

# It's in the Details

Most schools offer a good education. Look beyond that to find a fit for your child.

By Lori Zanteson



PHOTO BY SUMMER DREW

Families visiting Echo Horizon School in Culver City say they are impressed with how happy students seem and how eager they are to talk about what they are doing in class.

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Students at WorldSpeak Language School in Los Angeles are immersed in French, Chinese and Russian classes to promote a broad worldview.



PHOTO BY MARK BELL

The Country School in North Hollywood focuses on engaging students in hands-on activities that spark their natural curiosity.

“You can tell when a staff is a family.”

- Parent Toni Caballero

The days of sending kids to an assigned neighborhood school, no questions asked, are gone. Today, Southern California families are fortunate to have many great schools to choose from, giving us the opportunity to find just the right school for our kids. But after the websites are combed, tours are taken and the big questions are answered, how can a family be sure a school is the best fit for the child?

It's all in the details. Just because a school checks off all the boxes - location, philosophy, class size, test scores - doesn't mean it's ideal for every child. In fact, it's often smaller details such as an intimate setting for a shy child or a cutting-edge science lab for a budding chemist that can make a big difference in how well a school fits.

When Rochelle Siegrist of Monrovia and her husband set out to find the right school for their son, Declan, they looked at six schools. They wanted an environment that had it all but felt like it focused on the whole child. Early in the search, they saw that all the schools had similar bells and whistles and realized they had a lot more work to do.

In the forefront of their search was Declan. “We want him to be a good person when he grad-

uates, to discover [how he] will help in the world,” Siegrist says. But they also wanted a family fit. The Siegrists are fun-loving people who like to be involved in community, so they wanted to find like-minded people in their new school community.

They went to a lot of school events. Some were community events with parents and kids, and others were fundraisers that included only parents. They talked with families, noted when people approached them and how friendly they were. “We really listened to what they had to say,” Siegrist says, because people are the pulse of any school community.

### Tapping Potential

Angelika Putintseva also thinks a school's mission extends beyond its walls, and when she set out to find a school for her son, she was looking for one with a broad worldview. It proved so difficult to find that she opened her own. WorldSpeak Language School in Los Angeles, founded in 2001, offers full-immersion classes in several languages, including French, Chinese and Russian. The rationale is that teaching children multiple languages prepares them for life in a global economy and teaches them respect for different cultures.

When reviewing schools, begin

PHOTO BY MARK BELL



by making sure the campus caters to your child's interests - math, chess, music - and then make sure it offers everything else, says Putintseva. “You don't want to shut out everything else,” she says. “A 5-year-old's likes may not be her life calling. Give her what she's good at, but at the same time, you want to see something else.” This creates challenge for the child.

WorldSpeak also designs an individual academic plan for each student, by ability rather than by age. “We see where a child stands,” Putintseva says. “A 5-year-old may be either kindergarten or first grade, but for math even be second grade.” If a young child speaks better Chinese than an older child, this motivates the “big

The Country School focuses on engaging learners with student-centered activities.





PHOTO COURTESY WORLDSPEAK

WorldSpeak designs academic plans based on students' ability, rather than by age.

kids" to work harder, and also teaches them to base respect on abilities, kindness and helping others, rather than on age.

"The core principle at WorldSpeak is to develop the gift that was given to you," says Putintseva. "You have the responsibility to develop your potential. Your happiness and the world's happiness depends on it."

### Inspiring Happiness

Schools can play a big role in creating this happiness. When students are challenged in school, they develop a love for learning that fuels current and future passions. The good news for families touring school campuses and classrooms is that kids can't hide this. Martha Schurr, Head of School at Echo Horizon School in Culver City, says visiting families are always impressed by "the happiness of our kids, who freely

and enthusiastically talk with them about what they're doing in their classes."

Behind every happy student is a dynamic teacher. This was a selling point for Toni Caballero, whose two sons attend Echo Horizon. She says teachers there seek out the most effective methods of educating and match them to how kids are learning. "They're always willing to change, and they're always asking, 'Are we doing the best we can do?'" Caballero says.

Because their oldest, Antonio, is deaf, the Caballeros' standards for a school were especially high. They were looking for a school that would not only serve his needs but also challenge him in a safe and family-like setting. "You can tell when a staff is a family, as well as when there's a disconnect," Caballero says.

Great teachers also make innovation possible. One way this happens at Echo Horizon is through its unique technology program. There's no separate computer class here. "Our teachers are held accountable for integrating technology into the classroom so that it is inherently part of everything our kids do," says Schurr, who provides ongoing professional development to grow teachers' technology skills.

Caballero loves the way this helps prepare her boys for the future. Not only has using technology become natural for them, it allows them, while doing homework on their Apple devices, to work beyond material covered in class for new challenges. "The tech piece is so critical. It's going to be over the top, so much more a part of their lives," she says.

### Empowering Curiosity

Technology isn't the only way education is changing. New ideas about homework and individual learning are also taking hold. "Education doesn't look the same today and it won't [look the same] in five years," says Holly Novick, Head of School at The Country School in North Hollywood. The small pre-kindergarten through sixth grade school offers its students an individualized and progressive program that includes a no-homework policy. "We want them to explore being a child," Novick says, adding the policy has improved student focus and boosted test scores.

Unstructured play is necessary for kids' development. "It fosters independence, resilience, problem-solving skills and adaptability," Novick says. "These are all skills that today's employers are demanding, and it only makes sense to construct our education system to prepare children to succeed in the constantly changing, creativity-forward business world we are seeing evolve around us."

Don't expect to see worksheets or pop quizzes at The Country School either, Novick says. Instead, classrooms are filled with students working on project-based, hands-on, student-centered activities that will develop students' natural curiosity and give them the tools to dig deeply into subjects that intrigue them. Teachers guide the students, who explore through doing. "Empowering children to take the reins of their own education underpins everything we do here," Novick says.

At Echo Horizon School, technology is integrated throughout the curriculum.

After many positive social experiences with one school, the Siegrists thought they had found an environment that fit their family. They brought Declan for his interview visit. But by the time the interview was complete, it was clear this school was not the fit they were hoping for. "They wanted kids who just stand in line," Siegrist says, referring to the school's disciplinary style. "We feel we dodged that bullet. You have to be authentic and true to yourself. You need to find a comfort level."

Eventually, the Siegrists settled on St. Rita School in the quirky San Gabriel Valley town of Sierra

Madre. The area is known for its small-town vibe and strong sense of community, and made the family feel right at home.

Finding a school that's right for a child is no small task. But really digging into what a school has to offer is sure to uncover those less-obvious details that can make the choice clearer for every family. And it is worth searching out the small details for the big reward of an education at a school that really fits your child. ♦

*Lori Zanteson is a San Gabriel Valley mom of two.*

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