



**HELIOS SCHOOL**  
Sunnyvale, California

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**HEAD OF SCHOOL**  
Start Date: July 2022  
[heliosns.org](http://heliosns.org)



Carney  
Sandoe  
& ASSOCIATES



## MISSION

*To provide engaging and imaginative education that meets the unique intellectual, social, and emotional needs of gifted students and families.*

## VISION

*Helios School students develop...*

- *a life-long love of learning that is internally motivated and self-directed*
- *academic skills and self-discipline*
- *a positive sense of self*
- *respect and empathy for others*

*...to thrive in and contribute to a dynamic, interconnected world.*

## OVERVIEW

Through a dynamic curriculum that ignites excitement, Helios School provides a meaningful and challenging education for gifted students in grades K-8. Learning fills a deep, emotional need for the gifted, and often the unique characteristics of gifted learners can make it difficult for them to thrive in a traditional classroom. At Helios, an authentic, immersive, and appropriate learning experience designed intentionally for gifted students ensures students harness their talents and develop a rock-solid sense of self, so that they emerge fully prepared for the challenges of high school and beyond.

Faculty and staff at Helios are focused on growing unique children into unique young adults. The school offers a theme-based, rigorous academic curriculum in a collaborative environment that is based on best practices in gifted education. Elements such as choice, mastery-based teaching, and collaborative projects allow students to grow into self-directed learners and engaged citizens of the world. Through experiential learning, a robust electives program, and a maker space, students are challenged, guided, and inspired by teachers to ask meaningful questions and pursue insights and knowledge by doing. Throughout, students are encouraged to use their learning to enrich the lives of both their own families and the larger community.

Current Interim Head of School Pam Clarke will be concluding her tenure at the end of the 2021-2022 school year. Accordingly, Helios is seeking a new Head of School to assume the role in July 2022. The successful candidate will be an experienced and progressive educational leader devoted to the school's mission and programs. The Head is responsible for the overall vision, leadership, and management of the school and is the academic leader, fostering a love of learning and spirit of inquiry among students, faculty, and staff. This is an exceptional opportunity to lead a young, dynamic, and distinctive school with deep connections to its community and an unwavering commitment to educating and supporting gifted students and their families.

## FAST FACTS

Founded: 2007

Enrollment: 135

Total classroom teaching faculty: 22

Faculty with advanced degrees: 14

Student/teacher ratio: 8:1



## THE SCHOOL

Refreshingly free of rigidity, Helios is suffused with a thoughtful, compassionate culture where out-of-the-box thinking is celebrated. Gifted children thrive in a warm and kind learning environment where they feel safe to take emotional and academic risks. At Helios, gifted children benefit from an appropriate educational setting and program which helps them thrive. The school's [Guiding Principles](#) and [Helios Learner Outcomes](#) are the foundation for its program design and curriculum. Teachers provide a truly compelling and compassionate education for gifted students, helping them harness their talents and grow into confident, caring, competent individuals.

Helios is a connected and caring community of about 150 students on a four-acre campus (take a tour of campus [here](#)). The school culture is authentic and relationship-driven, with students, faculty, and staff interacting and problem-solving together daily. An intentionally small student body, vibrant parent association, and treasured school traditions—such as Family Camping Trip, an annual tradition of spending two nights together in the redwoods—are just a few things that engender the close-knit community. From Santa Cruz to San Francisco and Half Moon Bay to Pleasanton, families come from various backgrounds, experiences, and occupations but share the common experience of raising children with unique learning needs. At Helios, along with their children, they find a place where they are welcomed and supported. A current parent commented, “My daughter can be herself at Helios. She’s able to explore and share her passions without judgement. She’s thriving emotionally and academically.”

Helios faculty and staff comprise a cohesive, positive community of professional educators who are passionately devoted to providing exceptional experiences for gifted children. Supportive of one another, and embodying lifelong learning, teachers have high standards for performance and integrity—not just



for their students, but also for themselves. “I’m inspired by my colleagues and the kids,” commented a faculty member, “I learn from them every day, and they’ve changed my life!” The teachers hold degrees in education and other professional fields and participate in continual professional development, presenting at conferences of the National Association of Gifted Children and the National Association of Independent Schools. Teachers are not simply expert educators but also models for their students of how to live and work as gifted adults.

Helios is fully accredited by the California Association of Independent Schools.

## ACADEMICS

Gifted learners thrive in a climate of intellectual depth and complexity. At Helios, the curriculum is built around this axiom, providing students the opportunity for independent and collaborative work with true cognitive peers across the K-8 spectrum. A parent noted that the program “let my son find his spark and to love learning again.” Students learn in mixed-grade groups, small ability groups, in home room, and in specialized subjects. After Kindergarten, classes are grouped in two-year grade spans (1st/2nd, 3rd/4th etc.), which are named after birds of increasing size—kindergarteners are hummingbirds and 7th/8th graders are herons. In specialized classes like math, class placement is based on learning needs rather than grade level. The opportunity for asynchronous learning is deeply valued and appreciated by students and their parents.



Helios knows that gifted students require voice and agency in their own education. This is provided throughout class work, as well as from programs such as the Imagine Lab, Wilderness Village, Community Meeting, Electives, and Passion Projects. The school also knows that academic knowledge and intellectual talent are far more meaningful when coupled with a commitment to kindness and social justice. This value is interwoven into the Helios program and curriculum to encourage students to use their learning to enrich the lives of both their own families and the larger community.

### **Lower School**

The rich and complex Lower School curriculum fosters not only the development of the intellect, but the social and emotional life of students as well. Helios offers a rich, interconnected curriculum that provokes deep thinking, provides a real-world context, and produces meaning. Teachers develop the curriculum around Expeditions, themes (e.g., small but mighty, Mission to Mars, the Italian Renaissance) that students investigate for a full semester. Once hooked on the topic, students explore it from many angles, and in the process learn new skills in language arts, science, humanities, reading, and writing. They apply these new skills and their new-found knowledge in a variety of projects to demonstrate what they've learned. At the end of a semester of discovery and skill-building, they share what they have learned with family and friends in a Celebration of Learning.

In addition to their Expedition work, students participate in math class daily, where they are grouped according to ability rather than grade. Students have the choice of Art, Spanish, Lab Science, Holographic AR/Robotics, and beginning in third grade, an extra elective. They also enjoy physical education and time in the school's maker space, Imagine Lab (I-Lab), each week. Helios takes learning beyond the classroom with regular field trips. Finally, woven throughout all of these experiences is a customized social-emotional curriculum that helps gifted students manage their intense natures and better understand themselves and others.



### **Middle School**

As they reach Middle School, gifted learners are ready to tackle more challenging, complex topics. With their heightened sense of justice, they also want to engage with their community and do good in the world. Just as in Lower School, the Middle School curriculum is organized around semester-long Expeditions. At this level, Expeditions provide the context for study in humanities and science, with a focus on issues where students can make meaningful change. As students delve into the topic through meaningful self-directed learning, they apply new skills in a variety of projects that demonstrate their knowledge, with a particular emphasis on impacting their wider community. Expeditions provide the contextual environment that makes learning exciting and relevant. Gifted adolescents crave this kind of agency and find these efforts deeply fulfilling.

Beyond Expeditions, students participate in daily math class, have time for physical education and the Imagine Lab, and enjoy fieldwork and camping trips. Students in Middle School also have the choice of Art or a World Language, and an extra elective. The social-emotional learning program assists students in developing a moral identity to guide behavior and responsible decision-making. Through thoughtful discussion, students clarify their values and align behavior and actions with personal ethical standards, providing a moral compass in which they can depend on when facing peer pressure or ethically ambiguous choices.

## **SUNNYVALE, CALIFORNIA**

One of the major cities comprising Silicon Valley, Sunnyvale is home to over 150,000 residents. Located at the southern end of the San Francisco Bay and bordered by San Jose on its northern end, the city is a sought-after location due to its big-city amenities and attractions with a small-town feel. As



part of California's Silicon Valley, Sunnyvale is the home to operations of many technology companies, including Apple, LinkedIn, Google, and Walmart Labs, and is a major operating center for many more. It is also home to several aerospace/defense companies.

In addition to the employment opportunities available in Sunnyvale, the area itself has a deep history. Whether exploring the 1850s replica home of Sunnyvale founders—the Martin Murphy family—at the Heritage Park Museum or ordering a classic cherry pie from Olson's—a local company that's been harvesting California cherries and apricots since 1899—Sunnyvale offers modern opportunities along with the nostalgia of California history.

Downtown Sunnyvale is vibrant and lively. Historic Murphy Street is the home of a weekly farmer's market, coffee shops, and specialty stores. With a plethora of Asian, Indian, African, and European choices, downtown Sunnyvale is a great area to find interesting and delicious cuisine. It also has some venues for music, theater, comedy, and other performances.

Sunnyvale's gorgeous parks and outdoor spaces provide plenty of places to enjoy the amazing California weather and the great outdoors. There are 476 acres of parks in the Sunnyvale area, including Las Palmas Park, Ortega Park,

## HIGH SCHOOL PLACEMENT

Starting in 5th grade, the high school search process at Helios is a family journey of growth, discovery, and excitement. Alumni students attend a variety of schools, including public high schools, selective independent day and boarding schools, charter schools, non-traditional private schools, and college. Helios graduates were accepted to the following schools:

### Independent Schools

Archbishop Mitty High School  
BASIS Independent School  
Silicon Valley  
Bellarmine College Preparatory  
Crystal Springs Uplands School  
Futures Academy  
Interlochen School of the Arts  
Kehillah Jewish High School  
Khan Lab School  
Kirby School  
Mentoring Academy  
Mid-Peninsula High School  
Phillips Exeter Academy  
Sacred Heart Schools, Atherton  
San Domenico School  
Stevenson School  
The King's Academy  
The Marin School  
The Nueva School  
Woodside Priory

### Public Schools

Carlmont High School, Belmont  
Fremont High School, Sunnyvale  
Henry M. Gunn High School,  
Palo Alto  
Homestead High School,  
Sunnyvale  
Lake Oswego High School, Lake  
Oswego, OR  
Mountain View High School  
Palo Alto High School  
Prospect High School, Saratoga  
Summit Denali School, Sunnyvale  
Summit Shasta School, Daly City



Seven Seas Park, Washington Park near downtown, two public golf courses, and Baylands Park—known for its extensive trails and wetlands. Charles Street Gardens, Sunnyvale’s oldest and largest community garden, is located adjacent to Sunnyvale’s Public Library. Art lovers will find much to enjoy in Sunnyvale as well, with over 100 pieces of public art to be found all over the city.

The southern half of Sunnyvale is predominantly residential, and the city is consistently ranked among the country’s safest. Sunnyvale is one of the few U.S. cities to have a single unified Department of Public Safety, where all personnel are trained as firefighters, police officers, and EMTs, so that they can respond to an emergency in any of the three roles. Sunnyvale is served by Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (light rail and buses) and by Caltrain commuter rail. Two Caltrain stations are in Sunnyvale. For air travel, Sunnyvale is serviced by three nearby international airports.

Because of its enviable location in the San Francisco Bay Area, the natural wonders of Northern California’s state and national parks plus the wineries of Napa Valley are all within reach.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Helios is dedicated to meeting the unique educational and emotional needs of gifted students. Respectful, responsible, and kind, Helios celebrates the rich inner world of each child in a student-centered environment that invites authenticity and love of learning. Imaginatively designed and differentiated, Helios’ constructivist approach makes room for exploration, expeditionary learning, social-emotional self-awareness, and asynchronous development. The passionate and dedicated faculty and staff inspire and challenge students while remaining nimble and flexible in order to meet students where they are.



Following a period of leadership transition and the guidance of an experienced Interim Head of School, Pam Clarke, Helios seeks a new Head of School dedicated to meeting the needs of gifted students, supporting the work of the faculty and staff, and elevating the profile of the school as a model for gifted education. Opportunities and challenges for the next leader will include:

Reaffirming and communicating the mission: As Helios continues its institutional maturation, the next Head of School will refocus the community on the mission—meeting the unique intellectual, social, and emotional needs of gifted students and families. A healthy dialogue with all constituents about how best to meet these needs will guide the next leader’s strategic priorities and partnership with trustees, faculty and staff, and parents. The next Head of School will share success stories and celebrate the mission-focused outcomes.

Establishing healthy protocols for communication and feedback: As a very relational community, Helios has struggled to navigate disagreements or articulate tough decisions for fear of disrupting a sense of harmony. The next leader will have the opportunity to model clarity as kindness and establish norms around difficult conversations by encouraging direct dialogue, proactive communication, feedback loops, and conflict resolution.

Preserving creativity while maintaining curricular coherence: Helios teachers demand a lot of themselves as they shape the curriculum to inspire, challenge, and stretch their students. With each new class, the teachers must adjust according to the needs of the students; they do not directly repeat last year’s lessons or rely on prepackaged curricula. This responsiveness requires enormous energy and sustained creativity. A curricular framework has been created to support new teachers, help them learn and be inspired by the Helios model, and decrease the need to reinvent the proverbial wheel when a faculty member retires or departs. The next Head of School will work with the faculty to add their own creativity, flexibility, complexity, and depth responsively as they utilize this framework.



Recruiting, supporting, and retaining a talented faculty: The faculty at Helios are celebrated for embracing and fostering the intellectual, emotional, and creative needs of the students. “The teachers and administrators love the kids and understand and see them even in ways that I don’t” reflected a parent. Recent leadership transitions, the cost of living in the Bay Area, and other opportunities have prompted some faculty members to leave Helios. From striving to ensure competitive compensation to securing the resources and tools for professional development and growth, the next Head has the opportunity to support and advocate for a talented community of educators.

Building organizational cohesion and trust: The next leader will articulate and celebrate the contributions of all Helios constituents. This work will include partnering with the Board to develop effective committees and strong governance practices; helping the faculty and staff understand the strategic and fiduciary work of the Board; supporting parents to establish strong partnerships with the school; understanding and elevating the work of faculty and staff; and sharing the compelling story of how all of these groups work together on behalf of Helios’ students.

Strengthening admission and enrollment: By design, Helios is a small school. The recent transitions of leadership and some faculty, attrition (particularly in middle school), and increased competition in the area have presented some challenges to reaching full and balanced enrollment. The next Head will partner closely with the Director of Admission to increase Helios’ visibility, appeal, and reputation and to compellingly share Helios’ values and stories.

# DESIRED QUALITIES AND QUALIFICATIONS

## Personal Characteristics

The next Head will be someone who exudes optimism and a growth mindset, and who is also outgoing, approachable, down to earth, empathetic, energetic, resourceful, and confident, with strong emotional intelligence, integrity, humility, and excellent listening and communication skills.

Helios seeks a Head who possesses the following professional qualities and experiences:

- Significant teaching and educational administrative experience in progressive schools, demonstrated commitment to social emotional learning, and, ideally, experience and understanding of working with gifted children.
- A palpable enjoyment of being an active and visible presence in the life of the school as a foundation for strong, supportive relationships with faculty, staff, students, and parents, thereby supporting the school's strong sense of community.
- A leadership style that is collaborative and genuinely invites and respects the perspectives and views of others yet is decisive when necessary.
- An ability to connect and communicate effectively, clearly, and consistently with all community members—students, faculty, administrators, parents, and the Board—to ensure that all are appropriately informed of school events, potential issues, and needs.
- Experience hiring, onboarding, supporting, developing, and retaining a talented faculty and staff.
- Ability to build, support, and partner with a dynamic and hard-working administrative team.
- An ability to collaboratively create systems and processes that support the community and help the organization to run effectively.
- Prior experience living and leading diversity and inclusion initiatives, skill in building inclusive communities, and the ability to respectfully navigate diverse cultural and social situations.
- Understanding of and commitment to strategic external affairs, including admissions, fundraising, marketing, and broader community involvement with the ability to inspire engagement.
- Ability to manage financial resources thoughtfully and intentionally with a commitment to serving as a responsible steward of financial and human resources alike.
- As the Falcons (1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> graders) shared through their class representative, “We hope our next Head is interested in students’ learning, nice, friendly and kind, and not selfish, mean or rude.”

**Search Timeline:** We will present candidates to the Search Committee in early August and encourage potential candidates to contact the search consultants as soon as possible.

## TO APPLY

Interested and qualified candidates are invited to contact the consultants in confidence. Candidates will ultimately need to submit the following materials as separate PDF documents:

- A cover letter expressing their interest in this particular position.
- A current résumé.
- Three recent writing samples that could include speeches, blog posts, articles, or letters to the community to:

**Jennifer Wong Christensen**  
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