



Polk Perspective: School choice is good for educators, too

**By Karla Collins
and Mark Thomas**
Guest columnists

We spent a combined 53 years in public schools. It was our life's calling.

We worked our way up from teachers to principals to district administrators. So how on earth could we pack up our book bags and leave mid-career to start anew in a private school?

In a word: empowerment.

Every educator dreams of positively impacting student lives. But not every educator feels they can. Not because they lack the skill, but because something above us obstructs and impedes our efforts.

As teachers, we weren't empowered to decide the curriculum or testing for our kids. As principals, we couldn't hire the teachers who were always best for our students. As district administrators, we made decisions for the entire county, without facing the needs of individual schools or students.

Now, at an independent private school, we have ownership of our ideas and decisions. We can make immediate changes as needed, focus on the whole student and identify ways to serve his or her unique needs.

We approached that freedom timidly at first due to our experience of bureaucracy and red tape. We often sought permission from the executive pastor of Victory Church anticipating a "no." Instead, he encouraged us to think out of the box.

In Florida, thanks to

school choice, more and more educators now have the ability to do what we did.

Florida now has 300,000 students in charter schools, and 140,000 students using state-supported scholarships to attend private schools. Students benefit from these options, including 301 at Victory Christian who use the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for lower-income students. But so do thousands of educators who serve them.

At VCA, we know our approach is leading to academic success.

We've used our flexibility to hire teachers who are in sync with our mission and culture; to use the testing we think is best; even adjust curriculum where needed to increase the rigor.

For example, we switched to a growth-model test called the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) in place of a one-time snapshot at the end of the year.

It allows us to test the learning gains of students three times per year. Unlike most standardized tests, including the Florida Standards Assessments, we get the results in 24 hours, not in the middle of the summer where it does little to inform teachers, students and parents. The Office of Student Learning at Step Up For Students provided invaluable support by training our staff and teachers to analyze and utilize the data. Now, the data is a driving force in decision-making.

Sitting down with our teachers, we're now able to drill down and locate specific learning gaps for individual students.

Teachers, in turn, prescribe customized solutions.

Lower-scoring students can be provided extra tutoring or summer school; high-scoring students can be promoted to more difficult material. Finding ways to differentiate is key to increasing student learning.

When MAP shined a giant spotlight on our math deficiencies, we researched math programs across the nation and replaced curriculum with Singapore Math at the recommendation of one of our experienced teachers. The key to a successful implementation is professional development, support and modeling. It worked! Last year, 79 percent of our lower-income scholarship students achieved a year's worth of growth, or more, in math, compared to about 55 percent nationally.

We never thought we'd leave public education. In a way, we never did. VCA has a similar demographic to Polk County Schools. We hire certified teachers. We're accredited by AdvancED.

But in other ways, VCA is different. It's special because we have the opportunity to use our educational experience, and the privilege to spiritually influence the lives of our students.

Over the past seven years, we've been blessed to see VCA grow from 260 to 560 students. We're still on a mission to positively impact the students in our community. All that's changed is the location.

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