



PERSONALIZED LEARNING

The new face
of education



MAKING LEARNING PERSONAL

BY SHANNON SPRINGMEYER

Innovative charter schools offer parents an alternative to one-size-fits-all

Kids are not all the same. So why should they all learn at the same pace, in the same way? A growing number of parents and educators believe they shouldn't and are exploring alternatives to the traditional model of schooling that shaped American classrooms over the last century.

"The way of the future is that people need to be creative. They need to be able to collaborate. They need to be able to get information quickly," says educator Vivian Price.

Price has been a teacher and administrator for a decade, and is now Assistant Superintendent of Education — Personalized Learning for Springs Charter Schools, which serves families in Riverside, San Diego, Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino and Imperial counties. As a free, public charter school program, Springs Charter offers parents the power of choice and an alternative to traditional classrooms.

Springs Charter's approach is dramatically different. Teachers, parents and students work together to design a personalized learning program for each student based on the student's unique interests, goals, strengths, learning styles and preferences. Personalized learning plans are implemented through an innovative homeschooling model, in which parents partner with credentialed

teachers in educating their children, and receive support from the school in the form of curriculum, training and access to site-based classes. Price says that this approach both encourages students to be successful and better meets their individual needs.

"We empower parents."

Vivian Price,

ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION —
PERSONALIZED LEARNING AT SPRINGS CHARTER SCHOOLS

"If you're personalizing, you're finding out what is motivating to a student and how you can tailor a plan just for that child, so that they're engaged and what they're learning has application in their life now and in the future. You motivate the student because it's an authentic experience," she says.

Parents and students have flexibility in how, when and where a child learns. Families are free to choose what works best for them, from a purely homeschooling,

independent study approach, to a hybrid model in which a student will take some classes offered at learning centers and others through vendors or online. Parents also have a choice of curriculum, continual support from a credentialed Education Specialist, access to educational funds, and the ability to design new courses tailored to a student's needs and interests, Price explains. Making learning relevant to the individual student and a greater level of one-on-one support contribute to the success of students who have not thrived in traditional schools, she says.

The results speak for themselves. Student academic achievement and enrollment have risen steadily over the 13 years since Springs Charter Schools' inception, Price notes. She believes that Springs Charter's stability and longevity are due in large part to its commitment to effectively meeting the needs of parents and students and to its enduring mission to honor parent choice.

"We value parents. We see parents as the child's first teacher," Price says. "I think many people come here because they want to be their child's teacher and they want to be validated and supported and empowered, and that is what we do. We empower parents."

THE FIVE GOALS OF SPRINGS CHARTER SCHOOLS

Springs Charter's mission is driven by the following defining goals:

1. PROVIDE PARENT CHOICE.

Thousands of instructional methods and textbooks are available.

2. USE THE COMMUNITY AS THE CLASSROOM.

Students have opportunities to go on field trips, participate in internships, work with mentors and take career classes.

3. EMPOWER STUDENTS AND PARENTS.

Teachers use powerful independent learning tools with all students, beginning in kindergarten, focusing on student goal-setting and goal management. Springs Charter Schools also provide parent-as-teacher training and development.

4. PERSONALIZE LEARNING.

Teachers target their instruction to the particular learning needs of each child. They do not hand out busywork!

5. FOSTER CURIOSITY.

Teachers design lessons and projects around each student's strengths and interests.



THE CHOICE IS YOURS

At any one time, there have been up to six Bucaro children in the Springs Charter Schools system. Mom Wendy is also an Education Specialist there.

PHOTO BY CARLOS PUMA

Mother of 10 finds homeschooling support and freedom at Springs Charter Schools

BY MEREDITH J. GRAHAM

With 10 children, ages 1 to 18, Wendy Bucaro has had more experience than most with the education system, and she's chosen to homeschool. Four years ago, she found Springs Charter Schools, which offered her invaluable support in making the homeschooling experience a success for her children.

"I've homeschooled my own kids for 13 years. I've done every curriculum out there," says Bucaro, who lives in the east San Diego County community of Alpine.

One of the benefits of homeschooling, Bucaro says, is the ability to tailor the teaching style and pace to each child's needs. For instance, one of her daughters had a hard time learning times tables. They tried several methods and even shelved the subject until she was ready.

"The public-school system doesn't do that. Every student is learning the same thing at the same time," Bucaro says.

At Springs, Bucaro found support not only for teaching styles and methods, but also in the form of funding for textbooks and enrichment classes, like karate or piano.

"It doesn't sound like a lot, but if you get \$900 a year for a junior-high kid, for a lot of families, that's make it or break it," Bucaro says. "Without instructional funds, many kids wouldn't be able to do any activities."

In addition, many areas served by Springs Charter have student centers where students can attend classes like math or science, which parents are sometimes hesitant to teach.

Bucaro actually wears two hats when it comes to Springs Charter. Of course she's a homeschool mom herself — her area is served by Harbor Springs Charter School — but she's also an Education Specialist who helps other parents create an education plan for their kids. Bucaro collaborates with parents to develop the best learning path for each child. She begins the process using the parents' ideas, and she's often able to suggest something they hadn't thought of — maybe their child would benefit from an online component to learning a subject, or there might be a field-trip opportunity that lines up with their child's needs.

"Regardless of the chosen curriculum, we will support them in how they educate their child," she says. "So if I have a family that wants to use Thomas Jefferson Education or Waldorf curriculum, I will help them be successful using it."

She also works with families to ensure their children are on track to meet state requirements for their grade level. This becomes more important as they reach high school, Bucaro says.

"We want to make sure that every homeschooled student in our program graduates ready for a four-year university," she says. "While parents still have choices, students will be college-ready."

What it comes down to, Bucaro says, is that Springs Charter provides support and resources for parents who want to homeschool their children, while still offering the freedom to choose what they'll teach and how and when they'll teach it.

"Regardless of the chosen curriculum, we will support them in how they educate their child."

Wendy Bucaro,
SPRINGS CHARTER PARENT AND
EDUCATION SPECIALIST

STEPS TO A PERSONALIZED EDUCATION

Springs Charter Schools believe taking these steps will produce a successful, lifelong learner:

1. Select curriculum based on student interests, learning styles and parents' educational philosophy.
2. Identify student strengths. Use these strengths to develop successful lessons.
3. Incorporate the community as the classroom through events, vendors, community college, internships, library and beyond.
4. Put the student in the driver's seat. Infuse student voice and choice in all lessons.
5. Use student goals and aspirations to focus the curriculum.
6. Make learning authentic through projects, internships, apprenticeships and real-life experiences.
7. Assess for mastery and provide opportunities to revisit content as needed.
8. Ensure that each student frequently reflects on his or her own progress and analyzes how to improve.

CONNECTING STUDENTS TO THE COMMUNITY

FIELD TRIPS

Springs Charter Schools offer more than 40 organized field trips a year, including:

- LA County Fair (multiple subjects)
- USS Midway (history)
- Sea Star classroom (science)
- Tanaka Farm (agriculture)
- Colonial farm life at Riley's Farm (history)
- Indoor skydiving (physics)
- Skiing (physical education)
- Disney – designing a story (literature)
- Sea World (science)
- LEGOLAND (physics)
- Irvine Outdoor Ranch (history, science and agriculture)
- San Diego Zoo (science)

PARENT AND STUDENT EVENTS

Through Student/Parent Regional Educational Events (SPREE), both parents and students have an opportunity to create and take educational workshops in most county locations. Here are some other events Springs Charter Schools offer:

- Writing Extravaganza (part one and two include two assemblies with “The Imagination Machine” and a writing contest)
- Spelling bee (students can progress to county, state and national levels)
- Science fair (students can progress to county, state and national levels)
- Math Extravaganza – Family fun math night
- Meet the Expert/talent show
- National History Day (students can progress to county, state and national levels)
- Algebra/math workshops
- Park days
- STAR award events
- Graduation night
- Prom
- Mobile science lab for high school
- Service vendors

Hundreds of service vendors also offer instruction in performing arts, fine art, physical education, academic tutoring and a wide variety of other areas. High school students can also take college courses at local junior colleges while enrolled at Springs Charter Schools.

Maxwell and Megan Chan, shown here with parents Stevean and Heidi, are both active in the robotics team through Springs Charter Schools.

PHOTO BY CARLOS PUMA



NEVER A DULL MOMENT

Chan family stays busy with school and lots of extracurriculars

BY MEREDITH J. GRAHAM

Megan and Maxwell Chan are active teenagers by anybody's standards. During any one week, the Chan family will bounce around from a learning center in Temecula, the ballet studio, martial arts class, robotics team meetings, the local community college, a learning center in Murrieta and a spelling bee or talent show.

“At the beginning of the school year I actually wrote out a whole schedule for myself,” says 14-year-old Megan. “I just hope I can follow it.”

The Chans, who live in Murrieta, are part of the Springs Charter Schools hybrid program, meaning they are homeschooled but they also attend “enrichment classes” at local learning centers. But what really makes their education unique is all the activities they're able to do because of not having a campus to report to each day.

“A lot of the friends we've made are through our extracurricular activities,” says Maxwell, who is 13 and a freshman in high school. “My sister has a lot of friends at ballet, and we've both made friends at kung fu and through the robotics team.”

Maxwell is the programmer on the robotics team, which means he's the one who programs the robot to do things like throw a frisbee and hit a target. Megan is on the business side of the team, helping to make a business plan and do fundraising for the team. Each year, they enter their completed robot in the FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) Robotics

Competition. The teenage siblings also attend robotics camp — where they are the teachers — each summer.

“I've been interested in computer programming and software design for a while. The team has helped me use that interest for something,” Maxwell says. “There was one time, at one of the competitions, when I was so happy that I got the robot to work, I jumped up and did a little dance.”

“If you know Max, you know that's a big deal,” Megan says with a laugh.

The Chans are also active in kung fu, where Megan has reached the level of black belt and Maxwell is not far behind, with a brown belt. They take piano and Megan is a ballerina. They are able to stay so active through the flexibility of the Springs Charter hybrid program, and the “flex funds” available to pay for extracurricular activities like ballet classes and piano lessons.

“We've also joined a lot of field trips through Springs,” says Megan,

describing whale watching, visiting museums and going to Knott's Berry Farm. “And there've been talent shows and spelling bees.”

As Megan speaks, it's clear the list of activities and experiences available at Springs Charter goes on and on. In a few years the Chans will attend the prom sponsored by Springs Charter Schools and walk in a traditional graduation ceremony to make their high-school experience complete.

“A lot of the friends we've made are through our extracurricular activities.”

Maxwell Chan,
SPRINGS CHARTER STUDENT

FREE TO THRIVE

BY SHANNON SPRINGMEYER

Teresa Nixon, shown with her infant daughter Mackenzie and son Levi, says she found the support through Springs Charter Schools to help Levi thrive.

PHOTO BY CARLOS PUMA

Flexibility and support mean success for student

Levi Nixon hated school. When he was in first grade, he had no time to be a kid. He went to school, came home, did homework for 3 1/2 hours, ate dinner, and went to bed. There was no time for his favorite activities — tinkering with LEGO blocks, playing with friends or long bike rides with dad.

What's worse, Levi, a less-than-stellar reader, felt bullied by peers at school. His mother, Teresa Nixon, grew frustrated when the school did little to stop the bullying, she says.

"It broke my heart," Nixon says. "I said, 'You know what, he's going to do better at home.'"

So she decided to homeschool Levi, starting with second grade. She learned through friends about homeschooling with Springs Charter Schools and enrolled Levi.

"He was more than excited," Teresa says. "He has been doing amazing. He loves the fact that he has freedom now. He can take as long as he wants to do his school work, or as little time."

Levi, now 9, holds himself accountable for finishing his assigned schoolwork. A typical day includes waking up and making his own breakfast, tackling language and math warm-ups, then doing independent reading and the day's in-depth lessons.

Levi also takes supplemental classes, including science, writing, LEGO Engineering and chess, through an approved vendor several times a week, which allows him opportunities for enrichment and socialization. Springs Charter pays for all the approved vendor classes, a major benefit cited by Teresa. Levi now enjoys

reading and is testing at or above grade level in all subject areas.

Teresa credits the support she's received from Springs Charter as instrumental to Levi's success. Springs Charter gives parents the freedom to decide how flexible funding is spent to help their student learn. In addition, Springs Charter provides parent certification courses for all homeschooling parents. The courses cover a variety of topics, from brain development, to making learning fun, to connecting assessment and instruction, arming homeschooling parents with the tools to be effective educators.

Every family is also assigned a credentialed Education Specialist (ES) who provides support for parents and regularly checks on students' progress.

"For me, having the network of support was so important," Teresa says. "If I had done it

independently ... I wouldn't have an ES to support me when I'm having my down day, or when I'm having a hard week. If you didn't have anywhere to turn, you'd kind of be lost."

Teresa has been so pleased with

the experience of homeschooling with Springs Charter that she's already decided to continue the tradition with her daughter, Mackenzie, now just 9 months old. Teresa cites the flexibility to personalize the learning experience to each child as a major factor in her decision.

"I want her to start learning when she wants to start learning," she says. "I don't want her to be defined by a birth date or lost in the shuffle."

"Having the network of support was so important."

Teresa Nixon,
SPRINGS CHARTER PARENT

HOMESCHOOLING SUPPORT

Springs Charter Schools provide a wealth of support services to parents who choose to homeschool their children, including:

- Single subject specialists
- K-8 subject specialists
- Mobile science lab
- Online foreign language program
- Free online resources, including ALEKs math, Reading A-Z and Discovery Education
- Diagnostic assessment with online instruction
- Guidance counselors
- Special education department and services
- Standardized test prep resources
- Independent study online courses
- Lending library
- Science fair & National History Day support
- English language learner support
- K-12 curriculum with lesson plans and answer keys
- Multi-age units
- Literature bundles



Education Specialist Sherry Kosmal works one-on-one with a student. Increased individual attention is one of the benefits of the Springs Charter hybrid homeschooling model.
PHOTO BY RODRIGO PENÄ

FINDING WHAT WORKS

BY MIKE BLOUNT

EDUCATION SPECIALISTS ARE HERE TO HELP

How do Education Specialists help homeschooling families? Springs Charter’s Education Specialists are:



CHEERLEADERS.

They encourage, support and give praise to help lead parents and students to victory.



GARDENERS.

Education Specialists plant seeds and cultivate soil so parents and students can grow to their potential.



COACHES.

By helping parents create the playbook and hone the skills necessary to win, students will be more successful in life and become lifelong learners.

Homeschooling Education Specialist shares her perspective

When you think back to your favorite classes in school, you think about the teacher who taught it. You think about how the teacher had the unique talent to make the subject interesting and entertaining, and how you wanted to learn as much as you could about it. Springs Charter Education Specialist Sherry Kosmal aims to help parents create that experience for every subject they teach in a homeschooling environment.

Kosmal says having the student drive his or her own educational experience is the key. When she begins working with parents for the first time, she helps them develop a personalized learning plan based around the curriculum the parents have selected. She then meets with the family once a month to evaluate the student’s progress and make any adjustments needed. Unlike a traditional school, students can learn at their own pace, and they can choose to come back to concepts or move ahead in the lesson if they understand it.

“As students are learning, you can really gauge their passion and enthusiasm for a subject by how excited they are about it,” Kosmal says. “If they learn more hands-on, you can have them work on a project, or if they’re more visual, they may learn more from watching a video. When students get to drive their learning, it’s really empowering for them.”

Kosmal works with a variety of homeschooled students and families with different learning philosophies and goals. But one universal thing that all of the students and families with the Springs Charter independent study program appreciate is the flexibility. Instead of being locked into a set schedule, students are able to participate in internships or volunteer in their communities during times they would normally be in school.

Kosmal says that her students have also used the flexibility in the schedule to visit museums and other locations on field trips outside the home.

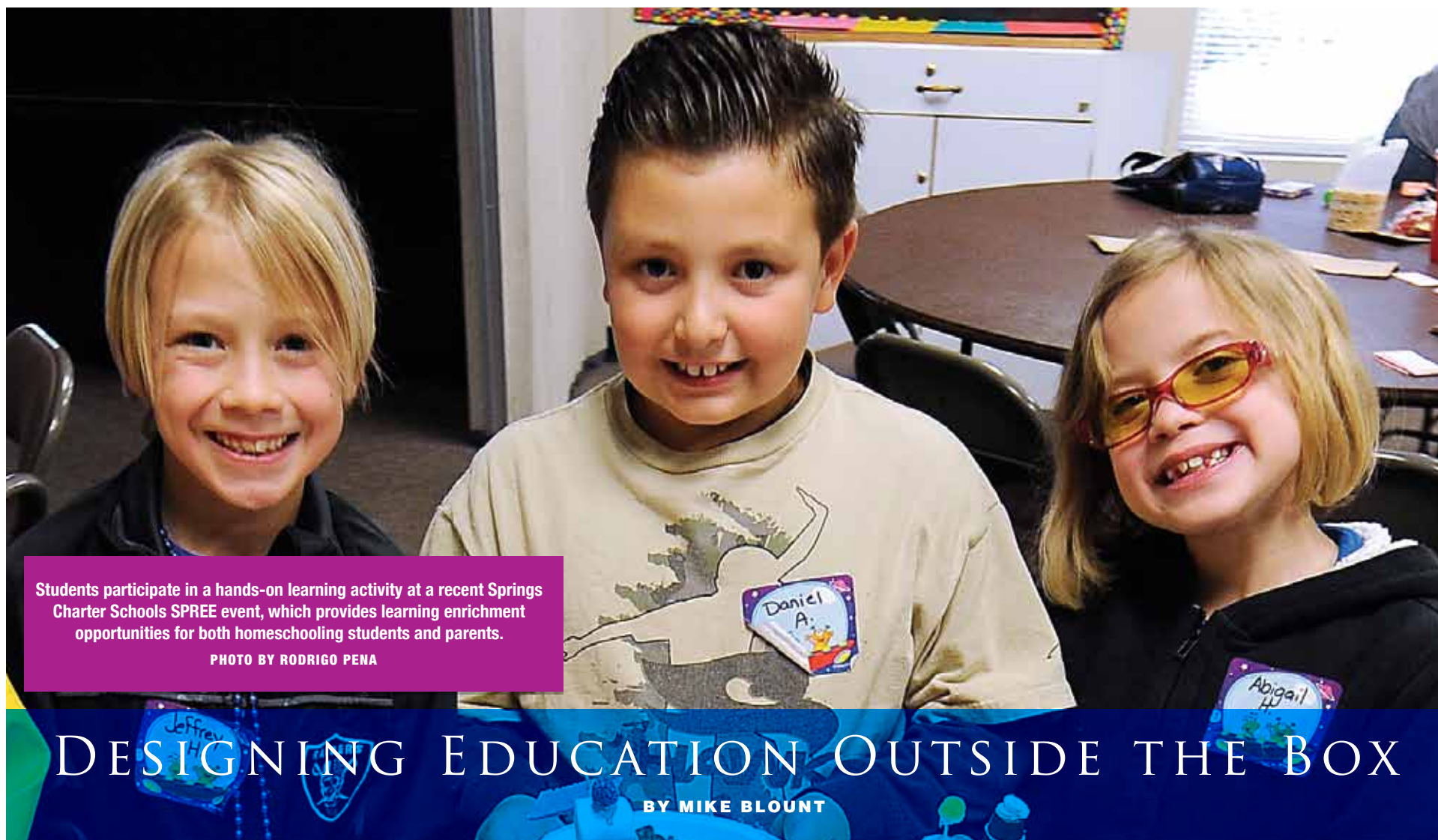
“They can do anything with their time, and they have unlimited resources while they are at home,” Kosmal says. “Students just have so many opportunities in a homeschooling environment.”

By far, Kosmal says her favorite thing about collaborating with families who are enrolled in Springs Charter Schools’ homeschooling program is finding what works for each student, and seeing all students reach their education goals.

“It’s been exciting to be exposed to so many different types of teaching,” Kosmal says. “Every student learns in a different way, and helping parents find the technique that is the most effective is a very rewarding experience. You can really focus on their education in a homeschooling environment.”

“When students get to drive their learning, it’s really empowering for them.”

Sherry Kosmal,
K-12 HOMESCHOOLING EDUCATION SPECIALIST



Students participate in a hands-on learning activity at a recent Springs Charter Schools SPREE event, which provides learning enrichment opportunities for both homeschooling students and parents.

PHOTO BY RODRIGO PENA

DESIGNING EDUCATION OUTSIDE THE BOX

BY MIKE BLOUNT

A Q&A with Springs Charter Schools Superintendent Kathleen Hermsmeyer

How does the Springs Charter Schools model empower students?

Unlike a traditional school, we first take into account the child's abilities, interests, learning styles and goals. Then we design a personalized curriculum that meets state standards, but also the child's unique needs. For example, there are many ways you can learn to write a research paper. You can write about something that doesn't interest you, or you can write about something you are really interested in. Which one are you going to learn more from? In general, having a personalized curriculum will improve the child's educational experience, and when children enjoy what they are doing, they will seek out more educational opportunities.

What are some myths and misconceptions about independent study?

The biggest misconception about independent study is that the students lack socialization. Because our students have more time to pursue their passion they have many opportunities to socialize in the community, including youth athletes who are competing on travel teams, Cub Scouts and 4-H. We also provide learning center workshops for our students to learn in a group setting with other children who are homeschooled. They might work together on projects involving robotics or take part in a speech and debate team.

Another myth is that there isn't a strong support system. Our Education Specialists work with the parents to provide them support through a variety of tools designed specifically for the parents. Our Education Specialists are available five days a week for tutoring, consultation or just general support. We support parents and students every step of the way throughout their education.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SPRINGS CHARTER

"We believe our model is the model of the future because it allows students to learn at their own pace through their own interests."

Kathleen Hermsmeyer,
SUPERINTENDENT OF SPRINGS CHARTER SCHOOLS

How does the Education Specialist work with the parents and students?

One of the biggest advantages to our program is that our Education Specialists are with the families for years. They know what is going on in the family and they know the family's values. They know if the student is not meeting his or her potential or if the parent's expectations for them are unreasonable. In a traditional school, teachers really only get to know a child's behavior, and that behavior masks the real issues. Our Education Specialists are visiting the homes and meeting with the parents and students independently and together to assess the student's performance. They're building a relationship, and even in the first year, they know the students better than they would at a traditional school where they only see them in the classroom.

Why is this model effective?

As the largest charter school in California, we've had a number of years to hone our program. Most curriculum is designed only for teachers, and isn't conducive to learning in the home. But all of our support materials and curriculum are designed specifically for the parents and students, which allows the parent to teach in a way that is interesting and exciting to their child. This model is also teaching life skills — things like time management and critical thinking skills that are helping prepare the student for the real world. With how fast the world moves today, people need to be able to use their time more efficiently. We believe our model is the model of the future because it allows students to learn at their own pace through their own interests.

AN EDUCATION DESIGNED FOR YOUR

CHILD

Springs Charter Schools offer a dramatically different choice in education. Learning is student-driven, not teacher-driven, with personalized learning plans built around each child's unique interests, needs and strengths. Springs Charter empowers parents by providing choice in instructional approaches and funding, and supporting parents' work educating their children at home. The result is students who are free to learn at their own pace, receive plenty of one-on-one help, and have fun learning hands-on. Students stay engaged through Springs Charter's many opportunities for collaborative learning, enjoying supplemental site-based classes, science fairs, field trips and more. Springs Charter Schools might be just the alternative you've been looking for.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SPRINGS CHARTER

PHOTO BY RODRIGO PENA

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Homeschool Families**

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