

Parent Choice

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Parent Choice is the rallying cry of charter schools across this great nation of ours. In fact, parent choice is the backbone of the entire charter school movement. Charter schools were created in response to rigid, poorly performing schools and parents who were hungry for options. When Gary Hart, a progressive lifelong democrat, initiated the legislation to launch California's charter schools in 1992, he believed that charters would "spur innovation and systemic change" (Hart & Burr, 37). I believe charter schools uphold the ideals of our free market economy by providing choices not only to wealthy parents who can afford private schools, but to all parents.

At River Springs Charter School, we not only believe in parent choice in the broad context of the charter school movement, but also in the truer and deeper context. We believe in creating a true partnership between parents and the school which requires interaction, flexibility, and modifications based on parent desires, student interests, and student abilities. Many schools say they want to partner with parents, but their definition of this partnership is that parents will come to school events, listen to the teacher at parent-teacher conferences, and ensure that the child does his homework. This is not a partnership; it's a dictatorship – even if it's a benevolent one. At River Springs, we expect better and truer collaboration between parents and teachers.

Many people find it difficult to wholeheartedly get behind our definition of parent choice. In fact, some of our newly hired teachers are at first doubtful about the wisdom of allowing parents the kinds of choice that we believe we should allow parents. So, the purpose of this paper is to explain River Springs' four-pronged philosophy about why and how parent choice works at our school.

#1 – Parents deserve to be empowered.

Parents are capable.

Parents may not be as knowledgeable about the practice of teaching as credentialed teachers are, but they are capable of doing more one-on-one instruction than the best teacher in a classroom of 35 students. We believe parents are the most important influence on every child. We talk positively about parents, interact collegially, and expect a lot from our parents. Our parents rise to the occasion!

Parent involvement improves student achievement.

In his meta-analysis of parental involvement and student achievement studies, William H. Jeynes found that the more parents are involved in their children's education, the better their child does in school and beyond (2005). The majority of the research revolves around parent involvement in the most superficial ways. However, the most compelling research are the studies that involve parents in meaningful ways, either by training parents to be tutors at home, by creating a daily dialogue with the teacher, or by allowing parents to make key decisions.

It's clear that parent involvement is good for children. River Springs parents agree. In fact, our parents are willing to take on the largest role in providing a personalized education for their children.

Parents know their children best.

As we know, linking new learning to prior knowledge is what constitutes lasting learning. Parents know what their children know and are best able to help their children make the connections necessary for optimal learning.

Parents deserve to have control of their children's education.

Parents have the right to decide for their children in every other arena of life – medical care, nutrition, rules, experiences. Etc. Why do we fail to give parents a say over their child's "compulsory education?" Instead, the State decides the content to be taught, and the local school district decides the brand of curriculum to be used from one of only a handful of approved choices. These choices are highly politicized and not always made using common sense.

To illustrate this point, during the whole language era, you would have been hard-pressed to find any traditional public school using a phonics-based approach, even for those kids not thriving with the State-approved textbooks. If parents had been given a choice, most would have requested a phonics-based program. At that time, the State believed those parents to be old-fashioned and short-sighted. Now, the pendulum has swung away from whole language. Phonics or not, our public educational system should not have the power to disregard a hundred plus years of educational research. At River Springs, we allow parents to focus on results and disregard passing fads and fashions. We are free to use the tools we need for each child's success.

*Why do I homeschool?
Because I know my child
and his capabilities,
weaknesses, and
struggles, and I can use
that information to help
in guiding the
educational outcome in
his life. He cannot get
lost in MY system.*

Jamie Nugent, Parent

*I am best suited to teach my
child because I am the most
vested. The experience and
the outcome of my
childrens' educations
matter to me more than any
paid professional. Because
I care so much, I am
willing to offer my blood,
sweat, and tears like no
other to make sure my child
has the most successful and
appropriate education
possible.*

Lynette Varnell, Parent

#2 – Collaboration with parents is the key to our school's success.

My son is thriving in life! I think River Springs does a lot of things well, but one in particular is the ongoing collaboration.

I have a wonderful, supportive ES who is always there with advice, resources, encouragement, and guidance. The summer conference at Pechanga opens my mind to new ideas and helps me prioritize what is truly important.

Beth Burt, Parent

Three months into the school year, my ES and I discovered that the math curriculum we had chosen was not ideal for my child. We were able to switch to a more hands-on approach that made math more understandable for my daughter. Had she been in a regular school setting, where the curriculum needs to work for twenty other students, our daughter would have been lost in the pool of a curriculum designed to suit the masses.

Mary Lemasters Tahir, Parent

Does River Springs Charter School advocate a “free-for-all” education where parents can choose to skip certain core subjects and focus on basket weaving instead? How do we blend the needs of the State with the needs of our families? The answer is simple. We do this through high level, “true” collaboration between each family and their education specialist.

A learning plan is created for each student collaboratively by the education specialist (ES) and the parent. Many times, the student is also involved in the planning. Collaboration is not optional in our school; it is required. For this reason, we insist on lengthy monthly meetings where planning and collaboration can occur.

We can learn from our parents.

The River Springs parent-teacher relationship is collegial – two equals discussing their passion for education and sharing information. It is not a lecture from the ES to the parent. Teaching is often an isolated profession with too few opportunities to collaborate with peers. In fact, many of our teachers report that they learned more about curriculum, teaching methods, and the learning process in the first year of being an ES than in all of their years in the classroom. Learning through collaboration is one of the things that makes River Springs really special.

Parents are eager to learn how to improve their homeschooling.

Parents want to know how they can help improve their children’s learning, what to expect at each grade level, and ways to make learning more fun.

State Standards

We would not be allowed to receive a charter in the State of California without promising to address the California State Standards. In fact, our charter says, “All students will achieve the student standards by graduation, but not all will progress at the same rate.” The benefit of our charter is the flexibility we have in how and when we cover these standards. If you are a mother of three elementary children who would like to have all of your children learning the same history during the same year, we will not only allow you to do that, but we actually recommend it!

Of course, reading and math instruction **MUST** be delivered incrementally by ability level. The research on incremental development of foundational math and reading skills is overwhelming and unequivocal. It’s not uncommon for children entering our school to be one or more grade levels above or below their age group in reading or math. We personalize the learning plan for each student to ensure at least a year’s growth in each year, regardless of the starting point.

River Springs allows me to tailor the curriculum to meet my children's interests. We can skim through things that don't seem to ignite a spark and focus on things that do – opening up lots of possibilities. We can also move quickly in some areas, for example – math.

Shelley Uekert, Parent

Parent choice has had a positive impact on my family but mostly on my eldest son, Arik. Arik, who will be a senior next year, spent most of his school years labeled as a special education child, struggling through each school year and never getting the help that he needed. Finally, I took him out of the traditional school system and gave him the opportunity to learn according to his interests and abilities. Arik no longer qualifies as a special education student and he now gets A's and B's. Arik passed the CAHSEE exam the first time he took it, and he will attend community college after graduation.

Angie Scolaro, Parent

From time to time, strange questions come up such as, “Must we teach multiplication facts? Do we have to teach writing?” The answer is YES. Our parent choice philosophy allows parents to select curriculum, teaching methods, and pacing for each subject, but it does not extend to cutting core subject areas from the course of study all together. For example, a parent may choose to delay teaching decoding until the end of first grade or the beginning of second grade. That does not mean that the child is free from reading instruction until then. The child must be provided with rich reading instruction in the form of listening comprehension activities, word games, rhyming, language experience activities, etc. until he is ready to begin independent reading.

WASC Accredited High School

When we became accredited four years ago, some parents were concerned because they believed the accreditation would limit parent choice. They were right. Accreditation holds our high school program to a more rigid set of standards than that of a non-accredited institution. Overwhelmingly, our parents preferred to give up some of their choices for high school instruction in order to receive the immense benefits that accreditation provides their students.

Our parents with high school students still have some choices. They can choose between several curricula for each course. According to the subject area, they can select the order in which certain classes will be taken. They can modify the teaching methods and adjust the pace to meet their child’s individual needs. But, no matter how you slice it, the choices are much more restricted than in our elementary program. Parents who want more freedom may want to homeschool independently or through a private independent study program.

#3 – Learning is supremely more important than teaching.

Teaching credentials are less important than relationships.

When "No Child Left Behind" was new, I attended a workshop on what this federal legislation refers to as "Highly Qualified Teachers." When I explained our school's unique issues and how we were going to comply with the law without sending four different specialists into every homeschooler's home each day, the presenter said, "Well, I guess that will work for compliance purposes, but how can teachers who aren't truly highly qualified in a particular field actually teach it?" I replied, "In our school, it's not about teaching. It's about learning. A person can facilitate high quality learning without an expert’s grasp of the subject matter." He laughed ruefully and said, "In my job, it's easy to forget that we should be more focused on the learning than the teaching!"

Credentialed teachers know a lot about the learning process, but parents hold a special kind of knowledge – they understand and love their child. There's a lot to be said for someone who knows exactly what the child already knows, the types of experiences he has had, and the things that motivate him. The teacher who has that "inside track" is sure to be

A few times over the last several months I have abandoned our prearranged schedule in order to spend more time and conduct a more in depth study in an area my kids became especially interested in. I have been able to abbreviate chapters or sections that were boring for them in order to capitalize on their deep interest in other topics.

Deborah Schneider, Parent

Can I provide a better education than the [traditional] schools? Academically, of course I can. Why? It's 1-on-1 instruction versus 1-on-20 (or 30)...My wife and I are fully capable of teaching the material.

Rich Tauchar, Parent

able to hook the new learning to what the child already knows. That "hooking" can be difficult in a traditional classroom when you have kids of so many different cultural backgrounds and experiences that it's hard to find a common frame of reference. Parents are perfectly poised to help children make the vital connections necessary for learning. In contrast, much of a traditional school day is disconnected and segmented in a way that reduces a child's ability to concentrate on a concept until he feels ready to move to the next idea. "Confusion is thrust upon kids by too many strange adults, each working alone with only the thinnest relationships with each other, pretending, for the most part, to an expertise they do not possess" (Gatto, 13).

Today, classroom teachers are increasingly frenzied, attempting to cover large quantities of information by the end of the school year. Howard Gardner, of Multiple Intelligences fame, refers to coverage as the single greatest enemy of understanding (3). This rush to cover leads to the type of teaching that's least conducive to true learning – lecture. Linda McNeil of Rice University found that teachers felt, "the pace of the lecture was critical to covering the course adequately. To maintain that pace, student talk has to be kept to a minimum. [Further,] most teachers felt they could cover more material more efficiently if controversial topics were omitted" (McNeil, 174).

Many times, teachers are more focused on delivering instruction than facilitating the type of interactive learning process that will stick with a child past the test. According to Bill Ayers "[Teaching] is not the delivery of the goods. Teaching is an interactive practice that begins and ends with 'seeing' the student" (Ayers, 128). Parents are the best able to "see" the student. Conversations in which parent and student discover a topic together not only resonate memorably for long term learning, but also model the learning process for students. And, after all, learning how to learn should be the primary goal of K-12 education. (Look to almost any school's mission statement for confirmation of the importance of this idea.)

One on one teaching is the most effective method of teaching.

In 1984, Benjamin Bloom (the author of Bloom's Taxonomy) published the results of a comprehensive study on teaching methods called "The 2 Sigma Problem." He found that tutoring was more effective than any other method of instruction that he studied, even when the tutor was not trained as a tutor or teacher. According to the study, the average tutored student outperformed 98% of his peers in a traditional classroom setting by two standard deviations (2 sigmas). Two standard deviations is an incredible claim. According to one homeschooling mom's analysis of this conclusion, "Since two standard deviations is an awful lot of wiggle room, this means that an average parent who makes a reasonable effort at tutoring his or her children is likely to do a better job than the best classrooms in the country" (Lioness). Our homeschool program's model is one in which tutoring is the primary delivery method. That's powerful teaching with or without a credential.

#4 – What is learned is less important than the learning process.

Parent choice has given my son back his joy of learning. I've been able to teach him that he doesn't need to wait for someone to teach him something; he can teach himself many things. I firmly believe that a child's natural curiosity is the most important "teacher" that he will ever have.

Janice Eichman, Parent

I think the best thing that River Springs has done for me personally is to confirm my beliefs that there are better ways to teach than always with books. Children need to "experience" what they learn.

Ramona Bywater, Parent

In today's world, there is more information than any human being can process. It would be impossible to teach a child all the information he needs for the rest of his life in a 13 year time span. At River Springs, we believe that true education is more than a mere collection of facts or ideas; it is knowing how to behave intelligently when you DON'T know the answer.

We believe that the focus of a good education should be on something educators refer to as "Habits of Mind." Habits of Mind are essential thinking skills – such as problem solving, reasoning, thinking about thinking, making connections – that serve as tools for both formal and informal learning and for life-long participation in society. River Springs graduates should be confident and skillful when facing a new learning task.

There are no magic textbooks.

For the past twenty years, American educators have been searching for the silver bullet textbook series – the textbook that will put an end to illiteracy and poor math skills and put our nation back on top of all the other countries. National and State standards are a step in this direction, and the despotic textbook companies keep a tight grip on their cornered market, ensuring that school districts are forced to purchase new textbooks every 7 years, whether they're needed or not.

In my years of teaching, I have been privileged to work in exclusive private schools in the USA and abroad as well as California public schools in both the inner city and suburbia. Over those years, I was asked to teach numerous curricula, many of which directly contradicted other types of prevailing educational thought – examples include whole language, whole word, phonics, new math, and drill-based math. The most surprising thing about my adventures is that all of these methods worked for most of the students in the class! Even those methods which are completely out of fashion now worked for most of the students. Conversely, if educational experts got together and settled upon one textbook that was the absolute best to teach a particular subject at a particular grade level (this is fantasy here...all experts would never agree), even that premier series would not work for every child in a typical classroom.

So, to make the point absolutely clear, we believe that textbooks are merely a tool to teach the curriculum. They are not the curriculum!

Curiously, the fact that River Springs parents are allowed to choose curricular materials from outside the State of California's adopted list of materials appears to be the most controversial practice of all that we do. It is controversial even though most educators agree that textbooks are only part of a high quality curriculum. In fact, many experts promote using textbooks more as reference materials than as the entire course of study for a particular subject. This is wise because textbooks

Although I create an outline for what content will be covered throughout the school year, I seek my children's participation in terms of how concepts will be learned. For example, we have used KWHL charts to discuss what the children already know and what they want to learn about a specific topic. While discussing how what they "Want to Learn" will be learned, we discuss field trips, computer programs, etc. To what extent it is possible, I incorporate their suggestions, especially field trips, into the learning process.

Peggy Muller, Parent

Personalized learning means that each child is allowed the opportunity to learn in a way that best fits their speed and style of learning. It means that a child will become a life-long learner rather than a short-term memorizer of facts.

Jeanne Fraga, Parent

are designed to give only a superficial "once over lightly" on each concept. In fact, relying solely on the textbook may have serious negative consequences. According to Fred Newmann, "Students receive only superficial exposure to countless items of knowledge that low-achieving students rarely learn and that high achieving students remember only long enough to succeed on tests" (253).

Contrary to the current political landscape in education, at River Springs we promote and encourage deeper, narrower learning. We believe that the human mind learns best when allowed to dig deeply into a subject and marinate in it for a more extended period than is allowed within the traditional system. Many highly regarded educational experts agree with this philosophy, and in fact, Ted Sizer (founder of The Coalition for Essential Schools) offers this revolutionary slogan to improve secondary education: Less is more.

In all my time in education, I've never met anyone who believes that schools should persist in trying to cram so many facts and figures into kids. Why? Everyone knows this information doesn't stick with a person as they grow into adulthood! This point is clearly supported on any episode of the hit television show "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?" In that show, smart, successful adults are asked questions based on today's National and State Standards. They frequently don't know the answer and need to get help from a panel of elementary children. This ridiculous phenomenon has led to one educator issuing the [Deborah] Meier's Mandate: *No student should be expected to meet an academic requirement that a cross section of successful adults in the community cannot* (Kohn, 111). Maybe we should revolutionize the school system by teaching the essentials better and deeper.

Curriculum is not as important as teaching.

It is true that California State adopted textbooks are aligned to the California State Standards. However, it is a vast oversimplification to think that the right textbook will automatically produce high level achievement. The research does not point to the type of textbook series used as being one of the top five reasons why some schools succeed where others fail. In fact, in research on successful schools, curriculum ranks low on the variables that are attributed to the success. What variable is at the top of the list? The teacher.

Actually, an over-reliance on textbooks may become a crutch used by some teachers and administrators to justify not having to address particular learning needs. (We must keep to the pacing guide at all costs!) We believe parents who are enthusiastic about a particular type of textbook or teaching method do a better job of teaching if they are allowed to use what they are comfortable with. If the teacher "buys in" to the method, the child learns better. Research has found that teachers who have choice over their curriculum are more motivated and effective in teaching their chosen curriculum (Zeichner, 301). This leads us to the conclusion that not only is it not necessary to force a cookie cutter curriculum on parents who want something different but that forced choice may actually result in less learning!

While the content that my child is learning is important, I also try to foster life-long learning habits in our homeschool. My child is responsible to do her work, but I allow time every day for her to learn and read on her own.

Kim Greene, Parent

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That said, there's absolutely nothing wrong with traditional textbooks; they can be a great starting point. Many of our parents either agree with the current educational philosophy or don't really know what type of curriculum they'd like. For them, traditional textbooks are often the best choice.

"The process of determining the curriculum for the classroom and for teacher education is increasingly politicized and increasingly subject to legislative mandates, mandates from state departments of education, and so on. Test-driven curricula, hyper-rationalized and bureaucratized school experiences and planning models, atomized and reductive curricula – all of these ARE realities. There HAS been a de-skilling of teachers and of curriculum workers, a separation of conception from execution as planning is removed from the local level and a severe intensification of educators' work as more and more has to be done in less and less time" (Apple, 38-39). If we focus on the learning process (Habits of Mind) instead of a tremendous list of facts and figures to be learned, the task becomes manageable again. We can nurture a highly literate, thinking, reasoning, lifelong learner without stuffing that person full of facts they forget the moment the test is over.

Conclusion

Parent choice is indeed at the core of River Springs Charter School. Our definition of parent choice is indeed revolutionary. Would it be easier for us to provide one or two curricula per grade level and call this parent choice? Yes. Why do we cling to our very difficult-to-deliver model of parent choice? Maybe River Springs parent Katrina Morriss sums it up best:

If we did not have River Springs Charter School as an option, with the mission and vision the way it is today, I am not sure how my son would have survived. I think some children can thrive in a regular public school, but there are others who need a different program. I needed the freedom to decide on the best textbook and pacing for each of my children.

Parents like Mrs. Morriss and you make our difficult task worthwhile.