

## Harper School's Legacy and Impact on Youth Made Evident Through Their Success

Unlocking the heavy door, Harper School owner Joe Wagner pulls it open from its closed manner. He wanders into the school and flicks on the lights. Blue and yellow walls surround his vision as he heads into his office and grabs his clipboard. He checks who will be in attendance at the school today and quickly sends the list to the teachers. He explains that Mary Fava, the school's preschool director, will not be in attendance today, so he is picking up her shift of managing morning check-in.

“Mary is my saving grace,” Wagner explains while finishing up a text. “She not only knows everything about each child in our program, but she is able to easily cater to each of their wants and needs.”

Luckily, Fava had room in her schedule to give an insight into her position. She elaborated on the school's message in hopes of explaining its purpose, “We have a strong focus on higher expectations for our students. No matter what age, we allow for students to grow and mature in a way that is respectful and allows character development.”

Wagner's schedule is never the same, and he constantly juggles new personalities and experiences each child brings to the school. Scurrying across the hallway, he welcomes the first preschool student into their classroom. The child runs into the classroom and throws his backpack in his assigned cubby. The vivacious boy has curly hair and an immense amount of energy. His screech fills the classroom as he runs to his seat. Wagner quickly scolds him for the disruption and reminds him of the inside voice policy. He shakes his head as he walks back to the front door to let another student inside.

Handing his clipboard to the teacher now on duty, Wagner walks back into his office and sits in his large brown chair getting ready to resume his interview.

Fiddling with his pen, he explains, “I was unhappy with how my children were being brought up in school. I only saw them for a few hours a day and could tell they were not engaged in their education while also lacking in their manners.”

This problem at home inspired Wagner to start his own educational program and allow for a safe environment that fosters individualistic youth.

When registering children, he said his primary focus is catering to the whole family, rather than just the child. He wants the school to play a role in the child’s character development and ability to add to his or her family. Wagner makes it a point to create relationships with parents and siblings in order to truly understand the child and their actions in school.

A long-time member of the school, Gus Haas, a fourth grader who started at Harper School when he was just 4 years old, has grown in remarkable ways since his attendance at the educational program his mother, Jenny Haas explained. She describes, “Gus was a boy who could not sit still and was not focused in a normal learning environment. Joe really worked with Gus and has taught him how to enjoy learning while also being respectful of the rules in the classroom.”

Moving from his desk, Wagner brings me into the school gym. Miniature bikes cover the wall as well as kites full of vibrant colors. Blocks were scattered on top of gymnastic mats that allowed for tumble time. Slowly moving his phone camera around, Wagner describes how important playtime is inside Harper School’s curriculum.

“We value letting kids be kids while asserting more and more boundaries as the kids move up in grade level,” stated Wagner.

Finishing up our time together, Joe Wagner describes his future plans about opening another school in San Diego, Calif. Unlike Harper School in St. Louis, the new location is not a

solo project. He is planning on becoming a cofounder and hopefully setting the school up to manage from a distance. California is not a new location to him as that was where he founded his first school, Stratford.

Harper School is an educational center that offers young students a chance to indulge in learning and encourages them to defy standard expectations. Joe Wagner opened this school with the hope of fostering an environment that encourages manners, education and continuity.

His previous journey allowed him to gain experience in the schooling field. He co-founded an institution now known as Stratford School Avenues: The World School Challenger School. This school is located in Silicon Valley and is now out of his ownership. He yearned for a project that could be created by not only himself, but with his wife, Molly, and their seven children. Harper School, located in Town and Country, Missouri, was the perfect challenge for the pair. This educational site has over 60 students making the ratio between students and teachers 7-to-1. With this school being as successful as it was, Wagner decided to open another Harper School in San Diego, California. Wagner hopes that this is only the start of this educational empire.

Registration for the San Diego location is not yet open, but keep an eye out on Harper School's social media for an update in early 2024.



Two young students smile as they touch hands while playing with a previously made science experiment Nov. 12, 2021. The teachers says the pair is inseparable and often find themselves sobbing when going home at the end of the day. Taken by Brooke Beste.



Two young boys attempt to finish a search and find during their recess time on October 1, 2021. The pair worked for ten minutes before giving up and playing with trucks. Taken by Brooke Beste.



Three students looked at representations of animals during their science lesson on October 1, 2021. This lesson taught students about the patterns of certain animals as well as their names. Taken by Brooke Beste.