

## To Teach the Child: A Mission of Love

Evelyn Dunbar Webb

*If a child can't learn the way we teach him,  
we had better teach him THE WAY HE LEARNS!*

Nestled amidst commercial enterprises and residential structures alike, Lynchburg is home to an incredible secret. Sixteen years ago, five women came together to organize a private, not-for-profit school specifically geared toward young people experiencing difficulties with, or needing more than, the traditional academic environment.

Since 1986, New Vistas School has offered a stimulating, challenging, and rewarding educational experience for these students in a small, personal, supportive, and noncompetitive atmosphere. Focusing on the philosophy that building self-esteem along with skills is the key to success, academic goals are set according to each student's current skills, interests, abilities, and needs. The individualized education program combines academics, fine arts, recreation, and counseling to help students successfully reenter the "educational mainstream."

Although teachers work with students whose learning differences make it difficult for them to succeed in a traditional setting, New Vistas is not an alternative school designed to replace the traditional classroom, nor is it for students with serious behavioral, emotional, or intellectual handicaps. Nothing could be further from the truth. New Vistas is a private day school offering a transitional program that attempts to offset the failure and frustration young people with learning difficulties often experience in a regular school environment.

Students range from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and are of average to superior intelligence. Their learning differences are as varied as they are. Most attend New Vistas from a minimum of two to a maximum of four years. By helping to provide the skills and self-esteem necessary to succeed in a traditional environment, students may return to the public school system, while others continue at private schools elsewhere. Some graduate high school through the program—two to five in any given year—and the greatest percentage of these young people go on to higher education, either at community college or four-year institutions.

"Smaller is better." At least at New Vistas, this credo has been taken to heart to provide a unique educational opportunity for children and young adults. Beginning with only six students in 1986, the program quickly grew to serve fifteen. Current enrollment stands at 42, and has been as many as 52.

Fully certified by the Virginia State Department of Education, all aspects of the school—curriculum, teachers, activities—are carefully monitored by the state to assure the quality of education offered to students meets strict criteria. Reading and language programs are different from public schools in the elementary and middle school grade levels. In high school, New Vistas follows the Standards of Learning (SOL) as outlined by the state. Although they are not required to give the tests, students must complete the same 150 hours for credit and they have to have the same number of credits in each area in order to receive a diploma.

New Vistas has ten full-time teachers, ten part-time teachers, and a guidance counselor on staff. With class sizes ranging from one to six students, it is this type of personal atmosphere that helps students achieve confidence.

“Education is an art at New Vistas.” This simple statement embodies the core of the school’s mission. Like the artist who offers us a new way of looking at something, New Vistas’ teachers support learning with a “multisensory” method of instruction. Students progress at their own speed, continually building on current skills as they stretch themselves to higher levels. The curriculum is designed to continually challenge them as they learn to become independent learners, good problem solvers, critical thinkers, and working members of the community.

“Intelligence is not fixed.” Based on this theory, New Vistas offers a highly innovative and unique structured program, Instrumental Enrichment, developed by cognitive psychologist Reuven Feuerstein. Students “learn how to learn and think about their thinking.” Used with middle and high school-age children, Instrumental Enrichment works to hone critical thinking skills and provide students not only with concepts but also an understanding of, as well as a firm grasp on how to use, the techniques required for independent thinking.

Organization and problem-solving are not just relegated to the classroom environment. These skills are important in everyday life. The program helps students take the things they learn and apply them to real life. The results are impressive, to say the least, and other private schools where students have transitioned have noticed: “These are the most incredibly organized kids we have ever seen;” “What unbelievable problem-solving skills these students have.”

“Lifelong solutions to learning differences.” Separate from the private school program, New Vistas offers a Tutoring Program for the community, which addresses the needs of Central Virginia students from age kindergarten

through adult. “Course content” tutoring is available, as well as basic skills and study skills programs, in a one-on-one setting.

Tutors, who are retired teachers as well as teachers from the public and private sectors, are carefully selected to help an individual achieve desired goals. Contact between a student’s home base classroom teacher and the tutor is maintained throughout. This allows for careful assessment of a student’s progress in order to tailor the program to meet changing needs.

As one student’s grandmother aptly states, “Life is a big learning experience.” This is the essence of New Vistas Tutoring Program. Providing “individualized attention, positive motivation, and an experience of success,” the program “helps students and adults break through barriers that block the learning process.”

“New Vistas is not just a school. We are also a resource to the community,” states director Lucy Guggenheimer Ross. “We have an incredible expertise for educational consulting.”

Suzanne Pharis, the Educational Coordinator for the school, is also a part-time instructor at Lynchburg College, teaching teachers. Lynn Boatright, the new Principal, comes to New Vistas with educational experience from around the world—Peru to Bavaria to Germany to England, as well as the U.S.

“There aren’t many resources in this community for children when they’re not being successful in school,” Lucy explains. “Parents don’t always know where to turn, and traditional school systems often don’t have the time to look at all the needs of the children.”

It is important to match the child’s needs with the program best suited to provide those needs. New Vistas helps parents find the answers to help their children succeed, whether or not it is in the best interests of the child to attend the school. Sometimes, the public school system or another private school is the correct answer.

As with many private schools, the cost of tuition at New Vistas often creates a barrier for some who could really benefit from the services offered. Those who need the program most often are the ones who can least afford to pay the fees. Using the same financial aid package colleges use, parents may apply for assistance.

Not affiliated with any church or other organization, private donations help provide needy students with scholarships. Most recently, the school announced the creation of The Lucy Guggenheimer Ross Scholarship Fund, established anonymously to honor Lucy’s steadfast determination on behalf of, and lifetime commitment to, the success of New Vistas School. This endowment

is at the core of continuing efforts to make a New Vistas education available to all who need it.

Each year, a major fundraising event occurs, sponsored by one of the Board of Directors. This year, a “Finger-Licking Feast,” complete with down-home food, music, and fun will be held May 4 at Mountain Run Farm in Sedalia. Ticket prices include a tax-deductible donation to benefit children who might otherwise be unable to attend New Vistas School. For more information, contact the school office at (434) 846-0301.

Standing at the base of the steps leading to the Oakley Avenue entrance of New Vistas School, I was drawn somehow by the sense I was on familiar ground. I was flooded with memories, good ones, of caring teachers working tirelessly to provide me with the special attention I required, sometimes one on one, sometimes in a group. Yet these weren’t my memories. These were the feelings that permeate the walls of New Vistas School. Hundreds of miles and several decades after I attended school elsewhere, when I walked into the front hallway, I felt as if I were coming home.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the school is that it is a community. Staff and teachers alike continually emphasize kindness and respect for others. Young children and older children spend time together as well as apart. The teachers are here because they truly want to be. They want to make a difference in a child’s life. Their teaching is a calling, not simply a job. Because of their dedication, children who otherwise fall through the cracks have opportunities opened to them to allow them choices for their future. Whether they choose to pursue additional studies beyond high school, or work in the private sector, these young people are given a chance to shine.

Education is an investment in a child’s future. New Vistas School takes this mantra to heart. Theirs is a mission of love, an incredible venture that lasts a lifetime. Let’s spread the word.

**(Note: Suggested sidebar)**

## Some noteworthy “late bloomers”

Some children have a more difficult time achieving in school than others.

These “late bloomers” — despite rough beginnings — persevered and later achieved greatness.

- ❖ Beethoven’s music teacher said, “As a composer, he is hopeless.”
- ❖ Isaac Newton’s work in the elementary school was rather poor.
- ❖ Einstein couldn’t speak until the age of 4; he couldn’t read until age 7.
- ❖ Edison’s teacher told him he was unable to learn.
- ❖ F. W. Woolworth’s employers refused to allow him to help customers because he “didn’t have enough sense.”
- ❖ Louisa May Alcott was told by an editor her writings would never appeal to the public.
- ❖ Caruso’s music teacher told him he had “no voice at all.”
- ❖ Leo Tolstoy flunked out of college.
- ❖ Louis Pasteur was given a rating of “mediocre” in chemistry at Royal College.
- ❖ Admiral Byrd was deemed “unfit for service” before he flew over both Poles.
- ❖ Winston Churchill failed the sixth grade.
- ❖ Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper editor for his lack of good ideas.
- ❖ Henry Ford was evaluated as “showing no promise.”
- ❖ Fred Waring once failed to get into his high school chorus.

(Compiled from anonymous sources)