Alternative pathways provide personalized educational experiences

hatter and the smell of coffee fills the air as thou-

hatter and the smell of coffee fills the air as thou-sands of students pour into Paly, rushing into class-rooms to begin the school day.

But throughout Palo Afro — instead of the four con-crete walls of the 800s building — some start their days in grand lecture halls at Footbill College, white bospital oms and the Futures Café. Sam Lilly, a 2024

Paly grad, spent his junior year at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital, where he continued his course work despite leukemia

for hospital school is because things are not going particularly smoothly, in the sense that no one wants to are sick.*Lilly said Hospital, school is not something neonle more like a last resort

couldn't attend Pals while being treated for leukemia, he was able

to work independently and take assessments through the While not all PAUSD students who take additional

educational pathways share the same experience, they have all found ways to further their education outside of the

traditional four-year high school setting.

Newly elected school beard trustee Rowena Chiu, whose daughter is a sophomore at Middle College—a partnership between PAUSD and Foothill College that illows students in grades 10-12 to earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree simultaneously – said Palo Alto students have varied backgrounds and needs.

"There's a wide diversity of students in the district," Chiu said. "That doesn't just mean academically, but also, socially, culturally, economically."

To support this wide diversity of students, the district

has a number of educational pathways available includ-ing Middle College, The Hospital School and the Fatures special education program.

Creating Culture: Middle College

Senior Tilman Kareht enters his calculus class. Instead of high schoolers, he's surrounded by college students. Instead of a 30-student classroom, he learns in a lecture ead of a 30-student classroom, he les

That's because Kareht isn't a student at Paly. He studies at Palo Alto Middle College.

Middle College students like Kareht take three high

school classes: English, history and then either a math or science elective. The rest of their A-G high school require-

ments are taken as Foothill classes.

Middle College senior Hanu Thakur, who previously attended Paly, said while his initial transition from a traditional high school to Middle College was jarring, it has taught him how to navigate a new environment,

"It's hard and scary because you're leaving normal high school, which you've been part of for so long," Thakar said,
"Then, you're going to college 20 minutes away. You don't always know everyone (but) I got to challenge myself in my courses and meet new people. Learning how to get to make new friends is also a skill that a lot of people forget."

Chiu said students who struggle to find a community within Gunn or Paly may be better suited for additional educational programs

"Kids who feel they don't belong or are lost in the sea of large high school can (find it) intimidating even though there are incredible programs where you can find your niche, "Chiu said. "There is something about a very dif-ferent experience, or even a smaller experience of Middle College that I think is very important.

In a message to the Palo Alto community on Nov. I. Austin said the novel

at Middle College also allows students to escape the competitive culture of traditional high schools.

These students picked courses they wanted to learn about and the pressure to take a class melted away," lustin said.

Kareht agrees and said the diversity of courses offered at Middle College allows any student to explore their assions and thriw

"I think any student could really succeed at Middle College," Kareht said. "One of

PA Middle College Projected Enrollment

Year 3

25

50

50

Year 2

25

25

25

50

the benefits of Foothill is there is a super wide range of Although Chiu's daughter initially joined Middle Col-

lege for academic reasons, Chiu said she loves Middle College for the freedom it provides. "At the age of 15, she feels that she's being treated as

Grade 9

Grade 10

Grade 11

Grade 12

young adolt," Chiu said. "She has a lot of choice about where she's spending time and how she's organizing her day She really

omy and choice that she has at and she felt that she had less of that in the larser realitionmodel." Garrison said

Palo Alto

Middle College

"There are over 60 clubs and activities that students

can be part of. It's very unique to be a part of two

schools, two campuses and two worlds."

the partner-ship between PAUSD and Middle College also gives zudents acres to extensive steide of the

dents have access to all resources, services, activities and clubs at Foothill," Garrison said. "There are over 60 clubs and activities that students can be part of It's very unique to be a part of two schools, two campuses and two worlds." Looking forward, Garrison said Middle College hopes

expand to ninth graders.

However, Austin said some Middle College students oppose this proposal because increasing the number of idents in the program could weaken Middle College's tight-knit community.

"Part of my hope was to expand it pretty rapidly," Austin. aid. "What I heard from the students and the staff was, 'Don't. An expansion too fast could destroy what's great

Garrison said next year, the school will cap enrollment at 30 students per cohort, with two cohorts per grade.

said. "They're really trying to develop a different kind of such they to reasy trying to occupy a university and of culture here that is not about competition. Even though many of our students are very academically driven, our achool is really about enjoying the journey."

Adapting to Change: Hospital School

Scott Souter was teaching art class when one of his students came up to him and asked if he wanted to see the

student's lungs.

When Souter said yes, the student showed him a pie ture of them holding up their own lungs which had been removed prior to a lung transplant the student was recov-

That student was one of many who have been enrolled in the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital School. Opened 100 years ago, Hospital School is available for any student pitulized at Lucile Packard for three or more consecu

"I will see students ranging from kindergarten through 12th grade, and they can come if they're up for it (and) can stay for as (long) as they want," Souter said. "If they show , we have a number of projects in mind."
Teachers at Hospital School also coordinate with the

student's previous school district to ensure the student antinues their education.

Lilly, the 2024 Paly grad said the program was centered

around helping students continue learning in a new

The basic idea was for you to get assigned a teacher to meet about five hours a week (or) one hour a day to discuss coursework or questions," Lifty said.

Lilly with this support in place he was able to keep up with his classes at Paly by working asynchronously. "I was taking AP Lang with Ms. Launer, who sent the material to my hospital teacher, and I got the material through her, "Lilly said, "(The hospital teacher) processed

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Thad to do for

Paly." Hospital School teacher Elena Melen dez also said Hospital School

flexibility.

"Medications an make you or sick, and it's really hard to concentrate," Melendez said. you're just try

(The program) is very responsive to their needs."

And Souter said the teachers at Hospital School o their best to make the environment nucturing and

They are an incredibly creative, very talented at problem olving, improvisational team that work around amazing bstucles," Souter said, "They are very dedicated to pmviding the students or patients with continued academic enrichment or a little bit of something other than their

Specializing in Support: PAUSD Futures

izes in extensive support needs, said the Futures Program focuses on helping students in the program with functional academics like basic reading and math as well as job and daily living skills.

from sixth to 12th grade at all secondary sites in the

ditrict, and its curriculum equips students with practical skills while also integrating them into the community. "Everything we're doing in the classroom is going to be as functional and appropriate for their learning needs ... we're teaching them how to take cure of themselves, to achieve as much independence as possible," Gallucio said.

ESN teacher Lisa Jauregui said the program is tailored to each student's Individualized Education Program, and through the Palo Alto Technology Collaboration Hub, students have access to iPads equipped with specialized ac-cessibility tools, from text-to-speech to digital worksheets.

"It belos (balance) the field," Jauregui said, "Everybody's

Gallucio said the program also provides opportunities

Gainasia sand the program asso provides apportunities for students to attain real-would experience, such as running a cafe for staff on Fridays.

"We clean up the student center every day after lunch and brunch," Gallucio said. "We deliver mail across campus. We leave our cafe that we run on Fridays for the staff. king up lunch and other delivery orders from Town and picking up tunce and compus, Country for staff across campus,

Prioritizing Independence: Post-Secondary

After graduating high school, most Futures students move on to the Post-Secondary program until the semes-

ter they turn 22.
Coleman Hall, a postsecondary teacher who worked at both Paly and Gunn, said the program focuses on prepar-

ing students for adult life.
"(In high school), there's a pretty big emphasis on dents going to general ed classes and joining in with their typical peers," Hall said. "Here, it's more individualized." Like Futures, the Post Secondary Post Secondary program focuses on functional life skills through real-world

gram nocutes on nunciona are issue stretogia neu-words experience. We (practice) like drupping (or) following a visual pic-ture list to find tienus in stores, Hall said. We do a lot of fun, exploratory outleys as well, like (going) drawntown. Hall said students also get the opportunity in spend time with Poor Secondary students from nearly cities. "There are eight different poor eccountry programs."

that gather once a month and have a fun social outing,

Hall also said some students get full one-on-one support while others work on developing more independence.
"Some of those students take classes at Footbill College a few times a week," Hall said. "A lot of them practice awayating the community independently, like going on the VTA. The ultimate goal is for them to be able to travel around town on their own, safely and independently."

On the Job: Project SEARCH

During post-secondary, students have the opportunity to join Project SEARCH, a separate program that offers students a full-time paid internship program primarily hosted are Stantiurd's Lucile Packard Children's Hospital.

To get into the program, Lang, a Post-Secondary teacher and the head of Project SEARCH, said students must through an application process. "If they're motivated, they've dem

onstrated the drive to make it out there orstrated the drive to make it out there on their own through their work over the last couple of years, that's all we're looking for, "Lang said. Hall said the hospital internship al-

lows students to learn a variety of tasks with the help of job coaches.
"The goal is for students to be independent with these job skills so

Josh Salaman that they're able to get jobs on their own after they leave the program," Hall

world and not the world

grew up in."

The first time I tried to do the food service . I didn't

Spotlight

know how to do it," Qing said. "I'm hoping that I will con-tinue to build my confidence (and) challenge myself more

Adjusting to Adulthood: Adult Programs

Students who are no longer a part of Post-Secondary or Project SEARCH have the opportunity to participate in a variety of adult day

ograms that offer them support. These programs offer a wide range of activities, including further edi ention assestional skill activities and volum-However, students

who need more extensive support have limited options, Hall "It's more difficult for students that need

more support, one-to-one support full time, (because) adult day programs operate one staff to three students," Hall said.
"It's a tough world out there for our guys that need the

most support."

One alternative, the Self-Determination Prugram, allows the families of people with disabilities to create their own programs by choosing which support workers to his, how to purchase services and where their family member

Hall said only about half of Post-Secondary students

quality for the day programs.

"Vee bad three students exit my program that are doing this Self-Determination Program, but it's really lead to get finding that way." Hall said. "They besically haven't had a program since they've graduated, which is tough."

Looking forward: future improvements

Despite the many programs that PAUSD offers for special education students, some community members have criticized the district's initiatives for being ineffective and norly funded.

Chiu said many programs in PAUSD were far from perfect, especially with the district's large budget. "I think as a district with a really high budget of over \$30,000 per head, (they) could do a much better job of

providing the resources that students need in the special needs community," Chiu said. Emily Lee, who has a child who was affected by PAUSID's decision to move special education classes from Ohlone to Nixon, said special education teachers in

PAUSD are overworked. perience with teachers has been that they have been very caring, but I think they're also over-

whelmed with a lot of the administrative tasks whemed with a lof of the sidministrative basis that they've been given," Lee said. "They have to attend trainings. They have to do IEP meet-ings and so forth. That gives them a very heavy workload, and it's something that I've definitely "I'm very grateful for the fact that my son is growing up in today's noticed over the years.

But Gallucio said he is impressed by the district's willingness to listen to his ideas.

"Twe been able to talk with administrator and build relationships with people at the dis-trict office who I never really had a chance to other districts I've worked at," Gallucio said. Chiu, though, said she is concerned about

the district's management of special education "What can parents and students do bet-ter?" Chiu said. "I don't know that they can do say better.

They've been advocating to a district that isn't willing to

listen to them.

However, Austin said the decision to move special education classes from Oblone and Escondido to Nison was based on a recommendation from special education teach-

ee we cancer everyone won and a student in the pro-gram, and we have not had that feedback at all, "Austin-said. "We called every family in the program. So (it) sounds, again, like this is a campuign issue, and that cam-paign (is) every, so I'd rather not talk about it anymore."

consulted in the deri-

"Our case was wry extreme," Lee said. "Families that were removed from Ohlone and Escondido were told on a Zoom call, and the teachers also weren't even in the loop about what news was coming down. In that specific situation, there was,

PAUSD Budget:

\$30,000

per student

no transparency."

Newly elected school hourd member Josh Saleman, who is a parent of a student with special needs, also said the future of his son's education is unknown.

"One thing that I feel as a parent is a sense of tremen-

dout uncertainty about what things will look like for him at the middle school level and the high school level," Sak-

Despite some community doubts. Gallacio said the

Despite some community doubtes, teathers sand the district is moving in the right direction.

"If there were any girring issues in the past with these programs, I think there has been a concerted effort to really ramp up the special education services," Gallucio said.

Conclusion: Grateful for progress

Thousands of students enter the PAUSD secondary Industries of shatenes enter the PAUSA secondary school system each year, each taking another step to curve their own path. Through these initiatives, PAUSD has worked to provide students of various needs and back-grounds with an education that uplifts them, whether hey're in the hospital or looking to have more indepen

dence in their learning.

For example, choosing Middle College challenged

Chiu's daughter to develop her weaknesses.

"She has a 504 and executive functioning is something she struggles with," Chiu said. "But the experience of Middle College has required her to put in more executive functioning, because she's not in the structure of the school

where everyone's doing the same thing. For Saleman these additional educational programs give opportunities to children who would not have had them

"I'm very grateful for the fact that my son is growing up in today's world and not the world I grew up in," Sakman said. "As a society and as an educational system, we've made tons of progress, and I think what's important is that we keep looking for ways to improve."

STORY BY ISABELLA BIAN, LEA KWAN & ETHAN

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