

G.E.T. EARTH SCHOOL...



Something Good in the World incorporates what we believe are some of the best educational practices from everywhere to make our approach to learning as experiential, hands-on, sensory-integrated, arts-oriented, nature-based, and holistic as possible. While our programs include elements based on the philosophies of such well-known pioneers as Maria Montessori (Montessori Schools) and Rudolf Steiner (Waldorf Schools), we also integrate the methodology of less-famous, yet equally brilliant individuals like Dr. Caleb Gattegno (Words in Color, Gattegno Math) and Carolyn Pratt (City & Country School), along with more popular approaches from Jan Olson (Handwriting Without Tears) and Ruth Sidney Charney (Class Meetings, Critical Contracts).



Our Earth School curriculum, however, is the most directly aligned to the comparatively new Golden Education Template (G.E.T.) method, which began in Israel in the 1990s and now extends to several small schooling movements in the U.S., Canada, England, and Holland. Because so many people are unfamiliar with the G.E.T., we thought to try to pinpoint some of the elements of what makes this particular educational philosophy so special. Though the ideas are not necessarily new, the combination of these practices in our farm-based educational setting is definitely unique.



This style of learning offers a unique opportunity for many different types of students, and is particularly well-suited for those who learn best with their whole bodies (kinesthetic), for independent and free-thinking children, as well as for those who are drawn to smaller groupings and quieter environments, and especially those who love nature.



Here are some of the fundamental principles that make up the system of the G.E.T. approach that is applied to all of our educational programs:

- QUALITIES PROGRAM

Probably one of the most important principles of the G.E.T. method is the integration of academics with the development of essential qualities for natural childhood development. In other terms, this can be called ethics, or character education. Common values, such as respect, care, tolerance, acceptance, humanitarianism, altruism, community service, and teamwork, amongst many others, are brought to life through daily tasks, stories, research projects, class discussions, and much pro-active work out in the field. The goal is to create a balanced environment, within which learning outweighs teaching, and the natural outcome is a creative human being with a broad view of world cultures and citizenry, some one who can think and work independently, problem-solve without external intervention, and engage peacefully within a team.



- NATURAL DEVELOPMENT

The G.E.T. system consciously traces children's growth patterns and takes into account the mindset that is natural for each age group, and the expression of that inner design in the terms of language, attitude, behaviors, physical skills, and academic inclinations.

As an example, a 5-6 year old child is often already full with what s/he knows and is looking to give expression to all of this knowledge, through art, music, theatre, dance, play, and is generally quite confident and uninhibited. Therefore, kindergarten level programs make space for plenty of creative self-expression. Contrasting this is the 6-7 year old, who may feel less sure, having discovered more of the world, and needs confirmation of what s/he knows. Here a child may become temporarily quieter, know-it-all one minute and afraid the next. We tend to pair the older child with the younger child, so they can help each other to learn, feel confident, inspire one another with what is possible. As a result, our 5-7 year olds often work as a group, and we promote mixed ages learning together wherever we can.

- IMMERSION LEARNING

In-house, we refer to this as "lump-learning," because in the G.E.T. system, the thematic units of study can last anywhere from two weeks to six weeks, depending on the age of the students and the areas of learning.

For example, if kindergarten children are engaged in a study of Games, they will try out every kind of game there is, ranging from card games, board games, teamwork games, memory games, musical games, dancing games – all with an intention to learn how to play together towards a useful purpose, and to gain reference of the many types of skills involved in playing a particular kind of game. Gross and fine motor skills are developed in this way, as well as the ability to be a good sport, to play fair, to engage in an all-winners program where there is no competition, but one strives to do one's best for what it adds to the whole.

This kind of long, slow learning process is also best for retention. Different learners require different speeds, and immersion allows for some to speed ahead while others may linger over a project. Lump-learning also offers more opportunities for child-directed forays. Because there is no rush to get to the next subject, a genuine question leads to an excellent detour, which allows for more collective researches, and therefore a deepening of understanding. The ability to take one's time means that the learning process can be more individualized, and less pressured.



• EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

When we say hands on, we mean our hands are really in the dirt, not just passing objects around in a circle. Our students are handling earthworms, caterpillars, grasshoppers; they are digging for potatoes in the fields, carrying rocks, clearing algae from the pond; they clean the chicken coop, collect the fresh eggs from the nesting boxes, feed and water the animals; they sheet-mulch in our vegetable garden with newspaper, cardboard, and composted manure; they pump the water for our drip irrigation system and pull weeds from the gardens.

But that's not all we mean by whole body. When we study an academic subject, we use every sense we can to learn about it. If the territory is the alphabet, then children wear the letters, make words with their bodies, bake cookies in the shapes of letters, play games with finding hidden letters, painting them on rocks, singing and dancing alphabet songs, and even becoming a letter for a day.

If we are studying an ancient culture, we take on every aspect. Students make the food of that culture, design and wear the clothing, speak the language, practice the calligraphy, recreate the art, play the music, learn the traditional dances, act out the stories, and visit the museum exhibits or cultural centers that promote that time and place.

Parents often comment on our students' retention of the material they learn, and we tell them that the most important reason is because the children have experienced the subject with their entire bodies, so nothing is missed out.



• LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Our classroom setting is very important, whether in the outdoor classroom in nature (our favorite) or indoors in a home environment that lends itself to a softer feeling and a quieter tone.

When children are physically comfortable, there is less stress, and there is more openness to learning. We make sure most of our furniture is made from natural materials and that there are plenty of comfy pillows and rugs for story times, as well as cozy nooks to sit in and write in one's journal. Natural lighting is crucial, and whenever possible, we turn off the energy-saving CFLs in favor of full-spectrum sunlight. Walls are painted with pastel colors that are known to bring a sense of calm. While indoors, we always remove our shoes; children can go barefoot or wear slippers. This not only keeps our classrooms cleaner, it's more comfortable and there is less stress on the body, allowing for a more open mind.



• SMALL CLASS SIZE

An important aspect of being able to learn at one's own pace, is the fact that no more than 12 children are in the classroom at one time. This not only allows for more one-on-one attention, but it means more involvement in the process at hand. When participation is more full, learning is more fun. With younger children especially, we make sure that there is one adult for every 6 children. Free play, snacks and meal times are always supervised by the educators, which creates a safer situation for all, one in which conversations and games may be guided by an adult.



• FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

In Earth School, we look for parents to be active participants in their children's education. We promote a great deal of community service, and want whole families to be involved. Whether we are cleaning up garbage, taking care of chickens, maintaining our gardens, or going on field trips, we encourage the entire family to come along. Parents who have professional skills or hobbies that they love,



are invited to share these in workshops with students, whether once a week or once a year. Much communication takes place with parents, because we all want to make sure each child is getting the best possible strategies for learning and for promoting his or her natural genius.



- HOME PROJECTS

Yes, we give homework! Each week, starting with elementary school level programs, children receive both compulsory and optional assignments based on our lump-learning segments. Because the G.E.T. philosophy endorses the idea that learning never ceases, and is not limited to semesters or hours spent in a classroom, home projects promote creative approaches with "living as learning."

What better way to learn math than by weighing vegetables at the farm stand and calculating how much money to put in the honor box? How fantastic to learn how to follow instructions by actually writing a set, like a recipe, and bringing it in to school for others to try and follow. Rather than worksheets, homework assignments seek to unlock new avenues of thought. In most cases, children not only complete their compulsory homework, but they choose to do the optional as well.



- SUSTAINABILITY

Earth School embraces the principles of permaculture, especially as this relates to design. For example, our farm gardens are intentionally small, so that they are sustainable in terms of a child's ability to maintain them. We constructed our own simple wetland pond, which is gravity-fed using roof run-off and excess ground water. The pond is naturally filtered by the wetland plants we planted, and has become a haven for all kinds of wildlife. This year, we have discovered that the best source of renewable energy is that of children, who love to pump water from the wetland pond, using their seesaw, to direct it into rain barrels and then into the gardens through a drip irrigation system. Inside of this model, small is definitely best.



- REAL-LIFE APPLICATION

One essential principle of the G.E.T. method is for classroom learning to apply to daily life. Earth School embraces this ideal by offering many field trips and experiences to illustrate our studies. When our eldest students were learning about the world as a village and discovered the reality of world poverty, we hosted a UNICEF Hunger Banquet, visited the United Nations to see evidence of the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals in action, and participated in the Global Run Project: hiking, running, and walking to raise \$1 a mile to assist children in Africa with educational facilities and fresh water.



- ARTS-INTEGRATION

Using nature and the outdoors whenever possible, as the base for all our fine art, music, theatre, movement, and creative writing, we make sure that every subject we study has a component of expression through the arts. This ranges from collecting plants for clay impressions, constructed mosaics, or pastels and water-color mandalas, to developing the skills to be able to observe and recognize patterns and shapes for life drawing and painting. In other media, students might photograph signs of nature in the spring, then write poetry that reflects what they have captured. Yoga and Brain Gym exercises can be conducted out in the fresh air, and are a part of everyday preparation for learning.

There is so much more, but we hope this offers at least an overview of how the G.E.T. method works in conjunction with Earth School, and is incorporated inside of all of our farm-based educational programs at Hilltop Hanover Farm. To understand more about the sources for our approaches to experiential, holistic learning, what follows below is a list of some recommended reading and viewing sources... 



Books:

Last Child in the Woods, by Richard Louv
Reclaiming Childhood, by William Crain
I Learn From Children, by Carolyn Pratt
Magical Child, by Joseph Chilton Pearce
Dumbing Us Down, by John Taylor Gatto
Teaching Children to Care, by Ruth Sidney Charney
Yardsticks, by Chip Wood
Educating for Character, by Thomas Lickona
The Common Sense of Teaching Reading and Writing, by Caleb Gattegno
Now Johnny Can Do Arithmetic, by Caleb Gattegno

Films:

Etre et Avoir (To Be and To Have)
A Touch of Greatness
The Freedom Writers
Born into Brothels
Bowling for Columbine
Boys of Baraka
Lost Boys of Sudan
Mad Hot Ballroom
Youth Movement (SGITW)