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Austin Eco Bilingual School

By Phaedra Rogers, resident



Pulling into the Austin Eco Bilingual School, you won't hear the usual pandemonium that sometimes accompanies an early learning school. As you walk through the arched entrance, you'll see young children doing what they do best — learning and playing. But what you'll hear may be a little bit different. Between

the typical squeals and laughter in a preschool setting, you'll also hear background chatter between children and teachers in Spanish and English, sometimes both occurring within the same sentence. The school has a peaceful yet joyful vibe to it, and according to Adriana Rodriguez, Co-Founder and head of the AEBS schools, the vibe is like that for a reason.

If it's true that doing what you're passionate about brings success, then Adriana is a living example of that. Rodriguez's calm, warm and nurturing demeanor is the kind most parents pray for in a school director. But her tone switches to full-throttle enthusiasm when talking about her school's successful teaching philosophy.

AEBS is National Association of Young Children (NAECY) certified, accredited by the International Baccalaureate Foundation, and the Reggio Emilia Alliance.

The Austin Eco Bilingual School serves students ages 3-months to second grade. It's a perfect synchronicity between educating and creating strong thinkers. Says Rodriguez, "AEBS's aim is to create ethical leaders with a strong sense of civic responsibility, who will go onto the best universities in the world and become

successful leaders." That may sound like a lot for an early learning center to aim for, but it seems they're on the right track. "We have students who graduate from our school and go on to excel in whatever school setting they're placed in, whether it's private or public." Walking through the campus, you'll see flags dangling from the ceiling from almost every country in the world, as well as flags with words like "Kindness," "Inquires," "Knowledgeable," "Communicators," "Tolerance" and "Thinkers," just to name a few. These are visual reminders of the school's standards.

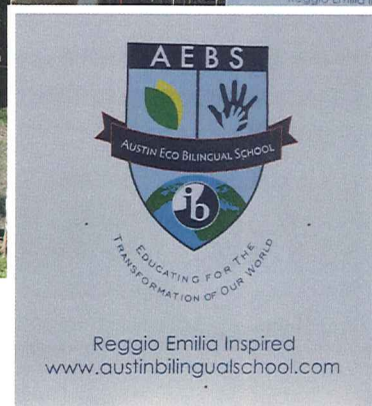
The International Baccalaureate

The International Baccalaureate is the foundation of AEBS's core structure. There are only 3 schools in Austin that are accredited by the prestigious International Baccalaureate, and AEBS is one of them. IB programs are becoming more and more sought after because of high success rates for students who progress through their program.

At the Austin Eco Bilingual School, the IB method is outlined through the Primary Years Program. PYP focuses on six themes:

- Who we are
- Where we are in place and time
- How we express ourselves
- How we organize ourselves
- How the world works
- Sharing the planet

These themes are the guideline that AEBS follows for their everyday instruction. Teaching core subjects like math and lan-



guage arts are taught through a variety of methods. They have classrooms and settings where students learn about different facets of the world they live in. Although students can't walk in or out of any classroom anytime they want, there is flexibility on where they can be within a learning "circuit," which is to say a specific time for a specific subject. For example, some children may be more motivated to learn about math through a tactile approach. There are rooms where a student can line up rocks and count them aloud while the teacher makes notes in the student's portfolio. Maybe the child will count in Spanish, then switch to English mid-count. There's no right or wrong in that scenario, as long as the student is able to learn the skill.

Through the International Baccalaureate and the Reggio Emilia approach, the AEBS has the ability to teach their very young students about global stewardship and environmental responsibility. Hence, the Eco in the school's name. The students are encouraged on a daily basis to make choices that serve the planet. And this isn't teaching just about recycling; it's about using things from the earth like flowers, sticks, leaves and dirt as learning tools.

If the International Baccalaureate is the what then the Reggio Emilia is the how. AEBS follows the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching. In case you were wondering, Reggio Emilia is not a who, but a where. This teaching approach started after World War II in the Italian village of Reggio Emilia. Because there was a great need for educational change after the war, schools started teaching children with the resources that were available at the time. This approach to teaching young children makes teachers, parents and the children themselves stakeholders in

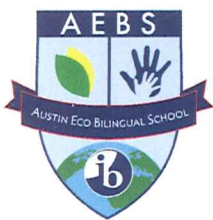
the education process. It's not the sit, stay, learn approach that is typical in many early childhood development schools these days. The foundation focuses on the educational importance of building a community and free inquiry as its primary values. "We don't expect our students to observe and experience what we're teaching the exact same way, because none of them are exactly the same," says Rodrigues. "Even though they're too young to really understand what different learning styles are, they all benefit from the atmosphere of total inclusion in the classroom regardless if they have a disability or not. To them it's just natural to ask questions and learn through different modalities."

The teachers observe and document the daily life of their students. In Reggio-inspired classrooms, teachers use a variety of documentation methods, such as cameras, tape recorders, and journals to track children's thoughts and ideas as they play together or work with materials. For example, each child has a portfolio binder including photographs of their projects, quotes from the child, artwork and writing samples. You can liken it to a narrative of what the child learns at school, noting that the children take great pride in their portfolios.

Educating The Educators And Putting It All Together

Because the AEBS is structured under the International Baccalaureate and teaches through the Reggio Emilia approach, the teachers are required to undergo extra education. In addition to their undergraduate degrees, they have to take specific coursework outlined by both the International Baccalaureate and Reggio Emilia Foundation. Neither the IB nor Reggio Emilia

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will certify a teacher unless he or she has undergone extensive coursework and exams. Rodriguez goes to Italy regularly to stay up to date on the Reggio Emilia method, which is something she feels strongly about.

What's Next?

Adriana already has two schools under her belt in Austin, but she has no plans of stopping there. "I'm very excited to announce that my third school just opened this past July in the Houston area" says Rodriguez. The Alianza Eco International School, which is located in Cypress, Texas, mirrors the same teaching philosophies as the Austin schools. The reception has been so positive that Adriana also shared she's teaming up with a partner this fall. Vel Murugan, CEO at Velamal Educational Trust, will be working with Rodriguez to expand into more Texas markets. "There just aren't that many schools that do what we do, and people are starting to rethink how they want their children to be educated in today's competitive global market."

Keep your eyes out for more from Adriana Rodriguez. If there's a shift in the way some parents decide to educate their young children here in Austin or Houston, there's a chance she may be the reason behind it.

To learn more, please visit <http://www.austinbilingualschool.com>, or if in Houston, please visit <http://www.alianzaecoschool.com>.

