

**Menlo Park, California, USA**

# **Oak Knoll Elementary School**

**Making students feel part of one big family**



**WORLD'S  
BEST SCHOOL**  
Supporting  
Healthy Lives

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**WORLD'S  
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PRIZES**



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The background image shows a school playground. In the upper left, a grey and orange baby stroller is parked on a paved path. Below it, a child in a plaid shirt is partially visible. In the foreground, a child in a light purple shirt and grey pants is on a yellow seesaw. Other children are visible in the background, including one in a red shirt and another in a grey skirt. The ground is covered in brown mulch.

# Introduction

Oak Knoll Elementary School, a co-ed school in Menlo Park, California, the U.S., promotes emotional and mental wellbeing from the moment students walk through the door and are greeted with a student-led morning news broadcast set up by the school counsellor. The broadcast ends with the words “Together, we are Oak Knoll”, reinforcing students’ sense of camaraderie and closeness. During the pandemic, the school switched to a new phrase: “Together or Apart, we are Oak Knoll ”. This ethos runs throughout everything the school does. Its multi-age classroom nurtures closer relationships between students of different ages.





# Profile:



**Country:**  
United States



**Region:**  
Menlo Park



**School type:**  
Public school



**Location area:**  
Town



**Student population:**  
501 to 1000



**Prize Category:**  
Supporting Healthy Lives

**“It’s not just about academics, that’s important too, but there’s such a variety of ways that kids can thrive.”**

**– Nicole Scott, School Counsellor**





# In-depth look

## CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

Catering to over 600 children from diverse communities, Oak Knoll Elementary School has worked hard to ensure all its students feel included and valued. The institution is guided by the principle that everyone within the school is part of one big family and in order to support students in their endeavours, both they, the parents and the wider community need to be nurtured as well. From its fifth-grade student-led morning news show KNOL, to student-interest lunch clubs and student-created murals across the campus, it celebrates all individuals who walk through its doors and endeavours to build a strong learning community.

In the past, the school has found creating a strong

community rapport to be a difficult challenge; often parts of the wider community felt fragmented and distant. In order to bridge the gap, the school had to “lean heavily” on its mission to create a nurturing environment for its students and create a similar connection with members of the community.





**“All of our students know that they matter, every day, here.”**

- Cathy Petersen, Office Manager at Oak Knoll Elementary School





# EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

Oak Knoll Elementary School runs numerous programmes including a mental health centre that helps families, small scholarships to allow students who come from lower-resourced communities to participate in after-school clubs, and gift cards that are given out during the holidays that are used in grocery stores. The Silicon Valley Bike Exchange provides bikes to students who request them, and the school partnered with their local bookstore Kepler's so each classroom mirrors the diversity in its community with material that is diverse in its characters and storylines. Teachers greet their students by the door each day by name, breakfast is provided for whoever needs it and the school counsellor works closely with every class to build resilience and emotional support.

The school created a multi-age classroom programme in a bid to nurture closer relationships between students of different ages and to allow teachers who chose to participate to develop a deep understanding of the whole child's strengths and needs. The school's multi-age classroom model focused on creating a single learning community, with students spending half their day for three years in the same multi-age class, and the other half in a single-grade class. The programme aims to foster community and treat students as individuals rather than confine them to grade-level standards. Though some teachers were sceptical of the programme, there were those that bought into the creative aspect of this kind of teaching model. "We sold them on the creative idea," former Principal David Ackerman says. "We sold them on the whole relationship idea and getting to know these kids for three years." The theory of the programme was rooted in the belief that if teachers became comfortable sharing their classrooms and their instruction, the teachers would be able to improve their teaching practices and build confidence, ideally leading to student improvement.





One example of its work in fostering empathy is the hunger banquet hosted by one of the school's upper-grade multi-ages. In the hunger banquet and subsequent discussion, students learned about wealth and poverty worldwide. Students were randomly assigned to small groups, and those who represented the wealthy dined on a meal including meat, vegetables, a side dish, and clean water. The students representing the middle class received a worldwide standard of middle-class fare, which is a small bowl of rice and beans. The majority of the students represented the world's poor and received a communal bowl of rice, which left them hungry afterwards.

Teachers have worked closely with trained therapists in order to learn restorative practices that have enabled them to create safer spaces for those in the school community and help students to thrive mentally as well as physically.



# OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

The range of initiatives has created a strong sense of family within the community and instilled an enduring sense of responsibility and empathy for the school's students. For instance, the hunger banquet helped students learn and share the school's core belief that education, access to clean water, and healthy foods are fundamental human rights that should be granted to all people.

A sense of leadership is fostered in the multi-age programme with equal opportunities for students of all ages to serve as mentors and to forge stronger relationships with their teachers and peers. Students showed a strong interest in taking part in school activities, such as the news broadcast and school garden, and a marked enthusiasm in their social interactions. They have become more willing to self-direct and participate in games and physical activities.

The school was recognised as a "Distinguished School" by the California Department of Education in 2020. The focus on supporting the wellbeing and social welfare of students and the wider community has resulted in a marked improvement in academic success. During the 2017-18 school year, 85% of Oak Knoll students met or exceeded English language arts standards, and nearly 82% did so with maths standards, according to state-released testing results.









# Key Steps



## SCHOOL MISSION

The first step the school took was examining its school mission and developing its student learner profile. The faculty began to hone in on what it means to be an exemplary scholar, a valued friend, and a courageous citizen and examined what traits each child needed in order to grow. It developed this into a learner profile, with exemplary scholars being defined by critical thinking, creativity, and a growth mindset. Self-reflection, compassion, and collaboration define being a valued friend. Agency, resourcefulness, and civic engagement define being a courageous citizen.



## DEVELOPING THE MULTI-AGE PROGRAMME

The multi-age programme was developed to give teachers the space to innovate. Ensuring that only teachers who wanted to teach multi-age were in the programme was critical to its success and it was also important to gain buy-in from the community.







## **PACT**

The school then implemented PACT – a programme for teachers observing teachers. The teachers are paired with an Administrator and Peer to walk in and out of classrooms observing and giving feedback to each other. Creating a safe space for this work began by giving only positive feedback and then slowly providing more constructive feedback into their respective teaching practices.



## **HEALING THE COMMUNITY**



Finally, the school developed policies and programmes that focused on healing the wider community as society started to emerge from the pandemic. It noticed that social isolation, trauma, and lack of emotional regulation in its students, teachers and community were evident and as such the school decided to partner with many different organisations to tackle these challenges.



# Advice and Guidance

“We give our time, energy and resources to student voices. When they come in the door with ideas... we go down that rabbit hole and spend our time, energy and resources on really important issues,” Kristen Gracia, former Principal of Oak Knoll, says. It is important to take input from teachers and other members of the faculty to coordinate in order to ease the workload. Administrators should try to lessen the burden of tasks so that teachers can better concentrate on meaningful work. This would allow teachers to take new risks with the curriculum and feel safer taking risks.

## More information

 <https://district.mpcsd.org/OakKnoll>  
 [@OakKnollOtters](https://twitter.com/OakKnollOtters)

**Learn more about their work by  
watching their event at 2022's T4 World  
Education Week: [watch here](#)**

