

Marengo Ranch Elementary School

Grades K-5 • Public/Rural • Galt, California • Galt Joint Union Elementary School District

Uniting Heart, Head, and Hands

The staff at Marengo Ranch Elementary School has coined the phrase *Marengo Love* to depict the special kind of caring that exists in this sunny school located in Sacramento County, California. *Marengo Love*, which is highly contagious, appears in many forms. It shines in the morning, when pupils gather for focus lessons and share what it means to practice character; it blooms every lunch time, when a round of applause greets every individual who enters the faculty room; it blossoms every spring in the Dream Board project, when students post their Big Dreams on how they “will make a difference in the world.” Heather Riggs, a parent, says, “This is by far how a school should be run. I will be saddened when my children grow out of it.”

It is easy to see why pupils and parents are saddened to leave the welcoming arms of Marengo Ranch School, one of seven schools in the Galt Joint Union Elementary School District. Fifth-grade student Jacob, who transferred to the school, notes that his transition to Marengo Ranch was easy: “I could tell there was a big difference here. Fewer kids were getting teased.” The school is truly diverse, with a minority population

of 57 percent and an economically disadvantaged population of 38 percent. Although character building has been an intrinsic part of the school’s mission since it opened in 1997, the adoption of the Heart, Head, Hands (H3) program has revitalized Marengo Ranch’s efforts. In addition, the faculty pared down the original long list of values to Eight Great Traits that are reinforced daily through visual displays, focus lessons, and integration into the curriculum. Lively principal Terry Metzger says, “H3 was the piece we needed to connect what we were doing around character building to the curriculum.”

Education at Marengo Ranch goes beyond teaching children reading, writing and math, although academic rigor is still a priority. Melanie Hernandez, a parent, states that “Marengo Ranch strives to improve the children’s life, socially and value-wise.” Essentially, the H3 program seeks to achieve this by showing the students how to practice the Eight Great Traits (Heart), teaching them to use conflict resolution and problem-solving skills in dealing with life (Head), and guiding them to help others through service (Hands).

Marengo Ranch’s approach to building character is anything but blind allegiance to a packaged program, however. With relationship building as the heart of its efforts, this 2008 California School of Character takes positive steps to develop teachers as role models and to include parents in their mission. The faculty has also received training in Fred Jones’ *Tools for Teaching* to help the staff build effective strategies to develop relationships and ward off potentially disruptive clashes. Parent Tami Anstess points out that the Parent Teacher Association also funded a



Jones workshop—for parents—so they too could possess the tools to help eliminate unacceptable behaviors. On a lighter note, parents join students for Friday Afternoon Sings twice a month, which bond the community and recognize student achievement. Metzger sums up the effects of *Marengo Love*: “It really is an amazing learning climate. For the last five years, our school consistently has had the highest attendance rate in the district . . . and every year it goes up! Children *want* to be here. Our suspension rate has gone down over 50 percent in the last two years. We can see that explicitly teaching students how to behave has had a big effect, and student academic performance continues to go up.”

REFERENCES

Project Heart, Head, Hands (H3). Hayward, CA: Alameda County Office of Education. Web site: www.acoe.org/acoe/EdServices/ProjectHeartHeadHands.

Tools for Teaching. Santa Cruz, CA: Fred H. Jones & Associates, Inc. Web site: www.fredjones.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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THE PRINCIPAL'S CORNER: Terry Metzger

ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION:
Baby steps, baby! You have to have a vision of what you want your school to look and feel like. Then you look for the barriers and address them with solutions. You have to invest time in listening and talking, but there comes a time when the principal needs to take action. There is no “one size fits all.”