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The school as brainchild

By Carla Rivera, Times Staff Writer
January 21, 2007



The idea for Vistamar School, a private college-prep academy in El Segundo, began five years ago with an innocuous question posed by a Manhattan Beach mother to a friend over lunch: Where will your daughter go to high school when she grows up?

The friends didn't wonder long. Dissatisfied with the options then available, they collected a group of like-minded parents and set to work. They researched the area's demographics, began fundraising and recruiting a headmaster, searched for a building and developed an educational philosophy. All of which led to Vistamar, which opened in 2005 as one of the newest private schools in the Los Angeles area.

"About four months into our research I thought, 'Wow, this could actually happen,'" said Romayne Levee, one of the founding parents.

There is a burgeoning trend in California and the rest of the nation for parents — dismayed with low-performing and overcrowded schools — to have more say in educational matters, whether it be through new public charter schools or more hands-on involvement in their local districts.

Although there is a tradition of resolute moms and dads opening schools, the Vistamar founders exemplify a new breed of entrepreneurial parents — like PTA members on steroids, as one of them put it — establishing private campuses with their personal visions of education. At Vistamar, this embodies a "global student," imbued with a mature understanding of the world through classes such as Mandarin Chinese and a partnership with a South African sister school.

New schools face many hurdles, including enormous start-up costs, especially in California, where it can be difficult just to find a location to hold classes. High costs translate into high tuition — at Vistamar, \$22,500 a year. It can be tough for newly opened schools with no history to gain traction and attract students. That is one reason private schools are not eligible to join the California Assn. of Independent Schools until their fifth year, after establishing a track record.

Still, in the last five years, at least half a dozen independent schools in California started by parents have opened or are in the works, including Newport Coast's Sage Hill School, which encourages student experimentation; the Bay School in San Francisco, which emphasizes science, technology, ethics and world religions; Northridge's New Heights Preparatory Academy, opened in August with a focus on arts; and Pacific Ridge, set to open this fall in San Diego, where students will have to complete a global service requirement.

"There is an entrepreneurial and pioneer spirit at play where we do see an explosion of new schools on the West Coast," said Myra McGovern, a spokeswoman for the National Assn. of Independent Schools. "There's a huge push and growth in developing schools that are more niche-focused rather than just sort of replicas of New England prep schools."

The new schools are attracting some top-flight educators. Pacific Ridge's head of school, Eileen Mullady, held key faculty positions at Princeton and Columbia universities and spent 10 years as head of Horace Mann School in New York, one of the nation's elite private day schools. Jim Buckheit, Vistamar's head of school, previously led the Anglo-American School of Moscow, Frankfurt International School in Germany and the Common School in Massachusetts, among other institutions.

Jacqueline Smethurst, a longtime educator who is the interim head of Sage Hill, acted as a consultant for Vistamar, Pacific Ridge and other parent-bred private schools in San Francisco; St. Helena, Calif.; and Napa, Calif.; and has formed an informal consortium among them to share information on such issues as fundraising, curriculum and recruitment.

"I think they're really well thought-out," said Smethurst. "They've gone through the finances very carefully; they're very disciplined. These are not make-or-break schools."

Buckheit had just bought a new house in Massachusetts when he got the call from the Vistamar founders.

"They had a good philosophy, they had done the groundwork, and they were learners — they had genuine questions about how I could help them," said Buckheit, who added that working to refine the vision of the school represented the most sustained creative period of his career.

Vistamar is in a semi-industrial patch bordering Manhattan Beach and Hawthorne and within walking distance of the Metro Green Line. The school occupies a

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76,000-square-foot warehouse that was once part of the Xerox campus and, most recently, DirecTV.

An architectural design team transformed the space into wine- and mustard-toned hallways with colorful art displays, science and computer labs, an art studio, a student center with cafe seating and academic "pods" such as the humanities commons, made up of a seating area with project tables and computers, off of which radiate four classrooms, teacher offices and a space for group meetings.

At Vistamar, most days begin with a student-led assembly featuring a poem or other personal expression as a way to establish stronger ties with faculty and staff. There are 98 students in grades nine through 11, with 12th grade to be added next year. Maximum capacity by 2010 will be about 400 students, with no more than 16 students in a class.

The school's ninth- and 10th-grade classes received accreditation last summer from the Western Assn. of Schools and Colleges. About 40% of the students receive financial aid, and 50% are students of color. The school recently mounted an advertising campaign to trumpet its philosophy. Its tagline: Discover a New School of Thought.

Sophomore Tara Nootboom, 15, who enrolled when Vistamar opened, said she feels fortunate to have gotten in on the ground level.

"It's always developing, always something new being added," she said between classes. "I think an older school would be stagnant without a lot of change. Sometimes I think this school is not going to be new forever, but right now there's always a changing environment, and I think that's healthy."

Her mother, Lisa Nootboom, said the school's small size and academic emphasis appealed to her, although the steep tuition made it a difficult choice. Tara's grandparents are helping to foot the bill. And although the school is new, the people running it have solid reputations, she said.

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