

Westerly School Origin Stories

At the beginning, Westerly School began to take shape with informal discussions of parents in the Long Beach area who were looking for alternatives to the public school system. The Long Beach community had no secular independent schools, only the public schools and a few religiously-based parochial schools. These parents wanted the choice of a local independent education that would focus on the strengths and challenges of each individual student.

That vision became a reality with the opening of Westerly School in 1993 with the following mission:

“The Mission of Westerly School is to develop each child’s full potential, intellectually, morally, and physically.”

And so began our remarkable history as an independent school built, fueled and nurtured by dedicated families in the Long Beach community.

Additional organizational help was obtained to help the Board work collaboratively and to craft a workable budget and before too long the search for a Headmaster was underway. The search spread across the US and a candidate from a school in Puerto Rico appeared to be a great fit with the Mission statement. Ray Bizjack was hired as Headmaster in February 1992. He had previously been the founding head of St. Marks School in Marin County. Operating without students, Mr. Bizjack was set up in offices borrowed from a board member and his salary was picked up via ad-hoc donations primarily by other trustees.

The Board created a provisional budget with the help of their advisors and set a structure of a teacher and an aide for each class of 22 students maximum, grades kindergarten through grade 8. The structure also showed dedicated specialists for PE, foreign language, visual arts, and performing arts. A financial aid program was established to help ensure economic diversity among the students.

After a few disappointments in looking to find a campus for the school, the Board was eventually introduced to a vacant lot on 29th Street in Long Beach close to the Signal Hill border. A local architect, was discovered, who would contribute much of his fee and negotiations with Scottsman, a manufacturer of modular buildings, were undertaken to provide classrooms. A subset of founding board members dug in and signed personal guarantees in varying amounts sufficient to secure a loan of \$450,000. The construction could move forward.

In September 1993, the School opened with just under 40 students and one week behind schedule. While this was just a bit under the Board’s projection of over 200 students, the school was now a concrete reality and more students were added as the year unfolded. The first school year ended with over 50 students enrolled. There were classrooms, books, teachers, aids, administrators, and some very happy students. The first of many jokes were told on opening day assembly. Long Beach now had a new educational choice for its families: Westerly School.