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How the Harriet Eisman Community School helps teens thrive

With small class sizes, heart-first leadership and a deep commitment to emotional well-being, the Harriet Eisman Community School is changing the way teens experience education.

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For more than 50 years, the [Harriet Eisman Community School](#) has been a lifeline for students who haven't thrived in traditional settings. Operated by Long Island Reach, this alternative high school in Long Beach offers more than just a diploma — it provides connection, purpose and a renewed belief in what education can be.

Founded in 1973 by progressive educators and community activists, including the school's namesake, Harriet Eisman, the program was launched in response to a clear need in the community. "There was a need for something different," recalls Dr. Joseph Smith, the school's executive director. "An alternative to the traditional educational system, which was really unsuccessful in meeting the needs of many young people."

Redefining what school can feel like

What began as the Community School at Long Beach has grown into a countywide program with the same mission: helping students succeed in an environment that emphasizes emotional wellness, creative learning and personal connection.

Unlike traditional schools, Harriet Eisman Community School is small by design. Classes average 12-15 students, and the atmosphere is intentionally non-institutional. "We don't set up classrooms like traditional schools," Smith explains. "Instead of rows and columns of student desks and a teacher's desk in front, we sit around a table, creating a warm and intimate environment. The message is: we're in this together, to actively participate, not passively observe."

Students are on a first-name basis with staff, choose their classes each trimester and have the opportunity to engage in electives ranging from art and music to theater and environmental studies.

Meet the heart of the program: Danielle Bertoli

Project Director Danielle Bertoli has been with the school for nearly a decade, starting as a creative writing teacher in 2015. Her leadership is rooted in empathy and experience. "I identify with the students in the program," Bertoli says. "I know what it's like to feel like an outsider to your life. So I try to lead with a heart-first approach... not just looking at students as academic performers, but as whole human beings."

Bertoli's own experiences as a writer deeply inform her leadership style. "A lot of what I do is help people feel connected. To realize their struggles are not only their own. That there are people here to support and uplift them."

Emotional wellness comes first

What makes Harriet Eisman different isn't just its small size — it's its focus on the whole student. Social-emotional learning is built into the curriculum. Two on-site social workers support students' personal growth alongside their academics.

"For most of these kids, I think for the first time, they're feeling like they're being fully seen and heard," Bertoli explains. "They're not worried about being judged or bullied. They feel like they can exhale."

Students who once avoided school now look forward to returning after breaks. "We have parents tell us, 'I don't know what's different, but my child shows up every day now,'" Bertoli adds. "And that's everything."

A legacy of impact

To date, the school has graduated more than 2,000 students — many of whom have gone on to college, trade schools or meaningful careers. Some have become educators, social workers, police officers, nurses, or entrepreneurs.

The success of the program, says Smith, is built on its people. "We don't have a lot of financial resources," he says. "But we have the most valuable resources there are — professionals like Danielle who bring energy, creativity and belief in this kind of education."

While some have asked if the school would consider expanding, Smith is clear: growth isn't about size. "I don't want it to get so big we lose what makes it special," he says. "But I do hope we can continue to grow in the quality and diversity of what we offer."

This year's graduation, to be held Aug. 24 at the Long Beach Library, will celebrate another class of students who found not just an education, but a place to belong.

"I always say this isn't just my job — it's my passion," Bertoli says. "And I feel really grateful to go to work every day. We've created a program that's full of heart, full of soul and full of connectivity for youth who really need it."

For more information on the Harriet Eisman Community School, visit <https://harrieteismanschool.com/>

For more information on Long Island Reach, visit <https://longislandreach.org>.

