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GRADING THE DIGITAL SCHOOL

A Silicon Valley School That Doesn't Compute



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

The Waldorf School in Los Altos, Calif., eschews technology. Here, Bryn Perry reads on a desktop. [More Photos »](#)

By **MATT RICHTEL**

Published: October 22, 2011

LOS ALTOS, Calif. — The chief technology officer of eBay sends his children to a nine-classroom school here. So do employees of Silicon Valley giants like Google, Apple, Yahoo and Hewlett-Packard.

Grading the Digital School

Blackboards, Not Laptops

Articles in this series are looking at the intersection of education, technology and business as schools embrace digital learning.

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But the school's chief teaching tools are anything but high-tech: pens and paper, knitting needles and, occasionally, mud. Not a computer to be found. No screens at all. They are not allowed in the classroom, and the school even frowns on their use at home.

Schools nationwide have rushed to supply their classrooms with computers, and many policy makers

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Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Cathy Waheed helps Shira Zeev, a fifth grader. Waldorf parents are happy to delay their children's engagement with technology. [More Photos »](#)

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R movies, I wouldn't want my kids to see them until they were 17."

While other schools in the region brag about their wired classrooms, the Waldorf school embraces a simple, retro look — blackboards with colorful chalk, bookshelves with encyclopedias, wooden desks filled with workbooks and No. 2 pencils.

On a recent Tuesday, Andie Eagle and her fifth-grade classmates refreshed their knitting skills, crisscrossing wooden needles around balls of yarn, making fabric swatches. It's an activity the school says helps develop problem-solving, patterning, math skills and coordination. The long-term goal: make socks.

Down the hall, a teacher drilled third-graders on multiplication by asking them to pretend to turn their bodies into lightning bolts. She asked them a math problem — four times five — and, in unison, they shouted "20" and zapped their fingers at the number on the blackboard. A roomful of human calculators.

say it is foolish to do otherwise. But the contrarian point of view can be found at the epicenter of the tech economy, where some parents and educators have a message: computers and schools don't mix.

This is the [Waldorf School of the Peninsula](#), one of around 160 Waldorf schools in the country that subscribe to a teaching philosophy focused on physical activity and learning through creative, hands-on tasks. Those who endorse this approach say computers inhibit creative thinking, movement, human interaction and attention spans.

The Waldorf method is nearly a century old, but its foothold here among the digerati puts into sharp relief an [intensifying debate](#) about the role of computers in education.

"I fundamentally reject the notion you need technology aids in grammar school," said Alan Eagle, 50, whose daughter, Andie, is one of the 196 children at the Waldorf elementary school; his son William, 13, is at the nearby middle school. "The idea that an app on an [iPad](#) can better teach my kids to read or do arithmetic, that's ridiculous."

Mr. Eagle knows a bit about technology. He holds a computer science degree from Dartmouth and works in executive communications at Google, where he has written speeches for the chairman, Eric E. Schmidt. He uses an iPad and a smartphone. But he says his daughter, a fifth grader, "doesn't know how to use Google," and his son is just learning. (Starting in eighth grade, the school endorses the limited use of gadgets.)

Three-quarters of the students here have parents with a strong high-tech connection. Mr. Eagle, like other parents, sees no contradiction. Technology, he says, has its time and place: "If I worked at Miramax and made good, artsy, rated

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In second grade, students standing in a circle learned language skills by repeating verses after the teacher, while simultaneously playing catch with bean bags. It’s an exercise aimed at synchronizing body and brain. Here, as in other classes, the day can start with a recitation or verse about God that reflects a nondenominational emphasis on the divine.

Andie’s teacher, Cathy Waheed, who is a former computer engineer, tries to make learning both irresistible and highly tactile. Last year she taught fractions by having the children cut up food — apples, quesadillas, cake — into quarters, halves and sixteenths.

“For three weeks, we ate our way through fractions,” she said. “When I made enough fractional pieces of cake to feed everyone, do you think I had their attention?”

Some education experts say that the push to equip classrooms with computers is unwarranted because studies do not clearly show that this leads to better test scores or other measurable gains.

Is learning through cake fractions and knitting any better? The Waldorf advocates make it tough to compare, partly because as private schools they administer no standardized tests in elementary grades. And they would be the first to admit that their early-grade students may not score well on such tests because, they say, they don’t drill them on a standardized math and reading curriculum.

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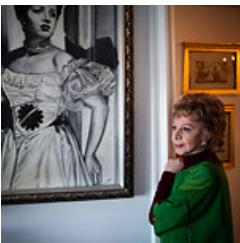
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