Santa Fe Trail Day

Las Animas High School, Las Animas School District

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The goal of Santa Fe Trail Day at Las Animas High School was to engage students, families, alumni, and community members in a shared celebration of local history, student leadership, and school pride. This long-standing tradition—then in its 92nd year—served as the longest-running student-sponsored event in Colorado. Rooted in the community's connection to the Santa Fe Trail, Bent's Fort, and surrounding historic sites, the event supported a positive school culture and reinforced student ownership of meaningful, real-world experiences.

Planning and implementation were led primarily by the Las Animas High School Student Council, with support from school administration, staff advisors, art teachers, and community partners. Students took the lead in organizing committees, coordinating events, and communicating with community members, alumni, and local organizations.

Santa Fe Trail Day was a full-day, school- and community-wide event. The day included a downtown parade featuring school groups, royalty candidates, antique vehicles, and community organizations. At Las Animas High School, students participated in Frontier King and Queen contests, costume contests, and leadership-based activities that highlighted character and school involvement. Art students designed t-shirts and the official event poster, selected by students to represent the celebration, while all artwork was displayed throughout the school building. Community members participated in a People's Choice vote. Academic and extracurricular displays showcased student learning, allowing families and visitors to engage with classroom outcomes and school programs. A ranch burger lunch brought students, families, alumni, and community members together in an informal setting. The day concluded with square dancing, awards, and the crowning of Santa Fe Trail Day King and Queen. These experiences promoted student leadership and reinforced Las Animas High School as a central hub of the community.

Evaluation of the practice occurred through participation rates, student leadership reflection, and community feedback gathered informally during and after the event. Staff and Student Council advisors reviewed planning effectiveness and student involvement to improve future celebrations. Challenges included coordinating large-scale logistics and balancing academic schedules with event preparation. Ensuring consistent communication across students, staff, and community partners was an ongoing focus for improvement.



For replication, the most important advice was to trust students with real leadership responsibilities and build strong community partnerships early in the planning process. A staff advisor noted that the event worked because the students owned it from start to finish.