

Walden Center & School  
**Frequently Asked Questions**

- 1. Why mixed age classrooms?**  
**How are classes structured in the Mixed Age Classrooms?**  
**How do classes progress through the groups?**

Mixed-age classrooms allow for the greatest flexibility in accommodating the developmental needs of all the children. Teachers carefully present material in a variety of ways to meet the academic needs and different learning styles of the children in their classes. They create classroom environments that allow and encourage a wider range of responses and creativity than might be accepted in a more traditional classroom. Each year, teachers create new units of study based on student interests. These units offer new ways to teach the skills and concepts appropriate for each grade level.

In mixed-age classes, children have ample opportunity to fully learn and master a concept as well as the accompanying skills over the course of multiple years. Teachers offer lessons that involve an overlap of expectations for a range of ages. They tell children, “everyone moves at her/his own pace”. Instead of relying on textbooks, teachers flex and mold curriculum to fit the needs of the group as it changes from year to year.

Advanced children feel challenged because they have the time to truly master and explore a set of skills before moving on. They often act as mentors and/or teachers to younger, or less confident, children. Individualized aspects of the curriculum allow teachers to introduce new skills within a unit of study, even if everyone is not ready to master the skill at that time. All learners benefit from a more open-ended instructional approach that allows for multiple solutions to a problem.

The current class structure is:

Kindergarten	Lower Group
Grade 1	Lower Middle Group
Grades 2-3	Middle Group
Grades 4-5-6	Upper Group

Most children spend one year in the Lower Group and then Lower Middle Group, two years in the Middle Group, and three years in the Upper Group. There is, however, always room in a class for those children whose developmental needs do not follow the more common trajectory.

**2. How do teachers communicate with kids about behavior?  
What about conflict resolution?  
How do you deal with bullying and teasing?**

At the beginning of the year, teachers create classroom rules with the active participation of the children in order to set up clear expectations about safe and respectful behavior. Teachers and students discuss the differences between behaviors appropriate to outside on the playground and those that belong inside the classroom. Teachers talk to the children about the need to have rules: that we need a physically safe and emotionally supportive environment in which to learn. We need to respect one another and show kindness toward each other, appreciating each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Class time collaboration offers opportunities for children to strengthen their communication skills including listening, sharing, compromise, and negotiation. Our "social learning" approach allows children to get to know one another, share ideas, disagree and work through it. This helps children feel more prepared when called upon to solve a conflict in the heat of the moment.

Children learn conflict resolution skills at every grade level. Each classroom teacher uses similar language and a similar approach when it comes to helping children solve conflicts. Teachers model appropriate language, and ask the children to retell what the problem is in their own words. Children learn to express their own feelings and listen attentively to their classmates' interpretation of the disagreement. Students are empowered to resolve their own conflicts when possible and ask for help when the situation is more complicated. If we observe that a situation is becoming uncomfortable for a child, we will communicate with the parents of the children involved in order to find the most effective course of action.

Walden has a "Respect for All" philosophy embodied by parents and teachers meeting throughout the year to discuss current information on bullying and teasing, create an effective school policy, to air concerns and brainstorm solutions.

### **3. What about 7th and 8th grades?**

**How do graduates do academically?**

**How does the no-grading affect the children when they leave Walden?**

Teachers at Walden feel that, developmentally, 6th grade belongs at the elementary school level. We have developed a unique program to enhance the experience of the 6th graders at Walden that includes community service, leadership within the school community, increased visibility in all the Arts, and preparation for the transition to a more traditional school setting.

Walden graduates continue on to do well in a variety of Middle School settings, both public and private, such as Willard, Longfellow, Berkeley Montessori, Black Pine Circle, Martin Luther King, and Park Day Middle School. Middle school teachers report that Walden students are creative and original thinkers, and know how to ask questions about the topic at hand. The students from Walden know their strengths as learners, and they are used to good communication with their teachers. Because they have worked without grades during their years at Walden, they approach school with an internal sense of motivation.

Because most middle schools begin at 6th grade, however, the number of children who stay through 6th varies from year to year. Though the transition to a public school culture and curriculum can take a little time, children usually welcome the large social circle it provides. They even like the new experience of being tested and graded. For those families who choose Independent middle schools, our staff works hard to support families in choosing schools and to facilitate the admissions process.

High Schools attended by Walden students include Berkeley High School, College Preparatory, Head-Royce, Oakland Technical, Lick-Wilmerding, and Maybeck.

Colleges include UCLA, Evergreen, Harvard, University of Chicago, UC Davis, UC Santa Cruz, NYU, UC Irvine, Occidental, MIT, Antioch, Sonoma State, Harvey Mudd, UC Santa Barbara, Yale, San Diego State, San Francisco State, and Columbia.

#### **4. How does a teacher collective work? How are school-wide decisions made?**

Walden Center and School is a teacher collective; there is no principal or head of school. The school is collectively administered by a teaching staff of 9 and an administrative coordinator. We have weekly staff meetings during which we discuss the daily workings of the school and review school policy as new issues arise. There are many forms that a collective can take. We make our decisions by consensus which means that everybody in the collective has to agree with a decision or agree not to block the decision in order for a new policy to take effect. This encourages thorough consideration, but it can take some time to reach a final decision and communicate that decision to the community.

Because there is less emphasis on centralized information, there are more people to whom a parent can turn when seeking information. All members of the collective are apprised of information on issues for discussion and can be approached if more information is sought. If the person you ask is not able to help you, they will know who to ask. In a way, there are ten principals, instead of just one.

A full-time teaching position is considered 4 1/2 days a week. This allows the teaching staff extra time for their administrative duties, and ensures that one's administrative duties remain balanced with one's teaching responsibilities.

The Walden Foundation is our Board and is made up of teachers, parents and founders. The foundation meets once a month and oversees the financial health of the school, as well as the long term vision of our program.

## **5. How do parents participate?**

### **What do you do if you have a problem with a specific teacher?**

Parents participate in many ways. There is a 50 hour work commitment for each family, with an additional 25 hours for each sibling. In the Spring of each year, we send out a roster of all the work commitment jobs available and parents send in their preferences. We then try to match up family skills with the needs of the school. The jobs range from: weekend cleaning, gardening, or light construction to working in the office during the school day, mailings, or monitoring the lost and found.

Parents also volunteer their time by attending committee meetings supporting school events, and chaperoning on field trips, to name but a few.

Instead of a PTA, we have the WPA (Walden Parent Association) as well as several Parent-teacher committees: Respect for All, Marketing, Fundraising, Community Events. Parents join the committee or committees that interest them and put in volunteer hours to help make ideas become reality.

The Foundation is our Board, and it is made up of parents, teachers and founders. As parents retire from the board, new parents are invited to join the Board. This usually happens on a yearly basis.

If you have a problem with a specific teacher, we ask that you first try to speak directly to the person with whom you are having a problem. If that does not seem possible, or if it does not prove helpful, you may approach another staff person to discuss your issue. Because we have no principal, it is important for our communication to stay as clear and direct as possible.

## Frequently Asked Questions About **ADMISSIONS**

### **1. How many applications are accepted?**

We accept applications until our child visit slots are filled up. We usually have up to 40 slots available from mid-January through the end of February.

### **2. How many Lower Group (Kindergarten) teachers are there?**

There is one Lower Group teacher and one part-time classroom assistant. There is consistently a 1:8 teacher to student ratio in the Lower Group.

### **3. What type of diversity outreach is done?**

We have always relied most heavily on our happy families to spread the word about Walden. We also attend an admissions fair each Fall in order to reach families who might not otherwise hear about us.

### **4. What is the experience of kids who join the school in the Middle or Upper group?**

It really depends on the child and the group. But in many instances, the children have “celebrity status” for a time because they are new and different. The children are usually quite kind to new students. Sometimes a class is particularly close-knit and it may take a few months before a new student is completely socially integrated, but teachers monitor the situation carefully to help with the transition.

### **5. What age is good to enter? Is a late summer birthday too late?**

Our Lower group age cut-off is 5 by November 1st. But if parents and preschool teachers really feel that a child with a later birthday is ready to attend kindergarten, then we will happily accept the application and meet the child. Sometimes a younger child is accepted with the understanding that they will be in the Lower Group for 2 years.

### **6. How many families get financial assistance?**

Our financial aid is awarded based on demonstrated need and our total enrollment at the time financial award decisions are made. We are able to give 10% of our total tuition intake back to families who need financial aid. Need is demonstrated by filling out an application and submitting the past 2 years' tax forms. Financial Aid instructions are available on the website. We use the Student Services financial aid forms through NAIS.