

An Overview of Highland Free Charter School's Educational Program



Highland Free School celebrated its 42nd anniversary on February 19, 2012. When we first opened our doors as a private school, we were embarking on an educational experiment to provide a unique learning environment for parents and students looking for an alternative to public schools. Our non-profit school was founded upon educational principles that were, at the time, fresh and innovative [incorporating widely promoted concepts such as the “open classroom”, where students no longer had to sit in straight rows of desks, and “student-based curriculum” that eliminated standard textbooks in favor of educational programs based on students’ individual readiness and interests]. We involved students and their parents and tried to build a school community that would integrate the child’s school life and family life. Although we have been a charter school for the past 12 years, we still maintain our high standards of excellence and our basic educational ideals. We have proven that our philosophy is sound, and our educational methods work and have successfully helped guide children in their process of becoming happy, productive and successful adults.

Highland strives to educate the whole child. Students are given freedom of choice and learn to take responsibility for their choices. We emphasize the development of self-discipline and self-control, rather than external control. Discipline is based on the theory of logical and natural consequences, developed by Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs. School meetings are held regularly, which provide a forum for teachers and students to share their ideas and concerns. Community topics (e.g. cooperation, problem solving, safety, peace, etc.) are discussed during meetings and then incorporated into all of the daily activities of the school.

The educational philosophy at Highland is based upon the fact that children are naturally inquisitive and excited by learning. Our goal is to keep that inquisitiveness alive. Our curriculum is aligned with the Arizona Academic Standards and includes individualized, skill-based packets and workbooks for the introduction and practice of basic skills, but the emphasis is on integrated, thematic units that use hands-on, innovative activities and projects designed to give students practice applying those basic skills. When developing each unit, we are aware that students shine in different areas, so we provide students with the opportunity to learn and share their knowledge in different ways (e.g. songs, posters, plays, movies, etc.). We emphasize that real learning follows a natural rhythm and is not tied to a specific number of minutes spent on one subject area, but is concerned instead with the following of an idea or practice session to its natural conclusion. For this reason we have no specified time periods indicating a break or change to another subject area. Since no child learns in exactly the same way or at the same speed, we try to integrate many different instructional methods into our curriculum. It is our low student/teacher ratio that enables us to constantly monitor and assess each student’s individual progress to determine which methods of teaching are the most appropriate for each child. This leads to more meaningful and personalized instruction. Special education professionals have consistently been impressed with the academic support we provide to all students as well as our response to intervention.

Like the real world, the school is multi-aged and non-graded. Student achievement is measured using a variety of assessment tools, including teacher observation and documentation, pre and post-testing, quizzes, CBMs, and AIMS/Stanford 10 assessment. Teachers compose narrative progress reports charting each child’s accomplishments and skill levels three times a year. Although teachers are in contact with parents on a daily basis, conferences are scheduled at least twice a year to discuss their child’s progress.

It is encouraged that the students' parents take an active, participatory role in the functioning of the school and in their child's education. All parents are asked to volunteer at the school a minimum of one hour per month and help out during several "Spruce Up the School" days. Cooperation and responsibility are the cornerstones of our school's philosophy, and they apply to students and parents alike. In fact, the students not only have to be responsible for anything they use, but at the end of the day they also take part in the daily tidying of the school.

We take pride in our current technology, which includes a variety of audio, video and digital equipment that is put to use in many creative ways. Highland is fortunate enough to have 3 SmartBoards, which enable the teachers to project their computer screen on an interactive whiteboard. This technology peaks student interest and makes lessons more engaging. We have over 30 laptops and 9 desktop computers that are frequently used in the classroom for a multitude of different projects and activities (e.g. keyboard practice, researching, creating slide shows, movie making, etc.).

Our outside learning area is an essential part of our school program. It includes a unique playground created using society's discards. A recycled telephone pole is a balancing beam. Enormous tires from mining equipment form tunnels and pyramids. Stationary motorcycles stimulate children's imaginations. Our playground also contains a 4-foot deep sandbox that holds twenty-seven tons of sand, a large climbing structure shaped like a ship, a climbing wall, and a multilevel play structure that includes a slide, climbing rope, sliding pole, and jumping platform. Additionally, we have basketball courts, a large grass area for old favorites such as tag and volleyball, and a covered work area for crafts, science and construction projects.

Highland Free School's most extraordinary outside learning area is the animal pen, which houses pygmy goats, chickens, and ducks with their own pond! Students can help feed and care for the animals and occasionally have the chance to observe the miracle of gestation and birth. This unique opportunity for children to care for and learn sensitivity to animals' needs helps them grow up with a sense of responsibility toward all living things.

We believe children need to grow up with a sense of connection with a larger community (both local and global) and confidence in their ability to contribute to that community. Our students have connected with schools in Kiev (Ukraine), Ama-Ata (in the republic of Kazakhstan), Colorado, Australia, Great Britain, Italy and France. Some of the local groups we have worked with through the years include the Tucson Peace Center, the Tucson Media Coalition, the University of Arizona, Teen Power, Project Listen, the Arizona Opera, the Arizona Department of Health Services, the San Antonio Neighborhood Association, the Tucson Free University, and the Educational Committee of TASCC (Tucson/Alma-Ata Sister City Community). Our students have participated in Earth Day as well as in the Tree of Life Initiative, which was a part of the Global Forum at the Earth summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Highland students and staff also pieced together a large tile mosaic peace sign for the inclusion in "A Show of Hands", a ceramic mural overlooking the Ronstadt Transit Center in downtown Tucson. Highland's students have also won a number of awards for their participation in community events and contests, such as The Clean Air art contest, R.U.M.B.A. recycled art contest, and the Desert Museum's Earth Day Poetry Contest.

When students 'graduate' from Highland, they move on to a variety of different middle school environments. Whether they attend performing arts middle schools or schools with a rigorous academic focus, former students and their parents often return and thank us for helping prepare their children for the challenges ahead.

Highland Free School by no means has all the answers for educating children. The one answer we do have is that we change and grow and are always looking for new ways to generate enthusiastic participation and learning. The basic keys to our success are low student/teacher ratios, parent involvement that creates a sense of community, and a learning environment that is individualized and approximates the way true learning takes place in the real world.