

Florida Reformers Got It Right

Hybrid schoolers reap the benefits

by WILLIAM MATTOX

My son Richard has the chutzpah of Hank Greenberg, the greatest Jewish baseball player of all time. So, soon after we moved to Florida, Richard tried out for the baseball team at Tallahassee's Leon High, even though he didn't go to school there!

Richard was considered a home schooler at the time, but “hybrid schooler” would have been more accurate: He took classes from an online provider, a small private school, and a performing arts program.

Richard made the team, and by midseason lots of new baseball buddies were hanging around our house on weekends. Soon we discovered that Richard wasn't the only “hybrid student” on the ball club that year. Leon's first baseman spent his mornings taking online courses through the Florida Virtual School, the knuckleball pitcher was taking a “dual enrollment” English class through the community college, and the left-handed pro prospect had enrolled in a financial management course at a local college (in case he was drafted).

Moreover, one of Leon's outfielders had figured out an ingenious way to get a music education few families could afford out of pocket. This kid took mostly music classes at Leon by day and then several online courses at night and during the summer. He ended up being a four-time All-State musician and getting a college offer from Juilliard.

When I first encountered all these hybrid students, I figured there must be something in the water at Leon High. But I came to realize that many of these unconventional schooling options were the by-product of reforms former governor Jeb Bush had initiated, especially the creation of the Florida Virtual School.

The rise of hybrid schooling bodes well for students whose needs, gifts, interests, and learning styles do not align with the factory school model of the 20th century, and for parents who know that no school can maximize the potential of every child every year in every way. (There is a *Magic School Bus*, but no magic school.)

Customized education is good for all kids and not just for academic reasons. Several years ago, Richard entered a local talent competition structured much like *American Idol*. Different singers would perform at big community gatherings and



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Customized education is good for all kids and not just for academic reasons.

then people would vote for the ones they considered the best. Richard kept advancing week after week, until on the night of the finals, one of the organizers took me aside and said, “I don't get it. You guys just moved here a year or so ago, and yet Richard seems to have a really strong base of support.”

As Richard's proud papa, I wanted to tell this guy, “Of course, Richard's got lots of support—he's the best one.” But I knew what this guy was getting at, so I explained, “See that guy over there? That's Richard's drama teacher at Young Actors Theatre. He gets all his thespian friends to vote for Richard.” Then I said, “See that family over there? They know Richard from baseball. Those kids over there took classes with Richard at the classical Christian school. The college students way back there know Richard from Young Life youth ministry. And those kids over there are in the AP classes Richard is taking at Leon.”

The contest organizer realized that Richard's social network was far larger than he'd expected. What I marveled at was how diverse his friendship network was. Gay. Straight. Christian. Non-Christian. Jocks.

Thespians. Nerds. Cool kids. Richard's friends reflect the diversity of his hybrid-schooling life.

Now, I'm not so naive as to think that hybrid schooling will eradicate high school cliques or classroom bullying. But customized schooling can offer kids a far richer, and more varied, social experience than they might otherwise get. And when you add these social benefits to the educational advantages of customized schooling, you can see why I'm glad that Jeb Bush and other reformers had the Hank Greenberg-like chutzpah to change the way that Florida does education.

William Mattox is a resident fellow at the James Madison Institute in Tallahassee, Florida.