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Ohlone: An open door

It's 8:15 a.m. and June Fuji's fourth- and fifth-graders in Room 13 at Ohlone School are gathered on the area rug in the classroom checking out their activity options for the day.

Fuji has written the day's schedule on the board. "This is your opportunity to choose from the contract you put together," she tells her class.

The students grab their clipboards and fill out their schedule forms. Some plan to edit written reports on Fort Ross in preparation for a class overnight trip. Others have reading to do, and still others will work on math problems.

Some work in groups, others by themselves. Fuji oversees all of this, with the help of several classroom aides.

At the morning's end, and maybe once again in the afternoon, students will meet on the rug to "debrief" about the day's experiences.

Fuji and the other Ohlone teachers spend a minimal amount of time in front of their classes lecturing or teaching the class as a whole. Instead, they serve as guides.

"The teacher is there to facilitate what happens, not to direct what happens," said Jim Mathiott, the principal of Ohlone when the school was founded in 1971. "The child is there to enhance their learning, not just to do what the teacher says. It takes a teacher who's willing to trust kids."

"Our mission is to provide a child-centered learning experience that is stimulating and challenging in an informal environment," reiterates Michael Kass, principal at Ohlone since 1990.

To an outsider, the informal environment may seem like uncontrolled chaos, but it is actually well-choreographed. "Some people's stereotypes call us an unstructured school," Kass said. "(But) teachers have to plan, to provide the superstructure," in order to be able to give students an array of choices.

At the beginning of the year, teachers help students come up with contracts outlining their short- and long-term goals. By third grade, students create their own schedules, manage their own time, and make decisions based on the choices they are given in class.

"Children have to be fairly resourceful and able to operate somewhat independently," Kass said. "(They) are expected to and taught to take responsibility for themselves. For a child that needs a continual reminder . . . that doesn't happen here much."

An important part of the Ohlone philosophy is to allow children to make as many decisions as possible, no matter how small.

"Make a good decision about where you're working," said teacher Bill Overton to his third- through fifth-graders. He has assigned a writing time when students need to work independently. They can crawl up into the loft (a fixture in every classroom), curl up on a couch, sit at a table, or stretch out on the carpet, as long as they are working quietly. Soft guitar music plays in the background.

The freedom and autonomy Ohlone students have is what attracted Lynn Winkle's family to the school.

"We chose Ohlone for our first child because we thought she needed a lot of flexibility in order to work," said Winkle, whose daughter Brooke, now in college, and son Bryce, a senior at Gunn, both attended Ohlone. Her

children, she said, still value things they learned at Ohlone, such as being able to work with people and plan their own work.

"Ohlone kids are taught to be their own advocates. (Brooke) would go to the teacher and say 'I need more work.'"

Rather than simply giving her another book to read or report to write and sending her off by herself, her teachers would try to find two or three other students in a similar situation so they could work together, Winkle recalls.

By some standards, many of Ohlone's practices may seem slightly unconventional. Students call their teachers and other adults by their first names to foster a feeling of equality among adults and children. There are no bells to mark the beginning or end of school or recess time. Instead, teachers use verbal or visual signals, such as hand motions or an open door to indicate the next activity.

"The idea is for kids just to be conscious of what they need to do in an unintrusive way," Kass said.

All but two of Ohlone's classes are multi-graded. Children generally stay in a class with the same teacher for two years, or in some cases three. There is one kindergarten through second grade class, and one third through fifth grade class.

Letter grades are not given at the school, and there is minimal homework. Students are given a written evaluation at the of the year. Ohlone was the first school in the Palo Alto district to eliminate letter grades, "not because we didn't believe in evaluation, but because we thought there was a better way," Mathiott said.

"Not all parents can be happy with the ambiguity that occurs," he acknowledged. But when the multi-graded classrooms were established, "we saw real advantages of having older and younger in the same classroom."

Ohlone teachers work hard to blur lines between grade levels. Scanning her classroom of kindergartners, first-graders and second-graders working on pumpkin stories, learning about bats and gluing bright clear paper shapes, Carol Miller says "most have one foot in one grade and one in another. We try to erase that," creating a classroom full of learners, called "olders" and "youngers."

There is a flurry of movement and lots of happy noise in Patrick Lee's kindergarten and first grade class. In one corner, children sort through piles of buttons and keys. In another, kids are writing life time lines, and a third group uses rubber stamps to make patterns. To an outsider, it's virtually impossible to distinguish the ages of the children, and that's the point at Ohlone.

"I don't want to differentiate" among students, Lee said. "The ranges are so wide."

Marilyn Simbeck's son is a fourth-grader at Ohlone, and he is thriving in a multi-grade classroom.

"We have found for his personality, being in a split class, he doesn't always have to go to the teacher. He can go to an older child," she said. "The first year you're the younger and the next year you're the older. There are a lot of opportunities for kids to develop independence."

That opportunity means a lot of planning for the teachers.

It's rewarding, but a lot of work, says Avery Walker, who teaches second- and third-graders. "It's a lot to manage," she said. "There's a lot of accountability." But her pride in her students is apparent, as well as her trust in their abilities.

The idea is to give children the freedom to explore with some gentle guidance and direction.

"The hope is that children will learn, really love to learn," Kass said, "so they'll leave with that flame lit."