

## POPPER-KEIZER SCHOOL FOR ACCELERATED LEARNERS 1977-1997

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The classrooms at Popper-Keizer elementary school look typical in most respects, with dinosaur cutouts on the walls and munchkin-sized furniture painted in bright primary colors. The children are a cheery, enthusiastic bunch, 'jumping up to answer questions in class and running like a pack of wild animals during recess. Only a closer look at the school's coursework indicates that these kids are doing something special. In the fourth-grade classroom, children translate sentences in Greek; the kindergarteners read out of third grade level storybooks; and seventh graders group around a 'blackboard, working out problems in 'matrix algebra. The 60 students at Popper-Keizer are very bright, but don't call them mentally gifted. "That's a theological term," said Dr. Lewis S. Keizer. Executive Director of Popper-Keizer school. "I prefer the term accelerated learners."

Popper-Keizer school was founded in 1977 by Keizer and his wife, Tess Popper. The school offers special education for accelerated learners from preschool through junior high school age. "It's not hard to identify these kids. They're the ones who can read before they enter kindergarten," said Keizer. "You can't teach a kid to read at age 3, or 4 or 5, they teach themselves. It's not a mechanical skill they can learn, and it's not related to early walking or talking."

Some children are precocious learners the way others are phenomenally coordinated, and Keizer has found that these youngsters come in fairly equal proportions from all racial and

economic groups. A casual look through the Popper-Keizer classrooms reveals the same racial mix of students one would find in any public school classroom in Santa Cruz. Children are not accepted into Popper-Keizer on the basis of IQ tests, but on the basis of what they have accomplished. And once they are accepted, the kids keep on accomplishing. "Our kids aren't nerds at all," said Keizer. "They're very skilled socially and athletically. Our students have danced for the queen of England and the president of the United States, they've been baseball and soccer all-stars, and played in the Youth Symphony. Three Popper-Keizer graduates are valedictorians at local high schools this year."

One of the secrets of success at Popper-Keizer is attention to the common-sense basics. Class size is small, with from 4 to 15 children per teacher. Class periods are longer, acknowledging the students' ability to concentrate for more than 50 minutes at a stretch. Students are given lots of individual attention, and are encouraged to go as fast and as far as they can with their studies. Parents are involved in their children's education. And students are required to work hard. In addition to accelerated classes in reading, writing and arithmetic, students are offered music training from kindergarten on, foreign language training beginning in first grade, literature, physical and biological sciences, health education and drama. Greek is offered in fourth grade, Hebrew and Arabic in fifth, Sanskrit in sixth, and modern languages including Russian and Japanese in seventh and eighth grades. While the program at Popper-Keizer encourages individuality in the students, one thing that is not tolerated is disrespect to adults. "This isn't a Summerhill-type program where the adults bow down and every little impulse is gratified," said Keizer. "If we did that we'd have big problems. We have discipline and our kids have savvy. They won't be the ones to get messed up with drugs or get pregnant at 15."

One of the benefits of grouping bright kids together is that it keeps them challenged, and it keeps them from feeling "weird" or "special." "I think I would have been just an average student if I hadn't gone to Popper-Keizer," said Khira Adams, now a 15 year-old freshman at York School in Monterey. "The stuff we were taught didn't seem hard at the time, they didn't force us to do it. I think a lot of people could do a lot better than they do if they're just given the chance."

Tuition at Popper-Keizer is \$2000 a year for preschool and \$2600 for grades K-8. Financial aid is available for qualifying low-income and minority students, some of it provided by the Cowell Foundation. Keizer points out that it costs only half as much to educate a child at Popper-Keizer as it does at a public school. "As much as half of the public school budget is allotted to special education for retarded, disabled and non-English speaking students, yet special education for the gifted is virtually non-existent," he said. Ironically, some special-education funds end up going to the mentally gifted who drop out, develop psychological problems, or turn to drugs and anti-social behavior. Studies show that these "severely gifted" children are more prone to these problems than any other statistical group, yet they are also ones with the greatest achievement potential.

According to Keizer, accelerated learners do not do well in the public school system. "Statistics show that anywhere from 25 to 35 percent of identified 'mentally gifted' children eventually drop out of high school," he said. "Ten years ago the drop-out rate was 17 to 25 percent. It shows that what the public school system is doing doesn't work." According to Keizer, public school

systems have pretty much abandoned special education for gifted students because they came to the conclusion that such programs were elitist. It was assumed that bright kids could fend for themselves. "I don't think accelerated education is necessarily elitist," said Keizer. "It may be in the national interest. The investment would be so small to turn the neglect of gifted learners around in this nation, and the payoff would be so immeasurably great. It is absurd to continue in the old way."