



# High school education has evolved

By Maureen Magee

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The caps and gowns haven't changed much. "Pomp and Circumstance" continues to mark the occasion. And many of those valedictorians are bound to quote "The Road Not Taken."

Commencement ceremonies have remained virtually unchanged over the years. But don't be fooled. The high school experience leading up to graduation has never looked so different for American teenagers.

Everything from technology to academic innovations to the lagging economy has influenced high schools and the students they serve — locally and nationwide.

- No longer a novelty, independent charter schools will issue a record number of diplomas to students who received a new brand of education — often in some unlikely venues, including shopping malls, museums and an old Navy boot camp.
- More students than ever will graduate this year after taking some of their courses online.
- And tough economic times have created a rising population of homeless students — and programs and schools designed to educate and help them.

Mainstream campuses will almost certainly continue to serve the majority of students, but even those institutions are moving away from the one-size-fits-all approach to high school.

"American high schools are starting to realize that educating students does not mean plugging them into a formula that was crated in the late 1800s," said Nancy Farnan, director of San Diego State University's School of Teacher Education. "What we are finally starting to see is a focus that is increasingly on meeting the needs of students and what they need to know."

## The charter dynamic

The charter school movement has driven many recent changes in education.

Public charters have spread nationwide since the first one opened in 1992. Today more than 1.6 million students attend 5,000 charters. California is home to 912 charters, more than any other state. San Diego County claims 91 of them, 11 opened this school year.

Free of some education codes and union rules, charters have more flexibility when it comes to hiring and academics.

In San Diego, there are charters that promote professional internships, the arts and languages. There are charters nurturing first-generation college students, and others are tied to museums and soon a library.

But not everyone turns to charters to escape an undesirable campus.

Janet Ilko's son, Steven, was headed to the academic powerhouse Scripps Ranch High School when a start-up charter caught the family's eye.

The Health Sciences High and Middle College promised students a personalized education with internships and ties to Sharp Hospital.

“We went a charter because it appealed to my son’s interest in the medical field,” Ilko said. “There is a trade-off because you give up homecoming and other things. But he’s worked as a hospital intern, spent time in the OR and he’s graduating with 24 community college credits and is headed to Berkeley.”

Traditional schools also offer career-themed programs and colleges classes designed to better prepare students for jobs and higher education. Many of those programs have been influenced by charters, said Jed Wallace CEO of the California Charter School Association.

“There is this hunger for freedom and for flexibility that charters have and it is infectious,” Wallace said. “At the same time, you have a technological landscape and a fiscal landscape that simply cries out for innovation.”

## **Technology revolution**

Technology’s influence on the classroom has been drastic in recent years.

In 2008, the nonprofit Sloan Consortium reported that students nationwide were enrolled in 1.03 million [online courses](#) — a 47 percent increase from the 2005-06 school year. By 2019, up to 50 percent of courses are likely to be offered online, according the International Association of K-12 Learning.

“The American high school experience is really being driven by this need to personalize instruction — that’s what technology does,” said Susan Patrick, CEO of association, a Washington D.C. nonprofit. “Students go from being consumers of information to creators and collaborators.”

Online classes can be more personalized than large traditional classes, Patrick said. Students meet with teachers and science labs, and receive assignments based on their interests. Online classes can also give students access to Advanced Placement courses when their school does not. The California Department of Education is not sure how many students take online classes, but will begin tracking that information next year.

Countywide, 15 of the 42 school districts offer virtual classes.

Some 5,000 of the San Diego Unified School District’s 130,000 students this year took some online classes — either to make up poor grades or take classes for the first time. The iHigh Virtual Academy caters to full-time students and those who want a combination of computer classes and traditional ones.

## **Educating the homeless**

Another growing population in schools — homeless children — comes from the relentless fiscal crisis that has pushed families into hard times and prevented others from climbing out of poverty. The National Center on Family Homelessness reports that one in 50 children nationwide experienced homelessness in the 2009-10 school year. That includes families living in shelters, cars, and temporarily with friends and relative, according to the center.

In San Diego County, 13,204 students were listed as homeless in the 2009-10 school year, according to the San Diego County Office of Education.

Although students who become homeless can stay at their regular schools, the San Diego’s Monarch School offers them a haven from judgment, while providing them with an education, health care, clothes counseling and other services.

Monarch has grown by about 75 percent since the fall of 2009 and now serves as many as 185 students on any given day. The cramped school is poised to move into a larger campus in 2012 to accommodate the growing population.

“We see education as a way out of poverty and homelessness for our students,” said Principal Joel Garcia. “It would be impossible for a school to meet the needs of every single student — especially with budget cuts.”

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