

October 25, 2017

To Whom It May Concern:

As a former independent school teacher and administrator (at Harvard-Westlake School and Albuquerque Academy), over the past 40 years I have had the opportunity to visit and become acquainted with a number of well-known secondary schools throughout the United States, serving on institutional accreditation teams during many of these visits.

Recently I visited and spent a day on the campus of Kirby School in Santa Cruz, observing classes and talking with teachers and members of their administrative team. My first impression was that Kirby seemed genuinely committed to fulfilling their Vision and Mission Statements, not only “preparing students to succeed in college,” but “to become informed and engaged citizens, leading active, healthy lives of on-going inquiry.....in a caring climate and encouraging students, teachers, and parents alike to see themselves in a mutually supportive partnership for excellence.”

Like many independent secondary schools, Kirby encompasses grades six through twelve, but Kirby’s student population is integrated within the same campus building, successfully uniting a highly diverse student population across multiple age-groups and encouraging cross-grade mentorship opportunities. Although initially impressed with the school’s layout and physical plant (a three-story building with classrooms and offices built around a central atrium), what really caught my attention was the genuine caring attitude and attentiveness of Kirby’s teachers to their students and their students’ individual needs. Observing classroom interaction between students and teachers is the “gold standard” when measuring the quality of education, and on this basis Kirby deserves a gold medal. The small average class size (none of the classrooms I saw contained more than 13 students, most arranged with desks in conversation-circles that invited student participation) allowed teachers constant opportunity for individual as well as group attention and instruction.

Kirby may be relatively small compared to elite “giants” like Andover, Exeter, Harvard-Westlake, or Albuquerque Academy—but Kirby has somehow managed to achieve and maintain quality without the need for quantity, while limiting the size of its student body and faculty. At the same time, the variety and range of curricular offerings (more than 108 different courses according to the Kirby Curriculum Catalog, ranging from introductory level to Honors Courses and Advanced Placement, plus Independent Study and external course offerings at UC Santa Cruz and Cabrillo College) are remarkable for a school with fewer than 300 students. Kirby seems committed to meeting the full range of needs and interests of their students, not only with the extent and depth of curricular offerings, but with exciting and inviting extracurricular opportunities ranging from team sports to student-interest clubs to outdoor and experiential learning trips/retreats.

In summary, it was exciting to discover that the Santa Cruz area hosts an independent school having the caliber of excellence and student-focus comparable to the best schools anywhere, yet which has remained accessible, suitable, and affordable to the regional community and its student population. Best of all, I am delighted that my granddaughter now has the opportunity to partake of the multifold advantages of a Kirby education over the next half-dozen years.



R. Keith Julian  
Grandparent of Sophia Distefano (Kirby Class of 2024)