

edmentum™



Changing Their Story— One Student at a Time

A PROGRAM SERVING STUDENTS WITH HIGH RISK FACTORS

“Our students inspire us by their courage and perseverance and are a reminder that obstacles can be overcome when you have just one person cheering you on to the finish line.”



For most at-risk students, staying engaged in school is a challenge in the best of times. Today, in a time of pandemic learning, the challenges these students already face have been exacerbated. Learn4Life, a nonprofit public charter with a network of over 80 high schools, has been serving non-traditional students since their inception in 2001. They help students who haven't been successful in a traditional school setting. Their student population is comprised of students who are at-risk, who are behind in credits, and those who have dropped out of school.

Learn4Life has designed its program to offer flexibility for learners with numerous risk factors. Students engage in a personalized learning program, built around their strengths. They receive one-on-one attention, a trauma-informed approach, and wrap-around services to support the whole student.

Flexibility is the cornerstone of how Learn4Life's learning model is structured. Students are the masters of their own time management and schedules with guidance from teachers.



Meet Dr. Christine Kasitz

For the past 15 years, Christine Kasitz has been building online programs designed for at-risk learners. She has served in various leadership capacities within Learn4Life, including Director of Educational Technology and Online Learning, Area Superintendent, and Head of School. Currently Christine is serving in a new role as Vice President of Diversification and Innovation.

Recently, I spoke with Christine to tap her deep knowledge and expertise regarding how virtual learning can improve outcomes for our most vulnerable students and to understand how the pandemic is informing our priorities and the strategies we employ to meet students where they are and help them reach their goals.

The Students They Serve

I began the conversation by asking Christine to describe the student population they serve at Learn4Life. While you might anticipate hearing about the students' deficits and challenges, which Learn4Life does publish on their website (www.learn4life.com), Christine approached this question by saying, "We have kids that have their whole future ahead of them and they should be defined by how they are acting now and how they will act in the future, not their past experiences. There's lots of hope. There are students who are willing to go the extra mile because they've already gone more miles than the average student. They're looking for opportunities and they're looking for support."

That's the mission of Learn4Life—helping students change their story.



Moving Beyond the Past

This mantra guides Christine's work with students: "We can't change the past." She explains, "Perhaps I had a conversation five minutes ago and I said something that I didn't mean to say. I can't go back and erase it, but I can say I'm sorry and we can move forward. If I didn't do my work yesterday, I can't go back and fix that. Right? I can only change my actions today and moving forward. You can't change what happened in the past. So, don't dwell on it. But we can change the future. And, you know, we can change it minute by minute. So, I wasted an hour because I wasn't motivated. The next hour I have to figure out how to get motivated—or maybe I just need to take a break. Okay, so I take break. I can't change the fact that I didn't get the work done." But as Christine reminds her students, they need to be honest and own up to it.

Christine admits that there are times when students use their skill set to push the adults around them away. "In their thinking, if I don't do any work, she is going to kick me out of class. If I don't show up today, she is going to kick me out of school because I missed too many times." But Christine's response is different. "No. I'm just going to keep calling you. I'm going to send someone to pick you up. I'm going to let folks know we are going to surround you and I'm not giving up on you."

She encourages teachers to move beyond the excuses, blame, and deflection to get to the root cause that prohibits student progress. That's when she believes there is a real opportunity to help. "We train our teachers to be patient, to really get to know the student, to be that person who is there even when they are ignoring our calls or being unkind. I tell our teachers, text them anyway. Leave a voicemail. Send them an email. I would rather teachers over-communicate with a student than have them fall through the cracks. We can never quit trying because that 99th phone call might be the one that resonates with them on that day and changes their life."

Learn4Life fosters belonging over exclusion, social engagement over control, and meaningful accountability over punishment. Students learn life skills including conflict resolution, anger control, and resiliency.

COVID's Impact on Our Vulnerable Students

When COVID hit in the spring of 2020 and disruptions to learning began to occur, the students at Learn4Life were still engaged. "Our teachers continued to do everything they needed to do," Christine recalls. "For us, the first two months were status quo." Students met with teachers and tutors virtually. They had access to remote one-on-one instruction and group labs, tutoring and counseling, and IEP meetings. Hot spots and devices were available to students who needed them.

But by the end of May and into early June, they began to notice that students weren't as engaged anymore. "I began to have teachers change the message and communication. Every call started with 'How are you?' and 'What do you need?' We began to find out that for some kids, their parents had lost their jobs

and their source of income. They had no food. They were losing their housing (prior to the federal eviction moratoriums). We called on our local resources and partners to help us meet basic needs. We switched from academics into that social worker-social support role to get our students and their families connected with the right people. And we began to check in more frequently on the health and well-being of our students. We had to make that connection with our students and not lose track of them."



As the pandemic progressed throughout the summer and into the new school year, mental health became a priority over schoolwork. Learn4Life engaged external organizations and brought in intern social workers to focus on student health and well-being.

“Academics can take a back burner when you’re really worried about mental health,” says Christine. In fact, the responsibilities of many students had shifted over time with COVID. Students were needing to find jobs to help support themselves or their families. That often meant any job that was available, even if it was a cash job, because every penny mattered. Others were caring for a child, siblings, or other family members during the day and doing work at night.

At Learn4Life, they view behavior problems as cries for help and work to understand the challenges students face.

For others, school simply was not a priority. “If we don’t put food on the table, we’re not going to be here,” some commented.

Learn4Life has added more counselors and intervention specialists to go out into the community to check on students. “We want to make sure that they are safe. We want them to know that they are not off our radar. We want them to know that we are not giving up on them. For others, they might not be doing the amount of work they need to do, but we want them to continually make progress, because that makes a big difference,” Christine shares with conviction.



What Have We Learned from This?

- **Good relationships will always prevail.**

Developing a good relationship with your students is one of the most important things teachers can do to keep their students engaged. “I encourage teachers to be honest and open with students. Over time, they will begin to trust you. You have to build that trust and you have to be there for them. It takes time to build those relationships,” Christine says.

Her advice? “Get to know your students. Understand their situations, but do not cave under the pressure of their excuses. Instead, focus on the high expectations you have for them and your commitment to help them achieve their goals.” “Yes, we know students have all these things going on,” Christine admits. “But you can be successful. You’re not in it by yourself.”

- **Remember the power of the small things.**

During the pandemic, Learn4Life launched a campaign to increase the frequency of student-teacher communication. Sometimes, it was as simple as a text saying, “I’m thinking of you today.” Other times, it was a voicemail with an unexpected message. “A small thing can go a long way,” Christine says.

“We sent cards to students in the mail. It was just like a little pick me up. We pulled images off the internet, created cards with encouraging messages, stuffed the cards in envelopes, and mailed them,” she told me. “There were many times that students would call and tell a teacher, ‘Thank you for the card today. It’s on the refrigerator. This is the only positive piece of mail we’ve gotten this week. Everything else has been bills we can’t pay.’” Christine is convinced that those little things that other people often don’t consider to be important actually do make a huge difference.

- **Focus on the human first and the work second.**

Christine emphasizes the power of starting with the human connection. “Rather than begin with a conversation on what your schoolwork looks like, start with a conversation of what’s going on. We already know our students are behind. We already know they struggle in school. We recognize that they have all these factors stacked up against them. But we have to begin by building a connection with them.”

Christine suggests, “Get to know them first as a human being and get to know what their struggles are and where school may have failed them.” Remember, the old adage rings true. Students don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.

- **Set goals with clear and measurable outcomes.**

In Learn4Life’s program, the learning goals are built around the strengths and needs of each student. As students reengage in learning, it is important to reestablish the habits of learning that will lead to success. As students work with their teachers to set realistic goals, monitor their progress towards those goals, and achieve outcomes, one step at a time, they will begin to believe in themselves as learners.

As Christine reminds her students, “You are good enough as you are. You are smart. You just may have to do things a different way or work a little bit harder. But you can do this.”

Summary

At Learn4Live, teachers and staff are self-described tireless advocates for all students, believing that earning a high school diploma is within reach for every child, regardless of their circumstances. Christine Kasitz is one of those special people, cheering each student on to the finish line.

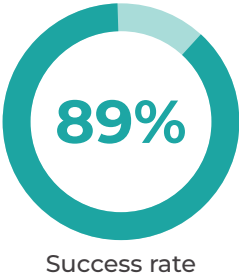
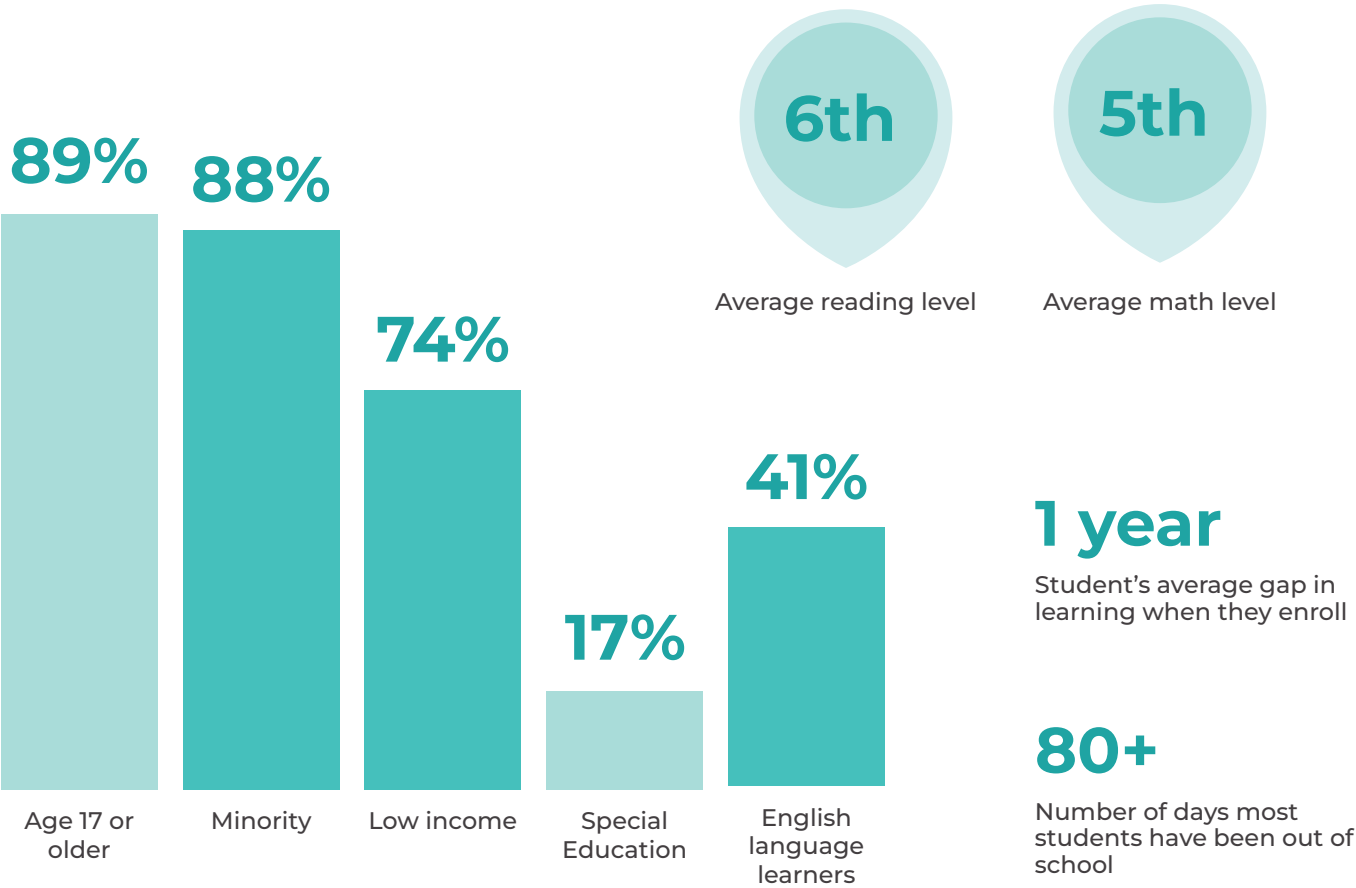


About the Author

Jean Sharp has dedicated her career to supporting great teaching and learning, both in the classroom and online. For the past ten years, she has served as Chief Academic Officer and Vice President of Content Development at Apex Learning.

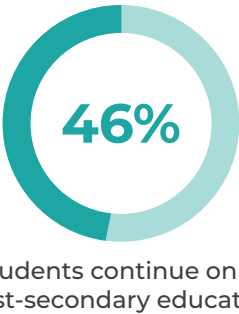
Now, after 32 years in educational technology, and a few more in the classroom, Jean is embracing the rhythm of a new season. She plans to continue to contribute to education in relevant and impactful ways through consulting, writing, and an intentional investment in ongoing learning. You can connect with Jean on LinkedIn.

Learn4Life At a Glance



120,000+

Changed stories since 2001



47,000+

Students served last year at more than 80 schools