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## WHAT IS SO SPECIAL ABOUT OLYMPIA COMMUNITY SCHOOL?

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1. **Our curriculum is child-centered, teacher-directed and, when appropriate, theme-based. Most subjects are taught in an integrated context making the learning more meaningful to the children than a standardized, test-driven curriculum.**

Child-centered means that the children help choose *what* they will study and *how* they will learn about their choices. Their natural curiosity helps drive the curriculum and they are motivated to acquire basic skills (math, reading, writing, scientific principles) because they discover that they need these skills to understand what they have *chosen to learn*.

For example, many children love to learn about animals. Using their ideas, the teachers might develop a study of animal habitats to help children understand the importance of the environment to all living things. If many of the class are interested in beavers, they might:

- Hear or read fiction and nonfiction books on this topic
- Build beaver dams together, use math skills to measure them, and reflect on their dams in writing and illustrations (with assistance, if they are just learning to write)
- Go on a field trip to a beaver pond
- Discuss the importance of clean water and learn the physical qualities of water
- Conduct a related art project or learn a song about beavers

In the context of this study, with teacher guidance individual children would have opportunities to pursue their own interests—by focusing on animals or plants of their choice and by concentrating more in certain academic areas, such as science or art. This flexibility also allows children's different learning styles to be taken into account.

2. **"The World is Our Classroom." The woods and beaches that surround the school provide a real world laboratory and a daily experience of beauty.**

Whether adding up bugs, learning the structure of different kinds of leaves, painting or writing about something discovered on the beach, students have ample opportunities for hands-on learning. The nature preserve inspires students and teachers alike and is invaluable in teaching awareness and respect for the environment.

**3. We avail ourselves of the rich and varied educational resources in the Olympia community to broaden and enhance the children's learning experiences.**

We have regular fieldtrips, some inspired by children and parents. We also have special activities on campus, as the teachers may invite parents and other Olympia community members—from doctors and scientists to artists and authors—to share their particular experiences and talents. In the past, this has included:

- Parent-musicians who have come in weekly to play their instruments, lead singing, and foster musical understanding and appreciation
- Native American storytellers and dancers
- Parents with Spanish and Japanese language skills who have come in regularly to present the languages, culture, music and art of these countries

**4. With greater flexibility than traditional schools, we value and make time for creativity and the arts.**

Art, music, drama, and play are often treated as occasional extra-curricular activities in other school settings. At OCS, these activities are integral parts of our curriculum. They are considered an essential part of children's learning and also help us teach more academic subjects in engaging, enjoyable ways.

**5. We foster children's individual voices and independent thinking.**

Children graduate from OCS with the confidence and ability to express themselves in a variety of dimensions—orally, in writing, graphically, through drama or music, etc. While at OCS they are invited to express opinions, reflect aloud and in writing about what they learn, and to work out conflicts between themselves (with teacher help when needed). A respect for children's ideas and opinions, as well as ample opportunities for individual and group exploration, encourages independent thinking. Though there is direct teacher instruction when appropriate, we do not follow the desks-in-a-straight-line approach to teaching.

**6. We develop children's ability to assess their own progress.**

We encourage children to regularly reflect on and evaluate their own work. They learn to value the effort they put into their studies, honor their own and other students' strengths and unique learning styles without negative comparisons, trust their own evaluations of themselves, and celebrate their successes.

**7. We embrace an appreciation of diversity and the development of self-respect.**

In addition to learning about other cultures, the children learn about each other's heritage, beliefs, and families. Children at OCS have time to talk with each other and find out how different they are and what they have in common. They are encouraged to engage in respectful relations with each other, and to discuss and resolve differences peacefully. At this early age, they are taught to value love, tolerance, and respect as the best ways to interact with people. This early learning of these values provides a successful model for how to continue to treat people as they mature. And in being treated with respect, love and tolerance, they also learn self-respect.