



Aaron Lagesse, left, 12, sings along with music teacher Ella Hubley on March 18, at the alternate school program Rock Tree Sky, which is housed at Summit School in Ojai. ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR

Ojai alternative school offers blueprint for salvaging enrollment

Isaiah Murtaugh

Ventura County Star | USA TODAY NETWORK

Each day at the Ojai learning center Rock Tree Sky begins with a link to a digital menu of activities for students to choose from.

Scattered across the nonprofit center's campus — housed at the former Summit Elementary School — are a greenhouse, a star observatory, a makerspace, an outdoor kitchen and a hut for mushroom growing.

The heavily self-directed learning ethos the center embraces is unique, hailed in some circles as an ideal future for education. In Ojai, it's drawing students by the dozens and helping Ojai Unified School District claw back some lost enrollment via a previously untapped demographic of student: homeschoolers.

Enrollment has been on a steep decline across California's public K-12 schools since 2017 as the state's population ages and shrinks. Private school enrollment has bumped up marginally in that period, according to state data. The California Department of Education does not keep an exact record of home school enrollment.

Ojai Unified has been particularly hard hit, losing just under 300 students, or 11% of enrollment, in the same period. Last year, the district closed a pair of schools and laid off the equivalent of 40 staff in an effort to balance a budget eaten away by the loss of enrollment-tied funding.

A rare bright spot for the district has been its new Summit School independent study program, which started with six students in 2019, then exploded to 113 students the next school year. This year Summit School, based out of the same campus as Rock Tree Sky, has about 185 students.

Almost all of that growth comes directly from a unique arrangement with Rock Tree Sky.

A partnership sprouts

Ojai couple Natasha Efross and Jim Bailey launched Rock Tree Sky in 2016 out of an office in downtown Ojai, providing enrichment programs to home school students and independent study charter students.

The center relocated in fall 2018, leasing a portion of the former Summit Elementary School campus months after the school closed. At the beginning of the 2020 school year, Rock Tree Sky and Ojai Unified cut a deal.

The district expanded Summit School to include all grades from K-12. For a discounted rate, Rock Tree Sky began offering its enrichment programming to district independent study students.

Efross signed on with Summit School as an independent study teacher. Bailey, the nonprofit's executive director, recruited Rock Tree Sky's growing band of homeschool and charter independent study families to transfer into the district.

About 100 students made the leap, Bailey said. In the years since, Summit has added another 60 students. Not every Summit student utilizes Rock Tree Sky — nor is every Rock Tree Sky student enrolled in Summit — but about 90% do.

Ojai Unified Superintendent Sherril Knox said the combination has been a saving grace for some students who may not have made it in a traditional school.

See **ENROLLMENT**, Page 5A

Enrollment

Continued from Page 1A

“There are students who have found a reignited interest in learning in Rock Tree Sky’s format,” Knox said by phone. “Now, they are going to make it because they’ve moved to a place they enjoy being.”

Knox said she’s waiting to see whether Summit’s impressive year-to-year growth will slow.

“I don’t know if we’re at a saturation point or not,” she said.

Most of the new students, Bailey said, came from charters, private schools and homeschools. Some transferred in from public schools.

On a recent Tuesday, fourth grader Lincoln Forthe and a pair of friends danced to old pop songs while waiting a turn at the pottery wheel in Rock Tree Sky’s ceramics area, a knocked-together studio of shipping containers and courtyard.

Forthe came to Summit and Rock Tree Sky from a private school. She vastly prefers her new environs.

“All you would do is sit in a desk,” Forthe said.

Rock Tree Sky didn’t invent student-driven education — proponents say it’s a pre-industrial practice — and it’s not alone today, part of a small, but growing national network of educators who hope to make the approach a more common part of American schooling.

Education Reimagined, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit focused on a “learner-centered future for education,” counts Rock Tree Sky as one of its darlings. The nonprofit spotlighted Rock Tree Sky in a 72-page report on the future of education and in a recent duet of documentary shorts.

“RTS is not merely experimenting, but rather showcasing a practical blueprint,” the paper reads.

“(Bailey) and his team are models to so many organizations, both great and small” said Emily Bader, the nonprofit’s chief communications officer. “Rock Tree Sky stands at the forefront of a movement.”

Accessibility

Rock Tree Sky’s model is not without holes.

Though the district is paying for two days a week of programming for each



Sky Martinez, left, 9, and Eli Robisheaux, 8, make bouncy balls on March 18 in the science and engineering classroom with teacher Peter Cable at the alternate school program Rock Tree Sky, which is housed at Summit School in Ojai.

ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR

student this year, it plans to cut its contribution next year to a level that Bailey said will cover about a day and a half a week.

The paid, independent-study arrangement favors students who can pay for more days of Rock Tree Sky. Some families pay for five days a week, Bailey said, and a few get scholarships. Some students have a parent or guardian home for the days they’re not on the Summit campus.

“What’s lost (in this model right now) is that five day a week custodial care,” Bailey said. “We haven’t fully solved that with public funding.”

Bailey said he carries a long-term vision of student-driven learning environments that are available to everyone, whether through an expanded Rock Tree Sky-style program or through adoption of the model in traditional public schools.

How students are performing

At the core of Rock Tree Sky’s pitch is that the model will, in the long run, do a better, more holistic job of educating students.

At the moment, it’s missing the mark on some traditional metrics. Summit School students scored well below their peers across the state and Ojai Unified on state standardized tests last year.

Just 30% of Summit test-takers met standards on the state’s standardized English Language Arts test, lagging behind Ojai Unified’s 42.8% pass rate and the state’s overall 46.7% pass rate.

Standardized math scores weren’t much better: 17.5% of Summit test-takers met standards, compared to 26.3% in Ojai Unified and 34.6% across the state.

Standardized test scores, of course, have long been critiqued as an imperfect assessment tool, and they may be even less perfect in an environment like Rock Tree Sky, where the focus of families and instructors alike is a student’s unique trajectory and overall well being, not annual learning benchmarks.

The test scores are an even more limited lens into the project because a number of families declined to have their children take the test, Knox said. And yet, she said, the low participation and low scores are still a ding on the district’s record.

“We know (these students are) learning a lot. If we want them to be able to showcase that through the test system, then we have to prepare them,” Knox said. “We have some work to do in figuring out how these state tests fit a day in the life of a typical Summit School kid.”

In the yard of the Summit School campus on that same day in March, freshman Katie Lagesse sat with sopho-

more classmates Elijah Davy and Lola Drury at a picnic table, working on history papers.

Lagesse, a former public school student, said Summit has been a better fit for her than other environments. She enjoys the freedom the program offers to choose what to study and learn material that she’ll actually need.

But all three classmates agreed that Rock Tree Sky’s loose, self-directed environment may not work as well for students who prefer the structure of more conventional classrooms.

There could be a sweet spot somewhere in the middle.

For all its freedom, Bailey said, Rock Tree Sky is still built to function in partnership with the more conventional curriculum of a program like Summit School. And public schools, said Knox, could stand to take on some of the “bits and pieces” of the Rock Tree Sky model.

“There’s definitely room for both in the world of education,” Knox said.

Isaiah Murtaugh covers education for the Ventura County Star in partnership with Report for America. Reach him at isaiah.murtaugh@vcstar.com or 805-437-0236 and follow him on Twitter @isaiahmurtaugh and @vcsschools. You can support this work with a tax-deductible donation to Report for America.