a spy.” Of course, she got my attention.

She continued, “I’m a psychologist, working on my PhD, and I used your school as part of my research, but I need you to know that your school is very different from other schools.”

She said, “When I came through the gate I felt a change in the energy, and I didn’t know exactly what it was. But then I saw the children walking between classes, and every single child had a smile on his or her face.”

She said, “Then I understood where the mysterious energy came from. It’s because you have happy children.”

I said, “Well, that’s the truth. The children who are in our school are basically really, really happy.” And she said, “You have no idea what it’s like, by comparison, to go into some of these other schools.”

“Oh, I do,” I said - “from the children who come here from those schools. They share their experiences - the lack of freedom, the bullying, the cliques, the competition, the stress.”

I believe that when you look at children as souls, and not merely as personalities, it instantly deepens and expands the relationship. When you visit the classrooms here, it strikes you that the students aren’t afraid. There will be times when they aren’t able to rise to the highest level they could,



but the overarching truth is that they are essentially loved, and when you take fear out of the equation, almost anything is possible.

### **Encouraging High Aspirations**

A keystone of our philosophy is a principle that we call “directional relativity.” The idea is that everyone in the world is looking for happiness and freedom from suffering, and the only way we can get there is by working with ourselves exactly as we are, right now. So we’re all moving in the same direction, toward greater happiness and freedom, but we’re going forward at our own pace, starting from the unique place where we are.

I don’t think I could go into a classroom and be an effective teacher without having that principle in mind, that you’re always looking at the individual child and very clearly understanding where they are, and then you’re imagining where they can go, and you’re helping them go forward in that direction.

So there’s a sense of directional progress but without a fixed timeline, and you’re always tuning into the individual child and evaluating their points of readiness.

A child takes a test, and they’re upset about their grade. We don’t see that as a bad thing, because it signals that they want to improve. So the teacher will give them lots of encouragement and support. “I love the fact that you want to do better!”

It’s the idea that we’re always wanting to move forward, starting where we are, at the level of our own abilities, without the slightest sense of being judged, and we communicate that security to the children through our expectations, our language, and our support. So it all works together in the child’s favor, and when you can communicate that sense of support and faith and promise, there’s no telling how far the child can go.



# The Science of Happiness & Success



## 21. Happiness, Success, & the Science of Positive Feelings

Modern science is confirming the lessons we have learned in the Living Wisdom Schools about the strong correlations between happiness and academic success.

Scientists at the Institute of HeartMath™ Research Center (IHM) in Boulder Creek, California are studying the effects of positive feelings such as love, compassion, and kindness on our bodies and brains. Their research supports the notion that it's important for children's academic success that they learn to "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, and don't mess with Mister In-Between."<sup>6</sup>

Here are some of the findings:

Positive emotional states exert a whole-body synchronizing effect by bringing brain waves, heart rhythms, breathing, and blood-pressure oscillations into a unified, harmonious rhythm. During positive feelings, "bodily systems function with a high degree of synchronization, efficiency and harmony."

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, as well as increased frequency of subjective reports of spiritual experiences.

Positive, expansive feelings such as love, appreciation, and compassion promote relaxation and synchronization of the nervous system. They quiet the "arousal" (sympathetic) branch of the nervous system and activate the "relaxation" (parasympathetic) side. The sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system is responsible for speeding up heart rate and

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<sup>6</sup>The Institute of HeartMath research is described in *The HeartMath Solution* by Doc Childre and Howard Martin (HarperSanFrancisco 1999), as well as in research papers on the organization's website, [www.heartmath.org](http://www.heartmath.org).

preparing the body for action, while the parasympathetic branch governs the “relaxation response,” slowing heart rate and calming body, emotions, and brain.

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.”

Additionally, the researchers found that negative emotions such as anger, fear, and hatred make the heartbeat change speeds erratically – the heart literally speeds up and slows down chaotically from one beat to the next, like the random, jerky motion of a car that’s running out of gas. (See

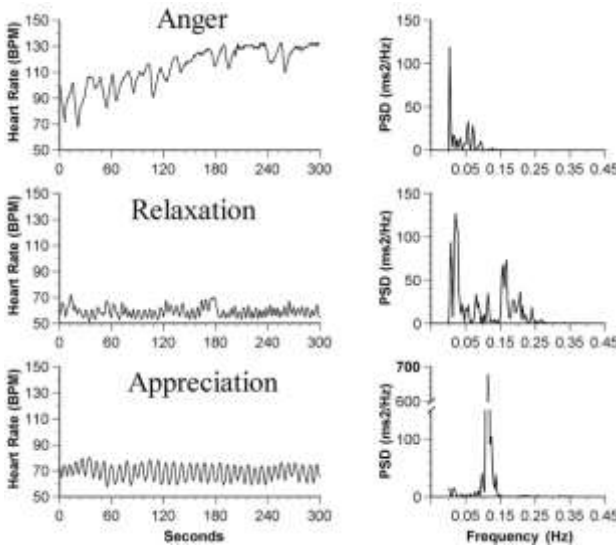


figure.)

Positive emotions such as love, compassion, and appreciation, on the other hand, make the heart beat with a harmonious, regular rhythm. During negative emotions, the heart’s irregular speed changes appear as jagged, disordered spikes, and its power output is relatively low.

Simple relaxation produces a more regular rhythm, but deliberately cultivating positive emotions makes the heart beat in a steady, consistent, harmonious rhythm, reflected in the regular, sine-wave-like pattern in the figure (“Appreciation”). During positive emotions, the heart’s power output jumps by over 500% above the levels attained during negative emotions and simple relaxation. (In the figure, note the Power Spectral Density [PSD] scale in “Appreciation.”)

The Institute of HeartMath findings have begun to find practical applications in professional sports. Here is an excerpt from an article on the website of the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA):

When we're stressed or upset, it's physically impossible to think clearly or perform at our best. This is because a disordered heart rhythm pattern sends a signal to the brain that inhibits the cortex, the higher thinking and reasoning part of the brain. On the other hand, when we are feeling confident, secure, and appreciative, our heart rhythms become smooth and even.... Smooth heart rhythm patterns send a signal to the brain that synchronizes and facilitates cortical function, speeding up our reaction times and making it easier to think clearly, perceive a bigger picture, and make better decisions.<sup>7</sup>

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 remain cool and concentrate. (The heart is the body's most powerful oscillator, sending out electrical signals roughly 60 times as strong as those emitted by the brain.)

To summarize: positive, harmonious feelings enhance mental focus, calmness, health, performance, intuition, 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.

When scientists from the Institute of HeartMath taught simple methods for harmonizing the heart's feelings to school children in the greater Washington, DC area, the children's test scores immediately rose.

In the Living Wisdom Schools, the teachers lead the students in practicing heart-harmonizing methods every day. In the classroom and on the playground, the teachers pay extremely close attention to the quality of the children's interactions with each other and their mood. The teachers are trained to nurture a harmonious, safe, expansive environment that is optimized for learning.

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<sup>7</sup> "Second That Emotion," by Deborah Rozman, Ph.D., Pia Nilsson, and Lynn Marriott, downloaded from [www.pga.com](http://www.pga.com) in 2004. *Gold Digest* readers voted Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott to the magazine's list of the top 50 US golf coaches.





## 22. Happiness, Success, and the “Social Brain”

In the Living Wisdom Schools, the teachers invest tremendous energy in helping the students learn how to get along. The goal is to create an environment that will be conducive to learning, where young children and teens can feel safe and secure to ask questions and experience the joys of supporting each other instead of feeling always compelled to compete.

Some parents question this approach, feeling that every moment of the student’s time at school should be devoted to the academic curriculum. Yet this view may be misguided, as Matthew Lieberman, professor and Director of the Social Cognitive Neuroscience Lab at the UCLA Department of Psychology, Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences explains in his book *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*.

It seems that children *learn more efficiently* when they are encouraged to connect socially in the classroom by tutoring each other and problem-solving together.

“Being socially connected is our brain’s lifelong passion,” Lieberman says. “It’s been baked into our operating system for tens of millions of years.”

“Someday, we will look back and wonder how we ever had lives, work, and schools that weren’t guided by the principles of the social brain.”

Lieberman believes schools could be dramatically improved by tapping the brain’s social potential. He notes that U.S. students’ interest in school tends to wane when they reach seventh and eighth grades — an age when, he says, humans become extremely social, and when most schools fail to nurture and wisely guide this instinct.

“Our school system says to turn off that social brain,” Lieberman said. “We typically don’t teach history by asking what Napoleon was thinking; we teach about territorial boundaries and make it as non-social as possible. Too often we take away what makes information learnable and

memorable and emphasize chronology while leaving out the motivations.

“Eighth graders’ brains want to understand the social world and the minds of other people. We can tap into what middle school students are biologically predisposed to learn, and we can do this to improve instruction in history and English, and even math and science.”

In the Palo Alto Living Wisdom School, the annual all-school Theater Magic presentation engages every child in the school intimately and directly with the life of a great historical figure – not merely the outward data of wars, treaties, and shifting borders, but their stature as human beings – their noble thoughts and high aspirations, their hard-fought personal battles, and their powerful message for our own lives and times.



classrooms of the Living Wisdom Schools. (*Photo: LWHS teacher Hazemach mentors a study group.*)

Lieberman’s research suggests that students are more likely to remember information when they take it in socially. He believes schools could apply this principle by having older students tutor younger ones, as routinely happens in the

“If you have an eighth grader teach a sixth grader, the eighth grader’s motivation is social: to help this other student and not embarrass himself,” Lieberman said. “Getting everyone to be both teacher and learner would create enthusiasm for learning.”

*Social* relates how Lieberman and his colleagues used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to show that hardwired neural mechanisms make us profoundly social beings.

“We’re wired to see things and think, ‘How can I use this to help other people that I know?’” Lieberman said. “I can have the most brilliant idea for an invention, but if I can’t convey that to other people in a way that they’ll help me build it and market it to other people, it’s just an idea in my head. If we’re not socially connected, even great ideas wither.”

(Adapted from a UCLA news release on Prof. Lieberman’s work written by Stuart Wolpert and posted on October 10, 2013.)

## 23. How Raw Emotions Interfere with Learning

In his bestselling book, *Emotional Intelligence*, *New York Times* science reporter Daniel Goleman relates how the pioneering Russian neuropsychologist, A. R. Luria, first suggested in the 1930s that the prefrontal cortex was a key brain center for self-control and restraining emotional impulses.

Luria found that patients with damage to this area “were impulsive and prone to flare-ups of fear and anger.”

A study of two dozen men and women convicted of heat-of-passion murders “found that they had a much lower than usual level of activity in these same sections of the prefrontal cortex.”<sup>8</sup>

In 2002, scientists at Duke University used brain scans to verify that raw emotions interfere with concentration, and that mental focus and raw emotions exist in a mutually exclusive relationship.

That is, not only do raw emotions distort our ability to focus, but deliberately focusing attention is an effective way to calm and “neutralize” those feelings. As the Duke news release put it, “Surprisingly, an increase in one type of function is accompanied by a noticeable decrease in the other.”

This is interesting news for educators, and for students preparing to take tests, since it confirms the age-old belief that deliberately focusing attention tends to help calm the pre-test jitters, while uncontrolled emotions are dangerous because they can interfere with concentration and good decision-making.

At Living Wisdom School, the students are taught simple meditation techniques that help them focus their energy and attention in the prefrontal cortex while studying, preparing for tests, and dealing with turbulent emotions.

“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.

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<sup>8</sup>*Emotional Intelligence*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1995) 314.

LaBarr, assistant professor at Duke's Center for Cognitive Neuroscience and an author of the study described above.

“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, located between the right and left halves of the brain's frontal portion, which is involved in a wide range of thought processes and emotional responses.”<sup>9</sup>

It's easy to test this finding by placing relaxed attention at the area of the anterior cingulate, behind the point between the eyebrows, a practice that tends to soothe troubling emotions by helping us feel more calm, positive, focused, and in control of our feelings.

Researchers now suspect that calm feeling (as distinct from raw emotions) and reason work hand in hand. Contrary to a longstanding prejudice of our western culture, which tends to assume that reason is the superior faculty, the neuroscientists are finding that reason is deeply compromised unless it is balanced by the feelings of the heart.

Neurologist Dr. Antonio Damasio studied patients with damage to the connection between their brains' prefrontal cortex and amygdala – the two most important centers of reason and emotion in the brain. He found that when these patients lost their ability to feel, they made terrible decisions in their business and personal lives and became incapable of making the simplest decisions, such as when to make an appointment, even though their reasoning powers were intact.

“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.”<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, there are risks in trying to make decisions based on feeling alone, because our decisions may be subtly compromised by personal

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<sup>9</sup> Duke University press release, August 19, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997) 27-28.

desires and raw emotion — our hearts may not be sufficiently calm and detached to be trusted.

Our feelings are more reliable when we check them against our reason, common sense, and experience. Are our heart's feelings *truly* calm and dispassionate, or are we just telling ourselves what we want to hear? Cool, clear *reason* can help us decide.

Our sense of the right decision will more often be correct when we hold ourselves in a state of calm “reasonable feeling.” It may help to imagine that our awareness is centered in an axis of energy between the forehead and the heart.

At Living Wisdom High School, the students learn to consult their calm feelings while listening to the voice of calm reason. Learning to access and use these important tools gives them an advantage when it comes to mastering the academic curriculum.

Researchers at the Institute of HeartMath have found that it's surprisingly easy to prove that intuition exists, and that its accuracy increases when we deliberately calm and harmonize our feelings.

In a study of intuitive ability, the subjects were shown soothing images, interspersed randomly with images that were emotionally disturbing. The subjects' EEG (brain waves), ECG (electrocardiogram), and heart rate variability showed that they reacted emotionally to the images *five to seven seconds before* an image appeared.

Confirming the folk wisdom that women are more intuitive than men, female subjects reacted with greater accuracy and sensitivity.<sup>11</sup>

The message for students and educators is clear: expansive thoughts, actions, and feelings have been scientifically shown to boost brain efficiency and happiness.

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<sup>11</sup>“The Sixth Sense—More and More, Science Supports It,” Gabriella Boehmer, Institute of HeartMath; the study referenced is: “Electrophysiological Evidence of Intuition: Part 1. The Surprising Role of the Heart,” McCraty, R., Atkinson, M., Bradley, R. T., *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, Feb 2004, Vol. 10, No. 1: 133-43; “Electrophysiological Evidence of Intuition: Part 2. A System-Wide Process?” McCraty, R., Atkinson, M., Bradley, R. T., *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, Apr 2004, Vol. 10, No. 2: 325-36.



## 24. Two Kinds of Feelings

By J. Donald Walters, author of *Education for Life* and co-founder of the Living Wisdom Schools

How many people recognize the difference between emotion and feeling?  
Very few.

And how many children are consequently taught that calm, sensitive feeling is an invaluable tool for the complete understanding of most subjects? Or that *turbulent* feelings – that is to say, the emotions – and not calm feelings prevent clear, objective understanding? Again, very few.

Few children, again, are taught the extent to which reason is guided by calm feeling but distorted by the emotions. And few are taught that by developing calm feeling they will improve their understanding of objective reality on every level.

Feeling, when it is calm and refined, is essential to truly objective, mature insight.

There are definite ways of clarifying feeling, just as there are clear principles of logic for learning to reason correctly.

For instance, feelings can be clarified by learning to distance our feelings from our personal likes and dislikes, withdrawing our awareness to a calm center in the heart. Feeling can be further clarified by directing the heart's energies upward to the brain, and thence to a point between the eyebrows that was anciently identified as the seat of concentration in the body.

Clarity of feeling can be assisted by calming the flow of energy in the spine, by means of certain breathing exercises. These exercises are a priceless contribution of the science of yoga to the general knowledge of the human race. It would be a grave error to ignore them.

Only by calm inner feeling can a person know definitely the right course to take in any action. Those who direct their lives from this deeper level of

feeling achieve levels of success that are never reached by people who limit their quest for answers to the exercise of reason.

Reason, indeed, when unsupported by feeling, may point in hundreds of plausible directions without offering certainty as to the rightness of any of them.

Children need to learn how to react *appropriately*. But they will never learn this very important skill if their reactions spring from their subjective emotions. Considerable training is needed to learn to harness feelings and make them a useful ally. What children are taught, instead, is that feelings are always obstacles to correct insight. The scientific method is offered as a model – “If you want to see things objectively, you must view everything in terms of cold logic.”

I remember a college professor who boasted to us, jokingly, that X-rays had shown his heart to be smaller than normal. This, to him, was a sign of intellectual objectivity, which he prized.

We too often ignore the fact that the greater the scientist, generally the more deeply he *feels* his subject. Or that, as Einstein put it, the essence of true scientific discovery is a sense of mystical awe.

Feeling can never, in any case, be suppressed. Shove it out of sight at one point, and it will only pop up at another. When long-suppressed feelings at last burst upon people’s consciousness, those feelings often assume terrible and unrecognizable shapes.

Right feeling is a defining feature of true maturity. It must be cultivated, and not ignored, suppressed, or treated as something beyond the scope of right education for maturity.



# Academics at Living Wisdom High School



## 25. The Super-Efficient Classroom

A conversation with Nitai Deranja, co-founder of the Living Wisdom Schools.

When children sense that their teachers understand their unique talents and motivations, they are much more likely to become happily engaged and excel in school.

**Q:** Parents who visit the Living Wisdom Schools frequently question the schools' philosophy. They're naturally concerned that their children receive a first-class education, but they often aren't aware of the powerful connections between academic success and children's feelings. As a result, they are often concerned that time spent on the arts and other feeling-oriented activities is wasted and would be better devoted to academics.

**Nitai:** The traditional image of a teacher is that he or she will come into the classroom with a good lesson plan, but the risk in sticking too rigidly to the plan is that the teacher will overlook the reality of the individual child: the child's unique abilities, needs, motivations, and the daily fluctuations of his or her heart and mind.

A good teacher will, of course, have a solid lesson plan, but their first concern will be to get to know each child, so as to be able to relate appropriately to their unique realities.

It's a wonderful boon for the children when their teachers have that skill, because it gives them a sense that the teacher understands their unique worth and abilities. It's an experience that most kids aren't getting today, if they're treated as cogs in the school machinery, and as just one more anonymous child swimming in the great ocean of students.

The tragedy is that the kids start to identify with being a cog in the machine; whereas if a talented teacher is acknowledging their reality, we see that the child comes alive and wants to learn because somebody is investing the time and energy to value and encourage them.

As adults, we know that when we're communicating at work or talking with friends, we need to be able to set aside our own mental buzz and understand where they are. My forty-eight years as a teacher have persuaded me that this is the indispensable foundation for academic excellence, because at that point you can do amazing things with the students and the curriculum. It's why I'm encouraging this quality more strongly than ever in my workshops for teachers.

Understanding the individual child is a skill that you can develop endlessly. I'll share a couple of stories. I led an online workshop recently for teachers in Italy, and because I had to speak through an interpreter, I wasn't sure they were getting the concepts, so I said, "I want you to work on this and come back next week prepared to share stories about opening up to children's realities."

The following week a woman reported, "I was visiting a friend who is the mother of two infants, both around two years old, and I thought, 'Okay, here's my assignment — I've got to figure out how to relate to their world.'"

She looked at the kids and saw that they were very contentedly chewing on their pacifiers. Noticing an extra pacifier on a table, she picked it up and put it in her mouth and sat on the floor with these two little babies, and she reported that the kids suddenly stopped what they were doing and looked up at her and got big smiles on their faces, and one of the kids came over and gave her a big hug. (laughs)

It was a powerful demonstration of how beautifully this principle works at all ages. How can you expect to teach your students effectively, if you can't get on their wavelength?

Another teacher in the workshop was working as a math aide with twelve-year-old kids. He told us about a boy in his class who absolutely hated math, and how the kid came slouching into the classroom with his hoodie pulled over his head and walked over to a table where he sat down, put his arms on the table, and threw his head on his arms.

Stefan, the math aide, observed the boy and thought, "All right, I'm going to see if I can tune into this boy's world." So he went over to the table and nudged the boy on the shoulder.

The boy was surprised and said, "What?"

Stefan said, "Could you move over a little?"

The boy grudgingly scooted over, and Stefan let himself fall into the chair, put his arms on the table, and threw his head on his arms. (laughs)

The kid started giggling, and finally he picked up his head and they ended up doing some math together. Stefan said it was remarkable how willing the kid was to work on his math, when he realized that the teacher could get on his wavelength and sympathize.

During the years from 6 to 12, or at any age really, the classroom should be a place of adventure — it should be a combination of theater, science laboratory, and space ship. The classroom should be an enclosed reality that you can turn into just about anything, to draw the kids into the adventure of learning.

When a teacher at our school wanted to introduce the kids to the science of the rainforest, he turned the classroom into a tropical jungle. There were so many plants and trees that you had to brush aside the branches to get through the door. The point is that you aren't just reading about the rainforest, you're having an experience of it. It's a prop that helps the kids feel what the rainforest is like, and the result is that because they can feel it, they begin to care for it, and to be interested in learning about it.

The Palo Alto Living Wisdom School puts on an amazing theater performance every year where every child in the school has a part, and all of the kids get totally involved in the self-contained world of the play.

Whether the play is about Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Dalai Lama, Buddha, Kwan Yin, Abraham Lincoln, or Krishna, they are deeply studying the history and customs of the times while they're acting the lives of these great figures. Most of the kids are picking up each others' lines as well, and it's hugely motivating for them because their feelings are engaged. Again, the result is that they are absolutely lapping up the academic side of the experience.

In our science classes, we approach the curriculum in the same spirit, where you're doing real-world experiments as you learn. It's a pretend world where you're being a scientist for a time, but it means that we're building the curriculum on that very powerful force of a feeling that's generated by the experience.

It's an approach to learning that catches their attention. They love it when there's a story, whether it's a story about math, science, history, literature, or the arts, because they want to experience life, and they have a highly developed sense of adventure, but they aren't quite old enough yet to go out and experience real adult life for themselves.

From age six to twelve, the teacher's job is to scale it down so they can experience it through stories, theater, music, painting, and adventure trips, because they can't always go to an actual rainforest.

When it comes to the adolescent years from twelve to eighteen, few people understand that these are the years when you *can* take them out of the classroom and get them engaged in having real-life experiences. It's no longer a time for just studying subjects in books, it's a time to introduce them to real life by giving them their own adventures.

Each of the six-year stages of a young person's development has its own unique methods for capturing their enthusiasm and interests at that age, and for bringing it into the curriculum.

Maria Montessori, the famous educator, said that when students reach age thirteen, you should put them on a bus and start driving them around and not let them off until they're eighteen. (laughs)

**Q:** If I understand what you're saying, it's that the teacher needs to get to know the individual student, and find out what they're interested in, and make use of their own natural wellsprings of energy and enthusiasm to help them move ahead in the academic curriculum.

**Nitai:** That's exactly it. When I began teaching, I was very intrigued by a document that Paramhansa Yogananda developed for a school he started in India. He called it the Psychological Chart. It was a way to help teachers and parents find out, among other things, what the student's deepest motivations are. I've been working with it, adapting it for a document that we'll call the Student Portrait.

At first, it was a bit confusing to try to figure out how to use it, because it covers so many facets of a child's character. But the point is that when children come into the classroom, you need to look at the key elements of their lives — their family, their character, their response to being disciplined, and so on — and there are twelve categories you can look at, with lots of fine detail. The insights of the parents can be another great aid to help you understand the child.

Yogananda used an interesting word: "salient." You look for the salient characteristic of the child — what is the core motivator in that child? And then you can use that as a leading quality to help you work with them.

It might be something that's coming from the child's life outside of school, or it might be some special quality of the child's inner nature.

There was a boy in one of my classes who was extremely competitive. It was the boy's salient quality, and I always had to take account of it, or else it would get out of hand and cause a disruption. But if I kept it in mind, we were able to find ways to make school work for him.

I would walk out to the playground with him and talk about competition, and what it means to win and lose, because otherwise he would be completely focused on winning.

One of my former students now works as a chef at a famous yoga retreat. In high school, the only salient quality I found that truly captured his interest was food. He was fairly oblivious of everything else, but his eyes would light up the moment you mentioned food, so we were able to work with that quality to make school interesting and motivating and inspiring for him.

I find that you can use this approach to help almost any child. Sometimes the salient quality will shift and a clear characteristic will evolve into something a little different, perhaps because of events in the child's life or an inner transformation. But there's usually one salient thing, and it gives you a useful clue for zeroing-in on the child's essential interests.

Knowing each child's salient quality helps break any tendency to think of the kids as cogs in a machine, because every one of us is absolutely unique.

**Q:** In an earlier chapter, "It's Time We Started Raising Organic Children," you quoted the author of a *New York Times* article who lamented that kids today are praised for earning good grades, but they aren't learning about grit and perseverance and enthusiasm, and how to get along with people, and other qualities that are crucial for success and happiness. We've all heard of people who didn't have much formal education, but who were successful because of their drive, initiative, curiosity, and enthusiasm, and their ability to get along.

**Nitai:** Yes, and it's wonderful that people in education today are starting to realize this. It's related to the idea that kids need to be themselves, and that we need to do things with them that are meant for kids, rather than force them to conform to the adult world all the time. So yes, I completely agree. I scratch my head, because it's hard to understand why people can't get that.

At the level of grades and test scores, the research tells us very clearly that happy kids perform better than stressed kids, and it seems so obvious.

Why did we go the other way? Why did we imagine that by pushing and pressuring we would get more learning?

**Q:** It's like owning a car and not understanding how the car works so that you can put the right fuel in it.

**Nitai:** Yes, it's like putting gasoline in an electric engine because you don't understand what it needs to function properly.

**Q:** I read a book by two authors whose previous work I admired. In a chapter on education, they were ranting that all of this new stuff about feeling-based education is hogwash, and that the traditional ways of teaching are just fine. And never mind if kids today are exposed to violent video games, because they're basically good kids and they won't be affected. I was surprised, because I knew the authors to be courageous researchers and independent thinkers, but they were captured by this idea, and I realized that they were reacting to the kind of feeling-based education that is truly going in the wrong direction, where educators latch onto the idea that feelings of all kinds are good. "It's healthy for the kids to scream and shout and express their anger openly and not suppress it." And it's because they aren't aware of the difference between raw emotions and refined feelings. They don't understand that it's essential to help kids learn to direct their emotions in ways that will support learning and help them thrive.

**Nitai:** People tend to judge any movement on the basis of what's happening at the fringe, but the topics in our Education for Life approach to educating children are the topics of life and eternal truth, translated to the world of the child. They are the ideas that describe how life works at every level. There are endless ramifications to explore, and I've been blessed to be able to specialize in the particular application of those ideas in education.

**Q:** There's an idea that we know from *Education for Life*, that what all humans are seeking is to experience ever-greater happiness and to avoid suffering, and when we can tap into that basic human drive in school, it releases a tremendous amount of energy in the children.

**Nitai:** Yes, and it's unfortunate that the educational establishment tries to press kids into the same mold, and that it ignores that very powerful natural drive to be happy.

There are natural laws of how human life works. Those laws are a feature of a universe that is constructed for the purpose of helping souls



learn to be happy and successful, and helping children to explore how this life works is tremendously important.

Kids are always doing it anyway, and in some ways they're better at it than we are, because as adults we tend to let our thinking processes get in the way.

Young people are constantly exploring life and experimenting. What will happen if I throw the ball over the bush? What will happen if I dance? What will happen if I eat this? To be a teacher who can value that, and see it as a core feature of an ideal education, puts us in touch with how the process of education was meant to work, rather than artificially trying to redirect children's behavior.

I tell people, "You want to get into the child's world." And they respond, "Well, I was over there with the kid, and they weren't really doing anything." And I'll say, "Go back." (laughs) Because they *were* doing something, and maybe they just weren't doing something that made any sense to you, but they were doing something that made a lot of sense to them, and we need to try to tune into that.

**Q:** When I talk to the teachers at Living Wisdom School, they say that if a child is doing art, for example, it can be harmful for an adult to rush up with their own ideas and say, "I really love that!" Or, "That looks like an airplane!" Because you're imposing an idea on them that might not actually be the child's own. The teachers told me that a more fruitful approach is to say, "Oh! You put so much blue in there!" And get them talking about what's coming out of their world.

**Nitai:** Exactly. That's what motivates me to try to keep spreading these methods as best I can, so that more and more five-year-olds can start their lives in harmony with these principles that will give them success and happiness in life, instead of having to learn them, perhaps painfully, much later.



## 26. How We Started a High School, and How It Succeeded Beyond Our Wildest Expectations

A conversation with Nitai Deranja, co-founder of the original Living Wisdom School.

**Q:** Tell us how you got the idea to start a different kind of high school.

**Nitai:** I realized that when kids come into the teenage years – the “Will Power Years” from age twelve to eighteen, as we call them in Education for Life, you simply cannot work with them effectively unless you’re acknowledging and welcoming their eagerness and enthusiasm for flexing their will power.

The first time I started a high school, in the early 1980s, I set it up along the lines of our existing elementary school, which was in its eighth year and was very successful, but I ultimately had to conclude that it was the wrong approach.

Reflecting on our experiences, I decided, “If we want to have any hope of getting the teenagers on board with what we’re doing, we have to offer them an education that will inspire them to make their own, independent choice to be part of the school.”

I got together with the teachers to ponder what teenagers like to do, and we unanimously concluded, “They love to travel.”

So we decided to create a high school that would have adventure travel as a core component. We weren’t going to be traveling to bribe the kids into liking our school. The trips would be a challenge, and we would call them “Service Adventures.”

I described the travel adventures in an earlier chapter, so I won’t repeat that information here. But we had some wonderful experiences. When we were in Dharamsala, India, we were invited into the Dalai Lama’s living room where we spent an hour and a half talking with him – and needless to say, it was a life-changing experience for our kids.

We didn't forget all of the lessons that had been so successful in our K-8 schools. Primarily, that if you want kids to be deeply engaged and enthusiastic about the academic curriculum, it's an absolute requirement that you must invest tremendous attention and energy to help them learn how to be happy, successful people.

It worked brilliantly for our teens, because they saw that we understood them, and that we were helping them fulfill their own desire to become happy and strong.

Instead of treating kids as empty brains to be parked at a desk for six hours a day and crammed with facts, we began doing lots of things to engage their will power and enthusiasm, and it worked extremely well. Aside from service, we created challenging theater productions, and we spent a fair amount of time on athletics and other positive channels for their energy.

Of course, we gave them a solid academic curriculum, but it wasn't the rigid system you find in a traditional high school, where you're in English class from ten to eleven five days a week, and math from one to two every day.

We had a flexible schedule, where we had math three or four days a week instead of daily, for reasons that I'll shortly explain. But it was generally because we found that the students made terrific progress with less classroom time.

In most schools, you do the same things five days a week, and because we weren't doing it that way, I began to wonder how much they were actually learning, so I began to test them.

I knew that if I gave them the usual standardized tests that are heavily data-specific and geared toward rote memorization, it wouldn't be appropriate. There was a test that was used in the California public schools called the Star Test that had tons of narrowly focused questions that were based on rote memorization – like, “What is the significance of the Tennis Court Oath?”

They were things that nobody in their right mind would know unless they'd been forced to memorize them. The Star Tests are no longer used, thank heaven, but I realized that they weren't the kind of tests that would be appropriate for our kids. So I looked around, and I found a standardized test of students' development in areas like reading comprehension, mathematical problem-solving, and scientific thinking.

The tests weren't data-specific, but they tested how well you could use your mind in these areas. So we began using the Iowa Tests of Educational Development, which were first adopted in the Midwest and are now well-respected nationwide; and right away, our students' average scores were in the top 10 percent nationally.

When I tested them the next year, they were in the top 10 percent again, and they stayed in the top 10 percent for the 10 years I was involved with the high school. Some years they were a little higher or lower, and one year we were in the top 1 percent nationally.

I thought it was a very promising result, for a school that wasn't delivering academics the usual way, but where a great deal of learning was obviously happening.

Most of our teens wanted to go to college, so I began keeping track of their SAT scores. Their average scores over 10 years were 200 points higher on the 1600-point SAT scale than the national average, so it was another satisfying result.

Another measure of our success was that our graduates consistently ended up being successful. Career-wise, our alumni are all over the map, because we encouraged them to find out who they were and follow their calling. So they include airplane pilots, a couple of doctors, and a tango dancer who happens to be my daughter. There are two young women graduates who take groups into the wilderness for life-changing experiences, and several of our alumni are now teaching in our schools.

On our fortieth anniversary we sent a survey to our graduates and to people who had been part of our school for a time, to see how they felt about their education and their lives. One of the questions we asked them was: "How do you rate the quality of your life as an adult?"

There were five choices: Excellent, Above Average, Average, Below Average, and Poor, and 70% said they'd had an Excellent quality of life, 26% said their life was Above Average, and just 4% reported Average. No one responded Below Average or Poor.

When we asked them, "Would you want your children to have an education similar to what you received through EFL?" 96% said Yes and just 4% said No.

People often ask if our graduates are able to function well in the real world, and when I think of graduates like David K, I have to laugh, because David works as a very high-level financial advisor for the well-known

national investment firm The Motley Fool. David started giving investment advice online when he was thirteen, and people were following his tips and having good success, when someone finally asked him how old he was, and he told them fourteen. (laughs)

Another of our graduates, Simon H., works as a bank inspector for the FDIC. Simon graduated from college with double Summa Cum Laude honors in business and economics.

**Q:** You've talked about two different styles of education, the traditional system where students have math class five days a week and there's a rigid curriculum that expects everyone to get through a fixed number of pages by a given date. And you're saying that you teach math just three or four days a week, yet the students are getting great results. Can you explain how it's possible to give them a high quality of learning with fewer classes, and why it's more effective than rushing them through a fixed curriculum together?

**Nitai:** The standard way of teaching math is extremely inefficient. The teacher stands in front of the class and gives a short lecture about the topic for the day, and maybe they'll follow up on what they've taught the previous days. Then they come back the next day and they do it all over again, so you're always trying to keep the whole class moving together.

The problem is that people are never learning at the same pace. Some will hit a hard spot in one area, while others will hit a hard spot somewhere else, and if you have that lockstep expectation, a third of the kids will be bored in math class because they'll already know it and it's wasting their time, and a third of the kids will be thoroughly confused because they don't understand it, so they're looking out the window and feeling completely disengaged, because you're in a lockstep rush to cover the material, and you don't have time to help them. And about a third of the kids will be with you, at least some of the time.

So two-thirds of your students aren't learning anything, and it's why, if you keep doing the same thing five days a week, you're absolutely going to kill their chances of being successful in math.

In education circles it's called "drill and kill." And it's truly deadly, because it's so boring, where you're coming back day after day, grinding it out, over and over.

When you're teaching teenagers, that's not who you're dealing with — because they simply aren't capable of being "sit-at-a-desk-and-behave-all-day" people. A small minority may be, but most teenagers are very active.

If you set up a curriculum that's highly individual and that challenges each student at his or her level, you can help each child grow at their own pace. And because they're having the satisfaction every day of overcoming challenges at their level, they are deeply engaged.

With our system, if you have math superstars, they can blast through a year's worth of material in three months. I had a student from Germany – he was with us for a year, and when he returned he won an award as the most outstanding math student in all of Germany. He was so good that I gave him a super-fast approach, but it was still too slow for him, so I ended up letting him turn in thirty problems a day, or ninety problems a week, and I let him choose the problems he thought were worth doing, because he was that good, and that engaged.

It would have been a terrible waste of his time to interrupt him with tests, because it would distract from his learning. So I said, "I'll test you every three weeks, so long as you keep getting A's," and he blasted through two and a half years of regular math in one year.

But then there will always be kids in math class who just can't get it, and I'll let them go as slowly as they need to, and I'll repeat the lessons as needed. I'm thinking of a girl who needed to go through the same problems so many times that the pages of her math book were black at the edges. But she persevered, and she was eventually able to understand all of it and move on.

There will always be a huge range of abilities in math class. With the student who had so much trouble, I had to check every single problem she did, because she would miss so many, but with the German boy I never had to check his math, because it was a waste of my time to look at it, since it was always perfect, so I just looked at his tests.

It's vastly more efficient when you can individualize math instruction and help everybody proceed at their level. It's why our students do so well on the Iowa tests and the SATs.

**Q:** In the LWS school in Palo Alto, they use the system you're describing, where the students will do a problem set, and the teacher and the math aides will go through every problem with them and work on the principles until they're sure they understand. And the result is that no one ever has a chance of not getting it, and they have a chance of being successful every day.

**Nitai:** When I was teaching, I would organize our math classes around a ladder-like system, where you could go to the person above you to get an explanation. If the teacher was busy helping another student, you could go to a student who was at the next level, but you also had to be willing to help the person behind you when they needed help.

If you have the top student trying to explain it to the bottom student, it doesn't work very well, because the bottom student can't understand the language of the math superstar, but if you're fairly close in your ability, it tends to work beautifully.



## 27. Can the Arts Help Children Excel Academically?

### A Professional Musician Shares His Thoughts

When David Eby isn't teaching music to children at the Living Wisdom School in Portland, Oregon, he's a professional cellist with The Bodhi Trio, the Oregon Symphony, and the Portland Cello Project.

David teaches cello at Lewis and Clark College. He 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 [www.davidebysmusic.com](http://www.davidebysmusic.com), where David shares his insights on meditation for musicians and the spiritual healing power of music for our lives.)

David has taught in the Living Wisdom Schools for more than sixteen years, initially for two years in Portland, twelve years at the original school at Ananda Village near Nevada City, California, and now again in Portland.



**Q:** David, let's have an informal conversation about the role the arts can play in helping kids be happy and successful in school and their lives. Have you given thought to the role of the arts in children's development, especially during the "Feeling Years" from 6 to 12?

**David:** My daughter Caitlin is in sixth grade now, and she's performing with the Pacific Youth Choir in Portland. They sang Mahler's Third Symphony recently with the Oregon Symphony, and 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 very passionate. She grew up in the Living Wisdom Schools, and she now attends the Arts and Communication Magnet Academy here in Portland. I've taken her to choir practice since she was a tot, and as a result she knows our entire repertoire inside and out. (laughs)

In my life, the arts have been a foundational 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 a constant throughout my childhood, and playing cello and singing gave me incredible experiences.

It was during those years from six to twelve that my heart was most open and I was able to experience something greater than myself through music, whether we might choose to call it a higher inspiration, God, or my own highest potential. I believe the name doesn't matter, so long as we recognize the amazing things that music can do for us.

There are two aspects to music. There is, of course, the purely physical, sonic experience, and then there's the interior, subjective response. The sonic experience is what the sound waves are doing to our bodies. Many studies have shown that music, especially playing an instrument, builds important connections between the two hemispheres of a child's brain, and that when a child is having a musical experience many areas of the brain become engaged. Music touches a number of brain areas simultaneously, and when we're performing the whole brain lights up in a striking way that scientists can observe on scans. The effect is there when we listen to music, but to a lesser degree, and even when we're just thinking of music that inspires us.

So there are the purely physical effects, but there are also other, "energetic" impacts. By "energetic," I mean the effects of the sound that are touching us in deep ways. It's what causes us to say, "Wow, oh my, that piece really moved me!" Or, "That music struck a chord with me — I really resonated with it."

It's something we can safely say lies beyond our ability to perceive intellectually, and beyond the simple effects of the sound waves on our

physical bodies and brains. There's something that music can awaken in us that's deeper than the physical beats and sound waves and chords.

Unfortunately, there's a great deal of popular music today that is nothing more than computer-generated sounds and beats and rhythms and effects designed to impact our brains as "ear candy." And while it does get our energy moving, and it excites our emotions, when it's over it just dumps us back out on the curb again.

I'm deeply intrigued by a kind of music that does the exact 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 subjectively, in a very real way, as a higher part of ourselves.

**Q:** Are there levels upon levels of uplifting music? For example, music that can raise our mood, and music that can take us to higher places?

**David:** I'm convinced of it. I coached at a music camp last week where an amateur quartet played a Schubert piece, and it was lovely. Schubert wrote some incredibly inspiring pieces, and 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 when he composed music he would come in contact with a divine presence that was "superconscious" – he actually used that word – and that it was from that level that he received his inspiration.

I find that music is a road map for my life, and a source code that can capture inspiration and the state of consciousness that great composers are able to enter and bring into their music. We're given these dots on the page, and when we perform them there's a big light that goes on somewhere on the scale of inspiration, and if you play the notes, and you carefully tune into the present moment, and if you're very focused and receptive, you can get a taste of that big light, or even 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 touch your soul.

It's a very effective prescription for bringing your consciousness onto a happier place. It starts with the realm of pure ideas, and it uses 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 our lives, like nature, that can awaken a remembrance in us of a beauty that lies buried deep in us all, and an understanding of where our truest fulfillment comes from.

Our greatest fulfillments never come from anything material, ultimately. 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 leads us to the inner kingdom where our universal birthright of happiness already lies, perfect, and eager to fill us.

**Q:** While you were growing up, and in your career as a musician, was there a point where you felt that there was a ceiling on the inspiration you could tap into through the kind of music you were playing?

**David:** First of all, let me just say that when I was in the Feeling Years from six to twelve 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." I wasn't quite sassy enough to snap out a snarky comeback — "Yeah, well, this music is *horrible!*" (laughs)

But it was. It was totally, totally uninspiring! Yet at the same time, I remember being deeply moved by the folk songs of that time, in the 1970s, especially the tunes from Godspell, and others. 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 music, everything will be okay!"

I had some incredibly inspired experiences that carried me through high school, but toward the end of my college years, I had I'd passed through a great deal of formal training, I woke up in a kind of panic one day and wondered, "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 a 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 often have to program "new music" to win the grants that support the more inspiring stuff, and it's very unfortunate that in our contemporary music we have a great deal to learn about inspiration. Right now it seems that the more

outrageous and atonal it is, the better the music is purported to be, and it certainly can be powerful — but, uplifting? Hmm, I don't think so.

So when I was in my late twenties I put my career on hold, and I went off in search of the lost inspiration, and interestingly enough, I ended up finding it.

At first, I was looking for a way to serve society through music, because I felt that it would be heart-opening and fulfilling, so I joined a troupe of storytelling musicians who were addressing the needs of children in the Feeling Years from age six to twelve. We would take popular stories and set them to music, and we would act out the characters, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

I remember playing the Mayor of Hamelin for a season — 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, because it was serving the needs of young kids who desperately needed upliftment through the arts.

But after a time I began to feel that it was too much about “art for art's sake,” without a true higher purpose. So I began working with the Suzuki Method, which is founded on a beautiful concept of nurturing children who may never become professional musicians, but who will be human beings with beautiful hearts.

But then I realized that I wanted something more. I wanted to be surrounded by people who weren't only practicing good teachings, but who were looking for Truth, writ large, because I knew there was a level of music that could truly touch the soul, and it was the kind of music I was longing to explore.

It was then, thank goodness, that I began working as a music teacher at the Living Wisdom School in Portland.

At that point, I had quit professional music, and I dove headfirst into teaching these kids who were in the age group of six to twelve, and it was the hardest job I've ever had, because it took tremendous energy to manage the kids and connect with them.

I had a class of all girls and one very shy boy who was overwhelmed and wasn't able to put out much energy. So for the first two years I had the typical, terribly difficult, soul-searing experience of being a beginning teacher. And then we moved to Ananda Village where I taught music in the original Living Wisdom School for twelve years, and it was a very, very successful and incredibly fulfilling experience.

**Q:** Here in Palo Alto, the directors of the Living Wisdom School, Helen Purcell and Gary McSweeney, are challenged to explain to parents why we spend so much time on the arts, because the parents wonder if we might be neglecting the kids' academic studies.

It can be difficult to persuade them that fifty 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, because there's a strong component of feeling in the learning experience, and it needs to be cultivated as an important cornerstone 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's performing, and it's a quality that carries over to his studies and his interactions with the other children.

In your years of teaching, have you noticed that children's lives are enhanced by the time they spend with the arts?

**David:** Without the slightest question. One of my first students at the Portland school was Keshava Betts, who's now in his late twenties and lives in Palo Alto, where he plays cello very inspiringly and teaches at LWHS.



Keshava realized as a very young child that when he was feeling low, all he had to do was pick up the cello and play and he would very quickly feel better - and 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 terrible opera rehearsal one night, and as I drove home through the rain I was feeling utterly drenched by the misery of it all. And then I began to sing a solo that I had volunteered for, from an oratorio called "Christ Lives." It was just a way to pass the time on a

miserable drive and I wasn't expecting any great change in my consciousness. But then — *whammo!* — I felt such a tremendous current of joy that I actually had to pull over to the side of the road to avoid being dangerously distracted. I thought, "What in the world just happened?! I don't understand this. How did this happen?" (laughs)

The song 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?"

It helped me understand that music can hold vibrations of consciousness, and that when we walk into an inspired piece of music it's like walking into a beautiful temple. We walk into a holy place and we feel uplifted, and when we walk into a holy song the same thing happens.

This is why I feel it's such an awe-inspiring responsibility to provide uplifting music for children. I'm teaching music at the school in Portland now, and when the children walk into these pieces, it changes them. So I feel it's very important to provide opportunities for them to explore those higher places in themselves.

It's not something you can drive into them — "Now I want you to *feel!*" (laughs) You can't force it, and it's the same with adults. There are adults who love listening to the music, but maybe they have a hard time tuning into the inner experience of it, and it's a joy to help them find that happiness within.

I'm working with a music education program called El Sistema that was started in Venezuela in 1975 by an educator, musician, and activist, José Antonio Abreu. It brought intense classical music training to the slums, the *barrios*, and it transformed the society, to the point where 80 percent of the doctors and lawyers and educators had come up through this system as children. — and that's such an amazingly powerful statistic!

We're working with children in an impoverished area of north Portland, and it's hard to measure the changes in the last three years, because how can you compare where a child is now, compared to some other potential for them? But we've seen an incredibly positive development of personal skills, 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 such as love, kindness, and compassion the heart's rhythms become extremely harmonious., and the scientists have shown that those harmonious

vibrations have powerful effects on the body and brain. They've found, for example, that in school districts where they've taught heart-harmonizing methods to the children, including methods that involve music, the children's grades improve.

**David:** A wonderful thing about music therapy is that it brings the children into an uplifted, happy place in themselves, without having to nag them into changing. (laughs)

They don't need a teacher or parent to be yelling at them, "Change your energy!" And the kid is going, "I don't know how...!" But if you have them perform uplifting music, it puts them in the right cycle automatically and effortlessly.

It's been really fun for me over the years to have the children perform only very high kinds of music for a time. I was amazed by how the kids never grew tired of it, and if they wanted to learn some new songs, we were fortunate to have lots of pieces to choose from.

Through music children are able to tap into a higher awareness that will always stay with them, without their having to struggle to quiet the mind. We would sing positive, uplifting songs that they loved — like "Mañana, Friends," or "A New Tomorrow" or "If You're Seeking Freedom." And it was amazing how their mood would change.

**Q:** Thank you, David. In the Living Wisdom Schools we're inspired by the streams of energy and joy that flow through the environment, thanks in part to the harmonizing influence of the arts.



## 28. Happiness, Success, and the Education For Life Curriculum

The Education for Life curriculum encompasses six areas, each of which addresses an essential body of learning, together with the cultivation of personal qualities and attitudes that lead to a happy, successful life.

### 1. Our Earth/Our Universe

These activities help students expand their awareness of the physical world. We foster a vision of the orderliness of the universe, a sense of appreciation and reverence for our place in the world, and an awareness of our shared responsibility for the well-being of the planet and all creatures.

Our Earth / Our Universe helps the students understand the countless ways in which all life is linked. They move from hands-on observation, to immersion in the academic subject matter, motivated by a sense of adventure as they discover the mechanisms by which all aspects of the physical world are interconnected.

“Science” can evoke images of boring people conducting meaningless experiments in a sterile laboratory, and that’s unfortunate, since the sciences as taught at Living Wisdom High School are rated by the students as being among their most interesting, engaging, and fruitful subjects – which is why we refer to this very special part of the curriculum as “Our Earth – Our Universe.”

Our Earth – Our Universe embraces all branches of science, yet it suggests the orderliness of the cosmos, and the sense of awe before the wonders of creation that Einstein called the essence of scientific discovery.

Instead of limiting our students to participating in the wonder of life as secondhand observers, we invite them to feel themselves part of the great mystery by giving them direct experiences. In Our Earth – Our Universe we help them see the particular and universal in relation to each other. For example, we may ask them to ponder how physical laws provide a model for many areas of their lives – how Newton’s law of motion, for example,

suggests a universal principle of action and reaction that operates on many levels: in our relationships, and in the consequences of our thoughts and actions.

From a lifeless catalogue of facts, Our Earth – Our Universe lifts the students into a view of the sciences that they can connect with in ways that are heartfelt and inspiring.

The separate sciences are not taught as compartmentalized disciplines, but as a unified totality that may be revealed from different angles. The discipline of scientific inquiry reveals in all nature a dignified coherence that mirrors the goal of education itself: true maturity. It's easier to relate to diverse realities when we see them in meaningful relationship to one another, and finally to ourselves.

Our Earth – Our Universe embraces all of the branches of science: physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, general science, botany, geology, and anatomy.

**Our Earth / Our Universe develops the following positive qualities:**

1. Attitudes of care. The Japanese conservationist Tanaka Shozo said: "The question of rivers is not a question of rivers, but of the human heart."
2. We help our students feel their place in nature and their connection with all living things. Feelings of connectedness engender attitudes of caring.
3. Appreciation for the wonders of the universe, from the smallest to the largest

We encourage the students to interact with the physical world with appreciation. We help them understand the underlying structures of the cosmos through a curriculum that is designed to elicit their enthusiasm – with guided discussions, field trips, and science fair projects. We help them understand how they can apply the scientific method in creative ways to 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 areas of personal growth: physical, mental, and spiritual. We help each student grow toward their own unique, individual potential in each area.

We give our students the tools they require to pursue their own inner growth. We help them understand their unique learning style, and we tailor the curriculum to stimulate their enthusiasm for academic and personal achievement.

### **Personal Development cultivates the following positive qualities:**

1. Perseverance
2. We help each student experience the joy of overcoming challenges by analyzing the obstacles and applying the right tools to achieve their goals. Daily experiences of success give them the self-confidence to welcome new challenges as opportunities to experience the joy of mastery.
3. Self-control and joyful self-discipline
4. Learning to control their physical, mental, and emotional energy opens the students to the realities of others. In a climate of calm self-restraint and respectful appreciation, attitudes of kindness and compassion flourish.
5. We help the students develop joyful self-discipline by teaching them how to be calmly aware and mentally focused while completing their academic work and 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
Math computation skills	Any subject matter that involves memorization
Long-term projects	Learning new tasks such as CPR, typing, etc.
Developing and applying positive personal qualities such as gratitude, contentment, honesty, servicefulness, and responsibility	Self-Expression and Communication

### 3. Self-Expansion and Communication

The ability to express ourselves and communicate effectively is essential for academic attainment and the ability to interact meaningfully with others.

Recognizing the importance of these skills, we carefully and consciously help our students develop clarity of thought and creative self-expression. We help them learn to express their ideas and feelings verbally and in their schoolwork.

Our high school students develop writing skills that give them a tremendous advantage when they enter college. Our graduates routinely thank us for giving them a giant head start in the skills to write well-thought-out, creative term papers and research reports.

Language Arts instruction at Living Wisdom School follows our school's core focus on teaching the students to be enjoyably immersed, enthusiastically engaged, and creatively insightful.

The students receive intensive help with vocabulary development. Through constant feedback, encouragement, and hands-on instruction in copyediting and rewriting, we teach our students to write and speak in a manner that communicates clearly to the reader or listener — a rare and extremely important skill for success in business, technology, and academia.

**Lessons in Self-Expression and Communication foster the following positive qualities:**

1. Honest, objective introspection
2. Clarity of thinking
3. Clarity of expression
4. Creativity

We measure the students' growth in this area by the clarity of their written and oral communications, the originality of their work, and the degree to which it reflects 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 vehicle for self-expression in speaking and

	singing
Public speaking	Insights for developing creativity
Visual arts	Drama
Vocabulary development	Foreign languages

#### **4. Understanding People**

If the elementary years from roughly age six to twelve are the time in a young person's life for refining the ability to feel, the years from twelve to eighteen are a prime time for learning to translate our feelings into action in the real world.

The quality of instruction in the teen years therefore has huge repercussions for the student's life in college and beyond, since feeling and will power are the faculties that enable us to tell right from wrong, and to act rightly, with respect and empathy for the realities of others.

Our practical approach to helping the students develop these deeply important life skills permeates their every moment at Living Wisdom High School.

The prime medium for students to learn to be aware of their feelings and direct them in positive, expansive ways is the arts. We therefore encourage the honest expansion of the students' calm, perceptive feelings through theater, music, the visual arts, and by observing and guiding them as they learn to interact and communicate meaningfully, with awareness of how their words and actions will affect others.

We employ effective conflict resolution methods that transform disagreements into experiences of personal expansion.

We help the students discover how they can achieve what all human beings everywhere desire most deeply: increasing happiness, and freedom from suffering, by becoming aware of the actions and attitudes that lead to lasting happiness and inner freedom for themselves and others.

The ability to understand others opens portals for insights into ourselves. Our students discover the richness of learning calmly, without judgment, from their own successes and missteps and those of others. Through their daily interactions, they learn these lessons up close and in three dimensions, with lasting positive effects for their own character formation and their ability to develop a strong foundation of values. As their understanding grows, they gain a deepening empathy and compassion for others and themselves.

**Lessons in Understanding People foster the following positive qualities in the students:**

1. The ability to understand the underlying impulses and motivations behind the actions of others
2. The ability to recognize similarities between others' motivations and their own
3. The ability to translate other people's experiences into wise insights to guide their own lives
4. The ability to enjoy positive interactions, by drawing on their understanding of behaviors that create harmony, cooperation, and happiness for all

Growth in this area is witnessed in the manner in which the students interact, and the choices they make. We can also monitor growth in this area through the insights they express in their discussions and schoolwork.

**Subjects that foster growth in Understanding People:**

The study of other cultures and their customs and beliefs	Geography
History	World religions
Psychology	Travel
The study of the lives of great people	

**5. Cooperation**

We teach our students practical skills for cooperating with others. They learn that cooperation is an enjoyable and productive way to work. The ability to cooperate will naturally come more easily to some students than others, but the environment and culture at LWHS ensure that every student will experience the joys of working and playing with others in an atmosphere of self-expansion, harmony, and inclusiveness.

The students are given endless opportunities to practice cooperative attitudes and skills that will be valuable in all areas of their lives – in career, relationships, and raising their own children.

Our instruction is practical. We are focused on the needs of the individual student and on adapting the instruction accordingly. Our teachers give extremely careful attention to observing the student's nature and tendencies and helping them rise to their own best level of academic and personal performance.

The roles we may be called to play in our lives as students, employees, partners, and parents, will involve other people. Whereas harmonious relationships lead to greater happiness in every endeavor, a lack of harmony will erode our happiness and success. Refined cooperative skills will make our interactions with others far more satisfying and enjoyable.

**Lessons in Cooperation foster the following positive qualities:**

The ability to be flexible and not overly attached to our own opinions and desires

1. A genuine caring for the well-being of others
2. An ability to compromise gracefully without compromising our principles
3. An ability to learn from others
4. Flexibility in our thinking
5. We will be able to observe the student's growth in this area in the harmony and effectiveness of their interactions with others.

**Subjects that foster growth in Cooperation:**

The study of human cooperation in Supportive leadership  
the contexts of history, science,  
literature, economics, the arts,  
business, etc.

Listening skills

Etiquette

World language and culture

## **6. Wholeness**

We achieve an inner sense of wholeness when our five Tools of Maturity come into a harmonious balance: body, heart, will, mind, and soul.

This area of study focuses on how the separate curriculum areas blend and overlap each other, and how each enhances the others. For the individual student, Wholeness reflects how their experience of Education for Life has helped them become a well-integrated, mature young adult.

**Lessons in Wholeness foster these positive qualities:**

1. When facing challenges, Wholeness manifests as the ability to draw on many diverse personal qualities and external resources to solve the issues at hand.
2. Wholeness increases the student's ability to face each situation by drawing upon a variety of perspectives and discern which will be most appropriate in the present circumstance.

3. Wholeness is reflected in an ability to look beyond the small, separate fragments of a situation or a person and see the “big picture.”
4. We can observe the students’ growth in this area in their actions and the results. When interacting with others or when facing challenges, are they able to respond in ways that will bring about positive change? Do they habitually apply the skills that are appropriate for the people and situations before them? Do they demonstrate a commitment to living according to their highest principles and ideals?

**Subjects that foster growth in Wholeness:**

The following academic subjects influence the students in ways that cross domains. They will frequently expand the student’s awareness by helping them be more energetic, creative, insightful, sensitively aware, and happy.

Music	Meditation and other centering techniques
Art	Literature
Philosophy	Religion
Nature studies	



# Meet the Living Wisdom High School Family



## 29. Rose Atwell: LWHS Alumna, Teacher, Actor, Chef

A conversation with a Living Wisdom TK-8 School teacher and alum.

**Q:** What was it like to be part of the first graduating class of the original Living Wisdom School High School, in 2001?

**Rose:** One of the beautiful things that I especially remember from my years at the school was the Service Adventures.

Our school motto was “Service, Adventure, and Self-Discovery.” Once a week we would serve at a women’s shelter, or a home that took care of the elderly, or a school for kids with special needs. Reaching out and serving was a highlight of the week for us, because it made our lives so much more meaningful and it gave us a sense that we could play a useful role in the wider community, even as young people.

For me, the particular strength of the program was that it allowed us to have adventures and explorations as very young students, along with a very strong academic program, side by side.

Our first year we traveled across Mexico in a bus, and it was a huge adventure. I remember how we got temporarily stranded in the desert when a flash flood blocked the road, and how we got stranded in the mountains in the snow. It was a super adventure, and I remember totally loving every moment of it.

Our second year, we went to Italy and India. We worked in a refugee camp in Italy for refugees from Kosovo – they were people who had lost their families in the war and had managed to escape across the Adriatic. It took us into another world as very young high school kids, and in my honest opinion it was completely amazing. We were fifteen, we were working with refugees, and it was a mind-expanding experience. The nuns put us to work ironing and cooking all day, and it was wonderful, and to this day I’m so glad I had that experience.

When it came to academics, it was equally fantastic, because you had so much one-on-one attention that you really couldn't slip behind. You were working so closely with your teachers every day, and whatever needed to be addressed would be dealt with right away.

Even when we were travelling, it didn't interfere with our academic studies. I remember taking a final exam in algebra on the flight home from Italy. So it really didn't matter where we were, because we could have these amazing adventures and get really good grades and go to college, and even if it didn't look a certain way, with a box around it like a traditional high school, it was wonderful.



*Rose is an enthusiastic gourmet vegetarian cook.  
Here, she leads a weekend workshop.*

After I graduated, I ended up at UC Santa Cruz, where I had a great university experience and received a wonderful education, so there wasn't a conflict between the adventure aspect and what we were learning, and my experiences showed me that you can have adventure and self-discovery as well as a very individualized education with tons of personal attention.

The teachers challenged each of us to go at our own best pace with the curriculum, and we had wonderful specialty teachers. That was a beautiful thing about the school, that people from the surrounding community who'd had gone deep in their fields were ready to offer us their wisdom and experience.

At LWHS we were part of a large community of really smart adults, and we had a plethora of highly educated, well-rounded specialty teachers who were enthusiastic about giving us deep information on a variety of subjects outside of what we were learning from our core teachers.

Traveling at such a young age was a tremendously important experience for us, because it helped us develop compassion and a strong sense of wanting to be useful in the world, and the confidence that we could truly help.

Here in Silicon Valley, we have so much, with one of the best living standards on the planet, and to learn to see other realities and understand the bigger picture was invaluable – to be able to travel and experience other cultures, and share in the happiness that comes with serving.

**Q:** You were accepted by UCSC, which has high admissions standards – how did that come about?

**Rose:** That story began in my junior year, when our teacher and school principal, Nitai Deranja, took the whole school to Italy for six months, and it was awesome! (laughs) I then enrolled at Santa Rosa Junior College, because I had adult friends in the Santa Rosa area that I could stay with.

After a year of junior college, I was accepted into Dominican University in San Rafael. I thought that Dominican would be a great place, because it was a small school with a beautiful campus, and I felt it might be compatible with my spiritual life, and they had a condensed four-year program for teachers. But the school wasn't all I expected, and it had a much narrower belief system than I was used to, so I left and returned to Santa Rosa JC, which is one of the top junior colleges in the country, and I think I got a better education there than anywhere else. The school is well-endowed, thanks to the legacy of Luther Burbank, the great botanist who lived in Santa Rosa in first half of the 1900s, and I felt that it had a special blessing, a Burbank blessing, and I had a fantastic experience there. Then, after two years, I applied to a number of the UC schools and I chose Santa Cruz.

**Q:** Who wouldn't?

**Rose:** (laughs) Yes, it's beautiful. But honestly, Italy was the most amazing experience of all. The six months I studied there were among the most incredible blessings of my life. I was able to go to a school where all the things I loved and that were most dear to me, and most filled with

growth for me, were combined in a single place where my personality, my heart, and my soul were deeply nourished.

**Q:** Where did you live in Italy?

**Rose:** In Assisi, in the Ananda Europa community. I did some work trade hours, serving in the kitchen and learning lots of practical skills. I'm a part-time cook now. For several years I managed a group kitchen and taught cooking workshops, and it's something I love and that I discovered working in the large retreat kitchen in Italy.

I'm also a singer, and we had an amazing experience in Italy, touring all over Italy with a choir and singing to large crowds in huge cathedrals. At one point, all of the other sopranos got sick, and the director had heard me sing solos from the oratorio we were performing, so about an hour before the performance the other choir members were saying, "Rose can sing that solo!" And I sang my first solo at a big Italian church that was filled with people, and there was a huge blessing in it.

My schooling with LWHS, and most specifically during the Service Adventures was absolutely wonderful. I took tests in buses and taxis as we traveled from place to place (laughs), but the focus of the school included many aspects that were profoundly meaningful and growth-filled for me.

It was such a different educational experience, and I absolutely loved it. I fondly remember traveling all over Italy while we were learning at the same time. I took three hours of Italian every morning and I ended up learning Italian very functionally. I totally loved the Italian culture, which is very beautiful to me.

**Q:** Was it a major adjustment to go from a small private high school to a major, formal university like UCSC?

**Rose:** Actually, the transition from high school to junior college was an adjustment — not academically, but because I was very interested in yoga and I wanted to deepen my spiritual life. My spiritual life was very important to me, and it was very deep, but then I had a session with a Vedic astrologer who told me, "You're going to be out in the world for a time." I remember protesting, "Oh, no!" But he said, "You'll be fine. This is important. You have to balance your interests and get some experience in this way."

It was hard, because I had been totally immersed in a spiritually uplifting environment, and now here I was out in the world where I couldn't relate

to anyone my age. Then, at Dominican University I finally decided, “No way!” and I came back and adjusted to what was best for me to do.

Entering UCSC was another big adjustment. It was a challenge. I knew that it was something I had to do, but it felt like I had my feet in two boats, and for a while it was very hard to hold a deep yoga practice in that environment, so I was very conflicted.

**Q:** What were you studying?

**Rose:** I had originally planned to study liberal arts and literature and get into teaching, but I ended up taking so many theater classes at the junior college and loving them so much that I ended up majoring in theater. Theater is a form of community when it’s done properly, and I loved that aspect.

I enjoyed my junior college theater program more than anything else. At Santa Cruz there was a clique of students in the theater department who wanted to get ahead, and I wasn’t attracted by that. I was taking theater to get a teaching credential, and because I loved it.

The junior college drama department was very different. It was built around community theater, and there were people in their sixties acting beside you, because they loved theater. Then you had the first-year college students working alongside a few people who were deeply serious about theater as a career, but we were all part of a family, and I enjoyed that aspect. I wasn’t concerned about getting accepted by Juilliard, as some of the others were, because theater for me was about self-expansion and fun.

**Q:** What are you doing now?

**Rose:** I’m a teacher. I teach music, theater, and PE at the Living Wisdom School in Palo Alto, and I teach cooking and yoga and meditation to adults. They are all things I love to do.

**Q:** Do you feel that your life has come full circle?

**Rose:** In a way. I’m eager to build on what I’ve learned, and to assimilate new ways of sharing and learning, and to keep growing. I could probably go deeper in the arts, but I would love to incorporate nature and sustainability into my teaching, and explore how we can care for our planet and learn to grow our own food. That feels very important to me.

All in all, I would highly recommend the high school. So here’s my shout-out: “I recommend Living Wisdom High School!”





## 30. Meet the Parents: Esther Peralez-Dieckmann

Esther Peralez-Dieckmann has more than 25 years' experience in workforce and economic development, human services, and policy advocacy. A well-respected community leader, she has earned numerous distinctions for her work and leadership on behalf of women, children, and families, and is currently Executive Director of Next Door Solutions to Domestic Violence in San Jose.



**Esther:** I feel that the approach they take at Living Wisdom is very practical, because everybody wants their child to be loved, to be safe, and to want to go to school – and we haven't had any issues with our children not wanting to go to school, because they've been very excited every day about going to Living Wisdom.

When it comes to how we educate our children, my stance is practical, because we all want our children to be able to get a good job and be very happy in their work, and as somebody with nearly thirty years' experience in the public, private, and non-governmental sectors, one of the first things I look for, and that I believe we need in the workforce, is people who can think critically, people with empathy, people who understand the needs of others, and who know how to work with other people, and who can deal with adversity.

You need lots of personal skills to have a good career and stay in a good job, and I feel that those are among the skills my children have picked up at Living Wisdom, including the ability to know yourself, to be loved and appreciated for your differences and for all the things you are, and to have the chance to explore and figure out who you are, what you love, and what's your passion, and all of the steps, all of the activities, and all of the outings at Living Wisdom have been carefully designed to accomplish just that.

I've been thinking about resource allocation, because we know that the economy is not great right now, and organizations and businesses are having to deal with severely limited resources.

I'm thinking of a time when we took the Living Wisdom School students on a camping trip to Malakoff Diggins, an old Gold Rush mining site in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

At one point it looked like we might run out of food. We were close to civilization, so it's not as if we were endangering the children, but we were camping out for three days, so we had to keep an eye on our food supplies, and I was very impressed by how the kids pitched in and cooked and did the dishes, and generally accepted the situation and cheerfully helped out. When I look back over the nine years we've been with Living Wisdom, I realize that all of those activities and experiences have had a tremendous relevance for helping our children learn to thrive in the real world, and that there isn't a price you can put on them.

So if you're looking at Living Wisdom as an option, I can say that you really must look at the total educational experience, and how you can raise children who will never want to stop learning. Because that's really the way to advance in a career — by being always eager to learn while loving the process and knowing how to think of others.

We're trying to solve the problems that are affecting our world, and we urgently need thinkers like the students that are coming through Living Wisdom.

## 31. Meet the Parents: Jack Dieckmann

Jack Dieckmann serves as Associate Director of Curriculum at the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE). Jack completed his doctorate in mathematics education at Stanford in 2009. He also teaches methods and language courses in the Stanford Teacher Education Program (STEP). He has worked as a public high school math teacher, a professional developer, and an education research associate.



**Jack:** We're the parents of Joseph, who's a student at Living Wisdom High School, and we've been with Living Wisdom for more than nine years. Our daughter attends the K-8 Palo Alto Living Wisdom School.

Given that my professional field is education, I spent a great deal of time trying to find the right school for Joseph. I visited and studied a wide variety of schools, and I interviewed the people, and I shadowed and observed. And then I came across this jewel of a school, Living Wisdom School of Palo Alto, and I couldn't believe it. I really could not believe that such a school existed, because I had never seen anything like it, and I had never personally encountered a school like this in all my years in education.

We enrolled Joseph at LWS with Kshama as his first-grade teacher, and it was fantastic. I couldn't believe that I could leave my child, the most precious thing in my life, leave him there and feel totally confident that he would be loved, supported, and that he was going to grow and be nurtured. I've had that feeling all the way through, including his time at Living Wisdom High School, where I know that I'm leaving him in good hands, and that he's not only going to be challenged with a rigorous curriculum, but he's also going to add meaning to his life.

Public schools do their best, but as a parent who taught math in public high school I know that they are large systems, and that the learning is very

often first and foremost about how to obey rules, how to follow, how to be passive, and how to do the homework that's handed to you. The poor students do the best they can, but there is no sense of agency or active learning or finding their place in the world, or finding meaning in what they're doing. Adolescence in particular is such a difficult time, and those are exactly the kinds of questions they should be asking.

Living Wisdom offers a unique program that I wish all students everywhere could benefit from, because they are giving the individual student a chance to understand who they are in relation to their world, and not just to be sort of college-ready.

That's a big term now, "college-ready," but many students, including those who go on to college, and even those who get good college grades, don't know why they are there, and they don't know the horizon that they're moving toward, because they're just following the rules.

I'm very happy to say that our experience of Living Wisdom High School has been the opposite — that we are not raising a passive rule-follower, but somebody who is trying to understand his place in the world, his purpose in the world, and who is very actively contributing to that purpose.

## 32. Meet the Parents: Baatcha

**Baatcha:** I'm the parent of Hari and Jay. Hari has been enrolled at Living Wisdom High School for three years, and Jay attended Jane Lathrop Stanford Middle School in Palo Alto.

The reason we decided to enroll our sons at LWHS rather than the local public high school is because that school is very large, with approximately 400 students per grade. The teachers are wonderful, but the system is built on a massive scale so that they have, of necessity, to teach to the middle, and there is no way they can personalize the education to the extent they do at Living Wisdom.

The Bay Area is an extremely competitive and stressful place, even though most of the competition is unnecessary, because this world is big enough for us all to be successful if we will apply ourselves.

It is also the other aspects of life at LWHS – the mindfulness, the learning for understanding's sake rather than just for getting through a subject, and the personal qualities they develop at LWHS, that make it special, where the kids lift each other up. In most other schools, especially in Palo Alto, there is an environment of competition that creates tremendous stress, and then the need to deal with all of the stress becomes as important for the students as the learning. So we are very grateful that Living Wisdom is here.

As other parents have said, LWHS is like a family where everyone knows everyone and the teachers are able to customize and personalize the learning to the specific qualities and needs of the individual student, which is a very big deal for us. So, thank you.



## 34. Living Wisdom Graduates Enjoy Varied and Exciting Careers

David Kretzmann  
Motley Fool Investment Analyst



I graduated from Living Wisdom High School in 2010 and entered Berea College in Kentucky, where I graduated in 2014. I studied business administration and was elected student government president two years.

After graduating, I became an investment analyst at The Motley Fool, which is where I am today, helping individual investors and evaluating companies and recommending stocks.

When I reflect on my time at Living Wisdom School, I see it as an experience where I learned how to live life, recognizing that academics are important, but what really matters when you're in junior high and high school and you're coming up into adulthood is learning how to live your life — how to be happy in what you do, make friends with what you do, and be joyful in everything you do.

I've carried the lessons from Living Wisdom School with me each day, whether it was in college or now in my career. I'm really grateful for what I

got out of Living Wisdom School, and I recommend the experience to anyone.

**Mirabai Deranja Commer,  
Professional Tango Dancer and Dance Instructor**



Mirabai graduated from the University of California at Santa Cruz with a BA degree in Astronomy. She now has a thriving business as a tango teacher and performer in the San Francisco area and in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

**Shyama Helin  
Project Manager, ID Branding**



I work with an award-winning advertising and branding firm. I'm married and we own a home in the north end of Portland, Oregon. I graduated from the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1995 with a major in Fine Arts.

I attribute my ability to communicate effectively to my Education for Life experience at Living Wisdom School. The



small classes and close relationships with teachers and fellow students helped me build strong bonds and gave me tools to work cooperatively with others.

As a team leader on high-stress projects in my work environment, I consistently rely on the centering and affirmation skills I learned at EFL. I remain closely connected with many of my school friends.

**Kai Girard**

**Mountain Guide, Alaska Mountaineering School,  
American Alpine Institute, National Outdoor Leadership School,  
and Outward Bound**



My early memories of Living Wisdom School include outdoor pursuits that were many and varied. From exploring rivers and caves, to canoe trips and making fires in the rain with our teacher, going to school in the foothills gave us the opportunity to be outside in so many ways.

I connected with outdoor sports starting in high school, and in an even bigger way in college at Seattle University, where I progressed from a rock climber to a raft guide and a trip leader. I now work as a wilderness educator for some of the best companies in the industry.

Being paid to explore, experience, and share the wilderness while participating in fun and challenging activities is certainly a great perk, but the real treat is exploring, experiencing, and sharing the process of personal growth as a facilitator and educator.

Organized classes can convey a certain amount of information, but direct experience, where you're held accountable to a high standard by nature itself, really makes the lessons stick, and the most impactful learning often comes from the realization that you arrive at upon returning to the outside world. Classes may be convenient, but they remove the accountability of direct experience, where you're forced to use your integrity and will to survive.

I might never have realized this perspective if it were not for the teachers and educators I encountered at Living Wisdom and later.

The chance to try with your hands and your heart is not commonly given in most schools. The chance to try while being inspired and supported by self-assured, competent leaders is a unique and powerful way to find your interests, your abilities, and yourself. The leaders at Living Wisdom School were the ones who inspired me to know the impact we can truly have on our own lives and the lives of others. They are my role models, and now the wilderness is my classroom.

### Keith Ross, Commercial Pilot



Keith flies for MC Aviation based in Santa Monica, California. He graduated in 2005 from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University with a major in aeronautical science and a minor in meteorology. He was interviewed by Susan Dermond, director of the Living Wisdom School in Portland, Oregon, and Keith's fifth-grade teacher.

**Susan:** What do you remember about your experience at Living Wisdom School?

**Keith:** It was all fun. I entered in fourth grade and attended LWS through eighth grade. Of course, like any kid I enjoyed the field trips best. But I remember all of the personal interactions and the friendships with teachers and students.

**Susan:** What do you think were the advantages of the education you received at LWS?

**Keith:** The small class size. It meant that we got lots of individual attention. I remember the caring of the teachers and the encouragement to be who you are.

**Susan:** Was high school difficult after our schools?

**Keith:** No, I graduated from high school with a 4.0 grade-point average.

**Susan:** Did you notice any differences between yourself and the other kids you met in high school and college that you attribute to your training at LWS?

**Keith:** Oh, yes. I feel that I've really found myself, mentally, spiritually, and career-wise, and I feel that I did it at a younger age than most people.

**Gita Matlock**  
Leadership Coach ([GitaMatlock.com](http://GitaMatlock.com))



Gita attended Education for Life schools from pre-school to eighth grade. She has worked in non-profit fundraising for thirteen years, after earning a bachelor's degree in International Studies and a master's in Nonprofit Administration.

**Q:** What do you think were the advantages of going to Living Wisdom School?

**Gita:** I learned the life skills and tools to succeed in both higher education and life. The meditation and centering practices taught me to

focus and be calm. The relationships with adults helped me transition very easily into the working world, and the values stick with me in all of my decisions.

**Q:** Was high school difficult after attending LWS?

**Gita:** No, it was very easy. I knew all I needed to know about how to get my work done and communicate with my teachers and classmates. Most of us who came from LWS ended up in the honors classes in our high schools.

**Q:** Did you notice any difference between yourself and the other kids you met in high school and college that you attribute to your education at LWS?

**Gita:** Yes! Many of the kids couldn't relate well to adults and lacked a sense of self. Each of my friends from Living Wisdom School shares two major things in common with the others: a strong sense of self and an interest in giving back to the world.

**Simon Hermann**  
**Financial Institution Specialist at**  
**Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC)**

Simon graduated Summa Cum Laude from California State University at Chico with a double major in Business and Economics. He now works as a Bank Examiner for the FDIC.

Simon travels around northern California as an examiner, working with teams that analyze banking institutions' capital, assets, management, earnings, liquidity, and sensitivity to market risk (CAMELS).

The job requires considerable flexibility, since he constantly needs to change roles and responsibilities from bank to bank, weekly or monthly depending on assignments.

Simon says his work involves "the review of banks' sensitivity to market risk. This review includes reviewing the assumptions and outputs of statistical models and simulations. How non-maturity deposit accounts react to changing interest rates is a large part of most model assumptions and is often measured through some form of regression analysis. I also need to understand the economy that our banks operate in."

## 34. More Testimonials for the Living Wisdom Schools

Because the Living Wisdom High Schools are relatively new, we include here testimonials from parents of K-8 students. The sentiments they express are related to the fundamental educational philosophy of Education for Life, which is the same for the upper and lower schools.

### Student Testimonials

We started meditating every morning before school, 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 Living Wisdom School, I learned that I can choose to be happy, and it led to another idea: that no one can make you unhappy, nor can you blame your unhappiness on other people, because it's you who decide to be happy or not. — *Rewa B., Oberlin College*

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I am a senior at U.C. Davis, graduating with honors this June in Genetics and minoring in French. I now have my own research project, studying the evolution of centromeric proteins, which I am hoping to have published in a scientific journal. I am also in the process of writing my honors thesis and will present it at the U.C. Undergraduate Research Conference in May.

I was originally interested in medical school, but am now applying to Genetics PhD programs such as the Marie Curie Institute in France. I attribute my love of learning and confidence in myself to my foundation in Living Wisdom School. I was taught that we really do have the autonomy to choose our own happiness, and I try to remind myself of this every day. However, it is curious how many students I see in college refusing to do this. — *Hadley*

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The way I view people and the world around me has changed dramatically. When other people are teasing or making fun of somebody in

a joking way, I can easily tell how that person is feeling about it, even more than just by seeing the look on their face. I can tell if they are not finding it funny or if they are actually hurt by it, even if they are acting as if they are fine. None of my friends understand when something like that is happening, and when I talk to them about it, they 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, 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. — *William P.*

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In math at LWS, 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 the 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.

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, and this increased my capacity to do well in school and in life. Basically my best got better. 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. LWS 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. — *Genyana A.*

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During Freshman Orientation 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 S., Georgetown University*

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I just received my acceptance to Stanford. Seriously, without LWS this never would have happened. — *Peter A., Stanford University*

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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 F., San Francisco Conservatory of Music, San Francisco Opera Chorus, and Gilbert and Sullivan Lamplighters*

### **Testimonials from Education Professionals**

The work you do with the teens on a daily basis is so meaningful for them, helping them grow internally and learn who they are, especially during the turbulent adolescent years. – *Physician, Palo Alto, California*

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If you could put what you are doing in the public schools, it would change the world. – *School Superintendent at initial accreditation visit to Living Wisdom School*

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This school is the best-kept secret in Northern California. – *WASC official at renewal visit*

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Education for Life...is an exalted call for change, based on deep insight into the potentials of every human being. It tells us how to nurture creativity, wisdom, and intuition in each child, and how to tap their unexplored capabilities. – *Jay Casbon, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate School for Professional Studies, Lewis & Clark College*

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I marvel at the spirit of Living Wisdom School. 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. – *Michael S. Katz, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, San Jose State University, Philosophy of Education, Past President of the North American Philosophy of Education Society*

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This is a wonderful school. — *Keith Devlin, PhD, co-founder and Executive Director of Stanford University H-STAR Institute*

### **Testimonials from the WASC Accreditation Committee,**

The committee members offered the following observations following their visit to Living Wisdom High School of Palo Alto in the fall of 2021.

“LWHS has a highly collaborative and interdisciplinary faculty culture.”  
- Chris

“Some of your strengths are the use of personalized learning plans and the high degree of student feedback and how it is incorporated into informing instruction.” - Chris

“You offer your students great opportunities, especially on campus but also off campus. Some of the things students did off-campus really made a difference in their lives.... The opportunities (at LWHS) are tremendous.... Through creative mentoring and partnerships, the LWHS students were able to get involved in things they wouldn’t be able to experience in larger schools.... The (educational) ideas you have are working very well, and you can be quite happy and proud.” - Yanik, former public school superintendent

“The interdisciplinary work among the faculty was notable and impressive... There were lots of synergies in your work.” - Chris

“Students, parents, and alumni consistently noted and appreciated the value of the education they are receiving. They valued the feedback they are getting from the school and the teachers.” - Chris

“A strong sense of community, collaboration, and partnership is the first thing that we noticed, and it ran throughout as a thread in our experiences observing the school! It is clear that in this small and tightly knit community, everyone is dedicated and driven by the mission and vision of the school, as well as the powerful educational philosophy.” - Melissa

### **Testimonials from Parents**

I highly recommend Living Wisdom High School that just opened last Fall. I am incredibly impressed by their academic team, personalized learning plan, blended approach, and focus on providing an education for life. We have only been there for a few months, but I am happy to answer



questions about our experience and why we chose this school for our high schooler.

When my husband and I noticed that our once exceptionally bright, enthusiastic, and talented daughter was struggling (emotionally, socially, and academically) in our top-rated public school, we knew we had to pull out all the stops in order to help her.

We'd already tried a very disappointing local private school when she was younger. Thus, we knew that putting her in another typical private school is not the answer. What she needed was something truly extraordinary. Thankfully we found Living Wisdom School.

It's been about five months since our daughter started Living Wisdom School, and honestly, we have never seen our daughter this joyous, appreciative, and happy with herself – and so motivated to learn and to give her best as a student.

I have also never seen such dedicated faculty: The teachers intimately get to know each and every student. They recognize the beauty and strength of each child, and they REALLY invest in each child. In another word, they give and give – and they don't hold back.

The educational philosophy and approach of LWS are both highly intelligent and amazingly evolved. As a former UCLA psychological researcher and a psychotherapist, I notice that everything they do is meaningful, purposeful, thoughtful, conscious, love-centered, and extraordinary. Furthermore, the proof is in the pudding – our daughter is absolutely thriving in every way possible.

I am convinced that this remarkable school is the best-kept secret in the Silicon Valley, and we will forever be grateful to have found this priceless gift. I highly recommend LWS to all parents who want their kids to truly succeed in life, as measured by their level of joy and positive contribution to the world. It just doesn't get better than this.

Our daughter is blossoming like never before! Thank you! – *Anadi G., parent of a 9th grader*

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Our three daughters started at the Living Wisdom School five months ago. They were studying in a private French school in Berkeley for five years and the transition was worrying for us, especially for the older girls. We have only one word to express how we feel right now: gratitude.

The girls unequivocally declare that this is the best school ever. They love the time and attention the teachers and administration give to them and their particular needs and interests.

My oldest who was always afraid of math now says she needs no help from us when she does her homework. Our middle daughter, who barely read a book five months ago, now will not stop reading.

In a competitive place like Palo Alto, it was a priority to give our daughters an excellent education, but also to impart values about how to live and how to comport themselves. We wanted them to develop a love of learning as a lifelong process, and we wanted a stress-free, supportive environment.

I feel that this is happening every day at Living Wisdom School. I am looking forward to our daughters growing up into intelligent, articulate, and overall good citizens in a global world.

I've been an honorary aunt/grandmother to many Living Wisdom School children. Some of "my kids" are through college now, and it's worth noting how many of the students credit their success in life now to what LWS gave them.

Education is so information oriented now – teaching to the test. It's ironic when the world is changing so fast, that information is obsolete before the degree is earned. Success today is how quickly you can learn, how easily you can adapt, how creatively and joyfully you can respond. The emphasis on pure academics – to the detriment of creating well-rounded individuals – makes even academics difficult to achieve. Develop the whole person and learning comes effortlessly. That's what happens at LWS. Cutting-edge research in education is looking more and more like Living Wisdom School.

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As an education researcher, I see that the rest of my field is just now becoming aware of the pivotal role of self-regulation and executive function.

Living Wisdom School has a rich tradition of equipping students with content AND the tools to become self-directed learners. When you know HOW to learn, you can learn almost anything.

A natural question that some parents have is this: can children have a loving, joyful learning experience in school AND still be prepared for life?

The answer is yes. Last spring's survey of LWS graduates showed that alums have an average grade point average of 3.85. Living Wisdom School

graduates have gone to Stanford, many of the UC campuses, Cornell, University of Michigan, NYU, Georgetown, Oberlin, Bowdoin, London College (UK), University of Bremen, Germany, University of Washington, San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and many more.

The school is a wonderful community, preparing students not only as learners but as happy, productive, fulfilled people.

Living Wisdom School provides a safe and nurturing setting to learn and grow both emotionally and academically. The academics are appropriately challenging while taking into consideration every child's unique learning style. Not only has my son received an excellent education, he has grown personally by being part of a community that fosters kindness, collaboration, and joy in learning. He will graduate from Living Wisdom this year, well prepared for the years ahead and fondly remembering the time our family spent as part of this wonderful school.

We have had two children in LWS. To sum it up succinctly – it's the type of school that we as parents always wanted to attend ourselves. Just on the surface level, the school has:

- 1) A very low student to teacher ratio
- 2) Highly customized instruction
- 3) A curriculum that simultaneously addresses core academic requirements and supports healthy emotional development

But beyond the surface the school is much more:

1. The creative expression in the yearly play about a historical spiritual leader brings the school community together and consistently inspires audiences to pursue life with understanding and courage.

2. A warm and inviting environment that accelerates a student's self-growth and encourages individual expression

We could say a lot more, but it's difficult to share in a short review. We encourage you to contact the school and speak to a parent. They can share more details.

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Our son went to LWS after a really difficult year and a half at a local Palo Alto school. The difference in the quality of the teachers, the calming atmosphere, and the love and genuine caring shown by the teachers was instrumental in turning his life around. His comment on returning from his

first day at LWS was, “I can be who I am, and don’t need to pretend to be someone else.”

Our son received an excellent education at LWS, was well prepared, and made an easy transition to a much larger school. What sets this school apart is its willingness to allow the students to learn at their own pace. In so doing, the school fosters a love of learning. This has made our son’s academic life joyful and given him an edge. We could not recommend Living Wisdom School more highly.

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LWS is an incredible school. We are Palo Alto parents who have tried the local schools, and feel that this school is giving our two children an amazing education. The academics are excellent and we find that the life skills our children are learning are helping them grow into great young adults. Our children have gained confidence, are more focused, are better able to navigate through conflicts, are more emotionally mature, and just seem happy. The teachers are very dedicated, accessible, and are inspiring role models. LWS is the school I would have wanted to go to when I was a child.

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This is a remarkable school. I truly believe it is the best gift we have given our sons in life. The academics were great; both sons are getting As at a rigorous high school now. Most impressive, though, is not the academics but the priority and emphasis the school places on teaching and training the children to get along well with others. The teachers’ dedication to this is truly inspiring. When I volunteered for lunch and other duties, I saw teachers do conflict resolutions between kids whenever there was any upset — even just unkind words. They taught the kids, even the youngest ones, to look each other in the eye, take turns telling their feelings, and listening. The kids learned true maturity, how to empathize with others, and how to include others in their play. This is true leadership training. Many schools offer living skills and leadership classes, but few take the time to apply them in the heat of conflict.

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LWS has been truly transformative for my son. The small class size and level of dedication among the staff could not possibly be beaten anywhere.

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LIVING WISDOM HIGH SCHOOL

This is a wonderful school. Students learn so much more than just the academics. They learn compassion, understanding, and finding joy in learning.

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My two sons attended Living Wisdom School, and it was a wonderful experience for them. They learned to relate to other people of all ages, young and old, with compassion and empathy. The school was a vital part of their emotional development. Today one is at Cornell University, the other at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Sending them to LWS was one of the best things I could do for them.

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We have a joyous, enthusiastic, and very sharp “firecracker” of a daughter in LWS. I already had a sense that this is an unusually thoughtful and emotionally intelligent school when I first met with the director and got a tour of the school years ago. Hence, we had a high expectation of the school’s curriculum and culture, teaching methodologies, and the staff when our daughter started school there. Amazingly, this school has managed to exceed our expectations in every level. — *Tess N., Menlo Park, CA*

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I am a Palo Alto violin teacher who has had the privilege of teaching eight children in past years who have attended the Living Wisdom School. These students started with me in fourth grade and the last child is graduating from high school this June. These children, throughout the time I taught them, have been exceptional in their attitude, in their loving interactions with other students, and have achieved exceptional levels both in school and on the violin.

In the past, I attended the performances of my students at Living Wisdom, and I believe it has been LWS that has helped make all of these children so well-rounded, grounded, and relaxed. When children at Gunn and Sacred Heart are behaving in such self-destructive ways, the students from Living Wisdom are providing their friends with guidance and helping them to recognize their self-worth. — *Denise C., Palo Alto, CA*

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My daughter scored 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.

She 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. — *Mother of an LWS graduate accepted at U.C. Berkeley*

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There are few things I can recommend without any reservation. Living Wisdom School is one of them. It is the best-kept secret in Palo Alto. I cannot say enough good things about this school, but let me name a few of the highlights that made us choose the school for our son.

1. Size — The school is tiny. This allows a truly individualized approach where the teachers know every child and their needs in a deep way.

2. Academics — The small size allows self-pacing. Our son is consistently 1-2 years ahead of grade level. At the same time, in areas where he needs help he gets intensive and dedicated support.

3. Multiple-age classrooms — this arrangement groups younger kids with older peers that they can emulate. We love this about the school and it works VERY well.

4. Emotional Learning — The school practices no religion. Most teachers live at the Ananda Community, but Ananda does not play a day-to-day role at the school. They teach a philosophy of kindness, love, and emotional honesty that is rare today. The children are taught yoga, meditation, and kindness. The teachers practice what they preach and live this approach in the classroom.

5. Teachers — The teachers are dedicated to the children and the philosophy of the school. They know each child very well and form deep bonds with them.

If you want to raise an independent, kind, self-aware child - you owe it to your self and your child to look at Living Wisdom. — *Ben R., Palo Alto, CA*

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If you are considering a private school, I would highly recommend Living Wisdom School (LWS). We love so many things about the school, it’s hard to pick just a few to mention here:

1. Their main philosophy is Education for Life. They want their children to love learning, and this is not just words!

2. Each child can go at his/her own pace with learning. At the same time, the teachers are very careful. Their goal is to keep the children interested in the subjects, not to jump grades.

3. The teacher/student ratio is excellent.

4. The teachers are amazing.

5. In most schools, only the most gifted students take the Math Olympiads and AMC 8. In contrast, at LWS all students take these challenging tests. Last year, my husband and I were at the graduation ceremony, where they were announcing the results: it turned out that the girl who got the best score in California was an LWS student (she achieved a perfect score of 100% — the only perfect score by a sixth-grader in the state). We were very impressed. — *Lana S., Redwood City, CA*





# Meet the Teachers



## 35. Meet Kshama Kellogg

Kshama Kellogg serves as Director of Living Wisdom High School in Palo Alto, California

**Q:** To begin, I'll ask you to visualize the person you were when you were two feet tall, and what you were interested in as a young person, what your early education was like, and how you discovered that you wanted to help give teenagers a better option for their high school years.

**Kshama:** I was fortunate to be raised in a family of conscious parents – they were very conscientious about the environment they wanted to provide for my growth and well-being, and they offered me lots of exposure to learning experiences that they felt would help nurture my maturity, starting at a very young age and throughout my teenage and young-adult years.

One of their major concern was that they wanted to choose a school that would nurture the whole person, so they enrolled me in kindergarten at the Living Wisdom School where we were living, and I was deeply involved in the Education for Life experience through my elementary and middle-school years.

I attended a public high school, but I remained involved in the Education for Life summer programs and other immersive experiences during my teen years and beyond.

A great deal of my growth came in the areas of how to relate with other people, how to feel myself as a global citizen, and how to be personally



empowered to make a difference and be part of the solution in small and larger ways.

**Q:** What was your experience like in public school?

**Kshama:** When my family moved to Italy for a year, there was no Education for Life school, so I entered an Italian public school where I found a very different learning environment. I learned incredible lessons, and in some ways it was magnificent, but in other ways it was challenging. There were still degrees of corporal punishment in the classroom, and there was an intense focus on rote memorization, so it was altogether a different approach to education than I'd been exposed to. But in other ways it was a beautiful time, full of new friendships and a growing understanding of the other ways people lived, and how diverse the world can be.

It also deepened my appreciation for what I had experienced in the Living Wisdom environment, where young people are allowed to be comfortable with themselves and free in who they are, able to trust and rely on the adults in their life, to have deeply meaningful friendships, and to be given the support to study and learn and go deeply with joy and passion into the areas that spark their interest.

So my time in Italy gave me a unique perspective, and it helped me develop better interpersonal skills.



*Kshama with LWHIS students.*

When we returned to the U.S., I spent seventh grade in an Education for Life school again, but then my family moved to Carmel, where I entered another public school, and from that point I continued in public middle and high schools.

I think my parents would agree that it wasn't the most expansive time in my development, but I do feel it was an important experience of personal

growth. I gained new perspectives, and I had experiences that would make me realize, years later, that I wanted to circle back and be involved with a flavor of education where I could support young people in their overall development. So I was motivated to stay connected with Education for Life during my teen years, through the EFL summer programs and the service learning experiences.

The EFL youth summer programs activated my sense of personal empowerment, will power, and joy. They awakened a wonderful sense of adventure and discovery in the natural world, and a personal appreciation for inner practices of meditation and other centering methods that would give me a touch point later, when I found that certain parts of my life weren't working, and I realized I could go back to meditation and yoga and deeply draw on those tools that I had been given.

I was in my early twenties when I first began to feel powerfully drawn to education. I felt as if the universe was conspiring to lead me back to this approach, and when I look back on all of the experiences I've had in education, it's clear that the times I felt most engaged and alive were with the Education for Life schools.

I very distinctly remember the integrated units and deep dives we took in Greek mythology in middle school, and how I was able to pursue my own studies in anatomy and physiology, because Living Wisdom gave me the freedom to personalize my education.



*Kshama (in truck, center) with LWHS students during a service adventure outing to a local organic farm.*

When I entered public high school and was suddenly part of a much larger school environment, academics took a back seat, to be honest, because high school was much more about social interaction. There was a great deal of growth, but there wasn't much in my high school education

that sparked the same deep level of engagement I'd had with Education for Life.

When I eventually began to feel drawn to serve young people, I very clearly knew that it would have to be in an environment that was feeding the whole person and creating the kinds of deeply meaningful experiential learning experiences where the students could come alive and be genuinely involved, rather than just go through the motions.

**Q:** You had a long experience teaching in the K-8 grades at the Living Wisdom School in Palo Alto. How long were you there?

**Kshama:** I taught at LWS for eleven years.

**Q:** You were in daily contact with teachers who had much longer experience with Education for Life. You said it seemed that the universe wanted to marinate you in those principles.

**Kshama:** Yes! (laughs) Our approach to training teachers is deeply immersive – every one of us goes through a process that not only involves studying the philosophy, but far more important, being totally engaged in its practical applications in the classroom.

Every new teacher receives at least a full year of experience as a student teacher or aide with guidance and mentoring by the active teachers. So the philosophy doesn't remain just an idea, but it quickly becomes a set of practical tools that you can apply to help the students grow at their level.

**Q:** At what point did you decide to become a high school teacher?

**Kshama:** The most meaningful part of teaching, for me, has always been the personal connections, and being able to work so closely with the students, and witness each student's transformation.

A core component of our schools is that our classrooms are like small communities. It's why we've never advocated for larger classrooms, and why we do lots of personalization by making those one-on-one connections.

Watching how the individual students were transformed by that degree of personalization was thrilling to me – it was wonderful to witness how they blossomed and became so much more of who they were and who they could be.

I absolutely loved working with the young children while that was my reality. I taught first and second grade for eleven years, and then I began serving as a service learning coordinator for the middle and high schoolers, and that experience greatly enlivened me. I was able to watch the teens step into a relationship with a school environment that was constructive and

powerful and full of kindness and that was empowering them to feel that they had personal agency and impact.

I had spent a long time pondering the desperate need for this kind of education, and how we could make it available to more young people, and when the opportunity arose I felt completely inspired to start working with students in this age group.

**Q:** There's an idea in Education for Life that when we engage all aspects of a person, including their heart and soul as well as their brain, that they will bring all of that to their learning. I saw it when I visited your classroom – how the small groups of students would get together on the floor and be so involved with their work. Or I would see a student reading during recess, and because they were so engrossed I would become curious, and I would quietly walk around to where I could see what they were reading, and it was a math book.

**Kshama:** (laughs) Because they love it.

**Q:** Yes, and I saw it also with the fourth and fifth graders and the middle schoolers, where I would visit the class, and the kids absolutely did not want to be interrupted or distracted in any way – they just wanted to be totally focused with each other on what they were doing.

**Kshama:** Yes, and in our high school program the invitation to every student is to take their whole self and go deeply into whatever subject they are involved in. Sometimes there are obvious classroom activities that create interpersonal connections, or that involve the body – science experiments, or games that are related to the curriculum – and the teenagers are certainly not too old for games and play.

But I think that, even deeper, we are imbuing the learning space with a profound knowing that flows through the teachers, that everyone loves to learn, as long as the learning is presented in a human way, and that we are all deeply curious about how the world works, and how we can work effectively. We may all have certain special areas that attract us, and we want to create a space that will not hold anyone back from immersing themselves in the learning process.

The way it translates in our math program, for example, is that the students study math at whatever level they are ready to go deeply into it, and they can go as far and as fast as they like, as long as they are developing mastery. Because you cannot skip steps, but you can move through it as fast and as far as you want to go. Also, there is no punishment, and there are no

consequences for taking the time you need, when you need it, to understand something deeply — and on the flipside, to fly through and not be held back by the rate that someone else is needing to learn.

We've seen students who come in, and maybe they've been in other learning environments and math is a really traumatic subject for them.

**Q:** Because of the mass education, where failure is built in for the students who aren't gifted?

**Kshama:** Yes, they've been on a treadmill, where everybody's moving at the same speed, and whether you're ready to move forward or not, we're moving on, and I hope you've got it.

That system ends up creating big gaps in their math foundation, and if you don't have a solid foundation it's impossible to understand what you're doing in any kind of deep way. Not to mention that it's extremely demotivating to be always feeling lost, and that you're missing out and failing most of the time.



*Kshama leads a masked, socially distanced in-person class during the Covid pandemic.*

**Q:** It can't be helpful to their self-esteem.

**Kshama:** It has a huge negative impact, and we see that when people enter the environment at Living Wisdom, their relationship with the learning process very quickly shifts. We've seen students come in with a visceral hatred for math, and after six months or a year they're either tolerant of it, or they're starting to have "Aha!" moments, or moments where they are genuinely inspired.

In other cases, where a student has been wanting to fly through the math curriculum but they've been held back, when they come to us they're allowed to go through one, two, or three years of the curriculum in twelve months and be completely on fire with what they're doing.

It translates into our other classes as well. There's the same personalization in history, social science, and English, where the students



will work with their mentor teacher to create projects or study texts that they feel inspired to learn from – and then you see that the learning process becomes deeply meaningful.

**Q:** You're engaging their own enthusiasm and giving them success experiences.

**Kshama:** Yes, and there's an incredible process of mentorship that's built into the teaching here. I was chatting with a public school teacher recently, and she was sharing that she is so inundated by the number of students she has to work with that there's hardly any chance to form a personal connection with any of the students. She described the process of editing essays, and how she can only spend about a minute on each essay, with the result that she will essentially skim to see if the student included the key points, and if they did they'll get a good grade, and if they didn't, they won't, because it's time to move on.

In contrast, I was listening to our English teacher describe how he works with the students' writing, and how he sits with every piece and reads it first to get a feel for the message and the flow of the work that the student is doing, and the ideas they are trying to engage with, and how they are trying to bring them forth or understand them.

Then he'll read it a second time and give the student his feedback and ask some refining questions. He said that he can usually identify the parts where they struggled or they couldn't figure out how to express what they wanted to say, and he'll feel the places where the inspiration was high and it exploded onto the page.

Then they'll have several meetings, and the editing process won't be only between the teacher and the student, but often also from peer to peer, where they're reading each other's work and giving feedback.

Why would a student want to write for an audience that isn't even going to read what they say? To be able to have a meaningful interaction with what you're writing and your ideas, and to try to make sense of the world – that's what a real education is about.

**Q:** It strikes me that you're giving them an approach to college and to life. If you're working at Google, how will you approach a project? Will you be thinking "How am I going to be graded?" Or will you be engaged and determined to come up with something shiny and new?

**Kshama:** One of our graduates recently began her studies at Cal Poly, and she wrote to me and to one of her former teachers to thank us. She

said to the teacher, “I want you to know how well you prepared me for college – so many of those strategies and approaches to thinking are being put to very good use.”

**Q:** Woo-hoo!

Yes. (laughs) It’s good to know, and it’s wonderful that they feel empowered and supported by the education they received here.

**Q:** Your approach brings to mind the tutoring system at Cambridge or Oxford, where you work with an individual mentor who encourages you and corrects you.

**Kshama:** Something else that’s unique here, and that is akin to the education that’s alive in many universities, is that we invite people to live with the big questions, and we don’t just tackle things that already have answers, or that are just one small step from where our current learning capacity is.

It’s powerful to grapple with the big, important questions, or questions that are unanswerable, or that have not yet been solved for, and to have that degree of respect for the students that they can handle living with the big mysteries and join you in the wonder of deep inquiry.

**Q:** The largest class in terms of enrollment at Harvard is on the psychology of happiness.

**Kshama:** Because they’re craving it. It must be a fascinating place to be, to have achieved such a high level of academic excellence and be in an environment like Harvard, and yet be grappling with the need for happiness, and wondering where it comes from and how to cultivate it in your life.

**Q:** At Stanford now, they’re selecting applicants who not only have high grades, but who are happy, motivated and well-rounded people.

**Kshama:** That’s an integral part of the education at Living Wisdom. It weaves into the kind of self-reflection and cultivation that I would call an inner life.

For the students, it’s woven into the traditional academic subjects, and also some of the unique subject areas we emphasize.

Our students all engage with what we call Personal Development, which is an umbrella term for our centering tools and practices. Our society is so frenetic – it’s brutal to see the pressures on young people not only to be successful and good at everything they attempt, but to be looking ahead and

figuring out what they want to do, who they want to be, which profession they'll enter, and the college they'll attend.

It's a heavy weight to carry. If you sit down and talk with most 16- or 17-year olds today, they are in a process of trying to understand who they are, and you can't come out the other end until you've had a journey of self-discovery. A major part of it is learning to be comfortable with yourself, and to live with calm inner peace, even while you're engaged in outward activity.

We invite the students into processes of self-reflection and engagement through courses like psychology, through mentorship conversations, and even through our literature studies, where we're constantly asking, really, what does it all mean to me — not just what do I think the teacher wants to hear, or what's an easy answer, but what does this really mean in my life?



*Individual mentoring plays a major role  
in the curriculum at Living Wisdom High School*

**Q:** That's immensely important in terms of what your college experience will be. I remember, as a graduate student at Stanford, that I really liked some of the things I was reading, like the poems of Rilke. But I had only the intellect to go by, and I felt that I was bashing my head against a ceiling.

With the kind of education you're giving teens, you're showing them the heights of literature, history, mathematics, and science, and you're giving them the tools they need to discover self-confidence and happiness, together with achievement in those areas.

**Kshama:** Teens need to feel where they stand, and how they relate to the world. It's a time of tremendous expansion of that aspect of ourselves that we call will power, and it has two facets, one of which is the raw will-power side, which is asking how I can push my energy out into the world and have an impact. When teens can learn to channel their will power in positive, constructive ways, they are among the most inspiring, innovative, creative,

and passionate people on the planet. But, of course, when it isn't channeled constructively, we see the fallout of unhealthy or harmful decisions.

**Q:** It's a war zone in high schools today, where the less imposing students may be afraid to walk down the hall.

**Kshama:** You see it in drug usage, you see it in harmful social interactions. You see it in all sorts of ways. Yet there is a great need to show them how to have meaningful engagement, using their full will power.

There's also a softer quality of will power, as willingness, as learning to say yes to life, and to show up to whatever circumstance is in front of you and choose happiness and make the most of what's there and look for the grace and the beauty in even the most challenging situations.

Especially at this age, we need opportunities to experience both – the need for strong will, and for gracious engagement. So we weave into our educational program lots of opportunities for service projects, and for immersion in the natural world, because nature is an amazing teacher. Not only does it awaken us to the awe and wonder of creation and life, but it pushes us right to our edge.

Our backpacking, camping, and day trips are profoundly healing on important levels, and they help us disconnect from the technological world that we're immersed in.

We do lots of nature exploration, and maybe it's less now because of Covid, but travel is a valued part of our curriculum. Young people rarely have an exposure to other cultures and experiences that are different from their own or their families', and being able to immerse in different ways of thinking, living, and being is profoundly expanding for the mind and heart, and it's hugely educational.

So we incorporate travel, but we don't do it in the way of superficial tourism. Tourism can be wonderful when it's done well, but we look for opportunities to live with people from other cultures, perhaps from different economic levels and different realities.

I've mentioned how, when I was in the Living Wisdom Schools, I served in two different orphanages in Mexico for extended periods. It was unique, in that we lived in their dormitories and shared meals with them. We cooked, we cleaned, and we studied together, and it completely shifted my understanding of what happiness is, what family can be, and what the simple pleasures of life can mean. To this day, I have a friends that I made

during those experiences that I'm still connected with, and they've shared, and I have shared with them, the meaning and the impact of that point of connection.

Authentic intercultural exchange broadens our perspective, and teenagers are ready for that kind of maturity-raising challenge.

Just like being in nature, travel pushes us to the edge of what we think we can do, or what we're comfortable with, so it creates excellent growth points.



*Daily victories at our own level give us  
the confidence and joy to accept new challenges.*

In terms of the personalized learning plan that each student engages with, we all — students, parents, teachers, and mentors — contribute to help design and develop their personalized learning plan which will integrate their readiness, their interests, where they hope to attend college, and what they might want to take up as a profession. Of course, many young people don't know yet, so we might look at a specific interest of theirs, and see if we can create a learning experience that will hold that motivation for them, or as much of it as we can access.

All of the students have certain requirements that they need to complete in order to graduate from high school. They can study any subject at a general education level, but in a college prep course we offer a broad range of honors extension programs, with advanced study that will integrate some degree of college-level content into their high school learning.

In some cases we offer advanced placement courses. We have a robust connection with Foothill College and the community college network in the Bay Area, so our high school students can take one or more college-level classes while they're still in high school.

Those courses may be in a standard curriculum area, so they might take a chemistry or biology or physiology class at the community college, or they might personalize the experience by taking a specific art program — it might be digital animation, or a language class that wouldn't be accessible to them in high school, like Japanese or Russian.

They can take those courses online, or they might go to the college campus, and those extended courses are woven into their high school learning experience. There's no limit as long as the joy factor stays strong, because when students start to get overloaded you'll see a lessening of their joy in learning that clearly indicates they're needing to relax and restore.

As long as the joy is there — and it doesn't mean that you aren't working hard, but if you can still feel the spark of a connection with what you're doing — then absolutely, you can fly as far as your wings will take you.

## 36. Hazemach — the Education of a Living Wisdom High School Teacher

We spoke with Hazemach who attended the TK-8 Living Wisdom School in Palo Alto from kindergarten through eighth grade. After advanced graduate studies in mathematics at the University of Bremen, Germany, he joined the staff of Living Wisdom High School of Palo Alto, where he teaches math, science, and PE.

**Q:** What age were you when you started at Living Wisdom School?

**Hazemach:** I was four. My mother had tried various schools for me, but they were all unhappy experiences. Even at that young age, I'd been targeted because I had never had my hair cut, and I was treated differently



for that reason. (Photo: Hazemach tutors an LWHS student.)

I had started martial arts when I was three, and I'm still training regularly today, so those two strains of martial arts and Living Wisdom have formed a major part of my life.

**Q:** Did you find that they blended well? What kinds of teachers did you have in martial arts?

**Hazemach:** I was seven when I found the teacher that I would stick with for the long term, and after I got my driver's license in high school I would drive fifty miles to Lafayette to train with him. It's been very interesting for me, because I've noticed that his perspective is quite similar to Education for Life, our philosophy at Living Wisdom School.

He believes that karate is different from other sports, because when you earn a black belt it isn't just a symbol, it's something that shows you've gained a skill that you can apply in every aspect of your life.

He emphasizes how everything we're doing is about acquiring life skills. Today, he was talking about how your English teacher might look at something you've written and tell you that you got all the words right, but you weren't expressing real emotion, and that you need to bring an emotional content into your style. So you can't succeed by doing it step by step, mechanically, but there has to be heart, and there has to be an intensity of feeling in every action.

Martial arts complemented my education very well, because it's such a disciplined space, and when I was very young at Living Wisdom I would often do exactly the opposite. (laughs) I would be a bit of a troublemaker, and yet when I was in the dojo I was very disciplined and respectful. I would always be very careful with every action, and I always wondered why there was that contrast, but I think it helped me. When I was very young, it was an ascetic practice that would eventually help me find a spiritual path.

I was very happy at Living Wisdom School, but I wasn't equally happy with the school systems I encountered after I left Living Wisdom, because they didn't bring me the same joy and enthusiasm, and they generally had the opposite effect.

At every single school I attended after Living Wisdom, I felt that it was killing whatever joy and enthusiasm I had, and I was eventually in such a sad place that I knew I needed to be happy again.

When I thought about it deeply, I realized that I had been happiest at LWS, so I decided to turn my life around, and instead of relying on external factors to give me happiness, I would direct my inner life. It was something I had learned at LWS, so I began bringing those Education for Life principles into my expression.

**Q:** How old were you when you made that decision? Were you still in school?

**Hazemach:** I was twenty-one, and doing my PhD studies in Germany.

**Q:** What was your field of study?

**Hazemach:** Mathematics. I was doing very theoretical math, very abstract and disconnected from any immediate practical concerns. It was very beautiful in and of itself, but not for how it could be applied. I think it's



nice when it can be applied, but at the same time it can be very enjoyable for the way it energizes the mind, and that was very pleasing to me.

That kind of abstract study can have a very powerful energy to it, and it filled me with love and delight. I had this very powerful love for math, and I was devoted to it, and I was ready to spend all my time on it.

When I first entered college I spent all my time on math. I would be sleeping and I would dream a solution to a problem I was working on. I'd wake up, and I wouldn't remember the dream, but in trying to remember it I would have the solution, and then answers would come when I was doing my other daily activities. So it was a very interesting field of study for me.

**Q:** Let's work backward. How did you wind up in graduate school in Germany?

**Hazemach:** After my first year of college, I applied for all kinds of summer programs in math. I was trying to get into something called a Research Experience for Undergraduates. Those programs are for juniors and seniors, to allow them to experience what research is like, and what professional mathematics is like. It's an important step if you want to be competitive in your grad school apps.

So I tried to apply after my freshman year, but there was a budget crisis that year, and I found out later that they'd accepted just one or two freshmen nationwide into the many REU programs for lack of funds.

So it was really out of desperation that I finally found a summer program in Germany, because I was ready to go anywhere to continue my growth in math.

I started by going to Germany for a two-week program called Modern Mathematics, where they would gather professional mathematicians from all over the world in a collaborative space for students from age sixteen to twenty. Later, I served as a teacher assistant for the camps, but at the time I was a student, and it was lots of fun.

One of the professors told me, in frankness, that my math background was very unusual for an American, because the U.S. is very far behind Europe in terms of math training, and when they saw that I was very competitive with the European students, they didn't understand how that could have happened.

At any rate, one of the professors took an interest, and he invited me to come to Germany and study longer-term, especially after he looked at my

university record and saw that I had exhausted much of the math training that they could offer in my first year. So it was a natural next step.

I had been enrolled at Bard College at Simon's Rock, which is in the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts. It's a program for students who want to leave high school and enter college early. The average starting age is sixteen or seventeen for the incoming freshmen, and it's a very, very good academic program, very advanced and well-rounded. It's rooted in traditional liberal arts, and the idea is that students need to have a broad grounding in the humanities in order to be well-rounded learners. So you can't just specialize, which is the opposite of what they do in Europe, where they're less interested in giving you that kind of depth and breadth, and you can go straight into your field and specialize.

Each approach has its advantages, but I'm very grateful for the wide-spectrum academics I received at Simon's Rock, because it broadened my perspective beyond mathematics into the realm of more human concerns, and it's essentially what led me to questions about consciousness and spirituality.

**Q:** Where did you go to high school?

**Hazemach:** I went to Woodside Priory.

**Q:** After Living Wisdom, what was your experience like at Woodside? Was the transition smooth?

**Hazemach:** There are many levels to look at. There's the academic level, and I don't know how it was for other students, but I know that I tended to have an easier time with academics, so it was an easy transition that way. I didn't need to put in all that much work to do very well at Priory academically, because it was just my normal work output, but honestly it was a bit...

**Q:** You're trying hard not to say that high school was easy.

**Hazemach:** (laughs) I mean, it did challenge me. I took AP calculus my freshman year, and it was very nice, but I was ultimately really bored with math there, unfortunately, and I've had concerns about math education all the way through my PhD. It doesn't matter that there were very good aspects in every single school, but I have lots of concerns about how we run math education in this country – but that's a different story.

I felt really lonely at Priory when I first arrived. There wasn't the same deliberate culture of kindness there that there was at Living Wisdom. For example, it was shocking when one of the students started speaking to me

very meanly, intentionally saying mean things. I just couldn't understand what the purpose of it was, so I laughed, and of course that made him even meaner to me. He was like, "Wait, what is wrong with you? Why are you laughing?" But after that he left me alone, so it worked, and he didn't talk to me again.

But it was a very different environment, because at Living Wisdom they don't let the students act out however they want to and create a student-run culture. The teachers take a very direct hand in making sure the school space is kind, that it's caring, it's compassionate, and it's fun.

**Q:** Did you feel at Living Wisdom that you were connected to the other kids around you? When I talk with the LWS administrators and teachers, it's a constant theme. Did you see it actually happening from your perspective as a student?

**Hazemach:** Yes, I definitely felt connected.

**Q:** Did you feel that you had lots of friends at Living Wisdom?

**Hazemach:** Yes. I never felt that I was without friends, and I always felt very happy there, and that's something I immediately noticed when I went back and visited the elementary school last year. When I walked in, it was just a bubble of happiness everywhere, just bubbling joy, and you don't see that, I think, very much in most schools.

I had done some substitute teaching at other schools, and it wasn't the same environment. I remember when I was a little kid at LWS learning conflict resolution, how to maintain good relationships with people, and how to empathize or sympathize and be compassionate for other people's realities so that you can get along.

It wasn't limited to being with your own age group. In most schools, they have giant classes where you're only interacting with others your own age, so the kids start to feel that it's normal to interact only with others their age, and then they feel like that's the right thing to do, so you don't see much interaction across age groups in the culture, which is very unfortunate.

At Living Wisdom, even as a little kid, the older students would spend time with us, and I really felt that they were my mentors. Then, as I got older, I played the same role for the younger students, and I learned how to be an older brother, in the sense of knowing how you can really engage and bring forth delight in the little kids and have fun with them.

**Q:** I was doing some work for the LWS school director. She wanted us to have more information on our website about kindergarten, for parents

who were looking for a place to start their child. So I spent a lot of time with the kindergarteners. I observed the partner reading and partner walks with the older children, and the interactions they had, and it was very moving to see how the older ones were genuinely sweet and kind to the younger ones and how they were taking care of them. It was an exercise in creating a positive school culture, and it was wonderful.

**Hazemach:** I felt that aspect all over again when I visited LWS with one of my high school students. My student is a junior, and at the start of the year he was very shy and withdrawn — it was very difficult for him even to open up and start talking. Somehow, he failed to get his permission slip signed by his parents to go on one of our high school service projects, so Kshama said, “Okay, you’re going to go with Haze.” Because I also teach PE for the kindergarteners at LWS. She said, “Your service today is going to be helping Haze with PE.”

So he came along with me, and from what I could tell he had no experience working with little kids, so at first he was very much unsure what to do. But then the little kids pulled him out of his shell — they sent so much love to him. They ran up to him and they were hugging him, grabbing his hands and asking him to play with them. They were the ones who knew how to pull him out of his shell. It was amazing, how he started expressing himself, and as I watched him play with them it felt so good to see.

So it’s not just the older students serving the younger ones, it’s the younger students reminding the older students of a kind of relaxed openness that they might have forgotten in their years of being socialized to what the teenage culture is like in our society today, which is oftentimes unauthentic and withdrawn.

**Q:** Did you learn those skills at Living Wisdom, of relating to others?

**Hazemach:** Yes, we did. There are bound to be conflicts. I remember a new girl who came to our classroom in second grade. She’d experienced lots of bullying, so she was very, very self-conscious and shy, and when she arrived she was very sensitive and she would cry easily. I didn’t have any ill will toward her, but I didn’t understand why she was crying, and I wondered, “What’s wrong with this kid? Why is she always crying?” So it augmented the problem, because we were second-graders and we didn’t know what was going on.

We would ask her, “Why are you crying?” and she’d feel like we were bullying her, but we couldn’t understand what was happening. So a teacher

stepped in and helped us understand the issue, and we were receptive enough to understand that it was a very difficult reality for her, and that we weren't being expansive, and we needed to see that, okay, she has a different reality, and there's no reason for us to be treating her in a way that makes her feel marginalized all over again. After that, I remember feeling that she was a close friend.

I had lots of those experiences at Living Wisdom, of expanding the heart to include broader realities. There are bound to be conflicts, and it's part of growing up to learn to resolve them and get along.

I learned an important lesson after I left Living Wisdom. I was at a summer camp with Zachary, one of my classmates at Living Wisdom, and I had a conflict with somebody at the camp. I'd been going to the summer camp for more than five years, and I decided to break out of a ceremony, which you weren't supposed to do. So I broke the ritual, and it made this girl really upset, and she didn't want to speak to me or look at me.

I thought she was being ridiculous, because, yes, she'd also been there many years, but I'd spent a lot of time with the ritual, and I felt I could

break it if I wanted to. It was immature, and my friend Zachary said to me, "I know you think you're right, but don't you value your friendship more than being right?" *(Photo: Hazemach tutors students during an outdoor study session.)*



I think it's a really good example of how an EFL wisdom principle was kicking in for me. Isn't getting along well

with others and having social harmony more important than just being right? (laughs)

Later, I could say, okay, that was immature of me. But even in the moment it was all I needed, and I apologized to her. I said, "Look, I know we're coming from different places, but I'm sorry for causing the social disharmony," and we were able to make up and be friends.

There are ways we can deal with those inevitable conflicts that are bound to come up with people, and as I've walked through life, I've always known that I was able, by deliberately expanding my consciousness, to let go of whatever I was holding on to and relate with others and maintain a harmonious situation with them.

It doesn't mean that I would passively let people walk over me, but it meant that I could choose harmony, and I could choose it even when people were difficult to deal with – just let go of my pride and get along with them.

I don't know if all of the Living Wisdom graduates have learned these lessons as deeply as I have, but whenever I had conflicts with people and the feeling wasn't harmonious, I was always able to remember that harmony and happiness were a deliberate choice that I could make.

I was always aware that I could choose a wrong decision if I wanted to. Maybe I could say, "I'll try something different this time – I want to see what happens if I argue, and if I don't stick with harmony." But over the years I learned that harmony is the right way to go.

**Q:** Conflict resolution is a major emphasis in the Living Wisdom Schools. The teachers talk about it all the time, and nothing gets overlooked. If a teacher notices two kids having an issue, they aren't going to let it slide because they're too busy, or because we have to get through math class. It's part of the fabric of life at the school, and it's part of the teachers' training, to intervene immediately and do something about it.

At a meeting that Helen had with several local high school principals, they were asking her what makes LWS unique, and one of the things she mentioned was that we don't have bullying at our school. She said that there was total silence, and she could hear the gears turning in the principals' heads, because they were thinking, "We have bullying."

Gary, the school administrator who's a former middle school teacher, talked about a situation that parents and educators encounter today, and that they don't know how to resolve, which is that they want the kids to be extremely competitive, but at the same time they're saying, "Oh, we don't want to go too far in that direction because we want them to be nice, too." And the kids have no trouble recognizing the hypocrisy, because all of a sudden you're asking them to turn around and be nice to one another, and in the next minute they're supposed to be competing fiercely.

What was your academic experience like in that respect at Living Wisdom School? I know that the teachers challenge people at their level.

**Hazemach:** There was no "top" or "bottom" at LWS. I remember feeling a bit competitive with one of the other students, but it was never encouraged in the classroom, and there were no classroom activities that fostered that kind of competition. I don't think I ever competed within the

school, it was just a feeling I had because I knew about his extracurricular activities and what he was doing well at, and I was doing all of these things, too, and there was that question, okay, so which one of us is higher? (laughs) But the school didn't foster that.

I've also had experiences of people who felt threatened by my presence, and they would start trying to be competitive with me. The karate dojo is a space where every single moment is competitive, but it's a very healthy kind of competition, where the goal is to bring out the best in others so that you can try to rise to your best, too, and then, when you rise, they try to rise also, but you don't ever try to pull anybody down, because you want the others to improve. You want the others to be better than you so that you'll have an ideal to work up to, so everybody's scaling each other up.

That's a model of competitiveness that I've never seen outside of the karate dojo really, and it's been amazing for me, just absolutely amazing. I think it's been one of the best experiences for my development.



*A young Hazemach plays St. Francis during a Living Wisdom School Theater Magic production.*

I often hear people talk very negatively about competitiveness, and I don't think it needs to be, if there's the attitude that we're all lifting each other up, and we're inspiring each other to rise to our potential. It's beautiful when you want others to be better so that you can be better.

In karate, one of the masters said, “Whenever you see something good in others, ask yourself, how can I try to work toward that? And whenever you see something negative in others, immediately pull away and think to yourself, ‘Okay, how can I make sure I’m not doing that?’”

Because it doesn’t matter. You’re not trying to identify “Oh, that person is good or bad.” You’re focused on “How can I continue improving myself?” — and that’s not egotistical. That’s the opposite, actually, where you’re deliberately not comparing egos anymore.

Education for Life does it very well, too, where you’ll have a child whose consciousness is very light and expansive and caring, and who’s working with students of lower “specific gravity,” and they’ll lift the ones who are heavier in their consciousness. So it scales downward, and then the teacher is lifting the students who are lifting the ones below them.

So you have a culture where everybody’s lifting each other, and you see that there are differences, but you want others to do really well, and it’s ultimately about helping the whole group rise, and creating a group consciousness that is higher.

**Q:** The school has a tremendous emphasis on the arts, especially the theater program. Do you have any thoughts about that?

**Hazemach:** Theater was my favorite aspect of LWS. (laughs) It was so exciting — all of a sudden you had this great outside responsibility, and you could leave class to prepare for this very big performance. It was very, very serious for us, and the teachers took it seriously also — it wasn’t just some superficial little play for kids. The kids are putting on the play, but it’s not just about that; it’s meant to be equally inspiring and uplifting and meaningful for both the actors and the audience, and you learn *so* many skills when you’re on stage. I think you can see that in the LWS graduates.

I talked about this with Kshama, the principal of our high school, who formerly taught first and second grade at LWS — how teaching is like acting. You have to stand up and engage people. You have to hold their attention, you have to draw them in, you have to be magnetic, and you’re going to be doing that throughout your life, whatever your work is.

You can see it in the Living Wisdom School graduates, in the way they really know how to engage a person and draw them into conversation and magnetize something positive from the experience. It’s all part of the learning that happens in the theater program, learning how to interact with people in a dynamic way.



You might think, “Oh, it’s just acting,” but the way we do it, you really have to project your energy, and that’s a very important skill throughout your life — when you’re speaking to a group of people and you can project your energy very effectively. You can see that the people who haven’t learned how to do it are never as successful.



*Hazemach congratulates a Living Wisdom High School graduate.*

I remember how authentic it felt when I played certain roles — St. Francis, for example. One of the constructive critiques I received when we were rehearsing was, “You need to approach people with inner peace. You have to share that peace with others. You can’t just be telling people to do this and that, you have to shift your own consciousness into that state of inner peace.”

I remember thinking, “That’s groundbreaking!” It was acting from an authentic place, and some of the students had authentic spiritual experiences during the theater program.

I’m reminded of when Yogananda listened to a famous choir and afterward he said, “Technically, it was beautiful, but there was no real devotion in your hearts.”

There’s a culture of profound genuineness in the theater program at Living Wisdom School, because the purpose of the plays is for the children to attune themselves to the consciousness of those inspiring historical figures through the poetry of their words, and the songs and movements.

The goal isn't just to play a role well technically. When I was in high school, I noticed that the actors didn't feel that same sincerity — I felt that they were putting on a face that would suit the moment, without any inner sincerity that I could feel, and I couldn't tell where their heart was.

The acting experience at Living Wisdom was from the heart. It was from an authentic, sincere space, and then you could project that energy without putting on a mask, and in the process you were expanding your consciousness, and expanding your authentic experience into new realms.

**Q:** Watching the plays over the years, I've always felt that the kids had an inner feeling for the roles they were playing, and that they were wanting to give the audience something wonderful and deeply meaningful.

**Hazemach:** I was able to watch one of the plays for the first time last year, because I had only ever acted in them before, and I was so moved. I was so inspired, because the student actors actually became the essential vibration of the saint they were playing, and by acting the lives of these great, inspiring figures it's giving them a very powerful experience.

**Q:** It's clear that you're able to look back and enjoy your memories of Living Wisdom School, and now that you're teaching at the high school, how has that experience been for you?

**Hazemach:** I had some experience teaching graduate students and some undergrads, and it was very different from the teenagers. (laughs) Grad students know what they want to be studying, and you can give them a task and know that they'll be motivated and they'll do it, but with the high schoolers you have to inspire them and get them interested.

Then there's a vast cultural background that we're fighting against. There are so many habits and understandings that they've developed — for example, that it isn't cool to be enthusiastic, it's not cool to like something too much, it's not cool to enjoy your school subjects, and it's something you might get made fun of for, or get bullied for. It's something I experienced after I left Living Wisdom and entered high school, that liking things and enjoying things suddenly brought negative attention to me. It's very odd. Very, very odd. But it's so rewarding to watch the progress that the LWHS students are making. It feels like we're making a difference in their lives.

The school culture in this area is deeply focused on the test-taking side of things, and it's hard for the students to see beyond test results as a measure of the progress they're making.

For many of our students, it's a source of inner turmoil — how much progress am I really making, if I'm not spending all my time preparing for tests? Isn't that where my time needs to be spent? If I spend too much time out in nature, if I spend too much time taking care of my body, if I spend too much time learning to socialize, if I spend too much time in service, I must be falling behind.

**Q:** Which is completely misguided.

**Hazemach:** It's completely misguided. Don't we learn things better when we're having fun? There are plenty of studies that support the idea that enthusiasm and engagement improve learning. When I started working with one of our students, she was studying 24/7 because she felt that she needed to be studying all the time, and that she couldn't be doing anything frivolous like going on outings. So there was lots of tension because we were spending time in nature and on service projects. But as I watched her studying, I saw that she wasn't really being productive. She was trying so hard, but she couldn't focus, so she was falling asleep, and she wasn't enjoying it.

She recently said something beautiful, "I just wish everybody could recognize that all the other stuff matters." After she decided to experiment with having fun when we went out in nature and did our studies outdoors, she said, "It was so interesting for me, because I didn't get sleepy, and I could actually focus on my work."

**Q:** Her body was relaxing, and her heart was being nurtured.

**Hazemach:** Exactly. Before, she didn't want to be interacting with the teachers. She just wanted to teach herself by studying and studying because she thought it was the way to learn, and then she discovered that she enjoyed it a lot more when she understood the teacher's perspective on why learning can be fun. So her subjects are becoming more interesting to her, and the service projects feel meaningful, and she's starting to ask deep questions.

She said that her biggest question right now is who she really is. And what a question, you know? But that's what we're hoping for, that they are asking big, important questions like that, "Who am I, really?"

The first real step toward growth is when you can ask those big questions — who am I, and what am I here for? — and not just put your head in the sand and study because that's what everybody else is doing.

Burying yourself in books isn't going to take you to happiness, which is the ultimate goal, right? The ultimate goal is to discover joy, and people mistakenly believe they're going to find it through studying all the time. But it doesn't get results.

**Q:** Shawn Achor concluded from his research that we have it backward in our society — you study so that you can get money and be happy someday, only it doesn't happen, because “someday” never comes, and you keep thinking that just one more thing will finally make you happy. But if you can be happy right now it's a powerful aid to performing extremely well in the present moment and getting the external rewards you might be looking for.

**Hazemach:** I remember having so much fun with basketball, and how I always played better when I was having fun, but when I got to high school the coaches were very intense, probably because their jobs were on the line, and a number of us couldn't play to the best of our abilities, and we didn't enjoy it, and it was scary because we were constantly in fear of the coach getting angry and yelling at us.

We were successful insofar as we put in a lot of work, but we could never achieve our true potential because we were being held back emotionally and we were constantly being forced to externalize. In the meantime, we were internalizing all of this anger, and we would get upset at ourselves every time we made a mistake. You can't play freely if you're getting upset at yourself. It's one of the biggest blocks I've seen for athletes, where they're punishing themselves inside for their errors, and for not playing perfectly.

**Q:** There were two sports psychologists in the 1970s who studied the qualities that separated champion athletes from the people who could never quite make it into the top ranks. They found that the best athletes were able to change directions. They were able to say, “Maybe I goofed up, but the game starts now.” Whereas the second-tier athletes were forever blaming themselves, getting down on themselves, and beating themselves up and lashing themselves for their mistakes.

**Hazemach:** It's something I learned in karate. It's called beginner's mind — it's a Zen concept, and we don't actually use those terms in karate, but it's there in the culture all the same, where you're always approaching things as if you're a complete beginner.

When you get your black belt, one of the questions on the test is, “What does the black belt signify?” — and the correct answer is that it's the very

beginning. You're just starting, and you constantly come to train with the attitude that I'm just a beginner, so you aren't going to be hard on yourself for making mistakes. You're never looking down on yourself, "Oh, I'm so bad." You're saying, "I am always in the place of a beginner, and there is always an upward direction for me to go. There's always more for me to reach up to." You're always trying to improve from where you are. It's very powerful to be able to forget all of the negative things and start fresh.

Whenever I made a mistake, I would laugh — that was how I broke the tendency to get discouraged. I would laugh. I have the same problem with piano, and whenever I make a mistake, I laugh, "Oh, that sounded funny," and I'll move on. I wouldn't laugh at other people, and it isn't a mean laugh, it's just about not taking life so seriously. At the end of the day, it's something we can laugh at and enjoy and have a lot of fun with.

It's fundamental to the approach we take in the Living Wisdom Schools, where mistakes are taken lightly because they're an expected and necessary part of the learning process. It frees the students from the tremendous pressure that comes from the idea that you're either perfect or you're failing. It allows them to move on without beating themselves up, and just find the joy in fixing the mistakes and moving on.



# Appendices





## Appendix 1. Education for Life Resources

*Education for Life* (the book). *Education for Life* presents a revolutionary system that teaches children to flower into full maturity. (<https://livingwisdomschool.org/education-for-life-the-book/>) Read online, download a PDF, or order.

*Head & Heart: How a Balanced Education Nurtures Happy Children Who Thrive in School & Life*. The companion volume to this book. (<https://livingwisdomschool.org/academics-living-wisdom-school/>) Read online, download a free PDF, or order.

Education for Life Website. Comprehensive information about the Education for Life approach to transforming schools. (<http://www.edforlife.org/>)

Education for Life Schools:

Palo Alto, CA

<https://www.livingwisdomschool.org>

Nevada City, CA

<http://www.livingwisdom.org/>

Portland, OR

<http://livingwisdomportland.org/>

Seattle, WA

<http://livingwisdomschoolseattle.org/>

Assisi, Italy

<http://www.livingwisdomschoolassisi.com/>

Ljubljana, Slovenia

<http://www.sola-lila.si/>



## Appendix 2. Education for Life and the Living Wisdom Schools

As of this writing, in mid-2022, there are six thriving Education for Life Schools: in Palo Alto and Nevada City, California; Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; Ljubljana, Slovenia; and Assisi, Italy.

(You can find brief descriptions of the schools on this page: <http://edforlife.org/about/#schools>.)

The appellation “Living Wisdom School” refers to schools that follow the Education for Life philosophy, and that were founded under the auspices of Ananda Sangha. (The first school was started at Ananda Village in 1972.)

Thanks to the success of these schools, the good news about this inspiring new broad-spectrum approach to academic excellence has spread to organizations that have started or plan to start their own schools that will be based on the Education for Life philosophy and methods, but that will not be formally associated with Ananda. These schools can generally be referred to as “Education for Life Schools” but they are not, strictly speaking, Living Wisdom Schools.

Because this book is based on the experience of the original schools, the terms “Living Wisdom School” and “LWS” are used throughout.



## Appendix 3. Research that Supports Education for Life

To obtain a PDF copy of this book with clickable hyperlinks, visit the website of the Palo Alto Living Wisdom High School: [www.livingwisdomhighschool.org](http://www.livingwisdomhighschool.org). In the PDF, you can follow the links to articles below that support the principles and practices of Education for Life.

Most education research focuses on how teaching methods affect academic performance, but forty-five years of experience have shown us that practices that enhance a child's inner development can powerfully contribute to their academic success.

(If you come across supporting research, please let us know. You can send us a message at [www.livingwisdomhighschool.org/contact](http://www.livingwisdomhighschool.org/contact).)

### Teaching/Academics

Education for Life online teacher development: <http://edforlife.org/courses/>. For teachers-in-training, and for continuing teacher education.

[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 results 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 refined feelings 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). 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.

[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, and 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 concepts 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.”

## 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](#). Posted on the LiveScience website. 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.

## 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 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.](#)