

ALTERNATIVE: Pupils are allowed to learn at their own speed in unregimented classes

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tio — typical of elementary school alternative programs.

The huge, high-ceilinged room filled with books, plants and small animals is more like a playhouse than a hushed, structured classroom.

The children range in ability from extremely slow to gifted, but they are not labeled or separated into groups.

"They have the freedom to be as fast or as slow as they naturally are," said Linda Rouzer, a volunteer seated next to her daughter, Lisa, 7, who was working on math problems.

"There's no grading. They have to master this page before going on. They have to get an A-plus."

Unlike traditional classrooms, where the teacher often stands at the front of the room facing students seated behind neat rows of desks, children in this classroom are free to wander.

"It isn't a place where children do what they want," Nordberg said. "Children learn to accept responsibility for themselves. They are not wild. They are very controlled. If it doesn't come from within, another child or teacher will help them."

While one 7-year-old sprawled on the carpeted floor coloring illustrations for a short story, a classmate used yellow-and-black blocks to solve multiplication problems. A 6-year-old stared at a video display terminal's screen, typing an original story on a computer.

Across the room, a third-grader sat on a couch reading to kindergartners. A parent hovered near each cluster of children, ready with encouragement or advice.

Children in these classrooms frequently use words such as "fun" to describe school and they usually score as well as, if not better than, their traditional classroom peers on standardized tests, administrators said.

"I never ditch school," said Jeremy Harris, 11, who attends the alternative program at Orange-thorpe for students in fourth through sixth grades.

Jennifer Greenway, 9, agreed.

"I have a friend, she's not in a program like this and she doesn't like school. She always fakes like she's sick," Jennifer said.

In the Fullerton School District, parents whose children were on waiting lists to get into the program successfully petitioned the school board this summer to add another alternative program.

The new program, with about 30 children in kindergarten and first

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Marion Nordberg

alternative-education pioneer

grade, began this month at Hermosa Drive School and already has children on the waiting list.

Districtwide, there are about 35 children on waiting lists, but program coordinators said the number will increase as more parents, particularly those with preschoolers, began planning for school next fall.

Most parents who get involved in alternative programs said they are searching for a school where they can have more of a say in their children's education.

Many previously taught their children at home and said they prefer not having to carry the entire burden of their children's education.

Other parents said they are disgruntled with the traditional public school system; they had negative experiences or did not think their children were as happy as they could be.

Parent Suzie Spangenberg, 29, said she was not challenged in school so she became disruptive and was held back.

"I was bored," said Spangenberg, who eventually transferred to an alternative high school and was able to graduate early.

When she noticed that her daughter Kendra, a bright 7-year-old, also seemed uninterested in school, Spangenberg tried to enroll her in an alternative program in the Laguna Beach Unified School District.

For the past year, Kendra, now in third grade, has been one of 30 students on the waiting list to get into the Community Learning Center at Top of the World School in Laguna Beach.

"At CLC she'd be given the opportunity to excel at the speed she needs to," Spangenberg said.

The center, founded six years ago by a group of parents, grew from 30 children to about 60 in first through fourth grades.

"When the school was formed, it wasn't thought of as bad, good or better than a traditional school, it was thought of as a choice," said

Kathy Reynolds, one of the program's two full-time teachers.

"It isn't for everybody. We've had people come and stay for a year, saying it isn't what they thought it was."

"Choice" is the key word in this child-centered environment.

"Our society tends to offer a lot of choices," said Lynn Hartzler, a state Department of Education consultant on alternative education. "You can buy a different variety and brand of car ... our whole life is full of options, yet some school systems are set up as if only one thing is good for people."

"It makes more work for teachers, but some teachers would rather have that kind of work than deal with frustrated and unhappy children."

During the 1988-89 school year, the state had alternative programs at 752 schools, according to state education officials.

Orange County had alternative programs at 53 schools — the majority are offered at the intermediate and high-school level as a last-ditch effort to keep students from dropping out. Five years ago, the county had 29 alternative programs and 33 alternative schools.

While the demand for alternative programs is growing at the elementary-school level, few teachers are prepared for or interested in coordinating the programs, school administrators said.

State education officials this summer released guidelines encouraging all school districts to incorporate some of the methods used in alternative programs: reduced class sizes, increased parental involvement, less emphasis on testing and drills and more flexibility in expectations about when and how children will master the basic skills.

"There are many classrooms in Orange County which currently reflect the vision of activities and experiences that encourage highly active participation and joyful learning on the part of the children," said Joan Bissell, assistant director of teacher education at the University of California, Irvine.

"Many of these exist in the regular schools and are not necessarily labeled alternative, individualized programs, but they are responsive to the needs of children."