

LITTLE HANDS SCHOOL UPDATE FAQs

1. What's going on? Why is Little Hands closing?

It really boils down to a few things: low enrollment, budget deficits, an inability to shift our program model significantly, and a reduced interest in and ability to participate in a co-op within the community. Fundamentally, our customer base is still out there - young families wanting support and community and a safe place to play - but they are less and less able to participate in a program like Little Hands because joining a co-op requires a commitment that many don't currently have the luxury to make. The following points all contribute to the current challenges we face:

- a. Enrollment for many co-op schools has been in a steady decline for years; co-ops represent a more challenging commitment for families.
- b. The pandemic disrupted the community input to our program, lowering enrollment even more.
- c. Families have two working parents and need daycare more than an activity. Daycare spots are in high demand so parents are forced to sign up for full time care, making mid-week activities less doable.
- d. Many people do not feel a parent/child activity with an infant is as essential as preschool for their 3 or 4 year old.
- e. Parents who are able to come to us want and need to buy out of their co-op jobs because it's the only way they can participate.
- f. Preschools have all been hurt by TK, so they are merging age groups and dropping down to include toddlers and 2 yr olds which impacts our niche market.
- g. Federal and state grants that were available 2020 through 2022 are no longer offered.
- h. Major fundraising events, which have previously helped us close the financial gap, are no longer possible with our smaller enrollment.

2. Are there things we can try? What have we tried already?

For nearly fifty years, Little Hands has truly been a living entity, growing, changing, adapting, and weathering ups and downs. Families from San Francisco to Sunnyvale, Fremont to Half Moon Bay, have found their way to our doors. As times change, so has the school, always trying to be an exceptional source of learning, community, play, and development for the families we serve.

Over the years, the brilliance of our boards and staff has provided numerous innovative and strategic changes to our school. Some successful, some less so. In recent years, in

particular, we've dug deep to try to find ways to offer families what they need and want. This includes, but is not limited to:

- a. Adding a program for 3 year olds
- b. Extending the program length for older kids
- c. Offering a lunch bunch
- d. Offering extended mornings for 2 year olds
- e. Reducing co-op commitment including:
 - i. Reducing night classes
 - ii. Reducing co-op hours
 - iii. Increasing job buyout availability
 - iv. Eliminating co-op job in lieu of community team participation
- f. Focusing our target audience
- g. Increasing our emphasis on spirit and community with less focus on "have to's"
- h. Adding more easy community gatherings with no commitment
- i. Continuing our talks and exposure at hospital groups
- j. Continuing our presence at preschool fairs
- k. Increasing our social media presence
- l. Offering short and free mini baby sessions with no commitment
- m. Offering virtual programming for kids and adults
- n. Moving parent ed and night classes to virtual to put less stress on young families
- o. Participating in Stanford Business non-profit support program
- p. Adding significant push for direct fundraising (GoFundMe, GivingTuesday)
- q. Promoting corporate matching and donations
- r. Continuing our large-scale annual auction, until no longer feasible with current enrollment
- s. As always, allowing grandparents to participate
- t. Offering evening classes for working families
- u. ...and much much more over the years.

3. Could Little Hands shift its program model to allow more days or hours?

The format and nature of our program make us more vulnerable to the challenges of today's economy and community needs. Traditional co-op preschools can increase days offered, hours offered, and hire aids to allow parents to drop off more and participate less. But Little Hands serves a very young community with a deep focus on parent ed and parent community. Expanding our days or drop offs simply won't work with our age group, and won't align with our mission and philosophy.

As noted above, we have offered extended hours and more days for older kids, but those

classes were not full. Adding longer days or drop off days for infants and toddlers, who represent the bulk of our attending families, is not a realistic option, given the nature of our program.

4. Can Little Hands just become more of a daycare?

No. Not easily. Little Hands is a parent education program and therefore license-exempt due to its affiliation with Sequoia Adult School. In order to become a daycare, we would need to drop that affiliation and become licensed. Licensing requirements are extremely strict and Little Hands would not qualify as is. Even the layout and age of our facility is incompatible. Additionally, we would likely need an entirely new staff as our current staff are highly qualified for adult ed and we would have to find staff who seek employment in a daycare center.

5. Could Little Hands operate in a way so that parents don't have to do a co-op job?

We have continued to reduce what we ask of parents. We have cut the co-op requirement down, making it easier for young families to walk through our door and get engaged. Over the years we have reduced night class requirements, job requirements, hours for events and maintenance, etc... This year we cut jobs altogether and asked families to simply join a co-op "team" and help when they can, but it has not worked well. As a result, the board and staff are overworked, and we have our smallest board ever. Little Hands has always been known to operate at a level of excellence that is unparalleled. To maintain that, we need the helping hands of many, and without enrollment or co-op job help, it has become too much on the tiny team that is running the school.

6. Can we offer mini sessions in the spring to entice new families?

We have done this multiple times. We offered a FREE 8-week baby spring class a few years ago, in order to introduce our program to families and engage them. Although signup for that session was robust, very few signed up for the next year. In Spring of 2023, we offered another 8 week baby session, with no commitment, but attendance was low, and we did not achieve the retention we needed.

7. Can we offer shorter sessions without as much commitment?

We have discussed offering 4, 6, or 8 week sessions and reregistering for each session. Operationally, this is too challenging when we don't have backup funding to support us during the growth period that would inevitably happen with this format. If we had full sessions one time, but low enrollment the next, we'd have to let staff go, and shift our schedule and program for each session. It would also mean that we could not build on

the parent education curriculum the way that we want and need to since families would be restarting and changing too frequently. With our current staff and format, this short-term option just seems to compromise all that Little Hands strives to deliver, and seems too tentative when we need stability more than ever.

8. What will happen to Little Hands? Can we regroup, rebrand, and return?

At this point, although the board has not yet voted or started the process to dissolve the school, it seems most likely that this will be in the near future. We do have hope that it's possible to find a new path forward, a new format or program, or a new purpose that allows Little Hands to continue supporting the mission of bringing parents and children together. With sufficient interest in the future, this could restart an active co-op. In an ideal world, there is a community member out there who might be thinking of starting a new program but doesn't have the space or initial funding to do so. Perhaps that person could work with us to rebuild. The challenge is that while we figure out that future, we would still need to pay rent and other expenses, we'd need to pay some small amount of staff, we'd need a board to legally operate, and we'd need some very dedicated people to be there when it's time to start up again. And if a new future did not come to fruition, we'd need a lot of help shutting down the facility. As a volunteer-run organization, this becomes challenging to sustain while we are not in operation.