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Fairview school takes alternative approach; Curriculum based on Four Harmonies

By JEANNA CUNY , Staff writer

11/03/2002



Austin Weller, 11, plants onions in the garden at the school. Greg Pearson/DFWCN photo

Eight-year-old Alyssa Duarte of Plano concentrated and carefully worked her knitting needles around the loops of yarn. "I'm making a rug," she said as her classmates worked on other projects.

The third-grade student attends the Robert Muller School

of Fairview, a non-profit private school that emphasizes a free learning environment.

The school's director, Vicki Johnston, founded the school in 1986, based on curriculum developed by Robert Muller, a former United Nations assistant secretary general.

"My life dream is to change education," said Johnston, who earned a master's in education.

And, she said she believes that's precisely what she's doing through her alternative approach to education.

She said the concept for a new kind of school began when she was 9.

"A teacher was shaking her finger at a little boy and I spent my years in school thinking there's got to be a better way to learn," she said. "Why should school be boring? Why do we have to sit in these rooms in these rows all day?"

With Johnston at the helm of her own school, learning doesn't take place in the traditionally accepted way.

Children work at their own pace and are free to decide what lessons they study each day and when.

Although Johnston writes the lessons, the basis for them is Muller's curriculum, developed at teachers' request.

The World Core curriculum is based on four precepts: our planetary home and our place in the universe, our place in time, the family of humanity, and the miracle of individual life.

The precepts, called the Four Harmonies, approach every subject imaginable, according to a curriculum summary report.

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In our planetary home and place in the universe, students study all sciences including biology, geology, geography, and astronomy as interrelated aspects of one vast, living system.

"We must form one grand synthesis of the sciences," Johnston said. "When I write the lessons, it's with an attitude of reverence."

Our place in time studies the cause and effect, interrelated events in the cosmos, the biosphere and humanity - including nations, religions, and world organizations.

"The emphasis is on what we can learn from the past to apply in the present to create a harmonious future - informed creativity and innovation in all fields of human endeavor," the report said.

The family of humanity encompasses studies on the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of humanity, such as world population, culture, geography, standards of living, and human groups, which include nations, corporations, and families.

"The inclusion of the heart brings all humanity's sorrows and joys, struggles and accomplishments within the radius of our own caring and sense of responsibility," the document says.

The section on the miracle of individual human life allows students a look at the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels of each human as components of a whole.

"Attention to the human need for optimal nutrition, loving relationships, mental brilliance, and spiritual refreshment lends relevance to this holistic education," the report said.

To encourage open minds, Johnston said no one doctrine is followed. Instead children are exposed to a variety of religions.

Janis Schubert, the school's business manager and parent of two former students, recalled a field trip to a Hindu temple her youngest son participated in.

"There are a lot of things that kids wouldn't otherwise be exposed to," she said. "I went with Michael's class and remember driving back in the car with all these kids singing about Hari Krishna."

Books about a variety of beliefs line bookshelves throughout the school.

Johnston presents ideas from around the world.

"I do mention God," she said. "But I don't get into dogma with them. I use the word soul. It's assumed and built in here that there is a spiritual aspect of life."

That aspect is included in the daily lessons as well.

Native American divination and healing cards explore the world of the Native American's spiritual beliefs and various blessings are used during snack times.

Conversion, however, is something Johnston says isn't happening.

"We aren't trying to convert anybody," she said. "Anybody who is strong in what they believe is not going to feel threatened by us teaching their children the fine aspects that unite all the religions."

Tolerance for religion and for life is an integral part of the school, she said, and impacts even the way students, faculty, and staff interact.

"I read Thomas Gordon's 'Leader Effectiveness Training' and learned you don't hold power over another human being," Johnston said. "You achieve mutual empowerment and I said this is the only way to teach."

Then and there, Johnston said if the principal didn't work, she would give up teaching and do something else with her life.

At the time, she was a new teacher at Amelia Earhart, a Dallas magnet school. When she began implementing Gordon's teaching, her already unruly students took advantage of the situation.

"I became a therapist. I don't know why I wasn't fired because it was a zoo in my classroom," she said. "It was all the ugly stuff that's under artificial discipline, and that's what it is if (the correction) doesn't reach a person's heart."

After two months, students settled into the new approach and began learning in earnest, Johnston said.

Traditional discipline is unnecessary, she said.

"I think punishing children is unethical, if you want to know the truth. Children need to learn how to discipline themselves," she said.

"If a child misbehaves, I still won't punish him. I have to get inside the child and make him not want to do those things."

That philosophy is built into the school's educational system.

"Part of our hidden curriculum is to spend time negotiating," she said. "We work the problem until everyone is happy."

Students discuss the issue back and forth, with a teacher as a mediator until both agree on a solution. As students mature, they become mediators also.

This lesson is taught not only for the sake of the child, but also for sake of humanity, Johnston said.

"The world needs this instead of our knee-jerk reaction," she said.

For those who take exception to her style, Johnston said there are plenty of traditional avenues available.

"I only want people here who get this philosophy," she said. "I'm not going to water this down."

From geology, geography, and languages, to math and spirituality, Johnston said her students' days are full of learning, without the pressure of grades or standardized tests.

Instead of operating like a factory that mass-produces educated students, Johnston said her school offers students the choice of when they study what topic.

Each day, after reading a story combining several subjects, students have the opportunity to approach their teacher and request a lesson in a particular discipline.

"Sometimes, I have to abandon the curriculum I've worked so hard on. Sometimes, I have to look at them as my teacher," Johnston said.

"Our relationship with children here is based on empathy," she said. "I have to ask myself, 'How do they want to relate to the teaching project.'"

"If a subject is presented, but doesn't spark students' interest, that lesson is abandoned in favor of one the children do support.

"Our rule of thumb is not to bore a child, so if we're doing (education) right they're going to keep learning."

During class time, children may be found in beanbags reading, knitting, crocheting, writing, or any number of various activities. Tables are present, but the usual lineup of desks is not.

"We need to come out of our monoculture. Not only in our farming, but also in our children," she said.

For Johnston, the monoculture approach is mass marketed education, a process that

results in graduates who are unable to function properly in society.

"The only way we're going to send off a generation of children is if they are in an environment of love and respect," she said.

Part of that respect includes realizing that all students are not alike and don't all learn the same things at the same times in the same ways, she said. It also means allowing them to be comfortable, so they can direct their attention to the issue at hand.

"A child does not naturally learn lecture-style, confined to a seat all day," Johnston said. "That's fine for college, but not for elementary and definitely not for kindergarten."

If students in traditional environments had a taste of an alternative where instruction was presented in a way more closely related to the way they played, yet could still learn, it would spark creativity, experimentation, and exploration, she said.

Even math is not the abstract idea it's often presented to be.

"The only way to teach mathematics is hands-on," she said. "They should learn through real life experiences. They need to know it relates to the real world."

Liz McElhaney, a teacher who earned a degree in criminal justice, put that real-world-application idea into action when her son was born.

"I was pregnant when I started here and I had him 18 days before class started," she said.

Because she was breast-feeding him, she couldn't leave him home, but soon found out that bringing him to class wouldn't be a problem.

"We incorporated him into the curriculum and all the children helped take care of him. He learned to crawl at school. He's just always been there," she said.

"It's just that kind of school. It was never, we'd love to have you as a teacher, but your child can't be here."

A sense of respect is taught throughout the school for everyone's way of life and situation, she said.

"For a few of the parents, it was hard to adjust to the idea that their children were being taught while the teacher nursed her child, but they learned to adjust."


For more information, contact the school at 972-543-5330.

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