



The **Power** of

Choice

Giving families educational freedom



Sky Mountain Charter School

Where parents choose and students succeed

BY ANNE STOKES

At Sky Mountain Charter School, educators put the power of choice into families' hands. The home-based personalized learning charter school provides students with alternatives to the traditional educational system and gives parents the tools and support they need to help their children succeed.

"Our organization is really built around [the] vision that every single child is different – they have different interests, they have different abilities ... they learn at different paces," says Susan Clark, executive director of Innovative Education Management, the nonprofit public benefit corporation that operates Sky Mountain and two other personalized learning California charter schools. "Each student has a program that's specially designed for them. If you couple that with giving parents as much decision-making as you can in the education of their own child, those two things together are going to create lifelong learners and contributing members of society."

First opened in 1999, IEM now serves nearly 6,000 students in Northern, Central and Southern California. They provide home-schooling support for elementary and middle school students and independent learning programs for high school students. According to Clark, the fact that their schools have been around for nearly 20 years reassures parents seeking educational options.

"We've been in business a long time ... and we know the rules and regulations of charter schools," she says. "Our

historic stability [and] our clean audits guarantee for parents that this school is going to be here tomorrow, it's going to be here next year, it's going to be here five years from now."

With IEM, home-schooling families can connect with 4,000 different vendors through which they can choose the curriculum, materials, programs and other educational resources that best suit their children's needs and learning styles. Sky Mountain Charter School supports both students and parents with diagnostic assessments, curriculum recommendations, tutoring and parent trainings.

"Together [teachers and parents] choose what books might be best, what supplements might be best, what services they might need – it's truly a collaboration between the teacher and the parent," says Clark. "We're not cookie cutter. You can talk to 10 different families and you will find 10 different ways that they're reaching students."

Whether students have specialized needs that aren't easily addressed in a brick-and-mortar classroom or crave a more advanced curriculum, Sky Mountain Charter School can provide the means for them to excel.

"These kids are really getting such an independently designed program that gives them the option to move at any pace," says Clark. "We're able to really meet the needs of just about any student there is."

According to Susan Clark, IEM executive director, students who may not fit into a traditional educational environment can find success at Sky Mountain Charter School through personalized attention and customized curriculum. "We believe we can serve any student," she says.
PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES



"We're able to really meet the needs of just about any student there is."

Susan Clark
Innovative Education
Management Executive
Director



MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR YOUR FAMILY

While the traditional classroom with one teacher and dozens of students may work for some students, many students don't fit that mold. Many parents aren't aware of any other options.

Charter schools like Sky Mountain exist to give parents a choice in their child's education. "We believe

that the old model of education where every child must learn from the same book does not meet the needs of all children," says Cynthia Rachel, director of education support services. "We want to help parents educate their children in the way that meets their children's needs. This may be different for every child."

As a public school, Sky Mountain:

- Is FREE (no tuition)
- Is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges
- Accepts any student living within San Bernardino and adjacent counties
- Allows for flexible daily schedules
- Offers curricular choices to suit students' needs
- Provides support from credentialed teachers

To see if Sky Mountain is right for your family, visit www.skymountaincs.org or call 800-979-4436.

According to mom Maria Arneson, home-schooling has afforded her family quality time together while meeting all five children's learning needs.
PHOTO BY SUSAN WEININGER



**“They
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Maria Arneson
Sky Mountain parent

Finding **Balance**

Sky Mountain family finds what works
best for their five children

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Maria Arneson’s home-schooling experiences began even before any of her five children were born. She and her husband opted to home-school their foster son, who struggled with his schoolwork as well as being bullied. “Our foster boy was in school all day, then doing homework until it was dark,” she says. “Home-schoolers have time to devote to other things. They can get their school work done in the morning and get it out of the way.”

Their eldest daughter Tabitha also initially attended public school, but started having problems by the first grade. “She was coming home in tears,” Arneson says. “She kept getting these ‘red stars’ every day for not getting her work done.” After unsuccessfully trying to work things out with her teacher, Arneson sought other options and found Sky Mountain Charter School to be a good fit.

“It really worked for all my kids,” she says. “The beauty of home schooling is you go at your own pace.” Arneson says that each of her children learn differently and the support from their educational specialist was invaluable to finding what works best for their unique strengths and weaknesses.

“She is so helpful. Every need we have, or if I just want to run something by her, she instantly responds,” Arneson says.

“The kids all love her. She is very laid-back and keeps learning fun for them.”

Arneson also appreciates the time their family has together. “We have influence over their social activities [and] who their friends are,” she says. “When they’re gone from your eyesight for eight hours a day, who knows? The foul language or disrespect teens can show – we don’t get that.”

Arneson says her kids’ ability to follow their passions and explore extracurricular activities is of great benefit to her family. Her daughter Hailey, who initially attended a traditional brick-and-mortar school, saw her siblings taking music lessons during the day and eventually “begged to be home-schooled” so she could get in on the fun.

All five of the Arneson children are deeply involved in martial arts – two are black belts, a third is training for one, and the older children teach and do martial arts demonstrations. According to her, they wouldn’t have the freedom to pursue their extracurricular interests in a brick-and-mortar school. “They wouldn’t be the children they are today if we’d sent them to a traditional classroom,” Arneson says.

See how Sky Mountain Charter School can accommodate any student’s learning style and visit www.skymountaincs.org or call 800-979-4436.



IS HOME SCHOOLING THE RIGHT FIT FOR YOUR FAMILY?

For many parents, home-schooling can be a scary decision, especially for those with no teaching experience. But if your family can rise to the challenge, a personalized education can be an amazing gift for your child.

“You have to really ask yourself if you’re ready to take on the full responsibility for your child’s education,” says Kristi Henry, education specialist advisor. Parents should also determine if they have the time for teaching and professional development, which can be especially challenging for a single parent or when both parents work.

But if the answer to these two questions is yes, it can give students the freedom to follow their passion and special interests, like piano, fine arts, gymnastics, ballet or acting.

“If kids show signs of being gifted in a certain area, they have the flexibility to explore their passion,” Henry says. “And on the other side, if kids needs aren’t being met socially, or they have a learning disability, one-on-one instruction can be much more successful.”

Learning in Motion

Social and educational opportunities abound for home-schooled students

BY MATT JOCKS



“I think kids in a traditional classroom setting socialize a lot, but ... I think our kids have a chance to interact with a wider group.”

**Jennifer Felton
Sky Mountain Parent**

Ice skating is one of Elizabeth Felton's favorite social activities. The 9-year-old has many opportunities to socialize with peers, according to mom Jennifer Felton, who home-schools her children through Sky Mountain Charter School.

PHOTO BY CARLOS PUMA

There are many ways to measure the experiences parents can provide for their children. All Jennifer Felton has to do is look at the odometer on her van.

“Yeah, I’ve got about 200,000 miles on that van,” Felton says. “There are a lot of times when we say, ‘Well, let’s just throw a lunch in there and get going.’”

The Moreno Valley mom home-schools her four children through Sky Mountain Charter School.

While there are plenty of opportunities for Sky Mountain children to socialize locally, there is also plenty of freeway time involved.

“We go to a lot of field trips,” Felton says. “We’ve been to Disneyland, the California Science Center, the Los Angeles Children’s Museum, the La Brea Tar Pits, the tide pools.”

For a parent willing to spend an hour or two behind the wheel, the opportunities for education and socialization in Southern California are many. The urban areas of Riverside, Orange County and Los Angeles, with their science and historic venues, as well as the natural learning opportunities of the moun-

tains and deserts, are all within reach.

Beyond the educational value is the chance for the children to interact, not just with each other but with others at a given venue.

“I think kids in a traditional classroom setting socialize a lot, but mostly just with kids in their age group,” Felton says. “I think our kids have a chance to interact with a wider group. When you get to college or have a job, you’ll be dealing with [older and younger] people.”

Closer to home, Felton says her children, who range from first grade to high school, enjoy the group gatherings that involve physical activity. Although there are not the traditional sports teams that are part of public schools, the children participate in physical education that includes basic instruction in sports like basketball and volleyball. And mostly, there is ice skating.

“They really like the skating,” she says. “It’s something they can do with their friends. They get to hang out and get a lot of activity.”

To those who are afraid that home-schooling will isolate children, Felton laughed.

“They socialize so much, we have to remember to do the schoolwork,” she says. “But we do.”

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GET HANDS-ON WITH GROUP EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Argi Sayari, education liaison for Sky Mountain Charter School, has plenty to choose from when plotting out the group educational activities for home-schoolers in Southern California.

There are the familiar big-ticket destinations like Griffith Observatory, Disneyland and the Wild Animal Park, as well as perennial favorites like the Renaissance Pleasure Faire.

However, there are plenty of other educational treasures to be mined, like historic re-enactments at Riley’s Farm in Oak Glen, the Gibbon Conservation Center in Santa Clarita or studying organic farming at Primal Pastures Farm in Murrieta.

“We cover such a wide area,” Sayari said. “We try to offer trips to all the areas.”

Aside from trips, Sayari is working on expanding both the offerings and participation. Sky Mountain offers activities like Family Days, which can include interactive activities such as a mobile science lab, or participation in the spelling bee that qualifies students for further levels of competition.

**“I felt
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Shihching Wagner
Sky Mountain parent



Shihching Wagner helped her son find success at Sky Mountain Charter School, where she says she had the freedom to give him a personalized education and the structure to help her know she was meeting educational goals.

PHOTO BY CARLOS PUMA



A PATH TO COLLEGE

Whether their path is career- or college-bound, Guidance Counselor Jami-Lynn Riley makes sure her students are ready for life after high school. Sky Mountain is a WASC-accredited school that offers students a multitude of A-G courses to ensure their interests are met while still meeting college requirements.

“The most important thing is being prepared for the coursework that’s coming when you go to college, [whether] you’re going to community college, CSU, or a UC or a private college,” says Riley. “A-G classes like ours are purposefully rigorous. They’re college preparatory classes for a reason.”

All of the 250 A-G college preparatory classes offered by Sky Mountain are approved by the University of California Office of the President, just as in a traditional brick-and-mortar high school. Students can enroll concurrently in up to two community college courses per semester and satisfy requirements for high school and college credit at the same time. In many instances, instructional funds can be used to purchase college textbooks through Sky Mountain’s vendors.

Finding That Perfect Fit

Home schooling gives family both freedom and structure

BY ANNE STOKES

When her son Mark started falling behind in the first grade, Shihching Wagner first went to his teacher for help. While sympathetic to his struggle, Wagner felt the school didn’t have solutions to help her son, who would be diagnosed with inattentive type ADHD by the end of the school year.

“He felt discouraged and felt that he was falling behind, and it seemed like he was being buried in work that he couldn’t complete,” Wagner says. “That was demoralizing, especially when he had to come home after sitting in the classroom for six hours and continue to sit until after dinner to finish the homework packets.”

Wagner was determined to give her son a better experience than that.

In December 2014, she pulled him out of the classroom and home-schooled him through the district’s independent study program. While she found the freedom to give her son the personalized attention that he needed, she also felt that the program lacked structure and feedback.

When she found Sky Mountain Charter School, she found the best of both worlds: the flexibility to teach her son the way he learned best, with the support and resources to know how.

“I think the most important thing that I like about Sky Mountain is that it gave me a lot of freedom to choose curriculum to meet the individual learning needs of my son and to really enable him to pursue creativity and his own interests,” she says. “I also enjoyed having that accountability with the [educational specialist] and brainstorming with her as to how to put things in place to facilitate learning and his own needs. It had the freedom and the structure.”

With home-schooling, Wagner was able to accommodate her son’s tactile learning style through engagement opportunities such as field trips and hands-on projects like model-making – things that many teachers in traditional classrooms don’t have the time or resources to do often.

“I’ve only been with them for the past year, but I’ve seen a lot of growth in my son Mark on a lot of different levels,” she says. “Ultimately I had the control as to what to try and what to use for my son. I really liked ... that they respected the parents’ involvement and really worked with me. I felt like it was a partnership rather than me doing it on my own or it being dictated to me.”

To find out if Sky Mountain Charter School is the right fit for your family, visit www.skymountaincs.org or call 800-979-4436.

The Freedom to Choose

Finding the right curriculum that works best for each student

BY JENNIFER BONNETT

Jennifer Slider has an insider's perspective on what goes on in a brick-and-mortar classroom. As a former teacher, she felt that in traditional educational models, students' full learning aspects aren't taken into account.

"I was very unimpressed with how children were being educated," she says. "You had to do it one way, and it didn't support all of the different kinds of learning."

So when she became a mother herself 14 years ago, she sought to do things differently. Sky Mountain Charter School gave her the tools and support to work with her child's learning style and abilities, not against them. The home-based personalized learning charter school gives parents the freedom to do things differently when it comes to education. The goal is, with the help of an education specialist, to find an individualized path for each child through a flexible curriculum.

Families do this by choosing curriculum and supplementing it through online applications, including flashcard apps, printed worksheets, textbooks, DVDs, even home-schooler classes. There are dozens of English language arts and math courses that serve as the core for most home-school families such as Saxon Math, the Critical Thinking Co. or the Art of Problem Solving.

Slider, a self-described "curriculum junkie," knows firsthand about selecting the right curriculum. Not only does she do so for her five children, ages 7 through 14, but for families she's worked with after becoming an education specialist last year.

"The model makes available to me, as a teacher and a parent, all the great curriculum they need to succeed," she says, adding that every child learns differently and there are so many available options to fuel that.

"The model makes available to me, as a teacher and a parent, all the great curriculum they need to succeed."

Jennifer Slider
Educational Specialist with Sky Mountain Charter School

Some of the most common curriculum Slider uses with her students and her children include Waldorf, Moving Beyond the Page or traditional curriculum similar to what is taught in a public school. Because even the students in her own family are different types of learners, she picks out what will work best for each child.

In her own family, Slider may use various curriculum to deliver the topic, but she teaches science to all five children, providing them age-based classwork. For example, she recently had each design a superhero using the periodic table of elements; the youngsters colored it, while the older children had to write a paper about their superhero.

She is happy the program allows her to build specific curriculum based on a child's needs. "[Sky Mountain] gives you the people to help you if you want it."

To see what Sky Mountain Charter School can offer your child, visit www.skymountaincs.org or call 800-979-4436.

Educational specialist and parent Jennifer Slider works with different types of curriculum to meet the different educational needs of her five home-schooled children.

PHOTO SUSAN WEININGER



HOW INSTRUCTIONAL FUNDS WORK

Like traditional schools, charter schools are state-funded based on student average daily attendance. IEM schools strive to provide as much instructional funds as possible to families. Currently this is over \$2,000 per student per school year, with higher funding available for high school students. At Sky Mountain Charter School, parents get to choose how instructional funds are spent, selecting from a wide variety of learning materials, programs and classes through thousands of approved vendors. Textbooks, dance classes, French lessons or chemistry labs — families are given the freedom to tailor their child's education with options that may not be available in a more traditional school. Educational specialists and parents determine together what best suits students' needs and learning styles.

"It's so customized, I've seen so many different ways that parents, students and teachers have used instructional funds. It's really customized to help them succeed," says Shawna Bohn, assistant director of teacher support services. "We really take a look at our spending and we try to give as much as we can to the kids and their learning curriculum."

An Education Built on a Foundation of Trust

Teacher of the Year Gabi Golan makes long-term connections with her families

BY JENNIFER BONNETT

Gabi Golan, Sky Mountain's 2015-16 Educational Specialist of the Year, started her career at the home-based personalized learning charter school after obtaining her bachelor's degree at UCLA, then a master's from National University.

? What does an ES do?

An educational specialist is a credentialed teacher that is assigned to work with a student and his or her parents to support them in planning, implementing and assessing the student's progress from one learning period to the next. It is an important relationship that builds as the parents come to trust the knowledge and experience of their ES in finding and choosing materials and classes, both online and in person.

In addition, an ES must maintain accurate records, meet deadlines, place orders for classes and materials, and maintain a budget for each student based on the instructional funds.

And, if the ES wants to go the extra mile in forging a good, trusting relationship with the student and/or parents, it means attending the occasional musical recital, ballet performance, art exhibit – or pet funeral.

? How does the practice of working with the same students year after year benefit them?

It allows you to continue to build on a foundation of trust that can take a while to establish. It does neither the student nor the ES any good if you have to start from scratch every year, because sometimes it can take a whole year to build the kind of trust necessary for real progress.

In addition, students and families go through changes from year to year and may have time periods when they are dealing with external issues, such as divorce [or] puberty, that may affect the student's concentration, performance and behavior. It helps if the ES has a long history with the student and family and knows them well enough to see past what may just be an aberration or temporary stumbling block.

? What do you feel are the benefits to working with home-schooled or independent learning students, and how is this different than working in a brick-and-mortar classroom?

I think the connection is just more personal. You are going into their homes; you are meeting with them on a one-on-one basis more frequently than you would in a typical classroom setting.

There is a greater ability to fine tune the child's education based on their individual strengths and weaknesses rather than the one-size-fits-all nature of the traditional classroom structure.

? Do you have any examples of students who have flourished under this program after struggling in a traditional classroom?

[I had a student that] came from a public school with a great reputation in West Los Angeles. At our very first meeting, her mom gave me the rundown about all the negative experiences they had which started when her previous fifth-grade teacher was moved to the sixth grade. My student was bright, but super shy. She was reluctant to participate in class and she started to get teased as classmates were picking up on the teacher's attitude towards her. Her grades also started to drop as the teacher heavily weighed on class participation.

At first, her mom did the brunt of the talking at our meetings, but in time, she was interrupting her mom to share with me directly.

She went on to take concurrent enrollment classes as a high school student with us and thrived. She ended up moving to New York after graduation and entered into a very public field.

Sky Mountain Charter School's 2015-16 Educational Specialist of the Year Gabi Golan values the close connections that she shares with her students and families.
PHOTO BY SUSAN WEININGER



“It is an important relationship that builds as the parents come to trust the knowledge and experience of their [educational specialist].”

Gabi Golan
Sky Mountain's 2015-16 Educational Specialist of the Year

Giving Families the Power of Choice

Sky Mountain Charter School is where parents choose and students succeed. For nearly 20 years, they have been supporting parents with the resources they need to give their children an education that best suits their strengths and interests, while at the same time giving students the freedom to follow their passions.

Over 4,000 vendors provide ample choices for parents to find the best fit for their student's learning style and interests, from traditional book-based curriculum to hands-on labs that bring

lessons to life. And as a public school, enrollment is free to any student who lives in San Bernardino or its adjacent counties.

"Our purpose is to offer a personalized learning model of instruction to anyone whose family decides that's the way they want their children to be educated," says Cynthia Rachel, director of education support services. "We really are able to say, 'Here are all of your options, let's see what works best for your child.' I think that's really powerful for parents."



To see if Sky Mountain Charter School is the right choice for your family, visit www.skymountaincs.org or call 800-979-4436.

LOCATIONS THROUGHOUT CALIFORNIA

Innovative Education Management has charter schools across the state to help families create enriching learning environments for their students.



Innovative Education Management

4535 Missouri Flat Road, Ste. 1A
Placerville, CA 95667
800-979-4436
www.ieminc.org



Sky Mountain Charter School

1423 W. State St. Ste. A
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