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A program showcase

Presidio Child Development Center, San Francisco, California

by Michael Kalinowski

On the grounds of the Presidio, and adjacent to one of San Francisco's oldest buildings, the Officers' Club, sits the Presidio Child Development Center, one of 45 Child Development Program sites that are a part of the San Francisco United School District. The program serves about 220 children from 23 ZIP codes throughout San Francisco. Sixty percent of these children speak a second language and more than half are eligible for free or reduced lunches.

This program includes one infant, one toddler, and three pre-school classrooms. There are also three school-age classrooms for children ranging from kindergarten through fifth grade. Presidio CDC is open Monday through Friday from 7:30 am to

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6:00 pm. Eligibility is determined by per capita income and family size. Family members must be working or going to school, in job training, or have a child in need of protective services. Tuition rates are based on a sliding fee scale, and approximately 25 percent of families are ineligible for a subsidy and pay full fees. Priority is reserved for families

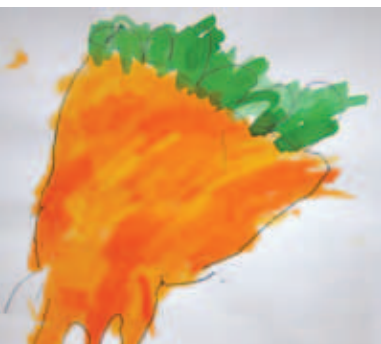
who live or work in the Presidio National Park. Funding is also provided on a per-child basis from the school district, grants, and donations.

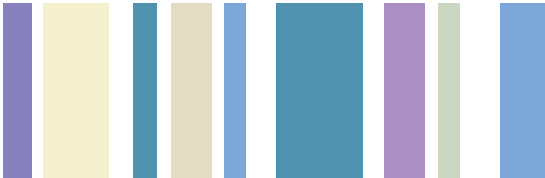
According to the National Park Service (2010):

"The Presidio has a rich cultural history spanning back to the time of the native Ohlone people. The Spanish arrived in 1776 to establish the northernmost outpost of their empire in western North America. The Presidio then fell under Mexican rule for 24 years before the U.S. Army took control of it in 1846. Over 148 years, the U.S. Army transformed the Presidio grounds from mostly empty windswept dunes and scrub to a verdant, pre-eminent military post. Since 1994, the Presidio has become part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and is managed by the Presidio National Trust."

This school has several interesting features. Located in a national park, the program explores the outer environment as an extension of its indoor classrooms. Staff members believe that the best way for children to learn about nature is firsthand, by seeing it, hearing it, touching it, and smelling it. One of the many favorite places discovered by the children is the Ecology Trail. There they can dig through the underbrush. They can also leave the forest atmosphere, and in crossing the bridge to the beach, observe egrets and smelts below. Staff members offer children daily opportunities inside and outside the classroom to investigate elements that the natural park offers: plants, insects, animals, horse stables, architecture, the Golden Gate Bridge, and fire station.

Site Manager Sandra Osborne has just been promoted and is leaving the program she managed for 14 years.





Sandy and new site manager, Maria Allis, a former teacher at Presidio, went on their first study tours to Reggio Emilia in 2000 and 1996 respectively. Sandy notes that the trip made a significant impression:

“We began with a discussion of teacher development and that has changed who we are and what we think. The Reggio values have made a huge impact on us: what they mean and how you live every day. I truly believe that I rail against mediocrity. I’ve visited the schools in Italy and seen what is possible, and to come back and stay the status quo would not be okay. As I leave, I expect the legacy to continue. I wouldn’t have done my job if the staff couldn’t continue to rock and roll.”

Assisting on this journey to fully implementing a Reggio-based approach in a public school setting is Susan Lyon, founder and Executive Director of the Innovative Teacher Project in collaboration with the School of Education at Mills College. Susan’s interest in the Reggio Emilia approach began on a study tour to Reggio Emilia in 1991, and she has brought two different editions of *The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibit from Reggio Emilia to the Bay area. It was under Susan’s direction that a five-year pilot project integrating the Reggio approach at the Presidio CDC was established in 2001, supported by Amelia Gambetti, Reggio Children International Exchange Coordinator and Liaison for Consultancy in Schools. Susan says:

“One of the reasons I chose the Presidio CDC was to prove that a public child care center could be of high quality and the key was to invest in teachers’ professional development. We created a strong collaboration between having Maria as a teacher and Sandy as site manager to begin the study of the Reggio Approach with the Presidio teachers. We built strong relationships and having Maria now step into the site manager position supports the value of education based on relationships. Sandy will



still share her expertise with school-age after-school programs and together our work will continue to build relationships and high quality in the San Francisco Unified School District.”

Presidio CDC demonstrates that high quality is possible in public education. It also confirms how hard achieving and maintaining high quality can be through funding cuts, San Francisco Unified School District administrator turnover, and a system that may not always have highly valued early childhood education.

Reference

National Park Service. (2010, September 4). History & culture. Available at www.nps.gov/prsf/historyculture/index.htm

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<http://portal.sfusd.edu/template/?page=cdc.presidio>

<http://Innovativeteacherproject.org>

The Program Showcases were developed by Michael Kalinowski as a component of the World Forum on Early Care and Education. They are intended to highlight the work of particularly interesting, unique, and/or exceptional early childhood programs around the world. Selected programs will appear in future issues of *Exchange*, and are also available on www.ChildCareExchange.com.