A COMMUNITY WHERE HAPPINESS CAN BE CULTIVATED

With its lush gardens surrounding peaceful streams and lakes, Riverbend School near the southern coastal city of Chennai, India, feels more like a nature retreat than a weekday boarding school. And that's exactly what Danish Kurani, the lead architect, was aiming for when he designed this campus of contentment.

The inspirations were a documentary, *The Economics of Happiness*, about how villages foster strong relationships, and a Harvard University study, which found that strong relationships lead to happiness. Armed with these insights, Kurani created a school where happiness is a top priority.

His mission for Riverbend was to improve the quality of students' lives and education through architecture. Mimicking the layout of a village, Kurani designed a one-of-a-kind school where right angles and straight lines are nowhere to be found. All the buildings at Riverbend are intentionally human-scaled – one to two storeys – and curved, so there are no corners where students can feel left out or isolated.

To cultivate a sense of community, student dormitories are modelled after the traditional form of communal housing known as *tulou*, found in China's Fujian province. Unlike other housing models, which reflect social hierarchy, *tulou* demonstrate equality and collaboration. The rooms are built around a central square, and each unit has its own common space for students to gather and build relationships.

Riverbend features winding paths, outdoor pavilions and a public plaza, for events, situated at the heart of campus. There is a meditation deck where students can practise yoga, as well as agricultural land where they can grow vegetables and raise small animals. Every aspect of Kurani's design is intended to promote physical and mental well-being as a path to happiness.

Riverbend prioritises the development of a child's personality and character, which is something most traditional classroom environments don't view as their responsibility. Riverbend's teachers also draw upon ancient Hindu texts to teach students that true happiness comes from within. According to Eastern philosophy, disconnecting happiness from external factors leads to a much happier life.

The school's curriculum is project- and enquiry-driven. Each term, students try to solve a new global challenge, such as health equity, food access or clean energy development. Students also get to pursue their personal interests in woodworking studios, digital creation labs and test kitchens (where they can explore cultures through cuisine).

When it comes to future possibilities, students are encouraged to keep an open mind, whether that means going to college, becoming an entrepreneur or pursuing a passion project. Giving students the freedom to choose their own path removes a lot of the stress and anxiety experienced by students at traditional Indian schools.

Riverbend aims to dispel the idea that you need to sacrifice health to achieve success. The conventional mindset is to work hard now so that you can be happy later. But Riverbend's goal is to teach students that they can find happiness, inner purpose and success all at the same time.

Because many schools are re-examining their academic priorities in order to incorporate happiness, Riverbend offers a model for the future of education. With everything that is going on in the world, it has never been more important to have an environment where kids can learn how to be happy, no matter what is going on around them. ■