

The pandemic has catapulted California schools kicking and screaming into the 21st century. Public schools will likely never return to the one-size-fits-all rigid “seat minutes” structure of just a few months ago. And it’s about time.

For 25 years many charter school leaders including me have been working to redesign schools to more flexibly serve students in the modern world. Nevertheless, our movement has been denounced, criticized and minimized by the educational old-guard. The traditional public school system is slow to change and unwilling or unable to recognize the benefits of a more flexible school environment for many of their students and families. Now that parents, students and teachers have experienced distance learning - with both its pros and cons - they will be reluctant to go back to an uncompromising system of education.

While traditional schools have spent weeks scrambling to get some temporary distance learning in place for students, our students at Springs Charter Schools never missed a day of “class”. As a charter school, we are a tuition-free public school of choice that specializes in “personalized learning,” or tailoring the curriculum and environment to the individual student. For us and many other charter schools that provide hybrid classroom and home-based models, it was just a matter of expanding the existing program we already had in place.

And, because we are familiar with distance learning, we know how to do it well. Keep in mind that high quality distance learning, at least in the way that Springs defines it, is not merely a child on a computer with a headset. It is a balanced multi-method approach, developed over many years, that includes live online discussions through a zoom-style platform, pre-recorded lessons requiring student interaction, as well as paper and pencil, workbook and textbook assignments. In addition, our computer programs use diagnostic tools to help us identify and target skills each student needs for personalized instruction.

That is why in March, as the state’s classrooms were closing, many parents contacted us seeking support to continue their children’s learning at home. While the pandemic prevents us from accepting any new students until the fall, we were able to share our experience with concerned parents by launching our OPEN Classroom, a free online public classroom for students in grades K-12 which allows children to continue their education at home with daily lessons. It runs through the end of the school year, and features weekly lesson plans, materials, answer keys and credentialed teachers who present live-streamed lessons four days a week. So far, 4,942 non-Springs students and 183 non-Springs teachers from all over the world have been using our content.

I realize that full-time distance learning has not been a positive experience for everyone, but it can be a highly effective component of a well-rounded education. I would encourage parents to explore the options available for their children, particularly those offered by charter schools that know how to do distance learning right. Distance education provides children with academic skills, experiences for future success in the 21st century workforce and a chance to spend quality time at home. Schools that adopt flexible models combining learning at-home with classroom experiences will create better schools than our nation has ever had.

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