

The Doyennes of Austin's Alternative

EDUCATION

Barbara Garza of AESA Prep Academy and Lisa Schmitt of the Girls' School of Austin offer independent options for unique educational opportunities.

BY JEANNIE RALSTON

PHOTOS BY RUDY AROCHA

Austin is known for its “alternatives.” Alternative music. Alternative films. Alternative lifestyles. Among the most exciting alternatives here are in education. Outside the mainstream offerings are a plethora of options that cater to various learning styles, creative interests, academic talents and parental priorities, and all with their own spin on how to build an independent, inquisitive and productive adult.

Two of the most interesting alt-ed choices are led by dynamic women with a combined total of more than 50 years in education. Lisa Schmitt, with Girls’ School of Austin, and Barbara Garza at AESA Prep Academy, each have long credentials at established public and private institutions and now are putting their knowledge (and hearts) into schools that reflect their passions, values and spirits.

AESA PREP ACADEMY

The valedictorian of AESA Prep Academy’s Class of 2013 has seen it all.

“I’ve been to every type of school—public, private, homeschool, charter,” Caleb Barlow said in his valedictorian address in May to an audience of roughly 130 parents, siblings and friends. “In no other school have I felt more accepted and more supported. The small classes mean we’ve really been able to bond with one another and get what we need from our teachers.”

He’s not kidding when he says small. Caleb stood at the podium in the central hall of AESA with the four other members of his graduating class behind him. In total AESA (which stands, loosely, for Academic

Excellence for Scholars, Athletes and Artists) includes 50 students, grades four through 12. But unlike some new schools—AESA was founded in 2009—AESA isn’t small because it’s just starting to build attendance. At AESA, small size is the school’s hallmark. Smallness allows it do to big things.

“We want to stay small to remain light on our feet so that we can keep up with the rapidly changing world of education,” says Head of School Barbara Garza, who founded AESA Prep Academy and won’t let it grow beyond 100 students. “In the next seven years, education is expected to change more than it has in the previous 40 years. We want to be ready for what’s coming.”

AESA Prep Academy, accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the NCAA, is located in southwest Austin, close to Dripping Springs—it sits on 25 rolling acres, which it shares with the Polo Tennis and Fitness Club. The school building was once the tennis clubhouse, and though it’s been modified several times to add classrooms, it still retains a homey feeling. In between classes or on independent study time, students lounge on sofas or study in an aquarium room or gather at a chessboard in the corner. Garza’s office is behind glass doors looking out on the central hall. “I can see everything that goes on,” she says. “There’s no way someone is going to fall through the cracks here.”

Garza left her position as a dean at esteemed St. Stephens School in Austin to start AESA. Her twin



Barbara Garza

sons were attending St. Stephens at the time and were burning out from up to four hours of homework every night plus a tennis training regimen. She figured there had to be a way for kids to get a quality education and have more balance in their lives. She then set about creating it.

“A lot of private prep schools create a ‘sink or swim’ environment, putting tremendous pressure on kids,” says Garza. “We feel really strongly that kids do best when they have time with family and time for other interests beyond books.” Because of the four-to-one student-teacher ratio, teachers can cover more in class, meaning less is assigned as homework. Teachers are better able to work around changing schedules, allowing kids to miss school for travel, sports tournaments, fine art activities or internships. “Traditional public and private schools can’t be this accommodating. Kids are stuck at school from 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. with only so many allowed missed days a year. A lot of people sour on that.”

The flexible environment also allows students to advance to their own levels. “For example, we have an

GIRLS' SCHOOL OF AUSTIN

eighth grader taking geometry because he's ready for it," she says, "however in English he's at grade level. That's not a problem for us. Making sure all students are challenged and progressing is what we do."

But just as important to Garza is the school's nimbleness as a whole, allowing it to take advantage of innovative developments, such as replacing the devalued AP courses with more rigorous dual-credit classes. Many high schools offer students dual-credit classes with a community college, but AESA is one of only a few that have a partnership with the University of Texas, offering a variety of classes—from microeconomics to American literature and Spanish. "College admission officers like to see that students can actually handle college course workload and demands," she says. "Community colleges are great, but we think that UT credits on students' transcripts mean more and are much more likely to be accepted."

Another way Garza is responding agilely to the changing world of education is by developing an e-school. Starting this year, AESA will begin offering courses online, targeted initially to students outside the Austin area who need high-quality classes but also want the flexibility to pursue other interests. The online courses will be a combination of videos of AESA teachers explaining certain lessons and live classes via Skype. "Most online courses are terrible—canned presentations and questions," she says. "We'll be online with an accredited curriculum that meets national standards and we know works and with a host of ways for teachers and students to communicate."

Garza says she's launching the online school for the same reasons she originally started AESA. "In my mind schools should be set up to meet the needs of families—to take care of kids in all kinds of situations. That's what we're committed to doing."

Barbara Garza, AESA Prep Academy founder, has a bachelor's in education from UT. Her experience as an educator and administrator includes teaching honors biology, supervising a variety of community service and student leadership projects at McNeil High School and serving as dean of ninth and 10th grade at St. Stephens School for five years. She is a recipient of the Governor of Texas Teaching Excellence Award.

Austin Woman: Why did you choose to get into the education field?

Barbara Garza: I realized when I was a student at UT, changing my major for the sixth time, that I basically loved the learning process. All my friends kept telling me not to become a teacher, that I would never make any money, and they were so right, but from the beginning I didn't care about the money. Like most

educators, I've been most passionate about making a positive difference for students. My dad, Frank Bronson, was a professor at UT for 44 years, and I am sure his love for teaching rubbed off on me as well.

AW: What's your favorite part of the day at AESA?

BG: I love everything about what we do. I never wake up in the morning and think, oh there is something else I would rather be doing.

AW: What experiences have you had as a teacher or administrator that have shaped your current philosophy on education?

BG: Educators have been shouting from the rooftops that student-teacher ratios need to be smaller, but that requires a different mentality by those in charge. Most suburban high school teachers carry a load close to 200 students. They can barely remember all of their students' names, let alone have the time to actually give substantial commenting on essays, give one-on-one tutoring or adapt teaching styles to fit the needs of the individual student. In large private high schools, it's becoming close to the same scenario. And during my five years at St. Stephens, I couldn't stand it when a family would have some great travel opportunity to a place like India, for example, but I would have to say no because of the attendance policy. I always thought, wow, how great it would be, and what a better way to learn, if teachers really had a small number of students and schools had true flexibility.

AW: What do you find most challenging about being an educator today?

BG: I admire any woman that is in an administrative position in the world of education. As an administrator, I have been called "sunshine," had a coach shoot the finger at me in front of his basketball team and simply had to tough it out to gain and keep any administrative position until I created my own school. Now my challenges revolve around keeping AESA at the forefront of education. Larger, more traditional schools are simply too big to be able to change directions quickly enough.

AW: Where do you see yourself and/or AESA in 10 years?

BG: We have two more AESA campuses on the drawing board: AESA of Australia and AESA of the Atlantic. AESA of Australia will provide a global experience for our students and AESA of the Atlantic is going to be a research-based school for high school students. This will be located in Maine near Acadia National Park where I was raised and will be connected with the local research centers and colleges. aesaprepacademy.com

Standing beside a desk in her fourth-grade classroom, Morgan strikes a gymnastics pose—gracefully reaching up and back and grabbing one leg kicked up behind her head—and contemplates boys. "Boys are kind of like, 'Eww!'" says Morgan, wearing a school uniform of a purple polo and black shorts. "It's more comfortable here with just girls."

"You can talk about anything you like," her friend Eleanor, in a yellow polo and a skirt, chimes in.

"I mean, boys can be annoying; they tease you," Morgan continues, slowly bringing her leg down behind her. "And really, they're not as smart as girls."

Welcome to the corner of Austin where girls can say this kind of thing without getting their hair pulled or a "wanna bet" challenge or a reprimand for provoking half the class. At the Girls' School of Austin (GSA) girls grades kindergarten through eighth can stretch themselves in a supportive environment without the shadow boys can sometimes cast.

"In an all-girl culture, students have to try on all the roles," says Head of School Lisa Schmitt. "The smartest kid in class, the funniest kid—they are all girls." The goal here is for students to become confident as leaders, collaborators and critical thinkers. By subtracting boys, the thinking goes, the girls gain opportunities and role models. "Students don't think of limits, they think of opportunity. It's very freeing that way."

The Girls' School was founded in 2002 with five fifth- and sixth-graders attending classes in a house on Patterson Street—part of a wave of girls-only schools opening across the country following research about how girls can be inhibited intellectually around boys. Today, the school has 130 students, 19 teachers and a shady campus in Tarrytown on the grounds of what used to be the Dill Elementary School. Studies cited by the National Coalition of Girls' Schools show that girls who attend single-sex schools (versus those in coed classes) spend more time studying; are more confident in their academic performance, public speaking and writing skills; and are more likely to choose a career in engineering.

Indeed, Schmitt says students of hers have gone on to perform high on the math section of the SAT, and two of the three National Merit Scholars at McCallum High School last year were Girls' School graduates. More than 50 percent of the seventh graders invited to take the SAT have scored high enough to be asked to join the exclusive Duke Talent Identification Program.

The curriculum is well-balanced with an emphasis on creativity and fine arts, Schmitt says. But math and science are stressed also, with all students taking algebra or beyond by eighth grade. "From the early grades, girls work under the assumption that



Lisa Schmitt, photographed in front of the interim administration building during reconstruction of the campus

they can do math and science,” says Schmitt. “That’s very powerful.” Schmitt says that the education is so strong across the board that many families come to the school for the quality of the curriculum rather than the single-gender environment.

One of Schmitt’s tasks is to occasionally reassure parents who worry that their daughters will be missing out on something at an all-girls school. “Sometimes dads are hesitant, worried that their girls won’t know what to do with boys once they get into a coed situation,” says Schmitt. “Our feeling is that when they are in an environment with boys, we want them to be self-confident and know how they want to be treated by boys. By the time they leave here they are such poised girls that they make a good transition.”

Girls will get plenty of exposure to boys at home, in their neighborhoods and churches and in extracurricular activities, girls’ school advocates contend. Plus, the school encourages them to enter academic competitions to test their mettle against boys. Students have won many regional and national awards in art and writing, and recently two students earned honors scores in the American Mathematics Com-

petition for eighth graders. Plus more than 40 percent of middle-schoolers placed at the bronze or higher level in the National Spanish Exam.

old elementary school will be torn down, replaced by an eco-friendly design that the girls helped devise. “The girls wanted tree houses and a zipline,” says Schmitt, as she puts an architectural drawing on the table in her office. Instead, the girls will get a building in which every classroom is connected to the outdoors. There are butterfly gardens, riparian streams, wildflower areas, a roof garden and rainwater collection. Plus, two areas will be set up as outdoor classrooms—with boulders for sitting areas. “We spend a lot of time outside,” Schmitt says. “There will be lots of opportunities to use where we are as part of the classroom.”

And during the construction process itself, you can be sure that the school will take advantage of that learning opportunity. “We’ll be sure to have hard-hat tours of the construction site,” says Schmitt. “And I’m sure the seventh grade physics students will be studying how the buildings go up.” Who knows? The Girls’ School of Austin may be in the process of breeding a whole contingent of female architects.

Lisa Schmitt, GSA’s head of school since 2007, has a bachelor’s in physics from Rensselaer Polytechnic

Institute and a master’s in science education from Boston University. She began her career as a research scientist and has worked in education for more than 20 years. Committed to advancing girls in the fields of science and math, she currently teaches middle school math at GSA.

Austin Woman: Why did you choose to get into the education field?

Lisa Schmitt: I taught a lab course when I was a graduate student in space physics at Boston University and found that I really enjoyed teaching. At its best, teaching is a highly creative endeavor that requires excellent problem-solving skills.

AW: What experiences have you had as a teacher or administrator that has shaped your current philosophy on education?

LS: Thinking back on my own educational experiences, what I learned in classrooms was important, but real experiences (building a house from the ground up, backpacking solo in the White Mountains) probably taught me more about physics and the way the world works than anything I learned in class. So from the very beginning of my career as a teacher, it has been important to incorporate authentic, hands-on experiences, especially for girls, who can often be very successful in the classroom, but are often less likely to have applied that knowledge to the real world. Being able to do that in the company of other girls makes it easier for them to take a risk. Our students expect for adventure and science to go hand-in-hand. Outside of the classroom, they may go spelunking, rock climbing, horse packing or kayaking to learn how to apply what they’ve learned. They see that designing and creating is for both arts and science. They imagine, design and build things both in and out of the classroom.

“We’ve got a nice community here,” says Schmitt.

And it’s about to get even better. The campus is in the process of being transformed—the

petition for eighth graders. Plus more than 40 percent of middle-schoolers placed at the bronze or higher level in the National Spanish Exam.

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AW: What’s your favorite part of the day at Girls’ School of Austin?

LS: I enjoy greeting each student every morning!

AW: What do you find most challenging about being an educator today?

LS: One can argue over whether schools should include more STEM or more arts or more language, but one thing is certain: Providing opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the study of something—whether it is the violin, painting, Spanish or physics—disciplining themselves to dig deep and focus will be the most important skill we can give them.

AW: Where do you see yourself and the Girls’ School of Austin in 10 years?

LS: Without a crystal ball I can’t say for sure, but based upon our growth so far, I expect that the Girls’ School will continue to grow [enrollment has doubled in the past six years], which means more opportunities for girls in Austin! thegirlsschool.org

Spanish Immersion

Adriana Rodríguez creates citizens of the world at Jardín de Niños Interlingua.

By Andy East

As world communication and economies become increasingly integrated, never has learning a foreign language been more important. While relocating to a foreign country might not be an option, immersing your child in another language at an Austin-area language immersion school is a viable alternative.

“Being a world citizen means speaking more languages and being in touch with the world,” says Adriana Rodríguez, founder and director of Austin’s Jardín de Niños Interlingua Spanish Immersion International School. “[We get students] ready for a dynamic world and teach them to be more international-minded.”

Founded in 2007 with 12 students, Jardín de Niños Interlingua allows infants through preschoolers to be fully immersed in the Spanish language, putting children on the fast track to fluency in Spanish. After preschool more languages are added to their multi-lingual repertoire. And in just six years, the school’s popularity has soared, expanding to 250 students and adding a second campus in Austin.

“We don’t introduce English until kindergarten because we feel that students need a strong foreign language foundation,” says Rodríguez.

By learning foreign languages at an early age, students are able to take advantage of what are known as “sensitive periods” of neuroplasticity when the brain is hyper-receptive to developing certain skills. From birth until puberty, children are in the language-learning sensitive period, allowing them to soak up languages like a sponge and develop native-like pronunciation. But after the onset of puberty, it becomes increasingly difficult to learn foreign languages and any new languages acquired would be more likely to be accompanied by stronger accents.

“[The students] have so much plasticity that they can learn so fast,” says Rodríguez. “They are so eager to learn.”

In addition to the heightened language learning potential during the sensitive period, other benefits of learning a foreign language at a young age include developing larger vocabularies, creative and critical thinking skills, myriad transdisciplinary skills such as research and social skills, and in-depth cultural knowledge.

“It’s not just that ‘red’ means ‘rojo,’” says Rodríguez. “[Students] not only get to learn the language, but also culture, traditions and different perceptions. Diversity is something that really enhances our classrooms. We have teachers from Mexico, Colombia, Spain and Peru.”

At Jardín de Niños Interlingua, students learn about world conflicts, issues and cultures by taking part in collaborative activities designed to allow children to learn by experience and apply classroom lessons to their personal lives, often combining elements from several classes. Rodríguez cites one activity in which the teacher distributes a gallon of water to each student to teach students about water shortage.

“The teacher would say, ‘You will take this gallon of water home and try to survive with it for a week,’ and then the students were to report how they washed their hands,” says Rodríguez. “[It allows] them to connect something they know with something new. By doing that you are fostering their natural curiosity and developing their skills.”

Given that Spanish is the third most-spoken language in the world with nearly 400 million native speakers living in more than 20 Spanish-speaking countries across four different continents, learning to *hablar Español* at a young age will surely allow children to develop a highly-coveted, marketable skill that with which many of their peers will not be able to compete, and with the US-Mexico border a few hours drive south, Spanish is not only an important language internationally but also domestically.



According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2009 more than 35 million US residents ages five and older spoke Spanish at home, up from 17 million in 1990, giving the US the second largest population of Spanish speakers in the world behind Mexico.

In addition to becoming bilingual and biliterate in Spanish and English, starting at age four, students at Jardín de Niños Interlingua begin developing proficiency in Mandarin Chinese and French, allowing students to be able to communicate with nearly 40 percent of the world’s population by the time they enroll in middle school.

“You understand the different cultures and conflicts in the world by studying languages and culture,” says Rodríguez. “[It gives students a chance] to see and appreciate the world differently compared to someone who hasn’t been exposed to languages and foreign countries.” 2700 W. Anderson Lane, Ste. 601, 512.299.5732; 8707 Mountain Crest Dr., 512.299.5731; 107 Ranch Road 620, Ste. 300, Lakeway, 512.466.2409, austinbilingualschool.com