

## **Springs' Personalized Learning Model Offers Alternative to One-Size-Fits-All Education**

A recent study by Udemy for Business rated the top skills employers want in their workforce: The willingness and ability of employees to solve problems, to take initiative, to learn on their own and with others in order to improve their work, and to think creatively.

Now think about a day in a traditional high school. What do students spend time doing? Maybe they're listening to lectures, taking notes, reading textbooks, answering questions, sitting in rows or even sleeping. How do the day to day activities of that high school experience compare with the typical expectations of today's workplace? How do these experiences help develop the employee described in the study above?

At Springs Charter Schools, we incubate highly skilled employees by giving students real, hands-on work to do. Our education model expects students to take initiative in designing their own learning experiences and our students rise to the occasion! Just like personalized medicine has changed the face of health care over the past decade, our philosophy of personalized learning meets the needs of ALL learners by providing the opposite of a one-size-fits-all education. Years of experience has taught us that this approach is highly effective, particularly for students who don't thrive in traditional school environments.

For those unfamiliar with charter schools, it is important to know they are tuition-free public schools. Created by the state legislature in 1992, these student-centered schools are laboratories of innovation providing alternate pathways to success for learners of all types. Charters offer a dynamic learning experience for all students including those who otherwise might only have the option of a poorly performing neighborhood school.

Charter schools are given more leeway for educational innovation than traditional public schools, in exchange for increased accountability. Unfortunately, recent changes in legislation are making it more difficult for charter schools to open and remain in business in California which is why it's so important for the community to understand the contributions charters make to public education.

Personalized learning, as we define it at Springs, allows every student to master skills exactly when and how they need them. We use a computer-based diagnostic to assess where each student is academically so we can set up a personalized plan of action for each child. As a former teacher, I am amazed by these tools; they would have enabled me to truly understand the strengths and needs of each student

Personalized learning is interest-driven as well as mastery-based. If two children are studying world history, for example, one may prefer to study the battles and weapons of World War II, while the other focuses on the women's movement of the 1800s. Each are studying history, but through a lens which makes it most interesting to him/her This is the essence of personalized learning, and helps put students in the driver's seat of their own education.

Flexibility in where and when learning occurs is a part of personalized learning. Students may sit at a traditional desk, or spend time on the floor or in small groups. They can work outdoors or on their couch at home. With the workplace constantly evolving and more people working remotely from home,

in a decade these same students might find themselves at work while sitting at home on their living room couch.

Personalized learning requires a shift away from traditional roles. The teacher is no longer the sole provider of information, but a facilitator. The child is in the driver's seat, with the teacher riding shotgun serving as navigator and helper. Unlike the old-school model; personalized learning encourages initiative, ownership, and the skills of life-long learning.

Some mistakenly view personalized learning as online learning, where the child spends the day completing lessons on the computer. Computers are part of personalized learning, but so is small group instruction, hands-on activities and pencil-and-paper tasks. Others say that even though the old-school "30-in-a-cell-with-a-bell" model involves drudgery, that's the way it's always been done, and should continue. Nonsense. Decades of classroom research proves that old thinking wrong

While personalized learning can be attempted in the traditional public schools, a variety of factors, beginning with the rigid daily scheduling requirements, make it difficult to succeed. Charter schools, conversely, have greater freedom to innovate, make adjustments when new programs are not working and adopt flexible schedules that work best for students. In fact, because Springs is categorized as a non-classroom based program, our students have the freedom to learn in a wide variety of settings. Like many charters, our schools offer hybrid programs where learning happens beyond the classroom walls. For example, we have programs where students spend half of the day in the classroom and half of the day at home, or three days a week in the classroom and two days a week at home, or even nearly entirely at home with speciality classes and regular meetings with teachers.

In the end, it comes down to parent choice. Some parents may prefer personalized learning and what it offers their children, others may opt to stick with the traditional model. Some students would never succeed in traditional public school. For these reasons, it's important that charter schools remain a viable option in our state. I would urge every Californian to support choice in public education, and to resist the misleading efforts of those who would hamper the establishment or renewal of charter schools. Choice is best for our state, best for our families and best for our children.

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