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New Torrey Hills Surf Club embraces the aloha spirit



Students build surf skills and community with Torrey Hills School's Surf Club. (Courtesy Jacob Ruth)



Torrey Hills School is building community and a sense of belonging through PTA-sponsored clubs, including the popular Surf Club, led by dedicated volunteer parents and one seriously stoked surfing principal.

Torrey Hills Principal Jacob Ruth said a school Surf Club has long been a dream that finally became a reality this year with the help of the PTA—their focus with clubs like surfing, dance, yoga, beading and origami is to help students feel connected to their school. As Ruth said, students learn best when they feel known, valued and respected by both the adults in the school and their peers.



Parent volunteers help kids learn to ride on dry land in Torrey Hills School's Surf Club. (Courtesy Jacob Ruth)

"When I go to a lunch club, it helps my body feel calm and relaxed. It's nice to do something different than just play on the playground," said first grader Coral Srickland at the Del Mar Union School District board's October session. "I like surfing and when I signed up, it was super fun. I even learned some new words like 'stoked' and 'aloha'."

Ruth has been a surfer since middle school and went to college at the University of Hawaii. "It was one of the best things I have done in my life," Ruth recalls. "I surfed the North Shore for four seasons and got a BA in history at the same time!"

He has been the principal at Torrey Hills since March, replacing Abby Domingo who now works in the instructional services department at the district office.

Ruth is highly involved as one of the surf coaches in the parent-driven club—they meet up during lunch at school with surfboards set up in the classroom to help students practice popping up on dry land and how to be safe in the ocean, like doing the stingray shuffle. On the weekends, the real fun happens on the beach when the group gathers to surf spots like Torrey Pines State Beach.

Lucas Crank, a sixth grade surf leader, said the club has brought a lot of excitement to the school.

“I joined Surf Club because I love the ocean and feel very comfortable in the water. I spend a lot of time in the pool as a swimmer so it’s only natural for me to want to learn how to surf,” Crank said. “Surf Club is a fun and positive space. Mr. Ruth and the other surf coaches make it fun by bringing great energy, playing music and teaching us cool surf slang.”

One curated club gesture is the “Hawk-a-Shaka”, the Torrey Hills Hawks’ take on the Hawaiian hand gesture with a closed hand with the thumb and pinkie sticking out symbolizing the aloha spirit of kindness, unity and local pride.

At the beach, kids take turns using boards with parents guiding them onto the waves.

“It teaches us perseverance and patience because not every time we’re going to catch the perfect wave,” Lucas said.



Students build surf skills and community with Torrey Hills School's Surf Club.
(Courtesy Jacob Ruth)

Ruth said one of the most skilled and stylish surfers in the club is Eunchan Cho, a new Torrey Hills student who is also new to America from Korea. Ruth said he has shown great determination getting back up on the board and challenging himself to learn the difficult new skill after taking a hard fall in one of his first sessions.

At the board meeting, Eunchan shared his thoughts on the Surf Club in his native Korean, "one of the many beautiful languages spoken at Torrey Hills", Ruth said.



Torrey Hills first grader Camilla rides a wave. (Courtesy Jacob Ruth)

“The surf club has now become my favorite activity at school. Surfing is so much fun and the feeling of accomplishment when I finally stand up on a wave is amazing. This experience helps me gain so much confidence but the best part is the sense of belonging I feel,” Eunchan said, his words translated to English by Gia Maganiello, a student leader who does the morning broadcast at Torrey Hills. “As a Korean student, it is hard for me to connect and be connected with friends but the Surf Club is a place where we all become one through the same passion. The Surf Club brings a powerful sense of positivity to our entire school. Surfing is a challenge and when we fall down countless times, however, our coaches always encourage us, to teach us the meaning of never giving up.”

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