



Photographs courtesy of Chandler School: Summer Enrichment Program

CHANDLER SCHOOL:
SUMMER ENRICHMENT PROGRAM FOR
PUBLIC SCHOOL YOUTH
(A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT OF CHANDLER, MAYFIELD
SENIOR, POLYTECHNIC AND WESTRIDGE SCHOOLS)

THE PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, it might be observed, is a microcosm of the greater Los Angeles region in which it sits. Its students represent a great range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds; some come from privileged households with ample material resources, some live near or at the poverty level, while others of course, exist squarely in the middle. Children of every race and a multitude of ethnicities are represented across all grade levels. Like many of its peer school districts statewide, the PUSD looks to identify and serve those children who are gifted, through enrichment programs that recognize and foster their special talents — as it attempts to embrace and support those students whose challenges are particularly acute, through programs meant to bring lower-achieving students to academic par with their peers. Yet as is true of so many “slices” of contemporary life characterized by haves and have nots and other measures of extremity, there are those children in the PUSD who, despite their own particular talents and/or challenges, fall through the cracks because the system is simply not set up to provide special opportunities for everyone.

In the spring of 1990, a small group at the independent Polytechnic School began to consider how deeply impacted life in Pasadena was by the experience of children in the area’s public schools. They decided that with a little ingenuity and a dose of generosity, independent schools could share their rich resources in a fashion that might give a boost to those PUSD kids in the “middle” — those whose potential was promising, but whose talents could not be given full attention within the overburdened and limited public school system. There were four “realities” that inspired these community-minded educators to found what became the *Skills Enrichment Program*: that early intervention is

critically important; that the District provided for children on the extremes of academic achievement but could not serve the “talented middle;” that very few children of ethnic minorities were represented in the PUSD’s gifted “GATE” program; and that the test score requirements for enrollment in GATE were so stringent that bright children from traditionally underachieving populations were rarely recognized.

Now celebrating sixteen years and with four leading independent schools on board, the Skills Enrichment Program was developed as an intensive summer school experience for a select handful of PUSD students for whom some extra attention, guidance, mentorship, support and opportunity might portend an exceptional future. Each year, representatives of each of Pasadena’s 22 public schools recommend their most promising mid-level students for this extraordinary opportunity. Those selected must be in the 4th and above grade, be good citizens in their schools, and have parents identified as supportive of their kids educations. For five weeks every summer, between 300-400 public school kids take over the campuses of Pasadena’s independent Polytechnic, Mayfield Senior, Chandler and Westridge schools, for



what may become a life-changing experience in which their minds will be opened, their curiosities piqued, their intellects pushed and challenged, and their spirits nurtured. The students commit to a full day curriculum that includes math, language, computer

science and experiment-based lab experiences, as well as rare and exciting enrichment opportunities that engage them in everything from bioethics to hip hop dance, and from urban planning models to summer-long units simulating life under water. They are taught by

exceptional educators who come to the program precisely because they want to make a difference in these kids' lives.

Over the years, a staggering number of SEP alumni — nearly every one of whom makes it to college — have returned as mentors and teachers in the program. Several cite their SEP experiences as key to their academic and personal successes. They remember how seemingly simple things, like manageable class sizes, supplies in abundance, and easy access to attention from teachers, helped them experience and eventually sustain a core attribute of intellectual curiosity, rigor and satisfaction — a lifelong joy of learning.