

MAKING A DIFFERENCE:

How Teachers and Parents Created a Unique School Model

by Jo Bennett

Preface:

This project began with a short conversation with two of the founding teachers at a progressive, parental involvement, child-development, project-based public school in the western United States. A good deal of this history is culled from the four founding teachers, to shed light on the core, founding philosophy and what this philosophy looked like in the classrooms. Other participants have added to this, but since the teachers for many years were perceived to be the “keepers of the flame,” their view is given as a central viewpoint, with other comments to add color and life to the telling.

I have chosen this focus in order to remain genuine, true, and accurate to the original vision and philosophy—and not dilute it by trying to tell everyone’s story or blend the stories of multiple stakeholders. This vision is what helped them develop a sense of commitment that they were making a difference. Their ability to work together despite opposition and issues is how this school has remained. Their comments and insights are included here as a way to try to tell their story, or intention, with truth.

This record is an ode to their commitment and the difference they have made.

Quote 1 from a student

We just adored our teachers.

Quote 2 from a parent

I will always be grateful that there was a public-school option that included parent participation, parent education, social-emotional learning, field trips, cooking, and real-life skills.

Quote 3 from a teacher

I think we're a fluke. One of the few flukes. And a lot of schools don't make it as alternatives; a lot of them have ended—unless they were private schools or run by churches.

A short overview of the book:

Jo: How did you get started?

Pat Steadman: Well, we started from a group of parents, coming out of a local nursery school—a parent cooperative nursery school. It was a particular parent cooperative that was very concerned with child development. The parents loved the atmosphere at that school and wanted to continue that for their children at the elementary level. They set up the environment. The children came in and worked on activities, and the teachers moved around. The teachers taught and worked with the children based on their interests. I remember talking to Angela—I warned her. I said, “You need to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

The classroom was the domain of learning and the source of decision-making. And the classroom, with its teacher, has been the driving force of the curriculum and the institution. The elements that were developed, implemented, and institutionalized from the early days include the following:

- writer's workshop
- holistic (whole book) reading
- manipulatives math instruction
- hands-on science projects
- integrated curriculum
- integrated art
- social and emotional learning (class agendas)
- early beach trips, for class bonding and developing life skills
- extended overnight field trip (at the end of the year)
- project-based learning
- parents in the classroom
- a paid, part-time instructional assistant (IA) in each class
- a governing board (made up of teachers and parents), a decision-making body

Contents: Prologue to the Teachers. 1. Institutional Agility. A Brief, Early History. 2. Parental Involvement Framework: Communication. Parent Education. Decision-Making.

Volunteering. Collaborating with the Community. Education at School (the Curriculum) at Home. 3.The Evolution of the Framework. 4.The Rich Curriculum of Projects and Integrated Curriculum. 5. Role of Social Emotional Education. 6. Experiential Learning. 7.Accountability & National Climate. 8. Benefits of the School and Why Caring About Education Matters. 9. Elements of a School and Parental Involvement-- Reimagined. 10. Closing Thoughts. Endnotes.