Walden School: Educating Students Who Are Destined To Make A Difference

Description

* Updated on Dec. 29, 2016. Walden Schoolâ€™s head of school is now Terra Toscano and Scott Turner is the admissions director.

Welcome to Walden School!

The Walden School in Pasadena is a Pre-K-6th progressive school whose namesake is the famous Walden Pond from Thoreauâ€™s â€œOn Walden Pondâ€•. The school, like Thoreauâ€™s personal journey at Walden Pond, embraces personal discovery, adventure and learning with its students.

Front entryway and head of schoolâ€™s office

Arriving at Walden School on a recent morning, I entered the colorful lobby filled with student art, next to head of school Matt Allioâ€™s glass walled office. I had the opportunity to sit down with Matt before he dashed off to teach a math class. Matt is a brainy, articulate educator who is thoughtful and soft-spoken. Adept at ensuring the school never strays far from its roots, he has bolstered the curriculum with pragmatic, result-oriented programs. His credentials are impeccable, previously serving as head of school at several of Californiaâ€™s most prestigious schools.

In his eight years at Walden, Mattâ€™s leadership has helped to shape a cohesive and distinctive vision for the school. It is a kid-focused, dynamic group of faculty, students and programs that make up this urban school on a shady street in Pasadena. Mattâ€™s tenure at Walden has also led to several one-of-a-kind, signature programs. Thoughtful and introspective, I got the feeling that Matt is simmering with ideas, eager to tackle projects big and small, as he stays close to the students who are his daily inspiration.

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Leading to the K classrooms

â€œWe want to graduate students who will make things better, not just maintain the status quo,â€• Matt told me. *â€œItâ€™s not about the â€˜Iâ€™ but the â€˜we,â€™â€•* he continued. The writer Alfie Kohn is a major influence on the schoolâ€™s philosophy. Kohn has written that progressive schools organize learning around projects, problems and questions rather than â€œlists of facts, skills and separate disciplines,â€• because â€œfacts and skills do matter but only in a context and for a purpose.â€• (Walden literature)

Walden is so interesting I spent more than an hour with Sarah Lougheed-Gill, the admissions director, taking it all in. I gleaned a lot about the school, which definitely resonated with me. An educator and mom, Sarah is enthusiastic about showcasing every aspect of the school. She is outgoing and friendly with a fun, upbeat approach to giving tours, chatting with kids and making visitors feel at home. Janel Umfress, a former Walden mom and now its learning specialist, also joined us.

One of two K-1 classrooms

Sarah explained that the K-1 program draws from some aspects of Montessori influences including mixed ages in the K-1 program. and other elements in the preschool program. There are 210 students in the school, two classes per grade and about 18 kids per class with two teachers.

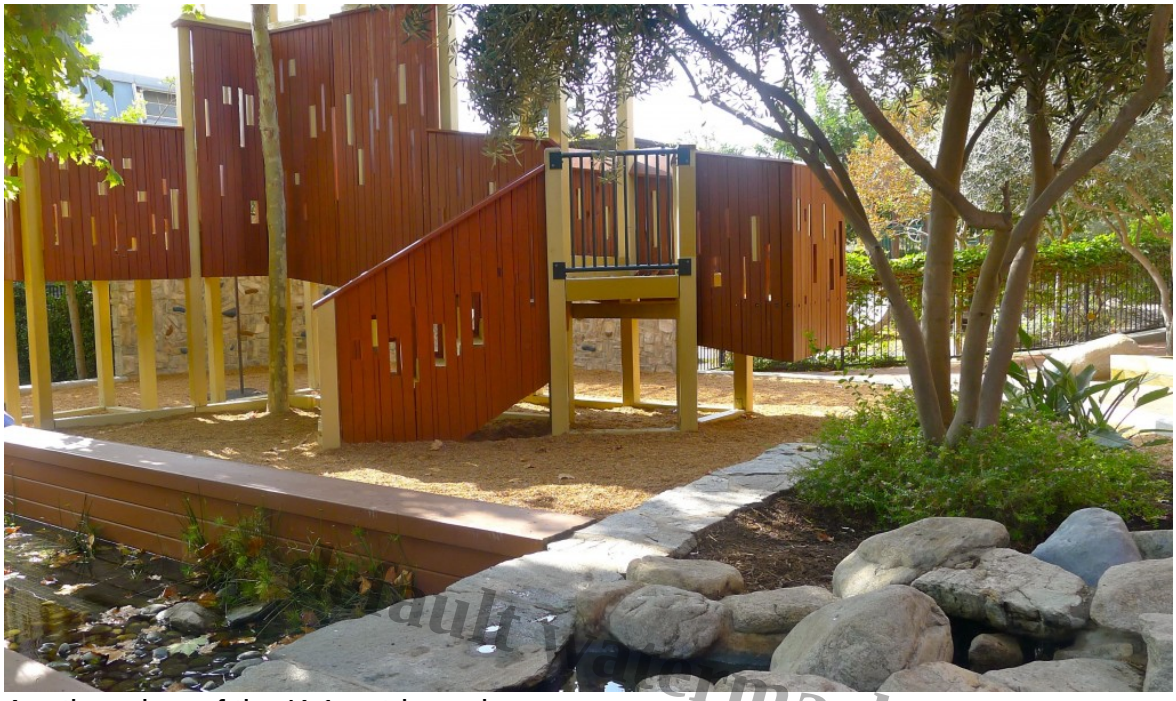
Where kindergartners play

Walden was founded in 1970. Remarkably, 39 percent of the students are ethnically and/or socio-economically diverse. Waldenâ€™s progressive approach means that students, through traditional academic disciplines, are taught and encouraged to question the status quo and develop skills to improve our world. Thinking in the plural is deeply ingrained in the schoolâ€™s philosophy. According to Waldenâ€™s literature, â€œStudents learn academic skills and concepts through experience and Socratic discussion, as well as through direct instruction and practiceâ€•. The day begins and ends with circle time at Walden for all grades. Itâ€™s a time for discussing practical tasks and a time for bonding and reflection.

Waldenâ€™s Pond

Ethnically diverse, with talented faculty and an incredible sense of community (gorgeous family photos adorn several interior walls), the school fosters collaboration over competition, emphasizing the important role of kids in their own education. It has the latest, most advanced teaching tools and is constantly innovating.

Family wall



Another view of the K-1 outdoor play area

The schoolâ€™s 1.3-acre campus is modern and spacious. It is includes 13 classrooms, an art studio, a technology lab, a science lab, a sport court and more. Several years ago, Walden students suggested adding a pond to reflect the schoolâ€™s heritage. Dotted with student-created and inspired projects and shaded with gorgeous greenery, the campus is understated, functional and absolutely marvelous!

The sport court

Matt is especially proud of two unique programs. Walden partners with the USC School of Education, so that Walden teachers receive training and professional development in math from the USC professors. This brings the latest mathematics teaching tools into the classroom on an ongoing basis.

The second program is a Walden partnership with Columbia Universityâ€™s Teachers College where the schoolâ€™s teachers are trained in cutting edge teaching reading and writing techniques. Matt explained that this creates students who are excellent writers.

The Technology Lab

Walden has a technology lab overseen by Drew Gagne (he also runs the outdoor education program). The Tech Labâ€™s work is carefully integrated with the classroom curriculum. While the school uses the most up-to-date-technology, there are no Smart Boards in the classroom, only in the Tech Lab. After talking to teachers, the school realized that Smart Boards in the classroom can create a very teacher-centric model where the teacher is at the front of the room using the Smart Board rather than moving around the room more freely. The willingness to stragetically use technology exhibits a confidence on the part of the school that is instructive and refreshing.

In the music room: drums!

In the music room: guitars!

In the music room: tambourines!

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Rainwater Harvest Demo Tank

Walking around the school, we stopped at a large, vertical metal container. Sarah told me the students created a demonstration tank to reuse rainwater to hydrate plants. It is a work in progress, not yet complete. Yet it is an impressive effort involving science, engineering and a variety of other skills. When finished, it will help the school become more eco-friendly.

The library

If you tour Walden, youâ€™ll receive one of the most useful packetâ€™s Iâ€™ve seen. It includes a *detailed curriculum guide*, grade by grade, describing what each grade will be learning in extensive detail. Check out the â€œMatriculationâ€• section of the website: Walden graduates place at the top independent schools in the area including Barnhart School, Chandler School, Clairbourn School, Flintridge Preparatory School, The Gooden School, High Point Academy, Mayfield Junior School, Marlborough School, Oakwood School, Polytechnic School, The Waverly School, and Westridge School.

Walden is a remarkable elementary school with a clear and compelling progressive approach. Matt Allio and his team have built upon the schoolâ€™s history to create a warm, forward-thinking place, where diversity of all kinds is embraced. It exudes a spirit of adventure, a sense that every student can reach for the stars, grab one and harness it to fit their unique talents. One incredibly articulate 6th grader remarked in a video about Walden that if her next school â€œputs her in a cage,â€• she will find a way to â€œbreak free.â€• Iâ€™m confident that she will!

For more information, visit, www.waldenschool.net

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