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A tale of two schools

Palo Alto's alternative schools, Ohlone and Hoover, celebrate two decades of teaching from two completely different perspectives

by Elizabeth Darling

In the early 1970s, elementary schools in Palo Alto looked fairly similar to one another. But this was a time of experimentation and innovation, and schools were no exception. Teachers at the new Ohlones Elementary School, which opened in 1969 on East Charleston, saw an opportunity they couldn't pass up. They wanted to create a school based on "open education," a concept taking hold nationwide at the time. The learning environment would be flexible, and the outcome would not be how much students learned and what grades they got, but how they learned, and that they enjoyed the process.

"The faculty wanted to find something better," said Win Lora, who taught fifth and sixth grade at Ohlone for more than 20 years beginning in 1971. "The role of the teacher wasn't the source of all knowledge, but was the facilitator."

There would be no letter grades, classes would have combinations of students in different grades, and it would be a more relaxed environment.

"We were wanting to have students participate in how the learning process would come about. The process itself is just as important as the knowledge. It's OK to make a mistake. That's part of the learning process," said Lora.

In 1971, Ohlone--which changed campuses and dropped the "s" to conform with the spelling of the name of the Native American tribe that was indigenous to this area--received the first of three years' worth of funding. Ohlone was designated an official districtwide "alternative school" by the Palo Alto school board in 1976 when more than 50 percent of its students came from other parts of the city.

Teachers voted to make the switch to an alternative school. Then-Principal Jim Mathiott said that without teacher buy-in and commitment, the venture would have failed.

Parents whose children were at Ohlone had the option of sending them to another neighborhood school as the transformation began. Very few did.

"Parents were looking for classrooms where children could move at their own learning pace, where they wouldn't be told 'you can't,' where the child would not be made to feel unsuccessful because they hadn't yet learned some skill. (And) parents of really gifted kids could feel really comfortable," Mathiott said.

Says current Ohlone Principal Michael Kass, "It's an open school: open doors, open policies and open relationships."

About the same time, a group of parents, reacting to the experimentation going on at Ohlone and at other schools in the state, wanted a more structured environment, a school that emphasized the basics in a rigorous academic climate.

They called on the school district to form a second alternative school founded on a more traditional educational approach, with one teacher teaching a whole class of students in the same grade at one time. It would be a consistent, orderly place to study and learn, with a strong focus on academics.

In 1974, Hoover Elementary School became the district's second alternative school.

"What Hoover did was make an extra effort to protect instructional time," said Roger Wilder, principal at Hoover for six years during the 1980s. He hastens to add that the school was not a stereotypical back-to-basics program, but it had a broad curriculum including science and the arts. Homework is assigned four nights a week starting in kindergarten.

Hoover, according to the school's 20-year-old written philosophy, "puts primary emphasis on the basic academic skills and subject matter and the establishment of good study habits."

"It's a very orderly school. Kids know what's expected," said Kay Van Der Berg, principal since 1988. "I call it a school of choice that emphasizes basic skills. (There's a) clear understanding of what the expectations are."

While teachers present the same curriculum, the environments at Ohlone and Hoover for learning and the approaches they take are distinctly different.

The emphasis at Ohlone is on learning how to learn, and enjoying the process. Teachers guide children rather than direct them, helping them to learn to express themselves in writing and orally, with a joy of learning.

The emphasis at Hoover is academics, in a "more structured" setting, to use Van Der Berg's term. Each class is self-contained, one grade, and offers a comfortable environment for accomplishment and satisfaction in completing assigned tasks.

Two decades after the creation of these unique schools, the contrasts between Ohlone and Hoover are still significant and both still offer parents distinct alternatives to the other nine district schools.

Both schools continue to be immensely popular. Until May 1992, both schools had long waiting lists. Parents would often put their children's names on the lists soon after they were born hoping to make it in.

Now, both schools are in the process of switching to a lottery system. Ohlone will have 25 percent of next year's kindergartners coming from its waiting list and 75 percent from the lottery. By fall 1996, Ohlone will be on a complete lottery system.

Hoover has three lists, in priority order: one for siblings, one for those on the waiting list before May 1992 and one for the lottery. At both schools, siblings have priority to attend.

No matter which school a child attends, there is a crucial ingredient.

"If parents can support the kind of education their child is having, the child is going to feel that support," Mathiott said.

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