



A public nonprofit TK-8
charter school in San Francisco, CA



A School As Unique As You

How Thomas Edison Charter Academy caters to the diverse needs of students



A Bright Idea – The TECA Story

How passionate teachers and parents created
a community-centered public charter school

by Thea Marie Rood

Like Thomas Edison the man — who relentlessly experimented until he got it right — Thomas Edison Charter Academy just keeps improving on an idea: that schools should serve the unique needs of the children in their communities.

Located in the heart of San Francisco's culturally diverse Mission District, Thomas Edison Charter Academy (TECA) is a TK-8 elementary school with about 700 students who reflect the diversity found in its nearby neighborhoods.

Creating a school that honored parents' voices and cultural diversity while ensuring the success of all students across economic and social divides was a natural idea.

"It didn't really take an epiphany," says Erin Lee Sears, academy programs director at the school, "it just took common sense."

But it also took something of a circuitous route: TECA began as an under-performing public school before being taken over by Edison Schools, Inc., a for-profit educational company headquartered in New York. That relationship, controversial from the start, didn't last. So in 2011, thanks to a passionate group of staff and parents who wanted local control, the school became a public nonprofit charter school, independent of both the San Francisco Unified School District and the New-York based corporation.

Since then, the next — and most successful — round of experiments have been implemented. They include changes large and small, but at the center of them all has been the academic experience.

"I think the school is a place where students can get a really high level, competitive education, and you can see that in the high schools our students are accepted to, what they're learning and what they're reading in the classroom," says TECA's Principal Dr. Olivia Lynch, who is also a leader in school reform.

Other improvements at TECA have included adjusting the school start time to make it easier for families navigating traffic; contracting with Revolution Foods for fresh and healthy lunches; and introducing the Spanish-English Dual Language Program as an option in kindergarten through third grade, meaning 50/50 instruction in all subjects. And perhaps their most interesting decision of all: keeping the arts program (visual arts, music, drama and dance).

Many of these decisions have been shaped by the school's supportive parents. For instance, when administrators realized that keeping the arts program meant not having enough money for paper for the copy machines, the parents sprung to action.

"A week into school, we heard this beeping noise — a truck was being backed into our courtyard. It was a semi-truck filled with copy paper the parents had arranged," Sears recalls.

The anecdote illustrates the TECA story: With creativity and innovation, a group of caring parents and educators made their school a community where all students can achieve.



Arts
Social-emotional learning
Leadership
Community
Dual language immersion program
Diversity Local leadership
Quality teachers
Technology
Rigorous curriculum
21st century learners
Extended school day
Uniforms
Events



**Charters
give
parents
choice**

A public nonprofit charter school:

TECA is just like any other public school, which means NO TUITION! TECA and other charter schools represent an alternative to traditional public schools. Parents choose to send their children to TECA because the school provides the kind of education they want for their children.

Anyone can attend:

Priority is given to siblings of enrolled students and San Francisco residents. But students don't have to live within the city limits. "Although most of our students are from San Francisco, we have a number of families from outside of San Francisco," says Lupe Aguilera, director of enrollment. "Usually these are people who live farther away but work in San Francisco and want their children nearby during the day."

How enrollment works:

Due to demand, TECA runs an in-house lottery (not part of the SFUSD lottery) to determine enrollment. Once enrolled, your student has a spot until eighth grade graduation. "We operate in that sense as a public school," says Aguilera. "If there is space, you are accepted."

Sandra and Danielle Ramo-Larios were happy to find a school that valued the arts and bilingual education as much as they did: TECA. PHOTO BY JAMES FANUCCHI



Speaking the Same Language

Parents find a school that fits their family

by Thea Marie Rood

Sandra and Danielle Ramo-Larios, both clinical psychologists, have three children and live in Noe Valley. When it was time for their oldest son, Orion, 6, to begin kindergarten, they investigated a lot of schools before deciding on TECA.

“We’re a bilingual and bicultural family,” Danielle says, “so we were really attracted by the Spanish immersion program.” They also believed the focus on art was interesting. “You hear about art being cut right and left in public schools,” she adds. “But at TECA they have art in the classroom every single day.”

The couple also liked the ability of an independent charter school to fine-tune the curriculum for its bicultural students, so that historical icons like Cesar Chavez are studied.

From their first hour on campus — at Back to School Night — they were not disappointed in their choice. “The two kindergarten teachers [one Spanish, one English] had different styles and personalities,” Sandra says. “We were worried how Orion

would transition, but they gave us confidence that first night when they partnered together and let us all know what we could expect from the year.”

Those expectations were not only met, but exceeded. Sandra beams with pride that Orion was reading and writing whole sentences in both languages by the end of the school year. “He came home excited every day about learning in two languages, and that was major for us,” she says.

Danielle and Sandra were also impressed by the parent involvement on campus and found the parent liaison, in particular, helpful in navigating activities and resources. They also were amazed at the successful parent fundraising, both for a new soccer field and a new library.

“This is a community that really cares about good bilingual education,” Danielle says. “And this is a school we feel all three of our children will be well-educated by for years to come.”

A Masterpiece in the Making

Graduate reflects on finding her foundation at TECA

by Thea Marie Rood

McKenzie Betancur, 14, is a 2016 eighth grade graduate of TECA and attended the school for five years. “I started TECA in third grade,” she says, “and what I loved most was the community. The staff was so welcoming, so exciting, so fun.”

Even visitors from the outside can sense how special the school is. McKenzie tells a story of one substitute teacher who insisted she had never taught at a school in her entire career where students were so happy to arrive every morning and so sad to be picked up every afternoon. “It’s true,” McKenzie says. “Those years were the best of my life. I laughed so much every day.”

McKenzie also deeply appreciated the focus on the arts. “I am much more an artistic person than an athletic person,” she says with a smile. “Having art every day was definitely a highlight there — and I really love to draw and write.”

McKenzie enjoyed academic subjects too, and remembers one from her eighth grade English class. “We were put into study groups where we analyzed and broke apart evidence in essays — all of them written by other students,” she says. “We also were assigned a ‘suspense story’ to write. That was fun ... really, all the creative writing I enjoyed.”

She feels the staff and students are all “special” and deserve “equal amounts of love,” but says she had a special bond with teacher Jessica Paa. “She was my favorite,” McKenzie says.

Teachers like Paa cultivated McKenzie’s self-confidence, which will guide her as she enters George Washington High School, a culturally-diverse, highly-ranked public school in the Richmond District. “The teachers at TECA gave you life lessons every day,” McKenzie says, and not just academics. She says success at TECA boils down to two things: “It sounds a bit cliché,” she says, “but try hard and have fun.”

TECA has given McKenzie a strong foundation she can build upon to reach her college and career dreams. “I’m thinking something medical, like psychology,” she says. “It’s very complex — and I love that.”



“The teachers at TECA gave you life lessons every day.”

McKenzie Betancur
TECA graduate

Graduate McKenzie Betancur says TECA taught her life lessons and helped her discover a passion for art. PHOTO BY JAMES FANUCCHI



Not Your Textbook School

TECA's unique academic programs serve all students

by **Natasha vonKaenel**

Dual Language Immersion Program

Students in grades K-5 can opt to receive 50 percent of their instruction in English and 50 percent in Spanish, with the goal of graduating students academically fluent in both languages. Teachers work closely to ensure students receive the necessary vocabulary for all subjects. Participating students have reached similar reading levels for both Spanish and English, and produced similar test scores as those in the English-only track. In addition, all TECA fourth and fifth graders receive Spanish as a foreign language instruction.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

For students who need help with writing or reading comprehension, RTI offers individualized attention in small groups of roughly four students per instructor. Students usually participate in RTI for one or two quarters, at which point the majority have caught up with their peers.

Schoolwide English Language Development (ELD)

ELD provides additional English language instruction every day, focused on grammar and academic language skills. In 2015-2016, 42 percent of the student population started out classified as an English language learner. With the help of the ELD program, one third of those students were reclassified during that same year.

Special Education Department (SPED)

TECA provides special accommodations and instruction for students who need it, with the support of the SPED full-time staff. SPED staff work with teachers to keep students included in all classroom activities and instruction.

826 Valencia and Youth Speaks

Improving the literacy skills of students is always a top priority. TECA works with local nonprofits 826 Valencia and Youth Speaks to get students excited about expressing themselves through written and spoken word.

Creative Engagement Program (CEP)

Passionate students are successful students. In CEP, students grades 6-8 choose what they want to study, with past examples ranging from the representation of women in media and character-to-product development in the Star Wars franchise. Students take field trips to sites of learning, including The Tech Museum of Innovation and Facebook's campus. At the end, students must give a presentation of their work to parents, peers and TECA staff.

UCSF Science & Health Education Partnership

Graduate students from UCSF work directly with students at TECA to engage them in the sciences, sharing their working knowledge with students and helping lead practical demonstrations — including dissections of sheep brains and hearts.

Extended Day Program

With staff on site from the time school gets out until 6 p.m., students can continue learning after school, with access to a wide variety of programs, including tutoring and homework help.

Events

To show off the incredible development of students and their work, TECA holds events throughout the year, including the Literacy Fair, Student Exhibition, Innovation Fair and the Art, Music and Dance Showcase.

Garden Program

TECA's 1,400-square-foot organic gardens are living laboratories for all students to learn important math, science and social studies lessons. Students plant vegetables and watch them grow while learning integrated lessons about concepts such as drought and conservation.

A teacher's point of view



Fourth-grade teacher Maria Davila comes into work every day because she loves her kids.

"It's the most rewarding thing ... when you see they are (understanding lessons) that before they thought were difficult," she says. Originally from Spain, Davila knew she wanted to move to California,

but wasn't sure where — until she found TECA. In 2015, she moved her entire family for the chance to teach in the Dual Language Immersion Program.

Davila says pushing her students to become fluent in both Spanish and English is absolutely necessary, both for career success and to preserve traditions.

"We have to help them improve their Spanish, so they don't lose their family connections and cultural heritage," she says.

Davila's 4th graders have two teachers — she provides Spanish-language instruction while her co-teacher teaches the same subjects in English. Davila says this unique partnership, as well as individual coaching provided to all TECA teachers, has greatly improved her skills in the classroom. Having the tools and the freedom to personalize her lessons — especially for students with unique learning styles — has also made teaching at TECA a joy.

"That's pretty great to me, because not every single kid needs the same thing, and that gives you the chance, once you know your students ... to provide them with exactly what they need."

“We try to change how people care about things.”

Arthur Martinez, 11
TECA student and Global Citizen Club member

Arthur Martinez says he learned about community issues, such as homelessness, through his participation in the Global Citizen Club, one of many ways TECA encourages the social-emotional development of its students.

PHOTO BY JAMES FANUCCHI

We ♥ Art!



Students' creativity has multiple outlets at TECA, where staff realize a well-rounded education includes the arts. “We know the arts is a big, important part of our students' lives,” says Erin Lee Sears, academy programs director. Art programming includes:

45 minutes of art, every single day.

Students rotate each quarter between visual arts, media arts, drama, music and dance. Coming soon? Yoga and mindfulness, Sears says.

Showcases and performances.

Students have plenty of opportunities to show off their work during art shows, music concerts, plays and dance performances. And the teachers are all professionals in their fields.

Adventures in Music.

This partnership with the San Francisco Symphony brings a quartet to the school to perform for TK through fifth graders each month. “It comes with a curriculum, so teachers do the lessons before the performance and students are aware of what they're listening to,” says Sears. “And the musicians are wonderful — very engaging with students.” The program wraps up with a field trip to see the entire symphony perform!



Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child

Social-emotional learning creates more compassionate global citizens

by Thea Marie Rood

To be responsible and caring citizens of the world, students need to know more than the square root of 144 or the capital of Argentina. They need to know how to manage their behavior and emotions, and how to navigate interpersonal relationships and resolve conflicts.

TECA places a great emphasis on meeting the needs of the “whole child,” which includes social-emotional learning.

“I would say addressing emotional and social issues makes students more able to focus on academics,” says Jessica Alfaro, MFT, TECA's full-time counselor (a rarity on any TK-8 campus). “This school is a safe place to come and be with their friends, it's a very stable staff, so they look forward to coming to school every day.”

This enviable outcome depends on several programs and resources. One is Alfaro herself, a licensed clinician who — along with a group of MFT interns each year — provides individual and small group counseling. The staff has worked hard to remove any negative connotation to using this service, Alfaro says, and students often “self-refer” (although parents and teachers can refer, too). Individual counseling might focus on divorce, domestic violence, anxiety or bullying. Group counseling can focus on developing healthy friendships or social skills.

Classroom teachers also hold weekly “community circles,” where students can discuss problems with classmates. If, for instance, a kindergartner expresses that she doesn't like how a fellow student is speaking to her, the group addresses the

problem in the circle. “It provides a way for people to work out conflict,” Alfaro says.

TECA takes a similar approach to discipline, using what are known as restorative practices. Facilitated by a teacher or counselor, students have a dialogue about a harm that occurred and resolutions that could help make it right. “Instead of one student being a ‘victim’ and one having a ‘punishment’ take place, the students work to restore their relationship,” says Alfaro. The school also creates Solution Teams of students who help resolve conflicts.

TECA's playground becomes another classroom for social learning. Following a program from Playworks, the staff sets up different centers of play, teaches kids the rules of games, and offers easy conflict resolution tools. “It can be something as simple as rock/paper/scissors to see who goes first,” says Alfaro.

Lastly, the school creates ties to the greater community. Seventh-grader Arthur Martinez, 11, got to experience this as part of TECA's Global Citizen Club. “We try to change how people care about things,” he says, adding the club focused on the local homeless population this year. “We took field trips to help them and presented our work to our classmates.”

The school also is one of the few that offers Gay-Straight Alliance in a middle-school setting. “The Gay-Straight Alliance Network of Northern California is only a few blocks away,” Alfaro says. “I just went and knocked on their door.”

All That We're Missing is YOU!

How to be TECA family

1 School Tour

We encourage all families interested in TECA to visit our school. School tours will be offered to prospective families October through January. No prior sign-up necessary. For dates and times, visit our website under Admissions.

2 Application Session

Applications for the next school year are submitted during Application Acceptance Sessions, held monthly from October to January. Find session dates and list of materials to bring at our website under Admissions.

3 Lottery

An in-house lottery is held after all Application Acceptance Sessions have been held. Priority is given first to siblings of currently-enrolled TECA students, then to San Francisco residents in lottery order. Families are notified by mail of their child's acceptance or waitlist placement status.



Thomas Edison Charter Academy

edisoncharteracademy.org

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What We've Achieved

Advanced academics

TECA students demonstrate continuous improvement in achievement on state assessments.

Graduates attending top schools

TECA students go on to attend the top ranking public, parochial and private high schools in San Francisco.

Diverse Student Population

We encourage applications from students of all races, ethnicities, family structures, socioeconomic backgrounds, learning styles and abilities.

High attendance rate

Our families and students are strongly committed to the school and help to achieve an outstanding 99% attendance rate.

Curriculum for critical thinking

We implement an enriched curriculum and project-based learning initiatives firmly rooted in the California Common Core State Standards and frameworks.

Arts for all

Our emphasis on the arts and creativity serves to support a dynamic learning environment that engages all students and provides opportunities for them to attain and demonstrate their mastery and talents.

Dual language immersion program

TECA's award-winning Dual Language Immersion Program supports student academic advancement in English and Spanish as well as multicultural social awareness.

City as a school

Learning trips and excursions are an integral and necessary feature of TECA's TK-8 instructional program and serve to build student background knowledge by extending the classroom to include the rich learning opportunities of the San Francisco Bay Area.



TECA thanks its many supporters

- 826 Valencia
- Boys & Girls Club
- CYO San Francisco Athletics
- Friendship House Association of American Indians
- Greater Mission Rotary Club
- Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts
- The Olympic Club
- Playworks
- The Salvation Army
- UCSF Science & Health Education Partnership
- Wells Fargo of San Francisco
- Youth Speaks

➔ *TECA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and accepts donations to help support students in the classroom. Learn how you or your business can send a child to camp, fulfill a need on the school supply wishlist or make a monetary contribution at www.edisoncharteracademy.org.*