Silicon Valley Preschools in the News

In Northern California, kindergartens, which are attended by 5 year olds, have long been part of compulsory education. Youngsters begin learning reading and writing there, so the image of a kindergarten is much like the first year of elementary school in Japan. Prior to entering kindergarten, small children often spend one to three years in preschool, and a flood of study results recently announced in the US indicate that enrolling youngsters in preschool can make a major contribution to their character development and the quality of their academic work later on. Broad preschool participation may even contribute to stability of the society at large.

In Silicon Valley, which is very diverse in terms of ethnicity and value systems, we find a rich variety of preschools.

*The Milestones Approach*

Among these, Milestones Preschool, which opened in September last year, has garnered attention as a new approach, an attempt at something that had not been tried before. Located in the city of Palo Alto, home of Stanford University, Hewlett Packard, and other well-known institutions, Milestones set as its goal providing an environment where both typically developing children and those who are developmentally delayed can play and learn together. Currently 27 students attend, and two types of class are offered: one meeting twice a week and one meeting three times. Among the 27 students are nine with special needs; they have conditions such as Downs Syndrome, cerebral palsy, and autism.

“Our goal is to enable children, while they are still young, to experience and understand the differences among themselves in a natural way,” explains Linda Joyce Steel, Executive Director. Ms. Steel is with the Community Association for Rehabilitation (CAR), the not-for-profit organization that operates this unique preschool. The mission of CAR is to aid people with disabilities to re-enter and participate in society, and to
achieve this, they believe it is first necessary for society to correctly understand people with disabilities.

When I actually visited the Milestones school, I immediately received the impression that the children were very much at ease compared to ordinary preschools. One reason is probably that, in contrast to regular preschools, the ratio of students to teachers is quite small which enables teachers to give personal attention to each child, but another influence is the program itself. It has been structured to encourage the staff who are all specialists in child development to emphasize compassion and empathy.

Students are not told which classmate has what sort of disability. Rather, as teacher Mai-Ling Fook explains, “We encourage them to play together with everyone, as much as possible.”

2 ½ year old William, one of the students, suffered a brain hemorrhage when he was born and weakness of his facial muscles has slowed his speech development. However, according to his mother, Jennifer, “When William began attending Milestones, it was clear to me he was making much more progress learning to speak.” Her pleasure was evident as she explained, “The stimulation he gets from the other children is more effective than any therapy.”

[Photo caption:] A scene at Milestones Preschool

*High praise from parents of “typically developing” children also. The secret is “75 to 25.”

It seems that the parents of typically developing children also are quite satisfied. According to Mary, the mother of 2 ½ year old David, “My son now feels great pleasure in helping his friends at school. He is developing other good traits too, such as being able to focus on something for an extended time, and I enthusiastically recommend the school to parents of other typically developing children.”
At the Milestones school, they have found from experience that it is necessary to limit the ratio of typically developing students to those with developmental delays to “75 to 25” to enable teachers to give each child personal attention. Today there is a waiting list of developmentally delayed children wishing to enter the school, but to offer more classes the number of typically developing students must be increased. For that reason the school plans to initiate an aggressive marketing campaign, starting this year.

*Other Preschool Trends

Most of the mothers of children attending Milestones are professional homemakers, but in Silicon Valley where the cost of living is quite high, there are also many families in which both parents work. A large number of preschools have been established to meet the needs of these families.

Also addressing this need, major high tech companies such as Cisco Systems and Sun Microsystems have actually provided preschools for employees’ children within their corporate campuses.

In fact, today parents can choose from a large selection of preschools designed to fit the various value systems and economic situations of Silicon Valley families. These include preschools where the teaching is done in a specific language such as German, French or Chinese, schools based on the Montessori Method, and ones backed by churches.

In Santa Clara County which covers the heart of Silicon Valley, 62% of the children enrolling in kindergarten have had the experience of attending some sort of preschool. With funding from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Rand Corporation, a not-for-profit research organization, conducted a survey related to the economic impact of preschool. According to the results which were announced at the end of March, making preschool compulsory for all four year olds in California would cost $1.7 billion annually, but in return the state would enjoy economic benefits of $4.4 billion from the resulting decrease in juvenile crime and nurturing of a more outstanding labor force.
Currently in California, various organizations have started campaigns seeking the state to provide preschool to all four year olds whose families desire it and some local governments have already started programs on a trial basis.

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