

Internships key to Rio Grande Prep's revamped educational model

LAS CRUCES >> Kayla Leiser, 14, spends her mornings in class and her afternoons working at Mountain View Market Farm.

The freshman at Rio Grande Preparatory Institute, [formerly San Andres High School](#), enjoys the internship so much she works well above the required hours each week and will continue volunteering in the summer.

"I've never had a job before because I'm only a freshman, but it helps show how people work in the real world," Kayla said of her internship.

New Principal Kathie Davis has revamped the alternative high school's educational model, requiring students to spend the mornings in traditional classrooms then afternoons interning at local businesses, working or taking community college classes.

The transformation comes after years of low graduation and attendance rates at the public school. Last year's graduation rate was 26 percent.

The school serves students who struggled in traditional, larger high schools, as well as students who are looking to catch up on credits.

Davis took over in June to put in place a new vision for the school in which education, college and career readiness are more closely tied.

The school has a new motto as well: Grit then glory.

"If you've got the grit, if you stick with it, then you get the glory, then you get to graduate," Davis said.

New model

More than 140 students participate in internships across the Mesilla Valley, volunteering in school classrooms, mechanics shops, Supercuts and more while earning high school credit for their work.

Another 60 students have jobs, take classes at Doña Ana Community College or participate in the district's program for teen parents to also earn course credit.

Morning classes are modeled on a summer school schedule with courses running in nine-week sessions. The students have two classes in the morning before heading out in the afternoon.

Internship students must complete 64 hours each semester. They interviewed for their positions to ensure they were a good fit.

Each Thursday, they spend the afternoon working on job skills like how to address a boss, how to write a résumé or how to handle conflict.

"All of the stuff that's really pretty basic but is hard in school settings because kids are worried about how they'll be perceived by their peers," Davis said.

Students at the school address Davis as "Miss" and answer questions in complete sentences, appearing older than their years.

The internships are beneficial for local business as well, MVM Farm administrator Nicole Fuchs said, noting the internship is a chance to get youth interested in sustainable, local food systems.

"It's humbling to work with youth and realize they're looking unto you to learn what you have to teach them," she said.

The students who work, whether it be a job at McDonald's or Walmart, must work 20 hours per week.

A grant from the state Public Education Department pays for city bus passes for each student, helping them get to their internships and DACC classes.

Changing climate

Staff say the new model has changed the school's climate.

"I've seen many kids step up their game and change the way they think about school," anatomy teacher Julie Gutierrez said.

Students seem happier, staff say. Many previously struggled to see the value of a high school diploma when they could have a job instead, staff said.

"They want to be here; they want to graduate," school counselor Lorraine Armendariz said. "I think the kids are realizing that education is important because they're out there" working in the real world.

There have been a decrease in discipline problems as well, staff say. There have been three fights at the school this year, Davis said, down from dozens of incidents last year.

Meanwhile, staff are cracking down on absences.

Students can only miss four days of school in each nine-week period. If they miss more, they must plead their case to administrators, including explaining why, if Rio Grande Prep were an employer, the school should continue to hire them.

Last period, 25 percent of students were in the so-called appeals process, Davis said.

Staff have added an incentive to lower those numbers: The students who attend the last 15 days of this nine-week period will go on a field trip.

Enrollment has risen as well, up to 200 this spring from 120 in the fall.

Davis attributes the rise to parents and students getting the word out about the school's

transformation.

Already, 70 percent of the senior class is pre-registered to attend DACC or New Mexico State University, Davis said.

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