

Progressive Education at Synergy (2007 article)

As we approach our 35th Anniversary, the staff turned our attention to our progressive roots and evaluated our practices. We considered what role we play in the forward movement of education. At our annual retreat, we asked ourselves, “ What makes Synergy a progressive school?” As we defined what it means to our community, we decided that it was time to fully reclaim this label and see how we measure up to its ideals.

The basic tenets of progressive education describe an experiential, integrated learning environment. Our commitment to hands-on learning was evident to us as we thought of tadpoles become frogs in the kindergarten, the builders of Sunville, the Rainbow Room world travelers, the bridge project and Japanese-American speakers who taught the 4/5 about the WW11 interment, the memorable science experiments our students engage in, the elaborate research and 3-D projects developed by the Middle-Schoolers, and the many collaborative performance pieces created at Synergy. Yet, progressive education goes beyond these vibrant curricular experiences.

The nine-decade tradition of progressive education emphasizes many of the same goals we have at Synergy – social responsibility and democratic participation. We pay attention to the emotional environment and development of our students. Our cooperative structure is mirrored in the challenges we pose to students as we ask them to work together and value each of their talents and differences. The diversity we strive for is reflected in our admission and hiring practices and in the multiple perspectives we offer in our non-textbook based curriculum.

Synergy teachers approach education with an open mind, recognizing individuals and encouraging children to do the same. Many of us attended progressive schools and/or were trained in progressive teaching methods. Our commitment to equity and social justice take form as we teach children about their choices in life. The knowledge they gain through a wide variety of learning opportunities informs these choices. We work in partnership with families to educate children. We are also dedicated to addressing learning styles and using Mel Levine’s cognitive constructs to understand and support differences in learning. When we differentiate and individualize our curriculum to help kids learn math or music, we are working towards these loftier goals. Our Agreement System encourages critical thinking, problem solving, and taking responsibility for personal actions. These are all part of the progressive vision of education.

Synergy is preparing to participate in the Progressive Educator’s Network conference in San Francisco this October 4th to 7th. We are looking to further enrich our understanding of forward thinking education and to share our ideas with colleagues from all over the country. In the meantime, we have discovered areas for growth as a school. We are renewing our efforts to become involved with our Mission neighborhood. We are exploring how to better Teach students about giving back to their communities and how to empower them in their school life. There will always be challenges in creating the ideal learning environment, but we have a strong foundation and a refreshed commitment to doing so. We look forward to sharing more of our learning with you as partners in this educational endeavor.

- September 11, 2007