

Science in Small Doses

The Elementary Institute of Science offers hands-on learning to small groups of focused inner-city kids

JUST OFF THE MARTIN LUTHER KING FREEWAY in a southeastern San Diego neighborhood, there stands a dazzling new building with multicolored walls and giant green rotundas shaped like laboratory beakers. This is the Elementary Institute of Science (EIS), a \$6 million facility devoted to low-cost, extracurricular science instruction for local children, ages 7-13.

EIS provides what many public schools cannot: small classes and practical instruction. The institute limits its classes to 10 students each and teaches such subjects as computer science, biology, chemistry, astronomy and engineering.

"Schools may have the textbook ability to teach science, but with large classes, it may be very difficult to let kids actually see what they've read about in action," says EIS director Doris Anderson. "We think of EIS as a good partner with the schools. We go hand-in-hand."

During two-hour sessions taught by college students, children learn about everything from the double-helix structure of DNA to the inner workings of a computer. Every activity is hands-on. Students dissect frogs, build plaster volcanoes and construct model bridges out of popsicle sticks. In the computer lab, every child has his or her own computer.

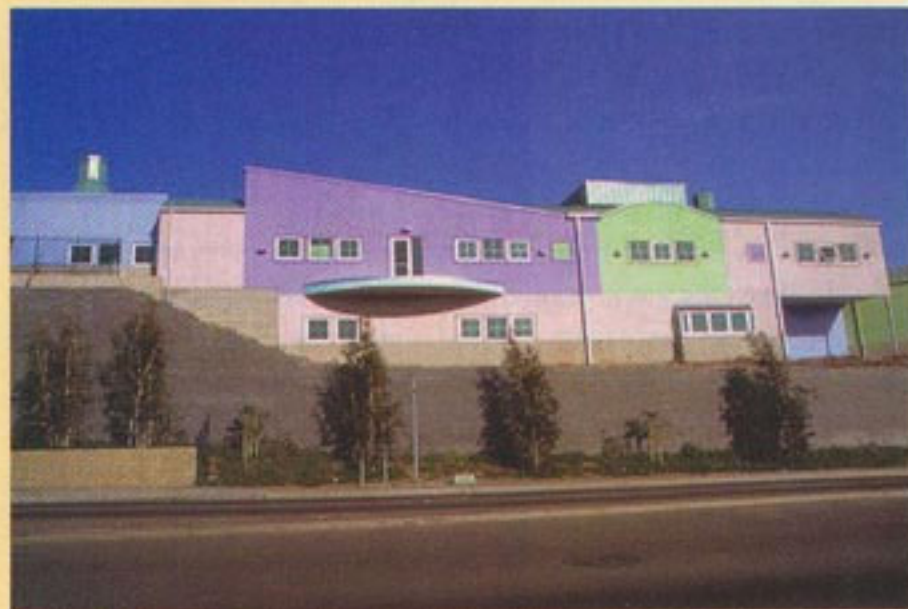
"The setting is not determined by what kind of grades you get. They've got enough of that at school. That takes a load off some of the kids and puts a different spin on learning," says Anderson. "We just give kids a good dose of science." Grades aren't given, though attendance and behavior is charted.

EIS charges each of its 400 students just \$20 a month for

twice-a-week classes, which means fund-raising is constantly part of its mission. It costs \$500,000 a year to operate the center.

Although the facility is new, EIS has been around since 1964. Founded by a San Diego science teacher named Tom Watts, EIS operated out of a dilapidated 2,200-square-foot house on the site for more than 30 years. The new 15,000-square-foot facility, which was almost entirely funded by private grants and donors, contains several large aquariums, a lecture hall, library, conference room and nine classrooms, each tailored to a different scientific subject.

—KAREN THOMPSON



EIS in southeastern San Diego offers big learning in small classes for youngsters interested in the sciences.