



An independent study school builds positive student-teacher relationships with the help of an online solution

Visions In Education

The Challenge

Over time, Visions In Education (Visions), a public charter school serving students across nine counties in California, has shifted to a blended learning model. Visions offers two independent study programs for high school students, as well as a home school program for students in grades K-12.

Before 2014, the curriculum for the programs came from traditional textbooks and online resources that Visions created based on the textbook material. But this approach was not ideal. Teachers had trouble monitoring students effectively since they met with students only once every ten days. In addition, since the online resources were homegrown, “keeping the content consistent and coherent was a challenge,” noted Tom Tafoya, the director of business and technology at the school.

Visions realized it needed a consistent learning platform to meet instructional goals, provide comparable measures of student performance, and establish accountability.



Pearson

An Online Learning Solution

Students seeking a high school independent study program all take the same courses in 9th grade in which they learn the skills and behaviors necessary for becoming successful independent study students. They then choose one of two academies for grades 10–12:

- 1. The University Prep Academy (368 students):** Students selecting this option tend to be “accelerated learners, really curious learners,” said Jody Graf, the executive director of the school. “The program lets them take a deeper dive into things that they are really interested in.” Some University Prep students take advantage of dual enrollment programs to earn community college credits, and even an associate’s degree, while completing high school.
- 2. The College and Career Prep Academy (1,508 students):** Students enrolling in this academy are often at risk and credit deficient. Some have faced academic or emotional struggles or suffered from bullying in their former school. Their family’s socioeconomic challenges may also put them at risk.

To meet the diverse needs of the University Prep and the College and Career Prep students and to establish coherence, consistency, and accountability in the academies, Visions implemented GradPoint®, a set of online courses and services now part of the Pearson Connexus™ suite of offerings, starting in the 2014–2015 school year.

Visions provides students in both academies with a Chromebook for doing their course work and provides low-income students with a MiFi device. “We’re able to equip our kids quickly, and they are ready to work as soon as possible,” Tafoya said.

“A lot of our kids are transient,” Frederick Lamora, the director of instruction, explained. “We have kids that are homeless. We have kids that are foster kids. We have kids from split homes that bounce to and fro. A Chromebook is pretty light. We give them a backpack for it. They’ve got a MiFi. They can pretty much do their work anywhere.”

The courses that students in both academies take meet the A–G requirements for admission to the University of California and California State University systems. The broad array of courses allows Visions to cater to the differing needs of students in the academies. University Prep students can take advantage of the honors courses. College and Career Prep students can use the courses to recover credits, working at their own pace.

PROFILE

State

California

School Type

Public charter school

School Enrollment

5,281 students

Grades

K–12

Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Priced Meals

47%

Ethnicity

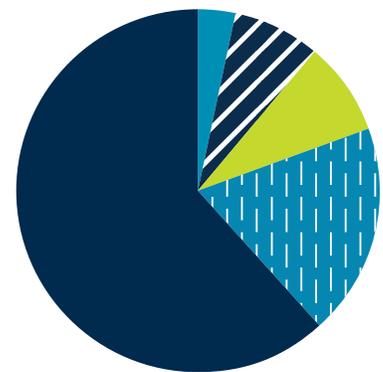
61.9% White

18.8% Hispanic

8.4% Black

3.2% Filipino

7.7% Other



Visions has customized the online content to meet its instructional goals and student needs. For example, because the school believes that writing is an essential skill, students are required to write in every subject. So it added five teacher-graded journal writes to every class.

Even though students take a wide array of classes, the online resources have been the “great equalizer,” according to Sarah McFarland, the associate director of instruction.

From the student’s perspective, McFarland said, “you have all six classes that look the same, with consistent navigation. You have similar types of assignments.” Because the school has eighteen weeks in a semester, curriculum developers modified the course content so that each course is exactly eighteen weeks long. All quizzes and finals are weighted the same, no matter what the content is, she explained.

There is an “amazing uniformity that is so beneficial for kids,” McFarland remarked. “Kids aren’t struggling at our school because they don’t understand the content. The kids who are struggling are kids that are literally not logging in.”

The courses have helped to transform the relationship between teachers and students in the independent study academies. Because teachers have 24/7 access to the system, they “can see at any moment by logging in if students are struggling or if they are being successful,” McFarland commented. Teachers can then reach out to students in a timelier manner, “providing better support for kids on an ongoing daily basis.”

When teachers meet individually with students every ten days, “instead of spending that hour focused on what assignments students did or didn’t do, they can focus on fostering a deep relationship, building trust, working on soft skills, working on how to be motivated,” McFarland said. “Because the online curriculum is so good and it has such great standards and because of Pearson’s cognitive load, our teachers are able to shift into a different relationship with students.”

“You get to know kids at a deeper level,” Lamora concluded, “and when you do, they see that you care for them. We operate by the thinking that students don’t care what you know; they want to know that you care. And then they just perform differently when that happens.”

“The online courses are] helping me to stay on target to graduate and take my homework with me because I’m a mobile person.”

— 11th-Grade Student, College and Career Prep Academy

The Results

“Being able to deliver consistent content to students so that we can look at learning between and amongst students” has enabled Visions to compare “apples to apples,” said Graf. “We have more confidence in our metrics. We can have better conversations about our metrics. That lets us adjust and monitor the goals that we have for students and ensure that students are accomplishing what they need to accomplish and reach their academic targets.”

“We have a lot of kids that weren’t doing well at school until they came to us, and now they’re doing well,” Lamora remarked.

“I would say some of it is due to the content; some of it is due to the different kind of relationship they have with the teacher.”

Visions has seen the average GPA for students in grades 10–12 in the two academies increase by 6 percent, from 1.97 on a 4.0 scale in the 2014–2015 school year (the first year the courses were used) to 2.09 in the 2015–2016 school year. Attendance for independent study students in grades 9–12 increased by 2 percent during that period, the first increase the school had seen in five years.

“Students are having greater access to learning,” commented Graf. “They’re not withdrawing, they are staying with us, and they are completing their work. They can be successful in this learning environment.”

“We are getting away from conversations about work completed and having more conversations about students owning their learning.”

— Sarah McFarland, Associate
Director of Instruction

For more information about mastering the shift to digital, visit pearsoned.com/transforming-learning

**Learning
makes
us**

Learning is a journey of discovery, challenge, and wonder. Along the way, we are transformed.



Pearson