



Find Out What Sets Us Apart



Sierra Charter School

www.sierracharter.org





Photo courtesy of Sierra Charter School

Success is a Personalized Journey

Students excel thanks to alternatives offered at Sierra Charter School

BY SHANNON SPRINGMEYER

Parents and students looking for something different in education just might find exactly what they are looking for at Sierra Charter School. Sierra Charter is a public school and operates at no cost to the student. The school enrolls students residing in Fresno County or a contiguous county, grades K-12. With a welcoming environment, Sierra Charter School's doors are open to all.

Sierra Charter School was founded in 1998 with the goal of providing an alternative to traditional public schools. The school is structured on an independent study model, with a credentialed teacher assigned to each student. Students learn through a combination of one-on-one meetings with teachers, small group classes and labs, and independent school-work completed at home or on campus.

Dedicated to the personalized learning approach, relationships are what make the school unique, according to Sherry Iida, business director at the school.

"You have more of that family connection, where parents get to know the teacher, they know what to expect, and they build this relationship with their child and with the teacher," she says.

Sierra Charter School offers a variety of resources to help students receive the right support. Credentialed teachers develop assignments based on the needs of individual students and offer a choice of curriculum options that meet state standards.

Sierra Charter's focus on personalized learning means that students get the individualized help they need, Iida says.

"I think the biggest thing that makes [Sierra Charter School] special is the staff and the way they care about the students ... They get to actually know these kids and who they are," says Dwayne Stewart, assessment technology director for the school.

Individualized attention and personalized learning mean that Sierra Charter School offers a path to success for many types of students, from those who

want to accelerate, to those who want to recover credits or catch up, to students looking to avoid the "drama" sometimes found on larger campuses. Some students are also attracted to the flexibility of the program, which allows time to pursue jobs or college classes. Sierra Charter fills the local need for such alternatives in education.

"The secret to supporting a diverse array of students and creating a harmonious and nurturing campus environment is surprisingly simple. It starts with listening, caring and recognizing each student as an individual."

Lisa Marasco, Principal/CEO
at Sierra Charter School

"Parents need choices because not all kids are the same," Stewart says.

An important way in which Sierra Charter personalizes learning is to defy the notion that students and teachers should settle for "good enough." The school has embraced performance-based learning (PBL), an educational model that meets the diverse needs of students by allowing students to move through material at their own pace, providing the optimal level of challenge. Under the PBL model, students do not move on until they have progressed beyond "good enough" to true mastery.

Under the performance-based learning model, Sierra Charter teachers collaborate to design integrated lesson units that tie in material from multiple subjects and deliver mini-lessons to small groups of students. Principal Lisa Marasco notes that this kind of integrated teaching makes the material more relevant and engaging for students, and more effectively targets the learning needs of individuals. Student performance is evaluated according to a 4-point rubric, and students continue working on a particular set of standards until they have achieved mastery, or a rubric score of 3 or better.

Marasco describes walking into a PBL classroom as "amazing."

"You see success. You see students really, really excited because they know that they're not going to be passed up, they know that somebody's going to help them to master whatever they have to master and they will move forward," Marasco says. "And then they may move more quickly on things that they already know, so there are opportunities to always catch up."

The emphasis on the individual is what makes Sierra Charter School a place where all are welcome and many thrive. "The secret to supporting a diverse array of students and creating a harmonious and nurturing campus environment is surprisingly simple. It starts with listening, caring and recognizing each student as an individual," Marasco says. These simple steps are a big part of what makes Sierra Charter School unique, she adds.

"We do care a lot about our students," she says.

Back on Track

Student falls behind, but catches up with help from Sierra Charter School

BY MIKE BLOUNT

Natalie DeAnda began participating in powwows when she was just 2 years old. The family tradition took her all over, performing traditional dances and representing her culture at Native American gatherings around the state. Natalie says she immediately fell in love with it.

"I liked it because I got to meet new people and I love to dance," Natalie says. "It's sort of instilled at a young age that this is what you do. It's tradition. But I always enjoyed doing it."

In 2002, 5-year-old Natalie won the title of Miss Chukchansi. But by the time she entered the fourth grade, the constant traveling and pageantry began to take their toll on her. Natalie's parents, concerned with her dropping grades, stopped taking her to powwows so she could concentrate on her education.

"When they stopped taking me to powwows, it kind of made me sad because I really loved going," Natalie says. "But my grades severely dropped from a 4.0 to just barely passing with a 2.0 because I was going to so many different places and I just wasn't there a lot to take part in class and learn."

During her eighth grade year, Natalie talked her parents into letting her try an online independent study program. At the same time her parents decided to get a divorce. Both events had a tremendous impact on her. The new sense of responsibility she felt became overwhelming, and she began to feel anxiety and not complete her assignments. Her parents' divorce sent her into a deep depression.

"My parents' divorce came as such a shock and I didn't know how to deal with it," Natalie says. "I was also falling behind in school, and because my parents had a lot of trust in me, they didn't know I wasn't getting my work done. I tried to

hide it by intercepting my progress report and acting like it never got sent."

When Natalie's parents finally received her 18-week progress report, it was too late. Natalie finished her freshman year with only three credits out of 60. Natalie says she barely had any interaction with her teacher at all. She only met with her in person four times a year, and the teacher never expressed any concern with Natalie's performance. It was clear she needed a change.

Natalie found out about Sierra Charter School after reading a newspaper advertisement. She knew she didn't want

to go back to a traditional school, and she needed more structure than an online school could provide. Sierra Charter seemed like the perfect balance for her.

"I called them on my own and got more details," Natalie says. "It really seemed like a place where I could

prosper. I told my mom and she said we could try it out."

Natalie was convinced that she wasn't going to be able to graduate on time. But her teachers at Sierra Charter began working with her to change her mind. Natalie says they helped her stay positive and gave her the confidence to work hard so she could take on the extra responsibility.

Today, the high-school junior is almost caught up and is on track to graduate with the rest of her class.

"Because of Sierra Charter, I was able to turn things around and I can really see the light at the end of the tunnel now," Natalie says. "I have lots of goals now, including going on to college to study psychology and criminology. Sierra is honestly one of the smarter choices I've ever made."

"Because of Sierra, I was able to turn things around and I can really see the light at the end of the tunnel now."

Natalie DeAnda,
Sierra Charter School student



Natalie DeAnda's grades suffered while she was traveling to participate in Native American powwows.

Photo by Jaques Gross

Resources for Students

Sierra Charter School provides students with plenty of tools to foster the greatest opportunity for success

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

- » Sierra Charter School provides tutoring by credentialed teachers, who are intervention specialists for reading and math, writing workshops, homework labs and preparation for the California High School Exit Examination.
- » The homework lab is available for all subjects.
- » Intervention specialists communicate regularly with the student's teacher regarding student progress.
- » Highly qualified department chairs offer office hours to assist students in all core subjects.

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT

- » Sierra Charter School understands that no one will be competitive in the real world marketplace without some degree of technology mastery. The school provides many resources for students to learn about and become efficient at using new technology.
- » Students can use technology tools to conduct research in support of school projects, to complete assignments and to perform required testing.
- » Eligible students can receive a free loaner computer to use during their time in school.



Josh Dale started studying American Sign Language at the suggestion of his teacher at Sierra Charter School.

Photo by Jaques Gross

More Than Words

Student realizes passion
for sign language at Sierra Charter

BY MIKE BLOUNT

There is a special bond between 17-year-old Josh Dale and his siblings. Like most brothers and sisters, they talk to each other about everything. But lately, they've been communicating in sign language. Josh is teaching them American Sign Language (ASL) because it may help them communicate in the future.

Josh and his siblings have Alport Syndrome, a genetic disorder that could eventually cause them to lose their hearing.

"I'm really glad that I had the opportunity to learn sign language," Josh says. "This is how [my brother, sister and I] talk now, and it has brought us all closer together. We have little inside jokes and everything."

Sierra Charter School offers ASL classes, which are helping Josh prepare for communicating after he's lost his hearing. But he enrolled in the school halfway through eighth grade for very different reasons — his main focus was learning at a faster pace so he could graduate earlier if he needed.

"Before, when I was in public [traditional] school, I would just have to sit there while the rest of the class caught up," Josh says. "I wanted to excel at my own pace and I couldn't get the one-on-one learning I needed to do that [in traditional school]."

A family friend had recommended Sierra Charter because she felt Josh would do well with independent study. He could concentrate on his work without getting drawn into high school drama and popularity contests. Josh immediately jumped at the chance to change schools.

One of the first differences he noticed was the individualized learning environment, where his teachers were able to take a more hands-on approach with him. It allowed his teachers to get to know him as a person and help him make important decisions about his own education.

Jana Montierth, Josh's independent study teacher, was instrumental in guiding him toward ASL classes. Josh says it changed his life.

"I was going to take Spanish at first, but she pushed me to take the ASL class instead because I needed to learn it to better myself," Josh says. "The teachers

here want to be involved and they want to help me succeed. They want me to do my best and that makes me feel awesome."

Josh excelled at learning sign language. His teacher, Aimee Ward, noticed her new student's eagerness to learn and encouraged him by giving him new words to sign after he quickly finished an assignment.

"His hands just move so clearly," Ward says. "I'm just

so impressed with him and his natural ability to pick up American Sign Language."

Because of his passion for sign language, Josh asked his teacher if he could return his senior year as a teaching assistant. Ward was happy to have him back.

"He wants to be my teaching assistant because he wants to keep up with sign language," Ward says. "He's doing this to better himself so it doesn't stop him in the future. He doesn't let anything get in his way."

"I'm really glad that I had the opportunity to learn sign language. This is how [my brother, sister and I] talk now, and it has brought us all closer together. We have little inside jokes and everything."

Josh Dale,
Sierra Charter School student

Tailored to Your Learning Style

Personalized learning is an approach to education that tailors learning according to the individual needs of each student.

The personalized learning approach to education has evolved over the past decade through a growing public charter school movement in California, and incorporates many of the latest educational research results as to how children learn successfully. Personalized learning is a cutting edge approach to public education that honors and recognizes the unique gifts, skills, passions and attributes of each child.

Sierra Charter School is dedi-

cated to developing individualized learning programs with the intent to engage each child in the learning process in the most productive and meaningful way, optimizing each child's learning potential and success.

Sierra Charter School places a strong emphasis on parental involvement, more one-on-one student interaction and attention to differences in learning styles.

No other educational model offered in today's public education system has integrated these proven educational research results in such an in-depth and comprehensive manner.

“We are given the freedom to tweak and make things individualized for every kid and that’s so different from the typical school. It’s such a blessing to have the opportunity and it’s a secret that needs to be let out.”

Aimee Ward

Free to be a Better Teacher

One-on-one instruction and personalized learning are reasons Aimee Ward loves teaching

BY TINKA DAVI

The one-on-one relationship with students, smaller class sizes and the opportunity to get to know her students are high on Aimee Ward’s list of likes about being a teacher at Sierra Charter School.

Ward has been a high school teacher for 11 years and is assigned approximately 25-27 students for the year. She also teaches high school students American Sign Language, which meets the college requirement for foreign language. Ward really enjoys working one-on-one with students in English, math and science. It gives her the opportunity to know where all students are in their academic journeys and work with them individually.

Ward says sometimes teachers become more than just educators of students, fulfilling the role of trusted adult ally and confidant. She adds that Sierra Charter’s smaller classes are a huge advantage.

“In larger classrooms, students get lost in the shuffle,” she says. “Here, they can’t fall into the cracks or hide behind the door. School just gets better every year.”

Ward recognizes the opportunity to individualize instruction for her

students. She recalls a year when students were struggling in algebra, so she approached administration with the idea of developing a three-hour weekly class to address the need. Her request was approved and by the end of the school year these students saw success on the high school exit exam. The teachers at SCS realize there is no one-size-fits-all approach and are given the freedom to be creative in their teaching.

Ward made a video of students for last year’s open house event, asking all students to hold up a card with three words describing what school meant to them. One student wrote, “Really great teachers.” Another card read, “Feels like family,” and a third card proclaimed, “Free being myself.”

Ward loves the environment at Sierra Charter School and feels she’s a better teacher because of it.

“We are given the freedom to tweak and make things individualized for every kid and that’s so different from the typical school,” she explains. “It’s such a blessing to have the opportunity and it’s a secret that needs to be let out.”



Teacher Aimee Ward enjoys the ability to give her students one-on-one attention at Sierra Charter School.

Photo by Jaques Gross

Parents’ Choice: Traditional or Charter?

Because not all students are alike, choices in education are important to meeting each student’s unique needs.

Charter schools are independent public schools with the freedom and flexibility to be innovative, while being held accountable for improved student achievement.

They foster a partnership between parents, teachers and students to create an environment in which parents can be more involved, teachers are given freedom to innovate and students are provided the structure they need to learn. All three are accountable for improved student achievement.

Sierra Charter School in Fresno offers a kindergarten to 12th-grade independent study program.

The nonprofit holds a charter from the state of California and the Fresno Unified School District and is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

Sierra Charter offers a safe environment conducive to learning and the flexibility for students to utilize tools to reach their maximum academic potential.

“[As a parent] you have to be involved and know what is going on with your children. At Sierra, I knew exactly what my children were doing in school.”

Sherry Huggins

1,000 Graduates and Counting

... not bad for a school that started in a one-room building, with 80 students and 12 graduates. Fifteen years later the school encompasses a complex that accommodates about 700 students and more than 50 faculty and staff members.

Families who saw the school during its humble beginnings continue to comment on the impressive growth and change the school has undergone.

Sierra Charter was one of the first charter schools to open in Fresno County and remains one of the largest Independent Study Charter Schools in the area. The school continues to grow and the strongest marketing tool has been referrals from current and past students and families.

The school is proud to have earned accreditation through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges and developed courses that are A-G approved through the University of California system. Looking into the future the school is moving to a performance-based educational system.

Sierra Charter School has seen several local charter schools come and go during its existence and is pleased to have weathered the ever-changing tides of education. Sierra Charter's longevity may be attributed to the school's continued self-reflection, the desire to always improve, and of course, caring about the needs of students.



Sherry Huggins chose to enroll her four children in Sierra Charter School because she believed it was the best environment for them.

Photo by Jaques Gross

Family Finds a Perfect Fit

Parent of four adopted children praises charter school

BY TINKA DAVI

Sherry Huggins took on a huge challenge when, as a single parent, she adopted four young siblings, a girl and three boys. Two of the boys have cerebral palsy, the other son was tagged “a problem child” and the daughter — the youngest of the children — needed more attention in school. That’s why Huggins chose to enroll her children at Sierra Charter School.

“I wanted more options than the [traditional] schools offered,” she says.

Those options include “a lot of one-on-one time” with teachers, help for parents, and intervention specialists who provide tutoring as needed in English, math and group classes.

“The teachers are fantastic,” Huggins says. “They helped me help the children be successful.”

The four, who have all graduated from Sierra Charter School, are Dominic Armstrong, 22, Christopher Armstrong, 21, Darion Armstrong, 19, and Shawanda Armstrong, 18.

A Sierra Charter School parent recommended the school to Huggins. She enrolled the two oldest boys when they were in fifth grade, then switched the two younger children from traditional public school to Sierra Charter School.

She’s pleased with their education and proud of their accomplishments.

The son designated as a “problem child” earned the title of valedictorian at his high school graduation. He has recently graduated from a two-year community college and is headed for California State University, Los Angeles.

Huggins zeroed in on why the children were so successful.

“[As a parent] you have to be involved and know what is going on with your children,” she says. “At Sierra Charter, I knew exactly what my children were doing in school.”

Huggins sat in on classes three days a week and also observed the tutoring sessions.

She also worked with them at home. Her mother retired and helped her with the children and their education.

Her mom also was a help since Huggins chose to adopt all four children, who would likely have been split up in different locations if she did not.

Looking back on her relationship with Sierra Charter School, Huggins explains, “It just worked for me. Sierra Charter is a very good school and I attribute that to the teachers, the principal and the programs.”



Photos courtesy of Sierra Charter School.

FAQ

Frequently asked questions about Sierra Charter School

1. What are some of the misconceptions about charter schools?

A common misconception is that charters are private or for-profit. Sierra Charter School and the vast majority of charters are public, not-for-profit, and open to all students who want to enroll. No referral or transfer paperwork is required.

2. Why do students choose Sierra Charter School over the traditional school setting?

Students come to Sierra Charter for a variety of reasons, but they all have one thing in common: they're looking for something different. Sierra Charter offers a flexible schedule so students can pursue other interests or be more involved with family and community. The environment is free from some of the distractions and social pressures found elsewhere. Teachers and students develop relationships by working together one-on-one and in small groups.

3. What is Sierra Charter School's Vision?

Empowering individuals to succeed in the real world through personalized learning. Sierra Charter believes that with personalized support all individuals can be empowered to be successful in all aspects of their lives.

4. How often do students attend school?

Students can expect to be on campus two to five hours per week, depending on their courses. While Sierra Charter is an independent study program, some on-site classes and tutoring in the homework lab are offered. Students may choose to study on campus — especially if they anticipate needing help.

5. Will my child learn the same material as in a traditional school?

All curriculum is aligned to California state standards, so your child will learn the same material being taught in other public schools.

6. Can my student get caught up on credits and graduate on time?

Sierra Charter allows students to recover credits by taking additional courses after they have demonstrated the ability to successfully handle the workload. Students who aren't able to finish high school in four years may remain enrolled until completion if they show continued academic progress.

7. Is my diploma from Sierra Charter School the same as any other high school? Can I still go to college?

Yes. Sierra Charter is accredited through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and offers college-prep curriculum. If students meet A-G requirements, they are eligible to attend a four-year university after graduation.

8. Do you have a graduation ceremony?

Yes. We celebrate our high school graduates at a full cap-and-gown ceremony at the Save Mart Center on the California State University, Fresno campus, where we highlight students in a personal way. We also have a promotion ceremony for eighth grade and kindergarten students.

9. Do you offer music classes or sports teams?

We offer a music performance class for students who wish to showcase their musical talent individually. Students may also earn credit for participation in approved music and theater arts programs in the community. We do not have sports teams, but students are often able to participate in sports programs at other schools, depending on the school's policy.

10. Do you provide transportation to and from school?

We provide students with tokens for the Fresno public transportation system, FAX.



Looking for something different?

Sierra Charter School provides an alternative to traditional education. Offering personalized learning, individual attention, flexibility and high expectations for student learning, Sierra Charter is poised to meet the diverse needs of students in grades K-12. Students learn through a unique combination of independent study and small, on-campus classes and receive targeted, one-on-one support.

Students of all ages feel comfortable on Sierra Charter's welcoming and safe campus. Students are often so satisfied that they recommend the program to friends and siblings.

As a fully-accredited California public school, there is no charge to attend and admission is open to all. Come in today to find out what makes Sierra Charter School different.

Call us today to find out more!

Sierra Charter School serves students residing in Fresno county and all contiguous counties. For more information on the program or how to enroll, please stop by the office, call, visit the website or email.

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What graduates say



"The teachers actually care about you and they taught me a good work ethic."

~ Donald Roxberg, 2013 graduate

Donald Roxberg is beginning his first year of college at Fresno City College and intends to eventually become an architect. He says his time at Sierra Charter School was paramount in giving him the education, skills and confidence to carry out his dreams.



"My work at Sierra Charter has always been challenging and I found it very rewarding."

~ Elysha Levesque, 2013 graduate

Elysha Levesque, now in her first year at California State University, Fresno, is looking to earn her doctorate in forensic psychology. She cites her experience at Sierra Charter as instrumental in arming her for the rigors of higher education.