

Oakland's

Community School for Creative Education

*an oasis of abundance in a
neighborhood of scarcity*

MARY JANE DI PIERO AND SIGRID MUELLER

On a typical foggy Oakland, California morning in early May, there is a familiar sight: parents walk their children through a gate where the teacher on duty greets them with a warm smile and a handshake. They give their parent a quick hug and jump onto the play structure, a good-sized jungle gym complete with slide and monkey bars. Around the corner, a small band of third graders plays hide and seek behind large planters packed with kale and chard, lettuce and sunflowers, in the school's container-garden. Few would guess that the schoolyard, this inviting and safe space, borders on an alley that hosts sex workers and drug dealers at night.

The bell rings and students flock to a spacious hallway where they line up behind their classroom teacher. The morning lesson begins with nourishment for the body (a small breakfast) and for the soul (the singing and recitations that carry the creative juices for the day). The morning verse reminds everyone that all are here to learn and explore with open hearts and minds. The usual charming and purposeful Waldorf elements such as singing in transitional moments; doing math with beanbags in morning circle; and telling stories instead of reading them, lean toward the artistic element, and bring rhythmic dependability, warmth,

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and beauty. “Art is relationship,” says founder and executive director Ida Oberman, and relationship is at the core of Oakland’s Community School for Creative Education (CSCE).

This is a public charter school, Waldorf-oriented, that serves inner-city children and their families from the neighborhood. The San Antonio District along International Boulevard is one of the most diverse and economically challenged parts of Oakland. Now in its fourth year, the school has found a home in a spacious building on International and 22nd Avenue, which originally housed the Red Cross. BART, the region’s rapid transit system, runs noisily an arm’s-length away, and the immediate surroundings reveal decades of urban blight and neglect. With only a gesture toward greenery, asphalt reigns and the rest of the city rushes through the area as fast as possible.

Once you walk through the main entrance, you step into a different world. The hallway walls are adorned with students’ artwork, poems they composed, or inspirational quotes. You find something else easily recognizable to those familiar with Waldorf education: classrooms that feel more like a home, with colorful curtains and rugs; and with consciously chosen playthings that nourish a child’s senses.

This is a school owned by the community. Next to the reception area are photos of the staff—a tapestry of diversity impressive even for a city like Oakland, which takes pride in embracing its immigrants. Parents don’t just drop off their children; they stay around. They help out with what’s needed that day, chat with other parents, or just enjoy an atmosphere of care and joyful serenity. In this challenged part of town, where it’s not uncommon for children to witness violence and economic deprivation, CSCE provides a place of abundance, safety, and trust.

the power of an idea, the learning of a lifetime

Although this small miracle of a school has had many moments of grace, they have been earned.

3rd graders with their teacher (center) and aide from Vietnam (back) practice their recorder; Fall 2013.



Ida Oberman, a founder of remarkable resilience and dedication, had a multilingual upbringing in Holland, the United States, and Germany. She attended Waldorf school in Germany from third grade through high school. After earning her BA at Swarthmore, she headed to Stanford for a PhD in medieval history. But her true calling, she quickly realized, was to become a social change maker herself, rather than researching those she admired. Serendipitously, she discovered the newly-formed Waldorf school in nearby Redwood City; its faithful translation of ideas and inspiration, heart and hope rekindled her enthusiasm for Waldorf education.

Oberman returned to Germany for teacher training in Stuttgart, where Rudolf Steiner had initiated the Waldorf movement in 1919. Her teachers had been taught by those Steiner had trained, and this immediate transmission generated a lively flexibility. “This is not a blueprint,” they emphasized, “it’s a conversation!” That this first Waldorf school was founded for the children of factory workers, and that Steiner wanted all children to have the best education possible were compelling ideals of social justice for Ida.

An *Economist* article on the demise of American public education lured Ida back across the Atlantic

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in 1985; she wanted to participate in the revitalizing efforts she was reading about, and she wanted Waldorf to be part of that conversation. She charted an intricate, decisive path toward acquiring the credibility and credentials, the wisdom, and experience to start an inner city public school grounded in Waldorf pedagogy. Her vision was finally realized in CSCE some twenty-five years later. Pivotal steps along the way included teaching at the independent Green Meadow Waldorf School in Chestnut Ridge, New York, and then, with other like-minded Waldorf educators, forming the Westside Community School in New York City. Ida’s return to Stanford for a PhD in education led to a stint as program officer for the Hewlett Foundation, and then to leadership of the California Best Practices Study. The mandate in this study was to discover what successful low income schools were doing that made them so effective in serving their students. Its conclusion: the common factors for success were an arts-based program, plus teacher empowerment, teacher collaboration, and whole-child emphasis—key components of Waldorf education.

back to the roots: bringing waldorf social justice to oakland

Ida, now Dr. Oberman, realized that she had everything she needed to organize a public charter school that would keep Waldorf essences, yet embrace social equity. The Waldorf essences included a deep understanding of the child, and the nurturing of truth, beauty, and goodness; that is, the creation of

a certain culture. The efforts to mitigate class divides included striving to realize the potential of authentic standards and assessment.

Dr. Oberman now knew the importance of learning to work sensitively with a racially and economically diverse community. An intensive leadership training course through the well-respected Oakland Community Organization (OCO) taught her peer-based community organizing, and how to build partnerships through listening rather than imposing preconceived notions of the community’s needs.

Emma Paulino, a staff member at OCO, helped Dr. Oberman form a listening team, which included East Oakland native Velia Navarro and Duffy Ross, an experienced educator passionate about social justice. That year, 2008, the small team met with community leaders, with pastors and clergy, with interested parents. They always asked what the community needed most, what pains were most urgent, emphasizing that without acknowledging the pain, no change occurs. What emerged was this: “our schools are not safe and our kids drop out of high school in droves. We need to offer a strong option that serves the whole child.”

A crucial component of this community organizing was parent leadership, and the transformative opportunity for parents to become leaders and organizers, as they discover how the school can serve and improve the entire community. “This is a core aspect of Waldorf education too,” says Dr. Oberman, “that the parents experience themselves in the process

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of building the school and share the responsibility of deciding what is best for their children and the community.”

CSCE has made impressive gains since it opened with a kindergarten and grades one through three. It grew from eighty children in 2011 to 200 in 2014; and now it has a transitional kindergarten through grade six, with an average class size of twenty-eight. In two more years the school will have its complete eight grades, and it is already building partnerships with schools that would provide a compatible high school experience. CSCE is also realizing its goal of serving the most vulnerable, with 72% of its student body living in poverty. The percent of English learners is higher than the district’s and state’s, and 20% of students are learners with special needs. The school’s demographic is 35% African American, 35% Hispanic, 15% Caucasian, and 15% Asian. The most distinctive diversity, however, is what one parent called its “invisible diversity: the one that matters most.” CSCE is socio-economically diverse, with approximately a quarter of the student body commuting

from neighborhoods of greater privilege, as far away as Berkeley, Piedmont, and Hayward. This mix is powerful in terms of supporting twenty-first century skills of working with and in diverse groups toward common goals.

The school is firmly engaged with its goal of becoming a full-service community school. “Children are whole beings,” stresses Dr. Oberman. “You won’t be able to lead them to success if you focus only on academics.” One of the many gestures toward this holistic ideal is a Waldorf-originated emergency pedagogy that addresses the ever-present traumas of an inner city. Yet academic success is understandably at the center of the parents’ dreams for their children; they want their children to be competitive, and they must be convinced that the arts are foundational.

The quality of the teachers is, of course, central to CSCE’s mission. An original question was whether to hire Waldorf-trained teachers or to provide training for non-Waldorf teachers. One successful answer, says teacher Monisha Peters, is that “the school is learning to pick teachers with big hearts. Kids need love, especially when they don’t see it at home.” The teachers’ attention to their students’ emotional needs, plus their close work with families, creates a respect, love, and kindness that are palpable.

The cultivation of good relationships with local community leaders and organizations, including the local police, helps CSCE weather the vagaries of local politics and also to fulfill its own mission. Weekly all-school assemblies are one venue for this work: community elders and trained mentors speak before the school community, and students have the learning task and honor of introducing the speaker. Other efforts involve working closely with Headstart, with local Cambodian and Vietnamese populations, and with the Alameda Food Bank. By inviting the food bank to provide food right at CSCE, with its families as volunteers, the school stands behind its commitment both to the families who lack food security and

Putting our Waldorf inspired sign up on Oakland’s International Boulevard June 2012.



to students' academic performance. Children can't learn when they're hungry.

commitment to standards-based education

During graduate school, as a staff member of the PEW Forum for Educational Reform, Dr. Oberman found herself at the table with nationally prominent educators furiously debating how to promote equal access to educational resources, with a view of standards and assessment as an issue of civil rights and fairness. Under her leadership, CSCE views standards-based education not as an impediment, but as an inspiration. For parents and students to feel secure in attending an arts-based school, they must have confidence that skill levels will also be emphasized, and that the school will work intelligently and diligently to manifest both the original intent of state standards and the original Waldorf school's impulse to mitigate class divides. Waldorf education, with its own budding commitment to rubrics and authentic student assessment, has a critical opportunity here. "The Common Core offers real chances," says Dr. Oberman, "although right now the tendency is to duck and run from it. Of course it has lots of problems in its execution, but the Waldorf approach could be of help in articulating assignments in a way that parents understand. There's actually a big overlap between what Waldorf tries to accomplish and the Common Core."

To the extent that the Community School arouses a sense of curiosity and inquiry from teachers, families,

3rd grader Ame had just shown Dr. Oberman her artwork (Winter 2014).



and the educational community, both Waldorf and public, it will survive and thrive. "It's shared inquiry actually, not just a conversation," says Dr. Oberman. "A project like ours needs allies, not just locally and nationally, but also internationally. We need to look over the rim of our small tea cup to the wider world. We need to keep the wisdom alive that Waldorf pedagogy is about thinking further. We may never just copy Steiner. He taught us not to do that. At the Community School for Creative Education we are in authorship; we're writing our own story." 📖

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