

The San Diego Union-Tribune

Encinitas Advocate News

ENCINITAS ADVOCATE > ENCINITAS ADVOCATE NEWS

New book by accomplished educator Stuart Grauer provides guide for small school leadership

By [Madison Beveridge](#)

[The San Diego Union Tribune](#) June 6, 2026 at 3:18 PM PDT

For 32 years, The Grauer School in Encinitas functioned under the leadership of Stuart Grauer, Ed.D., as founder and Head of School. In 2023 Grauer transitioned from that role to become Head of School Emeritus and the school board hired Dana Abplanalp-Diggs, M.Ed. to succeed him as the Head of School at The Grauer School.

Recently, Grauer released his book *The Way to Pancho's Kitchen*, a narration of learned and lived experiences through the lens of an educator.



Grauer's love for education began long before his time as a teacher. Growing up spending ample time outdoors, the invaluable art of lesson learned from nature was engrained in him from a young age.

“Almost all of what I remember growing up was outdoors. After, not during grade school and college, I have spent searching for great teachers, not only in classrooms, but in mountains, oceans, forests, travel, and communities.

Surfing has always been part of my life here on the coast, and skiing and hiking opened up the world to me when I was a young teacher,” said Grauer.

Working in public schools, Grauer formally began his career as a history teacher, but was consistently drawn back to his roots as a lover of nature.

“As a very young public school history teacher who loved mountains and exploration, I kept applying for positions in Switzerland, I have no logical explanation for why and eventually landed a teaching job at a Swiss international school with students from all over the world. There, I encountered something that changed my life: school founders. I saw people who had created schools around vision, courage, and relationships instead of simply inheriting systems. Schools where study and time in the mountains were not separate from any other part of teaching and learning. It was amazing to me,” said Grauer.

Thus began Grauer’s journey to opening The Grauer School.

“I returned to the U.S. for doctoral studies in educational leadership at the University of San Diego, where I applied based upon my fascination with founders and entrepreneurial school leadership,” said Grauer. “When I finished at USD and came to Encinitas to start The Grauer School, I had no money and no campus. Ray Chavez was a former farmer who developed and owned Rincon Plaza. The farmers got rich in this region. He lent me a space and said, “I like education. Pay me when you get students.” We shook hands. That was our only contract for all the years I knew him. That kind of trust and humanity shaped the school from the beginning. I still do business all around Encinitas based on trust.”

Now, after 35 years, Grauer accredits much of the school’s success to Encinitas and the strong sense of community.

“My students and I read together, surfed together, travelled to the mountains and Baja desert together,” Grauer said.

At its core, The Grauer School thrives on a student-forward approach, honoring the individuality of young learners. Straying from the standard

approach to early education, the foundation of what Grauer started is rooted in exactly this.

“I loved my students, but early on schools felt increasingly impersonal to me, like there was a rulebook everyone followed that I never got. Students often had little voice, little agency, and little opportunity to really be known. It happened almost completely in rows,” said Grauer. “Our philosophy was “Learn by Discovery®.” That came off my pen on the first week I had our school.”

Like what Grauer created with his school, his latest book, *The Way to Pancho’s Kitchen*, is an accumulation of lessons, learnings and fundamentals for early educators and school leaders.

“The Way to Pancho’s Kitchen reflects on what can happen when schools remain small enough to stay personal and mission-driven, how big that can feel to the school community and everyone in it. After 35 years of building and defending a small school, I began realizing that educational leadership is often discussed almost entirely through management language: systems, metrics, rankings, outputs and procedures, but schools are living ecosystems built on trust, courage, stewardship, and relationships,” said Grauer. “The Way to Pancho’s Kitchen is a collection of interconnected stories drawn from founding and leading a small school over decades. Some stories are funny, some painful, some adventurous, some outrageous, and many are rooted in nature and place. The book explores leadership through lived experience rather than prescriptions.”

Looking back at 35 years and ahead at the school’s future, Grauer is certain this is only the beginning.

“Reaching 35 years feels less like a finish line and more like an ongoing responsibility. We’ve now had generations of families come through the school. We’ve celebrated births, graduations, weddings, retirements, and mourned losses together. In many ways, the school has become an extended community across decades of Encinitas life,” said Grauer. “We also want to

continue innovating without losing our soul. We want students outdoors. We want teachers empowered creatively. We want learning to remain joyful, adventurous, and meaningful.”

The Grauer School’s identity is rooted in Encinitas, something that will never change.

“Encinitas still matters because it has retained something increasingly rare: a sense of local identity, creativity, and connection to nature. Surf culture, environmental awareness, physical and spiritual fitness, small businesses with a minimum of chain stores, music, art, and independent thinking have all shaped generations of young people here,” said Grauer. “Many teachers and staff members were first encountered through community life itself, coaching, music, environmental work, and local events. I have closed enrollment deals in the break at Cardiff Reef, I have hired teachers in the waves at Swamis, I have personally known and supported every Encinitas mayor through these decades because schools should not exist separately from the communities around them.”

More information on The Grauer School can be found at <https://www.grauerschool.com>. The Way to Pancho’s Kitchen can be purchased at <https://thewaytopanchoskitchen.com>

“I am so deeply grateful to the families, students, teachers, alumni, neighbors, and local leaders who helped sustain The Grauer School through decades of change. I feel so indebted to our city,” said Grauer.

Grauer’s expertise in education leadership is recognized nationally and globally, according to a news release. A Fulbright Educational Administration Fellow (2007), he is the founder of the Small Schools Coalition, which serves as an influential educational model for hundreds of independent schools across the United States and around the world, the news release stated.

His ASCD SmartBriefs have ranked among the most widely read of the year nationwide. He is a regular chairman of School Evaluation Committees for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and has taught at both

U.S. International University and the University of California, San Diego, specializing in international education and teacher development. He was awarded the Arthur E. Hughes Career Achievement Award for 2014 (the University of San Diego's School of Leadership and Education Sciences' highest alumni honor) and was named Peacemaker of the Year by Rotary International, the news release stated.



Listen to this article now

Powered by **Trinity Audio**



1.0x

00:00



07:38