

Far from a standard cookie-cutter classroom, Portland's third public charter school strives for hands-on, real-world applications in a project-oriented environment that reaches kids at a variety of levels, in a manner best suited for each child.

Using a bridge as an example, Sigmund proposes: "If I read about it in a textbook, I can tell you what facts I read. If I go and touch it, and I draw it, and I take it apart, and I talk to an expert about it, and I go back and look at it again, I'm going to get a whole different level that incorporates math and science and social sciences and history and public speaking.... So, project-based learning lets kids do that in-depth learning and then find ways to represent what they learn."

The public school system, comments Sigmund, isn't set up to support that environment for a number of reasons. Kids need to leave the classroom, for one. An individualized approach can take time and cost money, too. More importantly, it bucks the traditional model for public education, which is having a teacher lecture to kids or get information out of a book.

But learning how to learn won't replace basic skills.

"Kids need to have exceptional writing skills, exceptional reading skills, to understand math," says Sigmund. "They need to understand it so that they can actually apply it—especially with math and science. Very often, they're taught the formu-

la, the skill, but they don't understand what it is they're doing or how it works."

When the Emerson School begins classes Sept. 8, nine educators (two of whom are openly lesbian) will welcome to its River District home more than 100 diverse students, representing a wide range of socioeconomic, geographic, religious, ethnic and racial demographics.

"We have every kind of family imaginable," explains Sigmund, a lesbian parent whose daughter will enter first grade. "Single parents, grandparents, multiracial, multireligious families, gay families, lesbian families—you name it and we've got it. And every family in our school is honored and respected."

And should it arise, conflict is viewed as another opportunity for education, especially when it involves diversity and gender stereotyping.

"In public schools, they don't talk about religion and they don't talk about homosexuality," notes Sigmund, "which is interesting because what you're doing is taking huge pieces of a child's life and saying that they do not exist.... That's my opportunity to say let's talk this out: What does your family look like? How are they same? How are they different? What is really important about families?"

"This is a place where gay and lesbian families can come and be gay and lesbian families.... They can be out and be part of our community."

—Jo Sigmund



Basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic fall into place when kids are passionate and excited about what they're doing, says Emerson School co-founder Jo Sigmund. Charter school educators include (left to right, back to front) Michaela Garzelloni, Liz Levy, Lara Hubschmitt, Brandy Hussa, Sigmund, Anne Heimlich and Allegra Dahan Ruggles.

That people love each other, that they're there for each other, that they support each other. Wow, look at that. We have that in common. Our families look different on the outside, but really, ultimately, this is what it's about."

Sigmund says Ralph Waldo Emerson, the

school's namesake, summarizes the school's philosophy when he says, "The secret to education lies in respecting the child." ■

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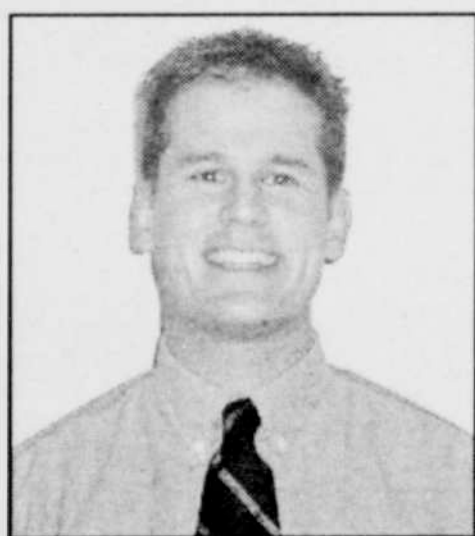
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