

Q&A with Peter G. Ruppert, President and CEO of Fusion Education Group and their chain of 43 Fusion Academy flagship private schools providing Customized, One-to-One Education enabling Greater Student Success



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CEOCFO: Mr. Ruppert, what is the concept behind Fusion Education Group?

Mr. Ruppert: Fusion Education Group is the operating company that owns and operates a chain of forty three specialty private schools under the flagship name of Fusion Academy, so each one of our campuses around the country operate as Fusion Academies. The core premise is that we provide one to one education, totally customized around the needs and interests of our individual students to help them succeed. In many ways, our customized approach with our one to one education model allows for students who have struggled in previous schools to thrive in our schools because of the set up and because of the format and structure that we have in place.

CEOCFO: How do you go about recognizing what is best for any given child? What goes into the mix?

Mr. Ruppert: Before a student enrolls we have extensive interviews with the parents and the student to really understand what their situation is, what their challenges are and what they are looking for in their school and in their programming. Then once a student comes on board, that student is assigned a lead teacher and that lead teacher is responsible for overseeing their overall progress. While a student may have many other teachers throughout the day, that lead teacher is monitoring their overall success and meeting with that student periodically. In addition, we have a variety of different reporting structures that we have in place, including our parents receive a daily progress report at home every night in the evening that recaps their son or daughters progress and activities and academic programming for the day.

CEOCFO: What type of feedback do you get from parents? Do they typically respond to some of the day to day reports? Do you meet with them on a regular basis?

Mr. Ruppert: Absolutely! Certainly, many of them respond to those daily reports they receive every day, but certainly also hear from parents that they want to call their individual teachers or call their school admin team. There is certainly much of that going on. Then periodically, on a quarterly basis, as a team we will review each students progress and set goals and objectives with the students input and the families input for the following term; not just classes that they want to take, but areas that they want to work on, socially, emotionally, academically or whatever it might be.

CEOCFO: How do you integrate what students should learn, whether that is basic English or certain math skills, or generalized history, with more individualized topics? What is the key to putting that together?

Mr. Ruppert: Like every private or public school, high school around the country, we have very clear graduation standards and requirements that every student must meet in order to graduate. Typically, our curriculum and our standards are tied to the various states in which we operate and either meet or exceed those standards. Therefore, there

is a core curriculum that every student has to take. However, in addition, they have the opportunity to take electives in areas that might interest them or be a passion that they want to pursue outside of the core curriculum. Thus, we can offer over two hundred and fifty courses to our student body, which is much more than most private and public high schools are able to offer. That is largely because we are in this one to one set up.

CEOFCO: Do you look for a particular mix of students, perhaps students who were bored in their previous schools along with students who may have some learning disabilities, ages or a diversity mix? What goes into making up a class or a group at any given term or time?

Mr. Ruppert: We do not necessarily look for any particular type of student. First we are grades six through twelve, so we are a middle school / high school format. In addition, because of our customized approach, because of our one to one high touch mentoring and teaching approach that we bring to our student body, many of our students who have come to us have struggled in their previous school or schools. They may have social or emotional challenges or academic challenges or come from a difficult family situation. In all of those cases we can provide a customized plan around that student's needs and program going forward – period! That being said, we are not a Special Ed school whatsoever. We do not pretend to offer programs and support for kids with more severe learning challenges. In addition, we have a number of students who need the flexibility of our program or are accelerated and want to move forward faster than they would be able to do in their other schools. Therefore, we have kids who can come and accelerate from where they were and graduate early or take additional courses beyond the core requirements. We also have athletes and actors and actresses and musicians who are busy chasing their profession, so we can customize their schedule around their available times so that they can continue to pursue their passions while also receiving a great high school or middle school education.

“However, what helps Fusion stand out for many students is the fact that we are a very high touch, customized approach. Every one of our classes is taught with direct interaction between that teacher and student.”- Peter G. Ruppert

CEOFCO: How do you acclimate a student to this type of learning, to the one on one, rather than the traditional classroom setting? Is there an aha moment when the student gets it, that they are really important and that people care?

Mr. Ruppert: I think that happens very quickly, when a student is used to being in a class of twenty or twenty five or thirty students, then all of a sudden they come into a classroom where it is just them and their teacher. They quickly realize that there is nowhere to hide in our classrooms and they see that as a benefit, because the students feel like that class is really built for them. Therefore, because it is built for them we can go as fast or as slow as they are able. We can teach a particular subject matter based on how the student best learns. We can infiltrate a particular subject with interest and examples from their individual passions. Thus, students are quickly able to really show results and because of their results and their success they start to build their self esteem and gain confidence. That really goes a long way in helping them feel comfortable in our environment.

CEOFCO: What is about a teacher that goes from the whole group atmosphere to that one on one, to feel comfortable as well as the student?

Mr. Ruppert: I think the teachers feel that they are able to make a huge impact on their kids. Compared to a traditional high school teacher who might teach six classes a day of twenty five or thirty students, the number of kids they have the ability to directly impact is limited, because they have 180 students to worry about. But, at Fusion, in every one of their classes there is just one student. I think our teachers get a tremendous amount of satisfaction from knowing that they are reaching each of their individual students and in many cases changing their lives. That is one of the things that we say, that traditional classroom teachers have the chance to positively influence a number of kids through the course of a year and their career, but at Fusion teachers literally have the opportunity to change kid's lives every class, every day and every year.

CEOFCO: How did you go from an idea to forty three locations? What has been the business growth?

Mr. Ruppert: I started the company about ten plus years ago. I raised private equity money to sponsor me to sponsor our company to go out and look for various acquisitions. Fusion was a classic example of an acquisition that we made. We found the original campus in Solana Beach, California and visited and fell in love with it and we saw the school with its one to one model, much like our school still is today. However, that was what we saw and the one to one model and the customized approach to student learning, the mentoring that goes along with the teaching that our teachers are able to provide, really created this unique environment that allowed kids to thrive and oftentimes, kids who have struggled in

previous schools to thrive. I fell in love with that immediately and then we bought the original campus in December of 2008 and began replicating it in early 2010 and have since then grown to the forty three campuses we have today.

CEOCFO: *Do you own those? Are these franchised? How much control do you have over what goes on at the different campuses?*

Mr. Ruppert: They are all fully company owned, if you will. Therefore, we have regional management structures in place that are working closely with all the schools. Our corporate operation is headquartered in Grand Rapids, Michigan where we provide many of the support services and back office services, such as marketing and human resources, account, IT and so on.

CEOCFO: *Are there regional differences in how a student learns or how a teacher might interact with a student?*

Mr. Ruppert: We have a standardized approach across the board, but clearly, each school ultimately reflects the locale that they come from. Therefore, if you walked into one of our schools in California it would feel very similar to one of our schools in New York, as would a school in Texas. Therefore, the look, the feel, the culture, the approach, the teaching is very similar across all of them. However, each school also has a little bit of its local flavor that reflects the community in which it is located.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us about the physical structure of the school? What have you found that is important to be conducive for learning?*

Mr. Ruppert: Our schools are typically in office buildings, whether it be suburban or urban; it is a little bit different in those mixes. However, effectively the core component of our program is our one to one classrooms, which are typically small office spaces. In addition we provide, what we call our HomeworkCafé spaces, which are more open areas where students have a chance to socialize in between classes, where they have a chance to do their homework among their friends and it allows them to get a little bit of socialization. We break that into a quiet homework café and then what we call a social homework café, where a student can quietly do their homework and talk to their friends in the social homework café, but if they are studying for a test or have a project that is due, they will typically spend time in our quiet homework café where students are not interacting and socializing at all.

CEOCFO: *What have you learned over the ten year period that has changed your approach?*

Mr. Ruppert: The lessons are endless and we are still learning by the day. There is no doubt about that. However, I think that some of the things that we have always known and continue to focus on is the head of school is a really important job in any school and the quality of staff and teachers that you are able to assemble is vital to the success of a student and ultimately your programming. We know that when a school goes really well with their students and those students succeed and word of mouth spreads pretty fast and that helps our school fill up towards capacity.

CEOCFO: *Do you find that many students, if they start at the sixth grade level, will continue through?*

Mr. Ruppert: Some will, but not necessarily. Oftentimes, some students will come to us because they have an acute need and their goal is to get back on track and then return to their previous school. We have a number of students who come to us with that kind of intent and we help them fulfill that and we consider that a success. Then we have other students who come to us thinking that they might only be here for a year or two and then do so well and Mom and Dad and student decide to stay in the school until they graduate. Therefore, some kids might stay with us for four or five or six years and graduate. Others might come to us for a year or two and then return to their previous school.

CEOCFO: *What is the plan for the next couple of years at Fusion Education Group?*

Mr. Ruppert: We have a lot of interest from communities around the country to open Fusions in other markets. Therefore, we will continue to expand the number of units we operate and open additional schools in new communities and at the same time, stay focused on improving our existing schools and helping them become even more and more effective at delivering an amazing educational experience for our current students.

CEOCFO: *Is that the plan for the recent funding?*

Mr. Ruppert: Yes, it is. It came from our new private equity partners, Leeds Equity Partners, LLC, and we are thrilled with them! They do one hundred percent investing in what they call the knowledge industries, which is education and training and related industries. They are certainly investing in us to provide the added capital we will need to continue to grow the number of units we have and offer more and more educational opportunities for more students across the country.

CEOCFO: *There are many schools following a similar approach. We recognize the difference between what you offer and the traditional approach, but why does a Fusion Academy school stand out among its peers?*

Mr. Ruppert: There are many quality education providers out there. However, what helps Fusion stand out for many students is the fact that we are a very high touch, customized approach. Every one of our classes is taught with direct

interaction between that teacher and student. We do not provide online classed or we do not have several students in front of computers with a teacher monitoring their activity and helping where they get stuck. Some of those models are great for a particular type of student. However in our case, what our parents and students most benefit from is that high touch, direct interaction with the teacher, who is teaching the lesson and facilitating the learning with their individual student on a one to one basis.

