

THE UN-SCHOOL

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— Principal Michele Flynn-Fasnacht

Disenchanted with the structure of public schools, Solid Rock Community School’s founders devised an entirely new educational blueprint. By Melissa Solomon

When school let out last summer, students at Solid Rock Community School, like schoolchildren everywhere, had strong emotions. But they weren’t the typical giddy-anticipation-for-beaches and sleep-late emotions. The students were anxious because they’d have to wait months to return to school. They even tried to convince school leaders to cancel summer vacation.

“These kids love school,” says Michele Flynn-Fasnacht, principal and co-founder of the New Port Richey, Fla., private school. “During the summer, they’re bored.”

That students would prefer school to summer vacation is commendable in and of itself. But given that 35 percent of Solid Rock’s students were at risk or failing in their previous schools — public and private — their passion is exceptional.

What fuels that passion is the school’s unique approach to learning, in which students, with the assistance of faculty, design their own curricula. The wireless notebook PCs scattered throughout the open-loft-style school are an important component of that custom approach, offering

students virtual classrooms that they can fashion to meet their own unique needs.

Students decide which courses to take (within boundaries), at what level and how they’d like to approach them: in a group that meets with a teacher, on their own using textbooks or via the Internet.

PERFECT FIT

The custom approach helps accommodate the plethora of learning styles found in the school. That’s critical to parents like Tina Velasquez, whose fifth-grade daughter and seventh-grade son both have special needs and were failing in public and private schools before enrolling at Solid Rock.

“In public schools, you’re a number,” Velasquez says. “It’s all about order, efficiency, conformity.” Solid Rock is the opposite, she says.

“If my son does his math homework upside down and backwards, but it still comes out correct, he’s not chastised for doing it wrong,” she says. “He’s actually praised for taking a different approach.”

She was amazed at the results from



The technology used in classes depends on students’ personal learning goals, say Principal Michele Flynn-Fasnacht (left) and Vice Principal Terri Schryer.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAY CARLSON

Customized Learning

About 35 percent of Solid Rock students received Individualized Education Plans in their previous schools. That means they were at risk of flunking out and needed customized learning plans. Given the volume of students they work with and their limited resources, however, public schools can only customize plans to a certain extent, says Terri Schryer, co-founder and vice principal.

Solid Rock creates custom student plans for all students, whether they’re at risk of failing or they’re performing years ahead of their peers. The plans list the following:

- Course lists
- Type of courses (i.e., online, textbook or group)
- Diagnoses such as attention deficit disorder or dyslexia
- Therapy
- Learning styles (i.e., hands-on, visual or aural)
- Personal interests
- Pertinent family history
- Educational and social goals
- Strategies for intervention

the start. “My kid all of a sudden smiles,” Velasquez says. “For once, he’s happy.”

Unlike traditional schools, Solid Rock doesn’t use grade levels to group students and dictate what they should be learning. No two schedules are the same, so a student studying college-level literature might also be in a fifth-grade math class.

“It’s more like college in that respect,” says Terri Schryer, co-founder and vice principal. “The students are working at their individual levels, so they’re not lost because someone told them they had to be there.”

The amount of technology used in classes depends on students’ personal learning goals. Some students have never used computers before enrolling at Solid Rock; others have used them but are relatively computer illiterate, says Flynn-Fasnacht. The online classes (www.solidrockvirtualschool.com) teach them valuable technology skills, she adds.

Students even determine how long they’ll spend on a particular course. Because they don’t have to worry about

advancing to the next grade each year, students work as quickly or as slowly as they need. They move on when they’ve learned the material and completed the coursework. As such, students at Solid Rock can’t fall behind — or grow bored if they’re ahead — because they don’t have to keep pace with a group.

“We literally stop and we say, ‘You can’t do this? We’re not going to move onto the next lesson,’” Flynn-Fasnacht explains. That can mean working with a tutor, switching to another class or changing the method of teaching from, say, a lecture-style format to educational video games. “Whatever happens, we don’t leave the children behind.”

NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

The phrase “no child left behind” really gets to Solid Rock teacher and parent Valerie Anderson. “My son is the epitome of a child who was left behind,” she says. He had to repeat kindergarten and second grade because of his dyslexia. He even struggled in private school. At Solid Rock, however, he’s learning at his own level in each subject area.

“I needed an environment that catered to all children, not just children who could read and write,” Anderson says.

When you walk in the door, it’s clear that this isn’t a typical school. There are counters and round tables scattered about, with notebook PCs, TVs and DVD players, and other peripheral equipment out in the open for students to use at their own discretion.

“It’s very similar to home schooling,” says Rebeckah Shaw, the school’s president. “You go at your own pace.” But, she adds, you’re surrounded by fellow students and teachers, so it’s more fun than home schooling. “I love it.”

Shaw, who was home-schooled from eighth grade until this year, wasn’t cut out for traditional schooling. “I wasn’t learning anything in public school,” she says. “I was bored to death.”

Now, half her classes are online, so she can move ahead when she’s ready. “I’m always asking for more work,” says Shaw, who at age 15 already has enough credits to graduate. “I would have never had this chance in public school.”

A New Shape for Classrooms

The concept behind Solid Rock Community School is simple: “We don’t like sticking kids in boxes,” says co-founder and Vice Principal Terri Schryer.

With its open architecture and the virtual expansions provided by its online classes, Solid Rock teaches students of all shapes and sizes. Some kids have genius-level IQs; others have learning disabilities.

Schryer and co-founder and Principal Michele Flynn-Fasnacht had both home-schooled their children, and although they liked the flexibility it provided, they lacked the resources and sense of community available in schools.

“We were looking for something that didn’t exist,” Flynn-Fasnacht says. “We knew what it was, but it wasn’t out there.”

So they built it. Thanks to the school’s small size (60 students in first through 12th grade), flexible learning environment and technology, students are learning the skills that they couldn’t grasp when they were one of 20 or 30 students in a room.

Every child has a different learning style and pace, but traditional schools typically use only one curriculum. “Well, that curriculum doesn’t fit every style,” Flynn-Fasnacht says. “In our school, we have many types of curricula, so if one curriculum doesn’t work, we have another we can try.”

— Melissa Solomon