

sanchez school

San Francisco, California

based on a visit and interviews by Bonnie Neugebauer



Sometimes we forget about the importance of vision in guiding our work, but the big dream plays a powerful role in what happens for children, staff, and families at Sanchez Elementary School, located in the Mission District in San Francisco. Dr. Raymond R. Isola, Principal at Sanchez School for 10 years, sees his role as the social architect that nurtures a school community vision rooted in research-based practices and theories.

“This belief in possibility acknowledges the potential of every child to learn, every teacher to teach, and every family member to partner willingly and authentically in a child’s learning. If a school community embraces this belief in possibility, there emerges an opportunity to create an environment where children, staff, and families may succeed beyond initial predictions or goals.”

Sanchez Elementary serves 321 children from preschool through fifth grade. The two early childhood classes offer educational, school-readiness opportunities for three and four year olds, part of San Francisco’s Preschool for All program, funded by Proposition H and other state and federal monies. Mayor Gavin Newsom visited the school recently: “This city gets it. But it not only gets it, it funds it.” San Francisco is the only county in California that offers free universal preschool.” San Francisco Superintendent Carlos Garcia joined Mayor Gavin Newsom at Sanchez School because he views high-quality preschool programs as playing a vital role in the

launch of San Francisco’s Strategic Plan entitled “Beyond The Talk: Taking Action to Educate Every Child Now.” The ideas and actions described in this plan are focused on one main idea; every child has the right to be well educated.

Every child at Sanchez School has the opportunity to develop a healthy identity fostering social, emotional, physical, and intellectual competencies. Children’s identity and associated competencies are explored in a variety of learning environments: the classroom, the community garden, the art, dance and drama studios, along with the technology studio and the community dining room and playground. This is true not only for the children, but also for the teachers and other staff, and for the children’s parents. Basing their work on a core system of values, staff give great attention and intention to making these values visible, audible, and tangible throughout the school — in the way children’s work is displayed; sometimes side by side with the work of a teacher, in the way adults interact with children and with each other.

The values include:

- respect for what each child has within and can become — this includes a determination to challenge class and race demographic predictors and prove that they can be overcome
- sound educational practices based on extensive and ongoing research, exploration, and dialogue
- shared leadership and strong support mechanisms

- continual assessment and examination of practice through documentation and dialogue
- openness to inquiry and investment in innovation
- respect for teachers and a trust in their abilities.

Central to living out these values are the teachers. Isola: “We have to be very thoughtful in how we are investing in teachers. We are counting on them, that they have the expertise to teach and support children along with families, in a thoughtful and intelligent way to create a quality educational experience. In a community like this where families have many challenges, teachers play an even more critical role in helping children become more successful than may be predicted and enabling them to reach their full potential.”

Sanchez School utilizes effective professional development strategies that encourage and inspire teachers including cycles of inquiry, cognitive and critical reflection, peer coaching, and weekly time for collaboration that provides support and problem-solving opportunities.

Susan Lyon, Executive Director of The Innovative Teacher Project, points to professional development that works: “A reflective process builds experience and knowledge. It brings teachers out of isolation and enables them to examine their practice in a supportive context. Not only do teachers need to be brought out of isolation, but also schools need to build partnerships to support school initiatives.

Sanchez School has partnered with the Innovative Teacher Project for two years to help strengthen the early childhood program's practices as a Reggio inspired early childhood program."

An example of this was a Kindergarten teacher-led cycle of inquiry meeting with Ann Marin, Ravi Kline, Kathryn Pooler, Danielle Beymer, and Elizabeth Beetem, where it was evident that shared leadership guides Sanchez School's effort. Danielle is the Kindergarten Team Leader; Ann the Teacher Leader; and Elizabeth the Literacy Specialist. Together they were working with standards and benchmarks, mapping backwards from December. They were sharing strategies and experiences and resources. They were finding the spaces within the standards for their own creativity and personalities to emerge. When challenges arise, they will have support for dealing with them.

Ann Marin: "Our leadership is sustainable because it comes from within our community. And because we find our experts on our own campus, we're recognizing our own leadership. I am a teacher as well as a leader, so teachers know I am invested in this work and our process. They respect and trust me in my leadership role. Teachers here are very loyal; they are committed to the families and to the school. Every teacher is here to make a difference. We have children with extra challenges, but we have a shared vision and purpose. We believe in the potential of our children and our own capabilities to diminish the power of demographics and to create different possibilities for their lives."

"Our system honors our teachers' hearts and intellect," says Raymond. "Our teachers meet in grade level groups with their Team Leader. All Team Leaders meet together so that communication becomes vertical as well as horizontal. These meetings happen between 9 AM and 11 AM, the best time for thinking. They feel respected because this planning

and collaborating time is protected for them. We find the funds to give the children experiences with specialists in art, dance and music, and technology to create some of this planning time. Resources that are available to us are allocated for teacher research in a strategic design that provides children opportunities to explore their identity through an enriched curriculum.

Support is also provided through the work of Heather Gray who taught at Mills College, and currently works with preschool teachers as a Pedagogista: "My role is to provide provocations that deepen teachers' inquiry about their practice, supporting them in questioning their own strategies and asking questions of themselves. I try to listen and support them where they are. They enjoy working together as a group, but they also need time alone to do self-initiated curriculum, to expand their work. And this needs to be designed and scheduled together."

"We're able to be teachers and do the job," Ann shares. "Ongoing dialogue, equity, and best practice give us the space to share current information, problem-solve, and then move on to the bigger issues. With the big standards push, we've introduced a model that enables us to be consistent and systematic and not be so limited within the standards. We've created room to be professionals."

The system of shared leadership, the exploration of the Reggio principles, this model of professional development are all works in progress. But the foundation has been carefully constructed and the buy-in is strong. Ongoing assessment and continual reflection are protected instruments for professional development and children's learning.

Ann Marin concludes: "Our work is bigger than Sanchez School." And Heather adds: "This is the kind of thing that's going to change the world."

A big dream, but it just might work . . .