

## The River School's Educational Vision

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### Vision

Peter Senge<sup>1</sup> defines vision as a visual image which shapes the mission of an organization. The River School has as its vision the student as a **self-actualized, independent learner**. This means that we want our students to have a strong sense of self - self-motivated, self-disciplined, self-reliant - who take responsibility for their lives, instead of blaming others, making excuses, or justifying self; and who contribute to their families, communities, and planet.

We organize our school so that our students display qualities of:

- Responsibility
- Respect
- Responsiveness
- Resourcefulness

the four R's of our *implicit curriculum*. It is the responsibility of every public school to educate citizens who are conscious, responsible human beings. Thus, in addition to our *explicit curriculum* teaching the core subjects, our *implicit curriculum* focuses on developing the character habits of conscious, responsible citizens, necessary to a vibrant democracy.

### History

The River School has completed eight years of growth and refinement, culminating in winning a California Distinguished School Award in May 2003. While a fairly young school, the underlying philosophy and theory for educating the self-actualized, independent learner has been in development and refinement for nearly thirty years. This educational philosophy began in a small school in Hawaii in 1972 and was initially called "Individual Education,"<sup>2</sup> the result of a collaboration between a Catholic nun, Sr. Joan Madden, and an Adlerian psychologist, Dr. Raymond Corsini. Linda Inlay, the director of the River School, was trained by Sr. Joan Madden and spent her formative years as a teacher and later as vice principal in this program, which is now called "Ho'ala Education." Ho'ala, which means "awakening of the self" is also the name of the independent school that Sr. Joan and Linda Inlay started in 1986. Inlay brought the Ho'ala Education program to the River School because she found that it encourages personal and social responsibility and creative problem solving skills to help actualize the River School's vision of the independent, self-actualized learner.

### Underlying Assumptions

The paradigm that operates at the River School and at Ho'ala is essentially different from most schools. This paradigm begins with two assumptions: 1/ that human beings are decision makers whose essential nature moves toward self-determination. Thus, the most effective way to achieve this vision of the self-actualized, independent learner is, not by focusing on it directly and "making" students learn and behave independently. When parents and teachers take the responsibility for making the students learn or behave, the students feel less of the ownership of their learning, and more dependency on the adults to do it for them. While parents and teachers are coming from a place of concern for the students in helping, such an attitude is disempowering and results in loss of confidence in the students of their own abilities. This may be a reason why in ninth grade there are a larger number of dropouts and expulsions. High school demands students who are self-reliant and are responsible for their learning.

What we do instead is to orchestrate the entire school culture to provide opportunity after opportunity for students to realize that they are responsible for

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Timothy D. Evans, Raymond J. Corsini, George M. Gazda, "Individual Education and the 4Rs," *Educational Leadership*, September 1990.

who they are by the choices they make. They are not victims of life, but in charge of their lives. The choices - good AND “poor” - that they make in their learning are seen as valuable lessons towards being responsible for their own learning. Inherent in this assumption is another assumption:

2/ that we trust that our students are capable of achieving this sense of responsibility with practice over time. Like anything else, to become a good decision maker, one must practice by being given choices, that are true and appropriate, over and over again. In truth, that is how human beings have learned throughout the millennia. We trust that through this process, our students will become independent learners who continue to behave appropriately when the teacher leaves the room or when a substitute is teaching; who do their homework independently without parents nagging and checking or without teachers making them stay in during recess to complete assignments.

### Basic Curricular Organization

To be effective, we must address all aspects of the school culture to forward our vision. In other words, a systems approach to organizing a school. From governance to discipline to how teachers talk with students, to how dances are organized and conferences are facilitated; every part of the school’s culture must be aligned to support the realization of the school’s vision

To begin organizing our school, we make the distinction between and focus on aligning two kinds of curricula: *the explicit* and *the implicit*. The *explicit* curriculum includes the standards, textbooks, and assessments related to reading, writing, and arithmetic. The *implicit or hidden curriculum* is comprised of the assumptions and values that permeate the school’s culture: the organizational, disciplinary, and decision-making structures in a school, and the ways that parents, students, and faculty communicate.<sup>3</sup> Every school has a hidden or implicit curriculum whether the staff pays attention to it or not. And everything within the school’s culture communicates implicit messages from how a teacher disciplines a student to how parent conferences are run to what’s on a bulletin board. As John Goodlad, professor emeritus at University of Southern California put it:

We recognized, however, that there is both an explicit and an implicit curriculum. The latter sometimes is referred to as the “hidden curriculum” but this term is, I think, misleading. It is little more hidden than is the explicit curriculum of textbooks and workbooks. Describing the implicit curriculum is tricky in that it is inferred from the handling of the explicit curriculum and from expectations, rules, and regulations that are not always recognized.

And he also said in the same article:

The gap between the rhetoric of individual flexibility, originality, and creativity in our statements of educational goals and the cultivation of these in our schools reveals a monstrous hypocrisy.<sup>4</sup>

Simply put, we want everything and every person in the school’s culture “to walk the talk.” This is a lofty goal, which we never fully reach, but toward which we constantly strive.

We therefore involve the three major groups in a school- students, teachers, and most importantly, the parents - in communicating the implicit message that the student is capable of being responsible for his or her own learning. Teaching parents another way of parenting the middle schooler is a key piece to the success of our school. The U.S. Department of Education published a short booklet called *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning* in which is the following quote that

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<sup>3</sup> John Goodlad talks of this distinction in the landmark text, *A Place Called School* (MacGraw-Hill, 1984) and in an earlier article “What Some Schools and Classrooms Teach,” *Educational Leadership* (April 1983).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

talks of the importance of the role of parents in the learning process:  
Parents are the child's first and most influential teachers.  
If parents are not effective teachers, then in most cases,  
the school will have far greater difficulty being effective  
. . . What parents do to help their children learn is more  
important to academic success than how well-off the  
family is.<sup>5</sup>

All educators know that the attitudes for learning start in the home. If parents communicate that:

- they trust their child to be responsible for their learning,
- making mistakes or "poor" choices along the way are valuable learning opportunities instead of raising anxiety in the parents to fix it for their child
- it is okay for their child is encounter appropriate kinds of adversity to strengthen character and build confidence;

then their child will more likely become self-confident, self-reliant, self-disciplined and resilient. In order to convey this message to our students, parents have learned to trust the staff in how we support the students through this process; and they have attended parenting sessions provided by the school to learn new empowering ways of parenting.

## Theory of Personality

Despite the challenges of starting a school from nothing as all start-up charter schools have had to face, the River School has steadily improved and been successful, growing from 48 students in its first year to 185 in its 7<sup>th</sup> year, and culminating in receiving the California Distinguished School Award in May 2003. Our success is due to this holistic, coherent approach that answers two fundamental questions that should underlie every educational program:

1/ "What is the nature of a human being?" which is answered by our theory of personality

2/ "Under what conditions do human beings learn best?" which is answered by the concomitant educational philosophy based on brain research.

1/ **Theory of Personality:** The theory of personality is based on the work of Alfred Adler, a cohort of Freud, who, unlike Freud, believed that the behavior of human beings is determined less by being the victim of the forces from within (heredity) and without (conditioning), and more by the choices they make in regards to two basic needs for affirmation: the sense of belonging and the sense of significance. A person's sense of belonging and significance is augmented by:

- being listened to
- being taken seriously
- feeling needed<sup>6</sup>

When these two basic needs are fulfilled, then students do not act out to get these needs met and instead focus on the task of learning. Thus, the River School structures the school in order to provide for these two basic needs.

Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs, a student of Adler, theorized that human beings are teleological by nature, that they are purposive decision makers and self-determining. They learn by experience, by the choices they make. Buckminster Fuller echoed this concept when he said that human beings learn primarily by making mistakes. Furthermore, Dreikurs believed that the home is the most significant element in preparing students to be effective decision-makers and the school, a distant second. The collaboration of the two is a powerful combination to support students in acquiring knowledge about their world, and, more importantly, about themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> *What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning*, U.S. Department of Education, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> H. Scott Glenn, *Raising Self-Reliant Children in an Self-Indulgent Age*, (Rocklin, California, Prima Publishing, 1989).

## Educational Philosophy

From these assumptions of the nature of a human being, the River School evolved an educational philosophy, an amalgam of ideas that answer the question: ***Under what conditions do human beings learn best?*** The mixture includes democratic principles from Individual Education, brain-based learning, progressive education, Vatican II, and the philosophers, J. Krishnamurti and Buckminster Fuller. Here is a sampling of the ideas:

- Human beings learn primarily by making mistakes. Fear of making mistakes impedes learning.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a school's learning environment should support students in becoming less afraid of making mistakes and lessen situations where fear is used to motivate student behavior. Fear reduces the brain's ability to deal with complex learning situations and results in reactive responses by the primitive brain.
  - Use of other extrinsic means of motivation - like rewards and punishment<sup>8</sup> - impede learning because they go against the nature of a human being who desires being self-determining and, therefore, resists manipulation. These ideas fit with Adler's view of human beings as decision makers.
  - The use of these extrinsic methods implicitly assumes that human beings need such measures in order to learn. The assumption the River School makes is that human beings are innately geared to learn. . . unless the school and home environment - the assumptions, structures, and social mores - implicitly send messages that obstruct learning (e.g., students cannot be trusted to be self-motivated to learn).
- There should be as many choices as age appropriate so that students learn through trial and error what works and doesn't work to support themselves. We assume and trust in our students' innate ability to make good decisions for himself or herself with practice over time. This organic approach lessens extrinsic control and nurtures a student's intrinsic motivation to learn, and ultimately, results in his/her growing confidence in self to meet and overcome challenges. For example: We allow students the responsibility of bringing field trip permission slips back by the due date. If they don't, the natural consequence is that they are not allowed to attend. Parents are not called to bring in the permission slip as this is disrespectful by impinging on their time.
- As the adults, parents and teachers are responsible to determine which choices are given to students that are appropriate for them to make. Two principles from Vatican II operate here and dovetail nicely with Adlerian principles. *Collegiality* and *Subsidiarity* were radical ideas brought forth in Vatican II. *Collegiality* refers to decisions being made through consensus by those the decision affects. *Subsidiarity* refers to decisions being made at the lowest level possible. These are behavioral definitions of how we view *respect for others*.
  - Parents and teachers as the adults have to decide what decisions are appropriate for students to make and what are appropriate for adults to make. Some of the difficulties in the classroom and the home come from the adults making decisions where it is appropriate for students to make them, and also from allowing students to make decisions where it is appropriate for adults to make them. At the River School, parents and teachers continually reflect on the line between the two realms of decision making.
  - On the continuum of control where the ends represent mostly teacher control and the other end, mostly student control; neither is appropriate for the

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<sup>7</sup> Renata and Geoffrey Caine (*Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*, Addison Wesley, 1994) and J. Krishnamurti (*Education and the Significance of Life*, Harper 1981) are two of many who believe that fear is a major block of learning.

<sup>8</sup> Much of the writing of Alfie Kohn discuss this resistance to outside control. Kohn's *Punished By Rewards*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1999) cites copious research on the ill effects of rewarding students for learning.

vision of our school. Teachers controlling most decision-making create sheep-like students; students controlling most decision making create chaos and rude, self-centered students. A vibrant democracy requires citizens who are involved critical thinkers and who are willing to collaborate for the good of the whole.

When the system or culture in the school or at home follows the principles of collegiality and subsidiarity and encourages time to reflect on appropriate decision making; then students are less likely to be resentful, learn from the choices given to them, and don't resist learning as a means to act out.

- The brain also learns best when learning is presented in a coherent whole. The brain seeks meaning out of chaos, more specifically, seeks patterns to make sense of chaos. Therefore, curricular design must include interconnecting the standards across the disciplines wherever possible and imbuing the presentation of this coherent whole with personal meaning. The brain remembers best when discrete pieces of knowledge are interconnected by an overarching theme or idea that is meaningful to the students. Besides, the world is interconnected and interdependent and thus, teaching students knowledge about our world should reflect these same qualities. In the next section are examples of how the River School creates the explicit curriculum.

To recap the conditions in which human beings learn best:

1. Fear should be lessened as much as possible, especially from parents.
2. Making mistakes should be encouraged in a process that must include reflection about choices and consequences so that students learn self-control and better choice making.
3. Wherever possible, students should be given as many choices as appropriate, using the concepts of Collegiality and Subsidiarity to guide what choices should be given.
4. Meeting the basic needs for belonging and significance by creating opportunities where students are listened to, taken seriously, and feel needed will lessen the emotional obstacles to learning.
5. Connecting knowledge into a meaningful whole makes concepts easier to understand and retain and reflects the nature of our world.

### Explicit Curricular Development

**The explicit curriculum:** In the explicit curriculum, we follow brain-based principles by blending the state standards of the disciplines, connecting them through an overarching theme and essential question. We connect knowledge in this way because the brain learns best when the disparate state standards are connected into a meaningful whole and applying that knowledge to answer a question or solve a problem, rather than learning math separate from language arts, separate from science, and so forth. The knowledge and skills that our students learn are not to be used separate from one another, but used together in real-world jobs to solve problems.

One year the essential question to blend the standards for social studies (ancient and world history), science standards, language arts and visual arts was:

**“What evidence do you have that technology (applied science) shaped culture through the ages and culture shaped technology?”**

This becomes the context and the lens by which our students view all of the state standards. Rather than learning one more thing in a laundry list of standards, students are connecting the standards through their attempts to answer this question.

Another assumption we make is that human beings are creatures who seek personal meaning. This is what distinguishes us from other animals and, for middle schoolers; this is a critical key to opening up their interest and ownership for learning. Recognizing that personal meaning is the spark to ignite the students' passion and interest, the teachers began the year with lessons on the *art of questions* - what makes a good question - in order to engage students in asking their own questions. They created a list of qualities of a good question:

- it has more than one answer;
- it causes one to ask more questions.

Teachers also infuse their teaching with their personal answer to the question, “So why do we have to teach these standards?” For one teacher, it was important to teach the science standards in answering the essential question because technology has had disastrous results on planetary health. For one of the social studies teachers, it was important to have her students realize that despite the diversity among cultures across time, the aspects of our humanity show up in each culture and connect us across time and across the globe. Hopefully, through this modeling, students will be able to answer their own question: “Why should I learn this stuff?”

The three teams in the school created their own cultures as a “test” of their understanding of culture. In the process, each culture was challenged by war, pestilence, natural disasters; and in the science class, the science standards were taught through the solutions to these challenges (applied science). For example, as the cultures are attacked by marauding Visigoths, in science, students will learn about simple machines to construct catapults, this process mirroring the way in which technology was developed to meet a societal need.

Understanding of the essential ideas was assessed through creative solutions to mini-projects, a simulation culminating activity, and an end of the year essay, “*What evidence do you have that technology shaped culture and culture shaped technology?*” In visual art, they created images and objects to share their understanding of the underlying patterns they noticed through the cultures.

In 2002, we selected three essential focus questions from Dr. Edward T. Clark’s book, *Designing and Implementing Integrated Curriculum*<sup>9</sup> to integrate and make connections among the social science and science standards:

6 <sup>th</sup> grade	“What does it mean to be human?”
7 <sup>th</sup> grade	“What is our relationship to the earth?”
8 <sup>th</sup> grade	“How can a U.S. citizen act responsibly in a global community?”

Since adoption of these questions, we have developed a list of sub-questions and student questions in order to develop the units of study to bring meaning and connections to our teaching of state standards.

## Summary

It is this **systems approach**, this aligning of all the elements in the school’s culture - explicit and implicit - to follow our theory and philosophy that is the root of the success of our school. . As Senge said:

System thinking makes understandable the subtlest aspects of the learning organization - the new way individuals perceive themselves and their world. At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind - from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something “out there” to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.<sup>10</sup>

By paying attention to the context, we create an environment in which our students become strong individuals who flourish and learn as conscious, responsible human beings, necessary for the maintenance of a healthy democratic society.

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<sup>9</sup> Edward T. Clark, *Designing and Implementing Integrated Curriculum*, Holistic Press, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*