

Integral Elementary Offers an Alternative

La Jolla Village News - August 31, 2006

by Adriane Tillman

Testing is the benchmark of the American educational system right now, but not all schools believe in its validity. The Integral Elementary School of La Jolla, 8660 Gilman Drive, will open its doors to an alternative style of teaching on Sept. 5.

Integral Elementary roots its educational system in its mission to create life-long learners, and to help students find their purpose in life. In order to do so, co-founder Carla Gerstein believes that the material must be interesting and meaningful to the students. Teachers can create an entire lesson plan out of a subject that one child finds enthralling. If it's volcanoes, teachers can introduce the literature, math, science and societal/cultural references surrounding that phenomenon.

"We will often start the subject by posing a number of questions to find out what they know already about the topic and then what they're interested in learning about," Gerstein said.

Instead of handing out tests about the subject, teachers will evaluate the students using the Rubrics method, a chart that indicates the intent of the lesson and the conditions for learning. Students will be allowed to demonstrate their knowledge in various ways, including orally, written or artistically, and will be judged on a scale of one to four. In level one, students might have to show that they understand the volcano is part of the earth. Level two might ask students to show knowledge that the core of the earth is heated and pushing upwards, Gerstein said.

"If they haven't learnt it, we know that we need to continue on with the lesson until they demonstrate the knowledge level that we want," Gerstein said.

Founder and Principal Prapanna Smith said he believes that the American educational system has forsaken authentic learning for test-taking and that the obsession actually hinders students from learning. Smith was inspired by the Integral method that originated at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre for Education in India, where he saw older children acting as big brothers and sisters to younger children, instead of bullies and tyrants.

Similarly, Integral Elementary aims to focus on cooperative learning in which students build on each other's strengths. Students also will not be split by grade

level but into three groups by ability. Teachers will spend the first month getting to know the children and evaluating their aptitude, Gerstein said.

The school will also incorporate yoga and meditation into its curriculum to help develop the mind, body and soul connection. Meditation and yoga are tools that enable students to center themselves, develop their mind-body connection and to tap into their inner resources, according to Gerstein.

Twenty-five students are currently enrolled, with three teachers, and the door remains open for late enrollments. Students who join the first year will receive a discounted tuition that they will continue to pay even as rates rise in succeeding years.

Kindergarten costs \$7,750 per year and grades one through six cost \$8,500.

Integral Elementary is a step in the founder's vision to create an integral educational system from preschool through high school. Smith founded Rainbow Kids Integral Preschool in Mira Mesa in 2002 as a way to introduce families to the Integral concept in a relatively risk-free environment. The preschool now enrolls 100 students.

For more information about Integral Elementary, call (858) 450-4321 or visit www.integralelementary.com.