

Is this
the **Future
of Education?**

VISIONS IN EDUCATION | 9-12 Independent Study



A special advertising supplement



A Vision To Help Students Succeed

Public charter school provides alternative education for highschoolers **by Kendall Fields**

Hanging from the computer sitting on Jody Graf's desk is a red satin ribbon that reads: "Witness the greatness in you."

As executive director of Visions In Education Charter School, Graf says the charter school helps every student witness his or her greatness. Visions is a tuition-free, public charter school that is part of the San Juan Unified School District, Graf explains. Visions offers two approaches to independent study: Its K-12 home school program provides parents the curriculum and guidance to be their child's teacher, while the 9-12 Independent Study High School program gives students the flexibility to learn at their own pace.

High school can be a challenging time when many students struggle to "fit in" on top of getting good grades, applying for college, or finding the right career path. But six periods a day, six different teachers and 30 classmates isn't the right setting for every student. Visions' Independent Study High School creates the right setting for each student, whether he or she has fallen off track in the classroom, is eager for independence, or may even be a piano prodigy. The flexible schedule allows students to complete coursework while pursuing other interests. And teachers customize lessons to complement those interests — assigning a project focusing on fashion and design to a budding fashionista, for example. This personalized learning is

important because it helps students explore existing passions or discover new ones.

At Visions, dedicated teachers invest themselves in their students. This relationship, Graf explains, is what makes Visions so special, setting it apart from the traditional classroom environment where a teacher is working with 30 (or more) students at one time. "This one-on-one relationship between teachers and students really is the core of who we are," she says.



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JODY GRAF
Executive Director, Visions In Education



Although Visions teachers serve more than one student in their respective area, they have an opportunity to fully invest in them because of weekly or biweekly meetings and frequent communication.

Some teachers even teach the same students all four years of high school. Graf says it's rewarding to see students who felt brushed aside in past experiences at traditional public schools really thrive in this personal, stable academic setting. "[Visions] gives the disenchanted students an option ... to learn at a pace and rate they can manage with the ability to ask questions."

Students also learn skills through independent study that they couldn't learn so easily in a traditional school, Graf says, such as managing time and being an active seeker of knowledge.

Parents may worry that going to a charter school with an independent model may be detrimental to their child's social life, but that could not be further from the truth at Visions. The staff encourages students to enroll in extracurricular activities to socialize with peers and teachers. They even plan field trips, rounding up students with common interests to encourage a sense of community and friendship.

As Visions continues to help more students excel in an alternative school setting, Graf says she is enjoying seeing the charter school evolve with technology and fulfill its bigger mission of helping families succeed.

A Second Chance

Student gets back on track with his education

by Mike Blount

There was a point when 17-year-old Emmanuel Martinez was so unmotivated in school, he thought only a drill sergeant yelling in his face could get him to do his homework. But after he enrolled in Visions In Education charter school, he realized what he had really needed was a second chance and a teacher to work one-on-one with him.

For Martinez, fitting in was everything in junior high. But in his attempts to impress his peers, he began acting out in school and fell in with the wrong crowd. It wasn't long before he stopped doing his work and started smoking cigarettes, doing drugs, and skipping school altogether. By the time he started his freshman year in high school, those bad habits had set in. He was failing.



When you're a teenager, all you want is acceptance. That's what I was looking for even though it was leading me down the wrong path."

EMMANUEL MARTINEZ

His family — concerned with his behavior — enrolled Martinez in a different traditional high school for the second half of his freshman year. They believed that removing him from his friends would allow him to start over and concentrate on his education. Despite the new setting, Martinez says he continued to make bad choices and hang out with the wrong people.

"When you're a teenager, all you want is acceptance," Martinez says. "That's what I was looking for even though it was leading me down the wrong path. ... I felt like I was attracting the wrong people."

Martinez's family then enrolled him in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps program because they thought it would give him the structure he needed. He enrolled in the program, but continued to repeat the same mistakes he always had.

Feeling like he had gone past the point of no return, he began focusing on taking the GED test. But his sister told him about one more option — Visions In Education. At the time, his family had just moved to Antelope and Martinez was unfamiliar with charter schools. But after learning about the Independent Study Program, he told his family that he wanted to enroll.

Things began to change for Martinez at the end of his sophomore year.

"What really got to me was my one-on-one time with my teacher. That really got things into focus because she told me how it was. She told me the truth and said, 'You're here for you and you should be doing this for yourself.'"

Looking back on the past year, Martinez says that Visions In Education made a huge difference in his education. Being able to learn things like time management and having an open dialogue with his teacher were two things that he's really appreciated. He's getting his work done and making plans for his future for the first time.

Martinez says he's currently trying to figure out what he wants to do for a career. He's taking a banking class in the fall and has expressed interest in learning photography as well.

"Everybody has a second chance," Martinez says. "I sustained [bad grades] and it's affected me so much now that I have so much to recover, but just know that you can pull through."

Hear more of Emmanuel's story at VisionsStudents.org



Emmanuel Martinez says Visions In Education helped him turn his life around.

INDEPENDENT STUDY

Visions In Education's personalized method of teaching provides students at all levels the kind of instruction they need. For some students, this means that they find an alternative when traditional high school has not worked for them. For others, this means starting high school in an environment that is suited to their needs and may help them achieve more in their high school experience. Students who start with Visions as 9th or

10th graders almost always graduate on time — comparable to the time frame of traditional schooling. Most of Visions' 5th year students began the program as seniors or juniors who had already fallen behind in a traditional school. For students who begin with Visions at the start of high school, the consistency and stability of the Independent Study Program can be part of their success throughout all four years.

Swimming Through High School

Student athlete attends Visions In Education to get diploma and keep training

by Kendall Fields

Eighteen-year-old Kaitlin Staines sits at the wooden table in her family's Fair Oaks living room, poring over one of her school workbooks. One might think she's just doing homework, but in reality, this is her classroom.

For the last four years, Staines has attended Visions In Education's 9-12 Academy to balance her busy life as a world-class synchronized swimmer and still get her diploma.

When Staines was 8 years old she started her career as a competitive synchronized swimmer. As her technique blossomed and her inherent talent continued to be noticed by her coaches, it was obvious to the Staines family that Kaitlin's swimming was more than just a childhood hobby — it was her career.



You have to make time to dedicate your entire self to this sport if you are going to succeed. I don't know how I could do that if I were in [regular] school.

KAITLIN STAINES, Junior Olympic synchronized swimmer



PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES

Thanks to Visions In Education, Kaitlin Staines was able to complete high school while achieving her dream of being a Junior Olympic medalist in synchronized swimming.

As Staines joined a more competitive swim club in the Sacramento area, she committed to more practices. At 14, she decided to enroll in Visions In Education after seeing her older sister (who was also a student athlete) succeed in the alternative school setting.

Staines says that although a couple girls on her team still attended a traditional public school, it was becoming increasingly difficult for her to fulfill her dreams as a swimmer while in traditional school. "I don't know how you could eat, sleep and breathe swimming and still go to [regular] school."

At 16, Staines moved to a training facility in Walnut Creek to prepare for the Junior Olympics. She recalls staying with a host family, swimming for eight hours each day and barely having enough time to do homework at night. "You have to make time to dedicate your entire self to this sport if you are going to succeed. I don't know how I could do that if I were in [regular] school."

Her hard work paid off. In 2012, 17-year-old Staines placed 42nd in the world competition,

coming in first for the United States.

Staines, who recently moved back home to focus full time on graduating, says attending Visions was the optimal decision for her as a student. She tears up when she talks about the teacher she's had for all four years. "He's the best teacher I've ever had, the way he teaches is really positive," she says, adding that he makes her feel like things she thought weren't possible are, like recently passing the high school exit exam or making it to graduation.

"My teacher made a lot of things possible for me. He invested his whole self in me," Staines says.

Today, Staines is coaching younger girls, inspiring them to be good swimmers. She is excited to graduate high school and plans to attend a community college and earn science and language credits before going back to rigorous training schedules to prepare for Olympic trials. She says Visions has helped her learn that while swimming is her passion, it isn't everything. "There is life after synchronized swimming."

Hear more from Kaitlin at VisionsStudents.org

VISIONS IN EDUCATION

Visions In Education is a tuition-free K-12 public charter school that offers students flexibility in their education. Unlike traditional school, students decide when to study and set their own schedules, learning time management in the process. Students also have a one-on-one relationship with their teacher, who comes to the student and partners with the parents and student to personalize a learning strategy for success. Visions In Education curriculum meets state standards while also giving students access to a wide variety of educational and digital resources. Visions serves Amador, Contra Costa, El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Solano, Sutter and Yolo counties.

Visions' enrollment process starts at www.viedu.org/apply

Class Size Reduction

Being free of the classroom helps teacher connect with students one-on-one

by Michelle Carl

Chris Allan remembers what “one-size-fits-all” education was like. When she taught at a traditional high school, students would flow in and out of her classroom. She had only 50 minutes to get through the lesson.

“Sometimes it just feels like you’re a babysitter and you’re just trying to keep the kids in check,” she says.

Allan worked with low-level readers, who had struggles outside of school and negative experiences with teachers. While Allan feels many classroom teachers are great about making sure students don’t slip through the cracks, she felt she couldn’t give them the attention they needed.



So many of our students come with so many obstacles that when they do succeed, it’s huge.”

CHRIS ALLAN

Visions In Education Teacher



But when she found a job posting at Visions In Education, she realized that she could make a difference in students’ lives by teaching them individually.

Allan’s been with Visions now for seven years and works with students in South Sacramento, many of whom are English Language Learners. The credentialed teacher, who once taught English in Africa as part of the Peace Corps, now says she has the time and the flexibility to focus on students’ unique needs.

For instance, instead of one novel the whole classroom has to read, Allan knows enough about her students’ reading levels and interests to suggest a book specifically for them.

A typical day has her driving to meet her students — in their homes if the parents are there, but sometimes Starbucks, McDonald’s, or a local library. They spend over an hour talking about assignments or problems the student might have with a subject.

“But I’m also just checking in with how they’re doing. ... How’s your life going? Is your family still going to move? Did you get your driver’s license?”

Allan says by connecting with her students as individuals, it helps break down barriers some students have toward teachers and learning.

“It builds a whole different level of relationship,” Allan says. “The student learns that, you know what — this teacher knows that I’m not all about school. I have a life. And then I think they start to trust you a little bit, and when they start to trust you, they listen to you more.”

She recalls one recent graduate who became her student during his freshman year. He had emotional, mental and physical disabilities, and struggled with basic study skills, not to mention the concepts in the lesson plan.

With help from his parents and special resources at Visions, Allan says the student greatly improved. When he was close to graduating, he turned in a poignant essay that dealt with shame and forgiveness. That’s when Allan realized all the work had paid off.

“I told him, ‘You have become a writer,’” she remembers. “I knew that this student is ready to go out in the world and he will absolutely be successful.”

Being able to see a student blossom over multiple years is another part of being a Visions teacher that Allan enjoys.

“So many of our students come with so many obstacles that when they do succeed, it’s huge,” Allan says. “Graduation day is the best day ever.”

Chris shares why she enjoys teaching at VisionsStudents.org



Visions In Education Teacher Chris Allan works with student Roman. Allan said working with students one-on-one is what drew her to the charter school.

A TEACHING METHOD THAT MATCHES THE STUDENT

The biggest difference between Visions In Education and other schools is that the teacher comes to the student. Credentialed teachers meet with students in their homes or community anywhere in the nine Northern California counties served. The one-on-one relationship means teachers have the flexibility to tailor their curriculum to the student’s

interests and needs. Visions teachers are also coaches, motivating students to complete their independent study coursework. Teachers are available by text, email and phone whenever the student has a problem. This individualized teaching technique works for students who have struggled in a traditional school environment.

From Failing To Thriving

Mom took a chance and found a better school for her sons

by Michelle Carl

Laurie Cristoni fears how her sons might have ended up if she hadn't found Visions In Education.

"Both of my children are very active and [traditional school] just didn't work really well," she says. "They got bored in class and so they tended to fall behind when they were bored."

Eldest son Justin started falling behind his freshman year of high school. Although he asked his mother to try Visions, where some of his friends were enrolled, Cristoni mistakenly thought that independent study was for troubled students — not her son. Justin went on to his sophomore year and continued to fail.

But after talking to Justin's friends and their parents, she decided to give Visions a call, and she's glad she did.

After enrolling in Visions, Justin was able to focus on the credits he needed to make up. He was also able to

learn at his own pace and at a time of day when he was more productive (he's a night owl). Justin ended up graduating in 2012 — two months early — with a B average.

Although Justin never had college aspirations, Cristoni says his Visions teacher was instrumental in pushing him to continue his education.

"I think kids often just don't think their parents know anything, so you tell them something and they don't necessarily want to hear that. But when they're getting consistent messaging from other people's parents and their teachers, I think that helps," she says. "His teacher pushed him to establish goals and talked him into going [to college]."

Now 18, Justin is at American River College working on his general education.

When she started to see her younger son, David, having the same problems in middle school, she moved him into Visions, where he is now in his sophomore year.

Both of her sons have had the same teacher throughout their years at Visions, which is another thing that appealed to Cristoni.

"She got to know them and learned what motivated them," she says.

Cristoni feels the traditional school environment hasn't adapted to how the world has changed or the many different learning styles children have. But charter schools are in a unique position to offer flexibility to students. She believes in the

Visions mission so much, she joined its Parent Advisory Board to become more involved in how the school is run.

Although she once feared her sons were in danger of making a huge mistake by not finishing high school, today she has two sons with bright futures thanks to Visions.

“

If your child is not succeeding in a traditional environment, be willing to take a chance ... I'm really glad that I did."

LAURIE CRISTONI, Visions In Education parent

"If your child is not succeeding in a traditional environment, be willing to take a chance, because continuing year after year with a child being unsuccessful is really detrimental to their own morale," she says. "Be willing to take that risk, I'm really glad that I did. I think that if I hadn't our story would be really different."

Laurie shares more of her story at VisionsStudents.org

PHOTO BY PRISCILLA GARCIA

A PROVEN RECORD OF SUCCESS

Over the past two years, Visions In Education has graduated nearly
1,500 students

95% of recent graduates surveyed commented that Visions had a positive effect on their life

89% of recent graduates surveyed rated their satisfaction at high or very high



Q & A with Jody Graf

A passion for changing education

by Mike Blount

Jody Graf is part of a long family tradition of educators. As the Executive Director of Visions In Education, Graf brings her experience from the traditional education environment to the public charter school environment, helping students learn through personalized programs designed especially for them.

What are some common misconceptions about charter schools?

One thing that is important is to demystify this notion that charter schools are not public schools. I think oftentimes people think charter schools are private schools or for-profit schools. While there are some charter schools like that, the vast majority of charter schools you hear about in your neighborhood are public schools and by nature operate like a public school. ... They are open to all students who want to enroll.

Why did you want to work in the education field?

Well, it is really kind of in my blood. I had a grandparent and a great aunt who were both educators and my dad was a longtime educator. I have always known I would go into education — really as a teacher — from a young age. Education was something I enjoyed doing.

I went to college and I majored in education and became a teacher. I moved to an administrative role as I saw this as a way to influence change in education.

What is it about the charter school system that appealed to you?

I spent my first 20 years in education in what we call the “traditional environment” and I enjoyed and really appreciated that experience. But I became acutely aware in the last five years of that experience that changes needed to happen.

At that time, charter schools were about ten years old and I was starting to see some examples of ways to approach education differently. I think the advantage for me that charter schools offer is their ability to really respond to what families and students are looking for and desiring in school. ... What appeals to me is there is a dynamic ability to be flexible and really interact with the people you are serving. You are really refining yourself in a way that allows you to partner together in their education.

What are some specific things that make charter schools more flexible?

Our model has a great bit of flexibility built into it because we do not have the burden of structure that can impede your ability to be nimble and have dexterity with your program. For example, we don’t have a brick and mortar school that students show up to. Instead Visions offers a program where students and teachers meet in the student’s home or a place close to the student’s home, and that allows for a great amount of flexibility because students



are not regulated by a bell schedule or confined to having to come to a place. Learning becomes more integrated with their everyday experience.

What are some of the current trends in education and how is Visions In Education adapting to them?

[One trend is] the adoption of common core state standards that states across the United States will adopt and that California has already adopted. This really will change the pedagogy and [our understanding of] how students interact with information and knowledge and how they access it.

While we have already been doing that kind of work — in our environment, which is independent study — students have been encouraged for a long time to utilize the information that is available to them. Whether that is media through digital resources or using technology ... or learning in their environment by going on field trips, that has been a way to integrate the larger world into their understanding. ... That is one of the things coming down the pike, but we feel poised to integrate [it] into our system.

Learn more about Jody at VisionsStudents.org

“*I think the advantage for me that charter schools offer is their ability to really respond to what families and students are looking for and desiring in school.*”

JODY GRAF, Executive Director of Visions In Education

The Future Is Now

VISIONS IN EDUCATION IS ENROLLING

What makes charter schools special?

Visions In Education provides an alternative, independent-study education model to help students succeed outside of the classroom.

- It's free!
- Visions offers a more flexible schedule so students can pursue their passion or be more involved with family or community.
- Personalized learning allows students to explore their interests and achieve their goals, graduate, and get ready for college or vocational school.
- Because Visions is a public school, its courses meet state requirements to graduate.
- One-on-one relationship with a credentialed teacher.
- The teacher comes to the student, meeting at the student's home or a nearby location, such as a community center, library, or coffee shop.
- Secure learning, free from negative distractions and social pressures.
- Free computer while enrolled.
- Access to a wide variety of courses.
- Access to community college courses.
- Technical training through ROP and vocational apprenticeships.
- Support services including academic and career planning.



Visions helps students succeed all over Northern California

Credentialed teachers travel throughout the area to support parents homeschooling their K-12 students and conduct one-on-one study sessions with high school students. Visions In Education serves students in these nine Northern California counties:

- | | |
|----------------|----------|
| • Amador | • Solano |
| • Contra Costa | • Sutter |
| • El Dorado | • Yolo |
| • Placer | |
| • Sacramento | |
| • San Joaquin | |

More information is available online

Visions' website, www.viedu.org, contains many resources for parents and students, including:

- Video interviews with students
- Links to request a free information kit
- Application for enrollment



Visions In Education helps students succeed



Visions In Education
(877) 971-7037
www.viedu.org