

Valley Alternative named Model Continuation High School in Hacienda Heights

By Richard Irwin, Staff Writer

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Call them the 3Ms of success - mentoring, monitoring, motivation - a successful model for a model high school. Valley Alternative in Hacienda Heights is one of 25 California schools recently named a Model Continuation High School.

"The schools we are recognizing today have gone the extra mile to help kids get the education they deserve and need to succeed in life and careers," explained State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson.

He noted that 69,000 students attended more than 500 continuation schools in the state last year. The state's top educator added that the local school was recognized for helping students struggling to stay in school.

The Hacienda La Puente Unified campus offers a comprehensive program for students woefully short of the credits needed to graduate.



Valley Alternative in Hacienda Heights has been named a Model Continuation High School by the state superintendent of instruction. (File photo)

But what impresses a visitor is the welcoming atmosphere found at the small campus on Shadybend Drive. The administrators, teachers and staff seem truly interested in the lives of these at-risk teens.

"The inspection team liked the strong relationships between students and staff," Principal Priscilla Tam said. "They were also impressed with the instructional programs we have in place."

Assistant administrator David Nieto called Valley "a well-kept secret," noting its API scores jumped 129

points last year.

Alternative high schools serve students age 16 or older who are short credits. The teens must still go to school, despite not having enough credits to graduate. These schools focus on intensive guidance and counseling.

Valley's first step is to mentor each of its 160 students. The principal creates an individualized instructional plan for each student.

"We see exactly where they are short on credits, then create a plan so they can catch up without overwhelming them," Tam explained.

With a specific plan in place, the school monitors the student's progress closely.

"The staff suggested we stop every three weeks to update the students on their performance," Tam said.

The teens receive constant encouragement as they work on the extra credits, while still taking the same courses as a regular high school student.

The big difference seems to be the individualized attention they receive from teachers in the small classes of 20 to 25 students.

Instructors such as science teacher Michael Keith, who has worked with continuation students for 25 years.

"I like these students and the challenge," Keith explained in the modern lab at Valley.

English teacher Fred Riecke agreed the work was "challenging but fulfilling."

"It's challenging to deal with students who can't find success at school," Riecke added. "We try to give them lots of individual help so they can succeed."

In addition to regular coursework, Riecke teaches teens how to cope in the workplace.

"We'll talk about the different skills they'll need at work, such as interview techniques," the enthusiastic instructor said.

He also adds social emotional learning on Wednesdays. This week, his students learned about passive, aggressive people.

All this attention isn't lost on students such as Sergio Quintero. The 17-year-old is back on track after getting a year behind on his studies.

"I made a stupid decision when I dropped out of school to get a job," Sergio admitted. "Now I'm catching up on all my credits so I can graduate."

The La Puente senior wants to go on to college so he can become a social worker.

Junior Symphony Avery finds herself a half year behind in credits. Now, the 16-year-old is pacing her studies so she can return to Wilson High to graduate in 2013.

"Valley is my first step back," Symphony said. "Eventually, I want to study nursing in college."

The young artist is entering her oil painting in the first regional student art exhibition at Millard Sheets Gallery at the Fairplex in March. Valley is sending eight entries to the exhibit.

"Many of our students are very artistic, so we offer art classes in addition to regular courses," Tam said.

The teachers even invite students out to dinner three times a year.

"We call them 'getting to know you dinners.' The teacher will pick a student they want to know better. Maybe a shy student who doesn't say much in class," Tam said.

Social studies instructor Anne McKechnie likes to build personal relationships with her students.

"It's easier to form this rapport with small classes. I enjoy teaching here," McKechnie said.

Valley also brings in outside speakers to motivate the students. The speakers help the teens set concrete career goals.

"Our last speaker grew up in the district and went to continuation school. She now works with youth in the Orange County Department of Corrections," Tam said.

Mt. SAC also offers four or five workshops a year to provide information about community college. College officials discuss everything from classes to financial aid.

"Last year, we had 25 students go on to college," the proud principal noted.

Enrollment at Valley high school has been steadily dropping. Valley had 200 students last year and 250 the year before that.

"The district's four high schools are providing intervention programs to keep the students in their home schools," Tam said. "That's great. Some day I hope they put me out of a job."

Call it the price of success.

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