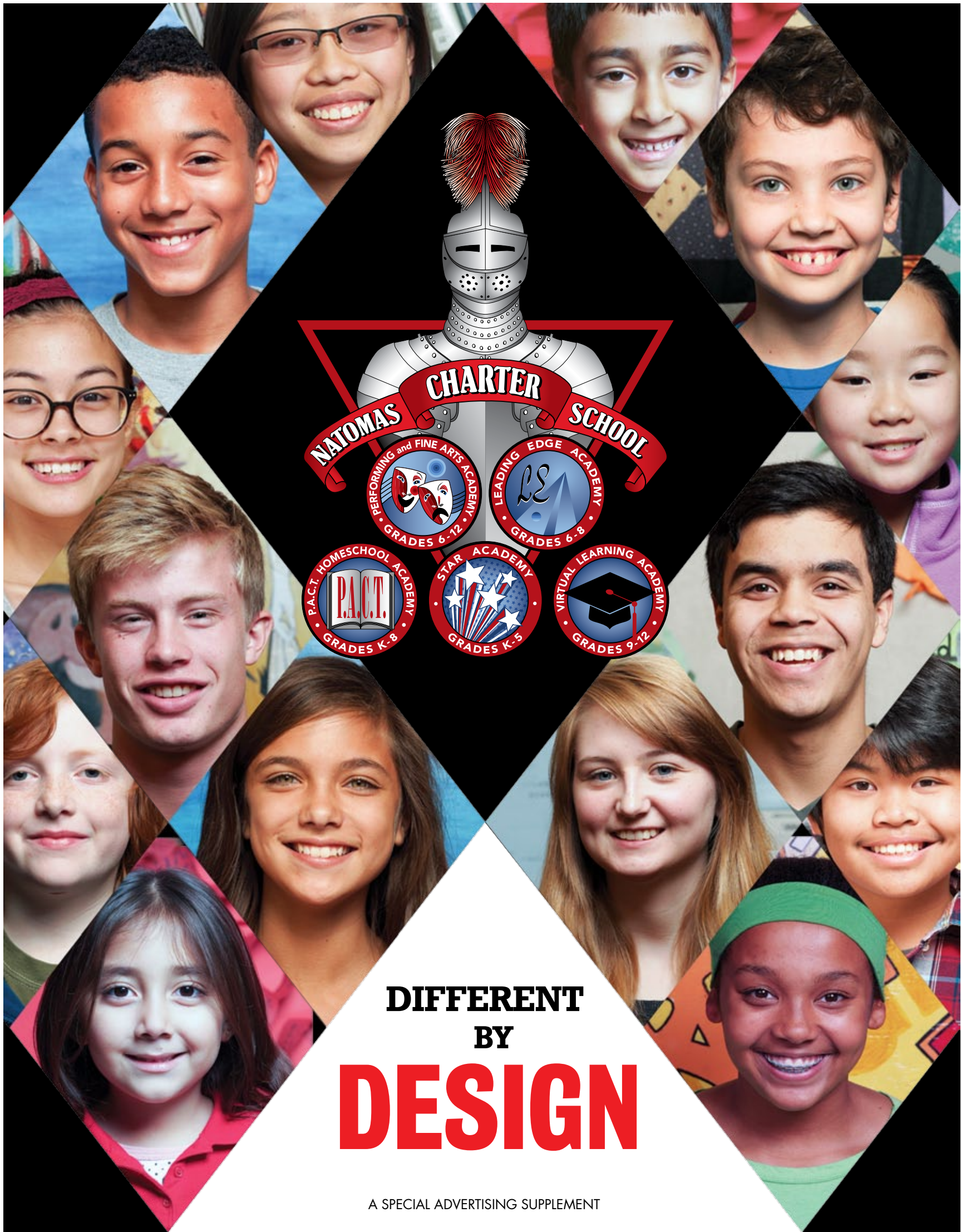




**DIFFERENT
BY
DESIGN**

A SPECIAL ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT

NATOMAS CHARTER SCHOOL DIFFERENT BY DESIGN



Programs at a Glance

Natomas Charter School's five academies are each designed to meet a unique set of student needs:



Star Academy

- » Site-based program, grades TK-5
- » Transitional kindergarten offered as part of a two-year kindergarten program
- » Emphasis on math, science, literacy, creativity and critical thinking
- » Spanish language classes each week
- » Literacy focus and technology integration



Pursuing Academic Choices Together (PACT) Academy

- » Hybrid homeschooling program, grades K-8
- » Offers support for homeschooling parents
- » Provides credentialed teacher, school counselor, curriculum choices, site-based classes and workshops
- » Enrichment classes, such as dance and art available
- » Field trips and events offered



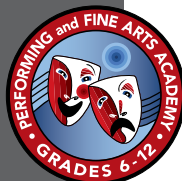
Leading Edge Academy

- » Site-based program, grades 6-8
- » Focused on technology, community involvement, sports and the arts
- » Rigorous academics utilizing thematic/project-based learning
- » Hands-on and real-world learning opportunities



Virtual Learning Academy (VLA)

- » Hybrid independent study program, grades 9-12
- » Online, college preparatory coursework paired with interactive workshops and tutoring
- » Innovative "flipped classroom" approach provides individualized pacing, one-on-one teacher help
- » Award-winning teaching staff



Performing and Fine Arts Academy (PFAA)

- » Site-based program, grades 6-12
- » Offers a rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum
- » Intensive arts training for all students enrolled, including dance, music, drama, and digital and visual arts
- » Personalized college and career counseling

For more information about these academies and how to enroll, visit

www.natomascharter.org
or call **916-928-5353**.

Co-founders
Charlie Leo, left, and
Dr. Ting Sun.
PHOTO BY
RON NABITY

A Different Choice in Education

Natomas Charter School sets the bar for educational excellence

BY SHANNON SPRINGMEYER



Natomas Charter School is different. The halls, the classrooms, the textbooks are typical enough. But what makes this place different is the people. Its students, parents, teachers and administrators will all tell you that the sense of community at Natomas Charter is what sets it apart. A recent visit to the three campuses housing Natomas Charter's five unique academies reveals what a special place this is.

Middle-school boys laugh and joke on the way to class, toting their knitting, a current project in their arts-focused Expressions class. Some enthusiastic learners have even yarn-bombed a nearby tree, knitting a multicolored cozy around its trunk. High-schoolers of various ages, wielding everything from kettle drums to the humble triangle, shake the walls of Beginning Percussion. Teens lounge with laptops over lunch in the Virtual Learning Academy's coffee-shopsque common space, while others complete projects in the state-of-the-art Mac computer lab. A first-grade classroom becomes a sea of eagerly raised hands, and the teacher masterfully ensures all students have an opportunity to share. Youths decked in leotards stretch out at the beginning of their Modern Dance class.

The common thread uniting these diverse vignettes is the striking realization that every student, without exception, seems truly happy to be at school. Laughing, smiling, confident and respectful, Natomas Charter students of all ages make the singular impression on the outsider that they are well-adjusted and well-supported. That they want to come to school, a place that challenges, nurtures and engages them. That this is what education is meant to be.

Co-founders Dr. Ting Sun and Charlie Leo, then classroom teachers, set out 21 years ago to design Natomas Charter School according to the vision of pursuing both innovation and excellence in education. They were granted one of California's first charters, and used the freedom it afforded to build their programs on

the foundation of student needs. Leveraging their own teaching experience, they created a school environment founded on the freedom, support and high expectations that students and teachers require to perform their best.

"Kids don't all learn the same way; they're not all comfortable in the same type of environment, and so we provide an opportunity for a student to find a place or a niche that works for them," says Leo, former Executive Director of the school.

Natomas Charter has grown over the years to five unique, need-driven academies, serving students in transitional kindergarten through grade 12.

"I'm most proud of the community that we've developed, and that we've been able to attract such great people to it," says Sun, who is the current Executive Director of Natomas Charter. She attributes much of the school's success to the teaching staff's commitment to the school's vision and expectation of constant innovation. The approach has been successful — Natomas Charter School's programs have garnered a veritable treasure trove of awards and accolades over the school's more than 20-year history.

Natomas Charter offers the opportunity for a world-class education, for every child, right here in our backyard. Students thrive here, respected as the unique individuals they are. Through a balance of support and challenge, they discover they are capable of things they may never have realized, which is entirely the point, says Sun.

"The spirit of the original intent of a charter school, which was to be a place for innovation, creativity and change, and a way to structure education that can best meet individual student needs, is really what Natomas Charter School has been about and continues to be about," Sun says. "We continue to work toward that vision."



"I'm most proud of the community that we've developed, and that we've been able to attract such great people to it."

Dr. Ting Sun, Natomas Charter School Executive Director

Natomas Charter School Is: Excellence

"I definitely wasn't who I am today," says 17-year-old Austin Phillips about the role that Natomas Charter has played in shaping his abilities since he enrolled six years ago. Austin credits Natomas Charter with creating a climate of excellence that pushes all students to achieve their personal best, prompting them to accomplish things they never thought possible.

Austin, who entered Natomas Charter's Performing and Fine Arts Academy in sixth grade and is set to graduate this year, says he's gained some valuable life experience during his time. Most important is time management, which he explains in the midst of one of his typical 13-hour days, has him primed and ready for college. Austin already has it mapped out: He plans to study neurology — he'll attend junior college, then transfer to UC Davis.

He has also picked up guitar and singing during his tenure, the latter of which he didn't know he was capable (Austin is currently playing Frankie Avalon's part as Teen Angel in the school's production of "Grease"). His parting words for those coming into Natomas Charter School?

"Have an open mind," he says. "Give yourself a chance to take advantage of what the school has to offer."

A Chance to Shine

Student soars with support for achieving academic and artistic excellence

BY MARK LORE



Willie Huggins will be the first to tell you that his five years attending Natomas Charter School are what shaped him into the young man he is today. It's hard to argue. Willie sounds wise beyond his 14 years — polite, articulate and confident. It's easy to forget that he can't even drive yet.

Willie attended Natomas Charter's Leading Edge Academy for middle school, and has thrived at the school's Performing and Fine Arts Academy (PFAA) since he entered high school two years ago. At a time when arts programs are being trimmed and hacked in public schools due to budget shortfalls, Natomas Charter's PFAA has created a culture that places the same emphasis on arts as it does academics. Willie — who's taken up acting in the academy — is so sold on the idea that he rides the bus an hour and a half to and from school. This isn't because PFAA, which serves grades six through 12, is an easy alternative.

"There's a misconception that it's all about performances," Willie says. "We take our academics very seriously — just as serious as our art."

The teachers do as well. The program is designed to prep students for college, with the added bonus of instilling confidence and social skills through performing and fine arts, including drama, dance, music, painting and

even computer animation. As with college professors, art teachers at PFAA are simultaneously practicing their craft and demonstrating to students how to apply their own artistic skills in the real world (Willie has already gone to auditions in Los Angeles). The results? PFAA has been named a National School of Distinction in the Performing and Fine Arts, and, typically, more than 70 percent of students make honor roll.

Willie doesn't take the opportunity lightly. A shy kid growing up in Stockton, he enrolled at Natomas Charter's Leading Edge program in January 2008 after he and his father moved to Sacramento, and entered the PFAA program three years later. "My dad was really impressed [with the school]," he says. "And so was I."

One of Willie's first memories of Natomas Charter is discussing an assigned book in front of a roomful of his peers. He was nervous; his knees were trembling. But he soon noticed the class was engaged, nodding in agreement as he made his points. His classmates' support helped soothe his shaky nerves.

Willie says instances like these are pretty typical with PFAA's small student body — everyone looks out for one another. It's a big part of why they're here.

"I am hard-working and put my best foot forward," he explains. "That's what [Natomas] looks for — they want to see that passion."

That's an understatement. Willie's passion drives him to get up at 5:30 a.m. every morning to catch the bus to school. He doesn't get home until 9 p.m., after rehearsals — they're currently working on a production of "Grease." Again, he's only 14 years old. But you won't hear him complaining.

"It's worth it. I'd do it a hundred times over."



**"It's worth it.
I'd do it a
hundred
times over."**

Willie Huggins,
Performing and Fine Arts
Academy student

Best of Both Worlds

Natomas' Virtual Learning Academy blends online courses with on-campus workshops

BY MEREDITH J. GRAHAM



When Terisa Taylor was preparing for high school, she decided to take a rather large leap from a traditional classroom to a virtual one. In shopping for the right fit for her, Terisa settled on Natomas Charter School's Virtual Learning Academy (VLA), a hybrid online/on-site program.

"I like working at my own pace, and it gave me that option," says Terisa, who is now a junior.

The VLA works like this: Students are paired with an academic coach — a credentialed Natomas Charter teacher — at the beginning of each school year. The coach helps in signing up for classes and also checks in with each student regularly to ensure everyone is on track. In addition

to the online coursework, there are weekly workshops for many classes that give students a chance to interact personally with their teachers and other students.

"I like the fact that we have to be self-driven but we also get the one-on-one help with teachers," Terisa says of the VLA model. "The teachers are so caring. They really want us to succeed."

Some courses, like Terisa's pre-calculus class this year, even include extra lab time or workshops that are optional, giving students added opportunities to work in person with the teacher.

For students like Terisa, the VLA offers flexibility that can't be found in a traditional classroom. For one, VLA offers virtually limitless options when it comes to where a student wants to learn. Terisa can do her

coursework anywhere there is an Internet connection: at home, in a coffee shop or library, or the school's learning center, which is open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily.

"Some of my friends dance, and it's helpful for them with their busy dance schedules," she says. For her part, Terisa volunteers once a week at her old elementary school. Because it's during the day, that's something she wouldn't be able to do if she had a classroom to report to.

"It's very social, even though you don't go every day. So you still have that interaction with other students," Terisa says. "You have group work assignments, and we see other students at workshops every week."

The VLA students also reap the benefits of a brick-and-mortar campus when it

comes to school-sponsored events like field trips, homecoming dance, prom and graduation.

"Although VLA is a more nontraditional high school, we still have a traditional graduation," Terisa says, adding that that's a question people often ask when considering the program.

When it comes to offering a quality education with caring, knowledgeable teachers while allowing students to learn on their own time, at their own pace, VLA seems to have gotten the recipe just right for success.

"You have to be self-driven, and you have to make sure you're always doing your assignments," Terisa says. "It really prepares you for college."

"I like the fact that we have to be self-driven but we also get the one-on-one help with teachers."

Terisa Taylor, VLA junior

Rob Kinder, left, Virtual Learning Academy Coordinator and History Teacher, consults with VLA student Terisa Taylor.
PHOTOS BY RON NABITY



Natomas Charter School Is: Innovation

Innovation is one of the cornerstones of Natomas Charter School and is integrated into each of its five academies in many ways, the most visible of which is the use of technology.

"We use technology more than most schools," says Rob Kinder, Academy Coordinator for the Virtual Learning Academy (VLA). "We do it in a way that's more than just using technology and offering it, but making it relevant and using it in ways that enhance the curriculum."

Natomas Charter students know they are in charge of their educational destinies because they are empowered to make choices based on their interests and learning styles. Teachers also take charge and work together to integrate the curriculum across subject matters.

"We might have an English 10 class that is reading 'All Quiet on the Western Front,' and the history teacher will make sure to teach trench warfare in World War I at the same time," Kinder explains.

Sophomore Joey Lopez says he benefits from the innovative approach to learning at VLA, where he takes classes online and meets weekly on campus, because it allows him to manage his school work around his ballet schedule.

"I spend roughly 20 hours a week dancing," he says. "Being in VLA has allowed me to have a more flexible schedule while having the benefit of attending high school full time."

Natomas Charter School Is: A Safe Place

Safety counts at Natomas Charter School. Not only do the faculty and staff look after each child's personal well-being, they also foster a campus culture in which students feel free to express themselves and take creative risks.

"We do our very best to create a very positive community," Counselor Melinda Curtis says. "We have a very clean campus. We work really hard at supporting students, and encouraging them to be positive with each other, so we do have an emotionally safe as well as physically safe environment. We have strict policies as far as behavior and academics go, and we have parents involved in the classroom, which I think contributes to that safety as well."

Curtis calls Natomas Charter School a "non-judgmental" campus where people are "accepting, positive and kind." Students respect each other and respect each other's personal space. On any given day, students of all ages and all walks of life can be seen smiling and laughing together in the hallways between classes. Happy, positive students are the norm here.

"It's a breath of fresh air, really," Curtis says.

One of Aleena Khan's accomplishments while enrolled in Leading Edge was winning the science fair.

PHOTOS BY RON NABITY

Gaining an Edge

Student well-prepared for success through rigorous academics

BY EVAN TUCHINKSY



Aleena Khan has vivid memories of starting middle school at the Leading Edge Academy. She was a shy sixth-grader, nervous about what she'd find at her new campus. Would she, a Pakistani-American, be welcomed, or face an uphill battle for acceptance?

"I remember the first day," Aleena says, "when everyone thought: 'Middle school, oh my God.' I was so scared I was going to be judged by my skin color or my race."

Turns out, that wasn't the case.

"Leading Edge was different," she says. "It's one of the most diverse campuses. By the second day, I was completely fine; I thought it was such an open and accepting community."

"Community" is a key concept at the Leading Edge Academy. Aleena, now 14, has started her freshman year at St. Francis High School, yet she returns to visit friends and faculty members.

"Over the three years, not only have I grown as a person, but they've become my family," Aleena says. "As I graduated, it was such a sad moment for me because it was like I was leaving my second family. Leading Edge was such a great experience for me."



"I think I was brilliantly prepared."

Aleena Khan,
Leading Edge alumna

The Leading Edge Academy opened in 1993 as the first program at Natomas Charter School, with an inaugural class of 82 eighth-graders. It now has 264 students in grades six through eight, with an emphasis not only on academics but also arts, technology and extracurricular activities.

The Leading Edge curriculum seeks to promote student growth in the "Five Pillars" — leadership, global thinking, cultural diversity, technical savvy and critical thinking. As Academy Coordinator Jared Austin explains, "In order to

be a productive member of society, you have to be well-versed in all areas. We believe with those five areas of focus, our students are ultimately going to be successful in whatever their future entails."

At the Leading Edge Academy, Aleena participated in student government and athletics while distinguishing herself in the science fair, spelling bee and National History Day competitions. She says she emerged well-prepared for high school. Her freshman class includes a dozen friends from Leading Edge, and when St. Francis handed out iPads, the Leading Edge alumni had a head start on classmates whose middle-school experience had included less emphasis in technology. Aleena is taking honors classes and already has joined the Academic Decathlon and Mathletes teams.

"I think I was brilliantly prepared," she says. "Leading Edge has taught me and influenced me to work hard, take hard classes and be involved in school."

Not surprisingly, Aleena heartily recommends the Leading Edge Academy.

"I got an email the other day from a family friend who has a 1-year-old," she says, "and she's already considering Natomas Charter School for him because she's heard so many good things from me and seen how well I've done!"

Natomas Charter School Is: Choice

Natomas Charter School embodies choice and flexibility in each of its five academies. Families can select an educational track that suits each child, whether through supported homeschooling or full-time on-campus academies. Students receive challenging coursework as well as a range of electives and extracurricular activities from which to choose.

"We do have the same state requirements as other schools; it's about how we get there, which is a great thing about a charter school," says Rori Wright, an Educational Adviser with PACT, the homeschooling program at Natomas Charter. "The teachers have a lot of flexibility and choice in how they deliver instruction, and that's present in all the programs at Natomas Charter."

Moreover, Wright says, the opportunities for learning at Natomas Charter "aren't just limited to what we offer here. Families are also networking outside of the PACT Academy." They form instructional co-ops and plan special outings.

Every child learns differently. Natomas Charter School embraces these differences and offers five different programs to meet student needs, which offer parents a choice beyond traditional neighborhood public schools.

Laura Kelly and son Noah review schoolwork in the PACT resource center.
PHOTOS BY RON NABITY

Options in Education

Flexibility and personalization help students achieve

BY EVAN TUCHINKSY



Laura Kelly is a teacher as well as a mother of three, and when her youngest son, Noah, finished third grade at a private school, she knew a big change was in order.

"He wasn't as successful as he could be," Kelly says. "I knew he was much smarter than his grades and test scores indicated. He didn't like school, and that's not good; he should be enjoying his day."

Noah has attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, and spending all day in a classroom is, his mom says, "distracting for someone who is distractible."

Kelly found the perfect alternative with the PACT Academy at Natomas Charter School. PACT — Pursuing Academic Choices Together — combines homeschooling with on-campus classes, customizing the curriculum to meet each student's individual needs.

PACT currently has 220 students from kindergarten through eighth grade, and can accommodate up to 265. Educational Advisers regularly consult with parents about at-home coursework, and teachers conduct weekly classes at school, ranging from math and science to music and dance. PACT also sponsors field trips while offering a myriad of opportunities for socializing.

"He gets really excited about learning, and that wasn't always happening before."

Laura Kelly, mother of Pursuing Academic Choices Together student

"People have preconceived notions of what homeschooling looks like," PACT Academy Coordinator Tracy Chatters says. "I would challenge anyone who has ever considered homeschooling to come by our campus. I think they would be surprised to find that we have different families of every makeup and socioeconomic background. Our program welcomes all types of homeschoolers, not just the stereotypical model on TV."

After Noah enrolled in PACT, his mom says, "It was a night-and-day switch. In third grade, his test scores were below basic, and he went to advanced in just one year."

Noah is now 12 and in seventh grade. He's tackling algebra at the eighth-grade level while reading classics of literature. On campus, he's taking classes in guitar, musical theater, tap dance, drawing and painting.

"He gets really excited about learning," Kelly says, "and that wasn't always happening before."

His education hasn't come at the expense of peer-to-peer interaction.

"I think he's more social now and definitely has more friends than when he was going to school every day," Kelly says. "It's been very positive that way."

Looking ahead, Noah may move over to Natomas Charter School's Performing and Fine Arts Academy next year, though he'd prefer to graduate eighth grade with his PACT classmates. His older sister, Alyssa, is a senior at PFAA; his older brother, Jordan, is a freshman at Mira Loma High School, in the International Baccalaureate program.

Kelly is thrilled with Noah's progress — and with PACT.

"For people who want to homeschool," she says, "it offers a lot of support yet also independence to do what you want to do."

Reach for the Stars

Star Academy offers unique approaches to learning

BY MIKE BLOUNT



The Star Academy at Natomas Charter School is not about just teaching out of a textbook. One day, there's a geologist in the classroom teaching the students about rocks and minerals. The next day, students are working on a project about their ancestors, learning about the places where they came from and their family history. Second-grade Star Academy teacher Julie Torres says the program keeps children engaged, while exposing them to learning in a different way.

The Star Academy was created by Natomas Charter School in 2010 to provide elementary students with a curriculum structured around hands-on learning activities that promote critical thinking and creativity, all within a supportive and nurturing small learning environment. Initially, there were two kindergarten classes with 20 students in each. Today, there are more than 200 students enrolled in the academy, which covers transitional kindergarten to the third grade. By 2014-15, the Star Academy will expand to cover grades TK-5.

One of the most important aspects of the Star Academy, according to Torres, is that the curriculum is designed by the teachers.

"The curriculum is what we call 'student-centered' because it's hands-on learning, but still follows Common Core state standards," Torres says. "Through the guest speakers, field trips, art and technology students are exposed to, they are inspired and excited about learning. They want to know more. I love the opportunity to build a curriculum that uses my strengths as a teacher and allows me the flexibility to teach my kids what they need."

The ability to create her own curriculum also allows Torres to address each student's needs by differentiating

"I love the opportunity to build a curriculum that uses my strengths as a teacher and allows me the flexibility to teach my kids what they need."

Julie Torres, second-grade teacher in the Star Academy

instruction. Because students have different academic needs, teachers can create lessons designed around student interests, needs and learning styles. For example, Torres often meets with small groups of students for reading instruction. While one group reads independently, a second group reads with Torres, working on specific reading skills.

Torres says this approach to learning has allowed students who come to the school at varying skill levels to meet high standards equally. Torres proudly brags about a particular student who came into the school last year behind his peers.

"When we got his [test] scores back, we were just blown away," Torres says. "He was succeeding well above the benchmark, and I don't think that would have happened where he came from, which is just a really good example of how well our program works."

Natomas Charter School Is: Creativity

Natomas Charter School's commitment to helping students develop their imagination and express their individuality is evident throughout the five academies. For example, opportunities for creative thought and expression are integrated across the curriculum at the Star Academy, including fun and inspiring activities in art, computers, Spanish and physical education. Several after-school enrichment classes are also offered, such as yoga, violin, piano, science, chess, ballet and poetry.

Andra Goodwin is the parent of Star Academy first-grader Maya, and says the program has nurtured her daughter's creative talents.

"In her kindergarten class last year, one of the projects was to have the kids create an alternate form of transportation," Goodwin says. "She came up with a Winnebago that ran on water, and she was very specific in what she wanted to do when she was sharing it with her class."

This year, Maya is learning "signal words" — academic vocabulary related to science curriculum.

"It's pretty amazing to have your child be able to use words like 'proboscis,' 'ungulate,' 'strata,' 'nocturnal' and 'diurnal' in a sentence and know the definition," Goodwin says.

"Teaching things in a creative way is really beneficial to their learning."

Julie Torres is a second-grade teacher in the Star Academy at Natomas Charter School. Torres says the program gives her the flexibility to teach her students what they need.

PHOTOS BY RON NABITY



Excellence and Innovation in Education

Natomas Charter School is different. You see it in the students, who are articulate, mature, caring and creative. You see it in the teachers and administrators, who display passion and pride for their work. You see it in the parents, who glow about the way they feel involved, empowered and completely confident in having selected Natomas Charter as the best place for their children. And you see it on the walls themselves, the creative student work adorning them a testament to Natomas Charter's commitment to educating the whole child.

With five unique academies targeted to meet distinct student needs from transitional kindergarten through grade 12, Natomas Charter School remains committed to its founding vision of offering a creative, innovative and engaging approach to learning, within a supportive environment.

Parents should consider Natomas Charter School "if they are looking for an educational program that can meet individual needs of their child and that will prepare that student for the future, whatever that might be," says Executive Director Ting Sun. "We have a unique way of working with students to make that happen."

Natomas Charter School continues to build on more than 20 years of experience in educational excellence, and produces graduates who are "well-educated, creative and open-minded individuals who have a sense of purpose," says Sun.

See for yourself what makes Natomas Charter School different. A world of unique educational opportunities awaits.

★ Awards and Recognition

For more than 20 years, Natomas Charter School has set the bar for excellence in education, earning recognition at the national level. Here are some of its highest honors and achievements:

**TOP 10
HIGH SCHOOLS**
in Sacramento
Sacramento Magazine

California
**Distinguished
SCHOOL**

90%
acceptance rate to
**University of
California**

Region's
25 SMARTEST
High Schools
(NCS ranked #16 based on SATs)
Sacramento Business Journal

California
**EXEMPLARY
ARTS PROGRAM**

**Western
Association of
Schools and
Colleges (WASC)
Accreditation
HIGHEST
TERM**

California
**CHARTER
SCHOOL
OF THE
YEAR**

California Academic
Performance Index
rankings of 10
(statewide) and 10
(similar schools),
placing NCS in
TOP 10%
of high schools
in California

**BRONZE
AWARD
TOP 10%**
of High Schools in
the Nation
US News & World Report

2011-12 California
High School Exit Exam:
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on English/Language Arts
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