

**How Personalized Learning Models Can Meet the Needs  
of Students with Disabilities:  
Thrive Public Schools Case Study**

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## **About the Center on Reinventing Public Education**

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

## Introduction: Purpose and Summary of this Case Study

Charter schools—public schools that receive greater autonomy from district and state regulations in return for greater accountability—present opportunities to provide exemplary and innovative supports and services to students with disabilities. Charter schools’ freedom to innovate enables them to create and offer new models and practices, much needed by students with disabilities and their families who seek the right “fit.” Charter schools, however, face specific challenges and struggles in providing students with specialized, and potentially expensive, services and accommodations, especially without the benefits provided by large district infrastructures and economies of scale.

In an effort to document and promote school models and practices that effectively serve students with disabilities in charter schools, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) asked the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) to conduct two case studies about exemplary schools that respectively leverage available opportunities and mitigate challenges.

This case study highlights Thrive Public Schools in San Diego and how its personalized learning model especially benefits students with disabilities and meets their specific needs. The other case study, *How School Culture and Support Systems Can Improve Disciplinary Outcomes for Students with Disabilities*, examines Mott Haven Academy Charter School in New York City and how its positive school culture and behavior support systems improve disciplinary outcomes for students with disabilities. Together, these case studies provide examples of models and practices that other public schools—both charter and traditional—can implement to create programs where all students succeed, including those with disabilities.

## Research Methodology

Through nominations from field experts, CRPE and NCSECS identified charter schools having success with students with disabilities via personalized learning. They narrowed the list based on publicly available data that demonstrated a school had similar student demographics to the district in which it is located, but had better academic growth or outcomes. Using this final list of schools, the NCSECS team interviewed school leaders using a semi-structured, information-gathering interview protocol. NCSECS also reviewed both publicly available resources (such as Thrive Public Schools’ website, original charter, Parent-Student Handbook, 2016-2017 end of year report, and the California Department of Education’s Thrive School profile and accountability report card), as well as privately shared resources (such as schoolwide and special education-specific data, policies and procedures, school documents, and master schedules).

NCSECS selected Thrive to be one of the case study sites after speaking with Executive Director Dr. Nicole Assisi. NCSECS visited the school in fall 2017 to conduct additional interviews with school administrators, teachers, students, family members, and staff (e.g., instructional aides), as well as to observe educators and students in action. These interviews enabled NCSECS to construct a consistent narrative about the school while enabling school teams to share strategies or characteristics unique to their school community. While the Thrive network is currently evolving and growing, this case study reflects data from its three campuses in the fall of 2017.

Findings from the data and document reviews, interviews, and school visit observations inform this case study, which highlights the areas identified as most important for the school’s work with students with disabilities, particularly as it relates to personalized learning. NCSECS has shared drafts and integrated feedback from the school’s leaders to ensure a full and accurate picture of their school.

### Thrive Public Schools Profile

<b>Year Opened</b>	2014
<b>Authorizer</b>	California State Board of Education
<b>Legal Status</b>	Local education agency (LEA) for all purposes EXCEPT special education; part of the El Dorado County Office of Education Charter SELPA for special education (see section “Provision of Special Education Services” for more information).
<b>Total Enrollment</b>	640 (2017-2018 school year)
<b>Grades Served</b>	K-12 that is growing to serve kids in the City Heights and Linda Vista neighborhoods.
<b>Mission and Goals</b>	<p>“By harnessing the power of cutting-edge technology and instructional strategies, we ensure students from diverse backgrounds and abilities come together so they can <b>Learn to Learn, Learn to Do, and Learn to Be</b>. Graduating students who are <b>college-prepared, career-inspired, and community-minded</b> is our top priority. It’s also critical to keeping San Diego competitive as an innovation economy. Out of the 500,000 students currently in San Diego schools, 375,000 will not graduate college. Those who graduate often lack the skills demanded by our innovation economy. At Thrive, students prepare for their futures by interacting with specialized technology and inspired teachers who are constantly advancing their skillsets. Through <b>personalized learning plans and project-based learning</b>, students get more of what they need individually while also learning to collaborate in groups. A struggling reader gets personalized instruction and adaptive curriculum, a talented mathematician is given more complex problems, and a classroom full of students from diverse backgrounds learn to work together to <b>imagine, create, grow—and thrive.</b>”</p>

## Thrive Public Schools and Its Students

Thrive is an independent charter public school network located in San Diego serving a diverse group of students from transitional kindergarten through 12th grade from various backgrounds and with various abilities. It opened its doors in the fall of 2014 after receiving its charter from the California State Board of Education.

Thrive emerged from its founders’ unique vision: to build a school that adapts to each individual student and that ignites passion for learning and self-confidence. With this in mind, they built a curriculum with active and personalized experiences as the core of the learning process. It is no surprise that the network enrolls higher percentages of students with disabilities and English language learners compared to the state of California and San Diego; such a curriculum particularly benefits this population of students who have unique needs and strengths that are simply addressed by design.

“In practice, the curriculum operates in a way that allows each student to receive instruction and support that are just right for them.” —*Thrive Principal*

Moreover, Thrive’s founders built a school model that intentionally mirrors the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity of San Diego (see table 1 for demographic data). Its lively school campuses are located in two of San Diego’s most underserved neighborhoods—City Heights and Linda Vista—yet the network currently serves students from 45 zip codes. Such a model also particularly benefits students with disabilities by grounding learning in inclusion and diversity. Fortunately, students with disabilities and their families are made aware of Thrive’s model and its benefits in a number of different ways, including official awards, word of mouth, media recognition, and leaders’ engagement within the community.

**TABLE 1.** How Thrive’s Student Demographics Compare, 2016-2017 School Year

	State of California <sup>1</sup>	San Diego County <sup>2</sup>	Thrive Public Schools <sup>3</sup>
Students with Disabilities	9%	10%	16%
English Language Learners	17%	19%	33%
Free and Reduced-Price Meals	59%	54%	53%
Asian	5%	3%	5%
Black/African-American	8%	7%	15%
Hispanic/Latino	51%	51%	41%
Multiple Races, Asian or Native Hawaiian, American Indian, or Alaska Native	8%	9%	6%
White	28%	30%	33%

For the past couple of years, California has undergone significant changes to its state testing and accountability systems; consequently, analysis of those results can be imprecise and unreliable. Many schools are therefore utilizing the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment, which is a research-based adaptive assessment developed by the Northwest Evaluation Association. This assessment enables educators to understand and interpret student academic growth specifically.

According to MAP data, students who attend Thrive for multiple years have greater success and growth compared to students who have not. At nearly all grade levels, Thrive students are meeting or exceeding reading growth targets. Notably, Thrive students are in the top 1 percent nationally for reading growth. In 6 out of 10 grade levels, its students are meeting or exceeding national math growth targets.<sup>4</sup> These results seem fitting, given that personalized learning and growth are central to the curriculum.

## Provision of Special Education Services

After the enrollment period ends and students accept their spaces, Thrive identifies those who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), requests all related documents and data, and works to provide a continuity of support and services.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, all students who may qualify for special education services but who don't yet have an IEP are evaluated at the beginning of each school year for their progress in the general program. If potential eligibility is demonstrated, a team of qualified professionals performs additional evaluations and determines an appropriate course of action.

This is a complicated and daunting task. Sufficient funding and technical expertise are essential for the network to provide a full continuum of quality special education services. Thrive is its own local education agency (LEA), which in practice means that the network operates as its own school district. Typically, LEAs have full legal and financial responsibility for delivering education to all students, including those with disabilities, regardless of the expenditures or degree of specialization needed.

California, however, uniquely mandates that districts join consortia, otherwise known as Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA's), that typically provide special education services to students residing within the SELPA's boundaries. Thrive belongs to the El Dorado County Office of Education Charter SELPA, which pools and subsequently distributes costs from multiple districts across the state to take advantage of economies of scale. But in reality, Thrive actively shoulders the responsibility of educating their students with disabilities by implementing innovative practices.

The school primarily focuses its delivery of supports and services for students with disabilities by having special education specialists work in the classroom alongside the general education teachers throughout the week. Pull-out services for students with and without IEPs are also provided for those that require more intensive support, such as for occupational therapy, speech therapy, and counseling. Still, 99 percent of students with IEPs spend 80 percent or more of their time in the general education setting. This is far greater than the national average: roughly 68 percent of students with disabilities spend at least 80 percent of their day in general education classrooms.<sup>6</sup>

While the specialists are primarily available to support students with disabilities, they work with all students. Ultimately, this creates an environment in which all teachers and specialists take responsibility for all students. By removing the silos that occur when only special education teachers work with special education students, the classroom flourishes as a fully inclusive community.

This partnership between general and special education teachers is intentionally fostered by school leadership. All Thrive teachers are provided 300 hours annually for collaborative planning, data review, and professional development. And they learn about strategies and practices that support different learning styles and abilities in addition to basic special education principles and relevant policies.

Thrive leadership also intentionally fosters a partnership between the school and its families both inside and outside the classroom. Given that parents are experts about their children and know their needs and strengths best, this partnership is especially helpful for the school in educating students with disabilities.

“Thrive really holds our hand through the entire educational process, while also giving us a space to have a voice and develop a partnership. The school clearly values finding solutions and deciding courses of action together.” —*Parent of 5th grade Thrive student with an IEP*

## A School Day at Thrive

Thrive lesson plans typically incorporate twice-daily opportunities for students and teachers to intentionally check in, connect, and communicate with each other and themselves. This builds class norms that are positive and inclusive—all students are heard and valued.<sup>7</sup> The entire school even gathers weekly for a schoolwide community meeting. These practices underscore and cultivate Thrive’s commitment to full inclusion, both social and academic in nature.

Lesson plans also focus on targeted academic progress and leadership development (see figure 1 in Appendix A for a typical school day schedule). For example, each Wednesday is dedicated to “flex time,” a period in which students individually work on either English language arts or math, based on their personal needs. Thrive students can also take advantage of free tutoring sessions in the morning and afternoon based on recommendations by teachers or specialists, whether because of family needs, intervention support, or assistance with complex learning. Thrive’s focus on personalized attention particularly benefits students with disabilities, given how instruction and support automatically adapt to every student’s own learning styles and abilities.

“Our focus is and should always be meeting the students where they are.” —*Thrive Core Teacher*

Thrive teachers create curricula that are tailored to individual student needs and strengths by using technology-based educational programs, targeted instruction, project-based learning, and social-emotional development (figure 2 in Appendix A shows the school’s learning objectives, approaches, and metrics). These components work together to support personalized learning so students can be “College-Prepared” (Learn to Learn), “Career-Inspired” (Learn to Do), and “Community-Minded” (Learn to Be). These three components are detailed below.

## Learning to Learn

Thrive students “**Learn to Learn**” as teachers use evidence-based, student-centered practices to develop their academic skills in numeracy and literacy. The curriculum focuses on building the foundations and developing the skills necessary for students to navigate their own future path, such as post-secondary education.

Thrive teachers supplement their instructional practices with technology-based educational programs that allow students to master skills at their own pace, to dedicate more time and focus to areas of difficulty, and to progress ahead once conceptual understanding is consistently demonstrated.<sup>8</sup> The programs also allow students to articulate and track their literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional goals and to measure their own growth. Given that IEPs dictate precisely where, when, and how students with disabilities can learn, this process can foster an environment of enthusiasm by granting them greater ownership over their learning.

“I really love that I can make my own goals and choose what to focus on during the day. I’m more excited to learn.” —*10th grade Thrive student with an IEP*

Notably, these technology-based programs enable teachers to collect instant data and feedback about academic progress, thereby allowing them to assess a student’s individual areas of struggle and achievement. General and special education teachers collaboratively review and interpret individual and class-level data and feedback to identify academic patterns. They accordingly prepare and adapt targeted lessons and interventions for all students.

This component of Thrive’s personalized learning model actively fosters full inclusion of students with disabilities. The unique learning needs, strengths, styles, and abilities of all students, regardless of IEP status, remain the focus of their learning process. Consequently, there is no discernable distinction between students who are receiving special education services and students who are not; individual support and progress is simply a classroom norm for all students, creating an environment ripe for students with disabilities to succeed.

## Learning to Do

As a project-based learning (PBL) school, Thrive students also “**Learn to Do.**” Students experience hands-on engagement in a dynamic learning environment and develop important skills like critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving. PBL sessions are intentionally cross-disciplinary to prepare students for the future—where subjects, disciplines, and knowledge all intersect. These project design elements and accompanying teaching practices allow the learning experience to be individually tailored to students with a wide range of abilities, and are thus an important part of Thrive’s personalized learning model.

All projects have driving questions relating to the curriculum, which can be explored via project deliverables that showcase competency and mastery of skills and content. PBL is student-led and task-oriented, and appropriately differentiates according to students’ individual interests. Students receive frequent feedback and guidance from teachers as they progress toward the final product. Thrive’s student project grades are based on both the student’s process and the product, enabling all Thrive students to succeed in PBL. This equitable and authentic assessment structure supports fuller inclusion of students with disabilities by reinforcing individualization.

## Learning to Be

“Everyone here is a part of the community—students, families, teachers, and leaders alike. Everyone is part of the team, and everyone belongs here. Thrive works because this educational philosophy is complemented by its instructional model.” —*Thrive Education Specialist*

In addition to individualized academic learning, Thrive students “**Learn to Be**” members of an intentional and committed community. The school builds a foundation for this community via social-emotional learning (SEL)—the final component of Thrive’s personalized learning model—with

teachers addressing SEL lessons and themes in academic discussion and assignments.<sup>9</sup> Students are empowered by connection, empathy, and communication, and learn to self-advocate, self-actualize, and self-regulate.<sup>10</sup> This equips students for the real world by enabling them to practice life skills in a safe environment, which are equally as important as academic skills and incredibly critical, particularly for students with disabilities.

An example of a tangible method for practicing social-emotional learning is the “council meeting,” in which a small group of students of different ages practice reflection and seek counsel. Students address an issue or dilemma collaboratively, and consequently resolve conflict in an empathetic, proactive manner. These types of social-emotional learning practices create a positive learning environment infused with restorative justice principles.

While marginalized student populations, including students with disabilities, are disproportionately disciplined compared to their peers, the environment fostered by Thrive allows teachers and leaders to keep equity as the foundation to the discipline process.

**TABLE 2. Thrive’s Discipline Rates Were Lower Than California’s and San Diego’s in 2016-2017<sup>11</sup>**

	State of California	San Diego Unified School District	Thrive Public Schools*
Suspension Rate	7.1%	5.8%	0.4%
Expulsion Rate	0.14%	0.14%	0%

*\*Thrive discipline data provided by Thrive Public Schools.*

## Conclusion

What makes personalized learning work well for Thrive’s students with disabilities? Other public schools—both charter and traditional—should pay particular attention to the school’s keys to success:

- Students with disabilities are fully included in general education. There is no discernable distinction between students who are receiving special education services and those who are not; individual support and progress is simply a classroom norm for all students.
- Teachers use technology-based educational programs to supplement instruction and develop data-driven individualized support that benefits all students, particularly those with disabilities.
- All teachers, special and general education teachers alike, receive training about special education and learn effective strategies for meeting individual student needs. Moreover, special education teachers work alongside general education teachers and share responsibility for all students, not just those with disabilities.

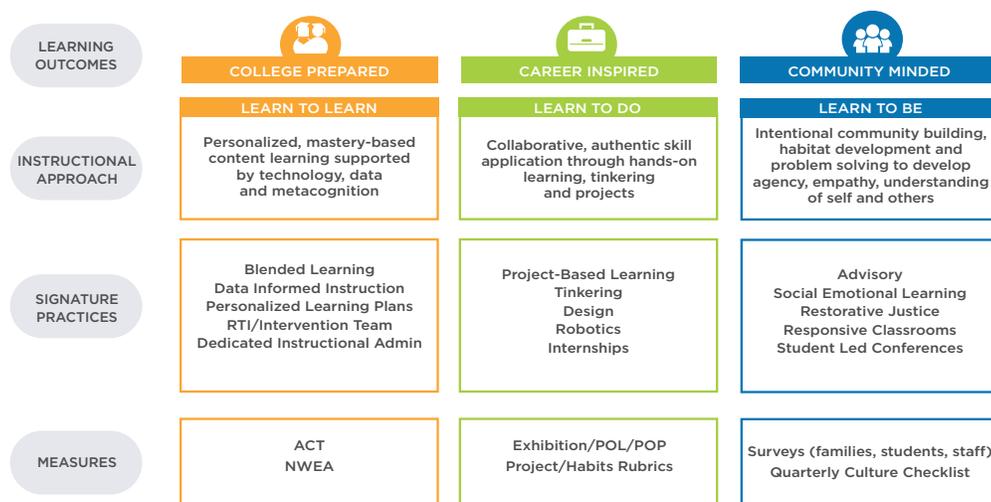
## Appendix A

FIGURE 1. Typical 6th Grade Schedule, Thrive Public Schools

SAMPLE SCHEDULE 6TH GRADE					
Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:00 - 8:30	Optional Tutoring	Optional Tutoring	Optional Tutoring	Optional Tutoring	Optional Tutoring
8:15 - 9:00	<b>Morning Meeting</b>	<b>Morning Meeting</b>	<b>Morning Meeting</b>	<b>Morning Meeting</b>	<b>Morning Meeting</b>
9:00 - 10:30	ELA Rotation	ELA Rotation	Flex Time	ELA Rotation	ELA Rotation
	Storyteller's Picnic (Literacy)	Storyteller's Picnic (Literacy)		Storyteller's Picnic (Literacy)	Storyteller's Picnic (Literacy)
10:30 - 11:30	Exploratory	Exploratory		Exploratory	Exploratory
11:30 - 12:15	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
12:15 - 12:50	Project-base Learning Science	Project-base Learning Social Studies	Flex Time	Project-base Learning Science	Project-base Learning Social Studies
12:55 - 1:30			Community School-wide Meeting		
1:45 - 3:15	Math Rotation	Math Rotation	Teacher Professional Development and Planning	Math Rotation	Math Rotation
3:15 - 3:30	<b>Afternoon Meeting</b>	<b>Afternoon Meeting</b>		<b>Afternoon Meeting</b>	<b>Afternoon Meeting</b>
3:30 - 4:30	Optional Tutoring	Optional Tutoring		Optional Tutoring	

Source: Thrive Public Schools

FIGURE 2. Learning Objectives, Approaches, and Metrics, Thrive Public Schools



Source: Thrive Public Schools

## Endnotes

1. "2016-17 Enrollment by Subgroup for Charter and Non-Charter Schools, Statewide Report," California Department of Education website (accessed February 27, 2018).
2. "2016-17 Enrollment by Subgroup for Charter and Non-Charter Schools, San Diego County Report," California Department of Education website (accessed February 27, 2018).
3. "Thrive Public Schools 2016-2017 End of Year Report," Thrive Public Schools website (accessed February 27, 2018).
4. Ibid.
5. Thrive has an open-enrollment period from October to April during which it takes applications for potential students. The school uses a random lottery drawing to admit students if the number of applications exceeds the capacity of a program, class, grade level, or building.
6. Lauren Morando Rhim and Shaini Kothari, *Key Trends in Special Education in Charter Schools: A Secondary Analysis of the Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-2014* (New York, NY: National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools, 2018).
7. At the TK-7 level, the school day officially begins and ends with the Responsive Classroom practices of Morning Meeting and Closing Circle, respectively. At the 8-12 level, the school day begins with an Advisory Class, supplemented with a weekly circle practice called Council.
8. The school uses Lexia<sup>®</sup> and ThinkCERCA<sup>™</sup> for reading, ST Math<sup>®</sup> and Zearn<sup>®</sup> for math at the elementary level, and Summit Basecamp at the high school level.
9. The teachers model strategies that strengthen the community, such as active listening, conflict resolution, and empathy, guided by philosophies like the SCARF behavior model and *Discipline with Dignity*.
10. Thrive leaders and teachers utilize a unique social-emotional-focused Multi-Tier System of Supports based on students' social-emotional needs and observed trends. This system specifically supports students who require social-emotional interventions, students who have behavioral supports in place, and students who need a closer connection to the community via research-based practices, such as breathing exercises, short-term goal setting, and circle practices (e.g., Joe Provisor's Training Manual and Jane Raphael's Circle Practices<sup>®</sup>).
11. "2016-17 Suspension Rate Statewide Report," California Department of Education website (accessed February 27, 2018).