

# LCPS Virtual Learning Academy finds niche after rocky start to year



LAS CRUCES - Las Cruces Public Schools established a Virtual Learning Academy six years before the pandemic. The academy's online setting offers a framework for students for whom in-person classroom instruction may not be ideal.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in spring 2020, the district went to remote learning for nearly a year. Remote learning is different than the VLA.

In VLA — which offers K-12 classes — students have scheduled instruction with teachers a couple hours a day and can then complete assignments on their own schedule. VLA teachers also have office hours for one-on-one instruction time.

Throughout the pandemic, the district has highlighted the VLA as an option for students who preferred to go at their own pace online.

The summer before the 2021-22 year, administrators took a poll and determined about 300 to 330 families planned to enroll in VLA and budgeted teachers and resources accordingly.

"Of course the school year got here and the craziness happened. At our biggest we've been closer to 900 (students)," said VLA Principal Stephanie Hanway.

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Hanway said she was enrolling 5 to 30 new students every day in the first months of the school year.

"I can't even sugarcoat this — I had one teacher in first grade and she had 76 students," Hanway said.

But after a rocky start, the VLA hired more teachers and Hanway said the academy is back on track with a sustainable student-to-teacher ratio.

When mask requirements were lifted in February, Hanway estimated that about 50 students left the academy.

## **Drowning in students**

The initial overcrowding put a strain on teachers, leading VLA fifth-grade teacher Carmen Merlano-Whitlock to speak out at a school board meeting in November 2021, begging for district support.

Merlano-Whitlock expected 28 students to start the school year, but would take in every fifth-grader that registered as parents decided to switch from in-classroom to the VLA.

"Every day it was like another 10, another 10," she said. "Our heads were spinning so fast. We hardly knew what to do."

At peak enrollment, Merlano-Whitlock had 73 students.

"I literally had to split them (students) into two," Merlano-Whitlock said. "I had one morning class of 35, and another morning class of 35.... That really made it hard because it cuts the teaching time in half."

The district heard from Merlano-Whitlock, Hanway and others and dedicated more resources to the academy.

The VLA soon hired two teacher per grade level as opposed to one. There is now also an educational assistant in every kindergarten class.

Merlano-Whitlock's class size was cut in half.

"I'm actually down to 22 now," Merlano-Whitlock said in April. "That's huge. Oh, man, life is beautiful now. You just actually feel like you're getting quality instruction and quality time with the students."

## **Learning virtually**

Merlano-Whitlock taught elementary school for 17 years, but this was her first full virtual position.

"It is the difference between day and night," she said.

The VLA began elementary instruction just this year. Before the pandemic, there wasn't much interest in a virtual program for younger students, Hanway said.

Merlano-Whitlock said teaching her fifth-graders has been rewarding, even if it requires more planning.

"You can't just wing it... because you only get two and a half hours a day with

them," she said.

The lesson plans have to allow for more flexibility and demand more creativity from teachers and students.

Merlano-Whitlock said she's been impressed how students have responded.

**Education:** [The Berry Bunch: Monte Vista Elementary students introduce progress on outdoor classrooms](#)

"I tell them, 'Boys and girls, you guys are the ones that are going to land on Mars,' she said. "'With your skills, there is no worry in my mind that you're not going to be successful.'"

## Adjusting the system

Hanway said the VLA has learned a lot after such a hectic year.

Instead of open registration, VLA will now limit students — chosen based on an application — to coincide with teachers available.

VLA is also looking to bring in part-time social workers to help implement [social emotional learning](#), which could be valuable for students who have limited social interaction due to the nature of virtual classes.

Hanway says the changes will benefit students.

"It's awesome for our kiddos, because I know that this was hard on them," she said. "To be able to be, I don't want to say normal, but something that they're comfortable with and they're able to succeed, in has been really good. I've got the best of the best teachers for this."

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