

# San Andres High begins transformation to Rio Grande Prep

LAS CRUCES >> Rio Grande Preparatory Institute looks just like San Andres High School. The walls are the same. The bulletin boards are the same. The students and staff are largely the same. The building even still displays the school's old moniker.

But change is taking place.

Las Cruces Public Schools' alternative high school is revamping its curriculum to address its chronically low graduation rates under the leadership of Principal Kathie Davis.

Recently the Las Cruces school board officially renamed the school, and Rio Grande Prep will now supplement core classes with afternoon internships and more community college classes.

The name change reflects the inner transformation, said Principal Kathie Davis, one of the few new faces at the school.

"We don't have to explain San Andres under new management," the former Lynn Middle School principal said.

"Keep a hold of them"

The staff are hoping the emphasis on career readiness and internships will show students the importance of school and keep them engaged in learning.

Another goal at the school is to raise the graduation rate from 26 percent last year to 60 percent in May.

"If a kiddo comes to us, we're

going to keep a hold of them," Davis said.

She walks down the hallway, high-fiving a student here, a student there.

Davis applied for the position, submitting a vision for the school. It aligned with Superintendent Stan Rounds' vision, and Davis got the gig.

The school's new mission statement is to prepare students for "school, work and beyond," "increasing graduation rates through pathways, internships and industry certifications."

Students take an online, state career aptitude test that evaluates their reading and other skills. The test compares students' abilities to those jobs require, rating the level of skill needed numerically.

"We're hoping that ties to why school's important," Davis says.

There are 16 broad "career clusters," such as health and science, that students can select. They then identify their interests and sit down with staff to discover which area they'd like to explore.

Upperclassmen at the school, which has 154 students, will spend the morning taking core classes like English, math and science. In the afternoon, they will take classes at Doña Ana Community College or intern at local organizations. (Younger students spend the afternoon in elective classes.)

The students will not earn an associate degree like their peers at Arrowhead Park Early College High School. They will, however, work toward obtaining a DACC certification, completing from 10 to 20 college credits in a subject of their choice.

Current upperclassmen may not complete certifications by graduation, Davis said, but the nine current first-time high schoolers -- credits and class levels get complicated at a school where many students are also working to catch up on missed credits -- will be able to complete them during their time at the school.

Internship pitches

History teacher Nikolina Keyes is overseeing what the staff hopes will become internship time for some students. The six students sit in desks typing up letters of interest on iPads.

"A lot of our students are hands-on and thrive in a work environment," Keyes said.

The students will email businesses and organizations they're interested in working for and will pitch themselves as interns.

"I wanted them to know what it's like when they have to go and look for a job," she said.

Destiny Rios, 16, is an aspiring actress who hopes to intern with local theater companies, ideally at the Black Box Theatre. She likes the work experience Rio Grande Prep's new internship component aims to offer.

"You get to go out in the real world and experience things you wouldn't get to experience," the high school junior said. "You get to observe actual artists."

Nuvia Chavez, 16, hopes to intern in marketing for a local radio station, maybe Hot 103.

"This program is really a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because how many students can do internships and get credit for it?" she said, while working on her email explaining herself, the curriculum, the new school. "I think it would be a great opportunity for people to get to learn more about our school."

Down the hall, math teacher Carmina Gomez and her students, ages 16 to 19, are listening to representatives from the Department of Health speak about their jobs. Gomez, who heads the health and science pathway, is hoping to place nine students in internships with the department. They would intern on a rotation schedule, moving from clinical experience and to teaching nutrition classes, for example.

"It's very important for our students to not only learn academics but to learn the soft skills so they can apply for jobs," she said, mentioning students will learn how to apply for jobs and to college all on their own. "All those opportunities will be open for them."

## State grant

The school will help transport students to and from DACC's East Mesa campus and internships with the help of a \$120,000 grant from the Public Education Department, Davis said.

Administrators are working to RoadRunner Transit to possibly get cheaper bus passes for students to get to and from internships and may hiring a shuttle to take them to DACC, she said. Some teachers are also cleared to drive and may transport students in Suburbans if students don't have cars, she said.

The school will also use the money to help develop students' fundamental skills, especially those tested on state and college standardized tests, she said.

Students say the internship program is also a way for the community to get to know the school and its new mission.

Destiny says people always tell her "Oh my gosh, you shouldn't go (to San Andres). That's for the bad kids." Now that she says she attends Rio Grande Prep, they instead ask "Where's that?" she said.

"It's not the same school any more at all," said Amanda Ramirez, 18. "We're starting off on a clean sheet."

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