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Opening to alternatives

RASHA ALY • THE DESERT SUN • AUGUST 30, 2007

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Desert Sands school district answers growing need for non-traditional learning options with new campus

LA QUINTA - The Desert Sands Unified School District is opening a new \$26 million campus to accommodate a growing need for alternative education.

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"We were not capturing all the students that we needed," Superintendent Doris Wilson said about why the district built the new campus off Washington Street.

The Horizon Alternative Education Complex/Summit High School is part of a new concept being embraced by the district: house most of its alternative education programs under one roof.

"We are determined that every child in our district will be served and graduate from high school," Wilson said.

The facility, at 43-330 Palm Royal Drive, is home to a number of programs including:



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Marilyn Chung, The Desert Sun

The new Alternative Education Complex that houses Horizon School, Summit Continuation High School and adult education

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Summit High School, the district's second continuation school that allows students to earn credits at their own pace.

Horizon School, which offers independent study, home schooling and classes for troubled students.

Desert Sands Adult School Services.

Carolyn Saam, a Horizon parent, said she is pleased with the changes.

"It's a great opportunity for the school to expand and for students and families to take advantages of the opportunities it has to offer," said Saam, who had two children at the school.

Rebecca Saam, 18, who graduated in the spring, enrolled in Horizon because of the coursework.

"I wasn't being challenged enough in the regular school," she said.

The future veterinarian learned at her own pace and had the opportunity to take classes that suited her career goals, such as reproduction and stallion management, an artificial insemination course at UC Davis.

While it's the first building of its kind for the district, said Peggy Reyes, the district's director of facilities services, it's not the first in the state.

In Riverside County, several school districts, including Corona-Norco and Jurupa unified school districts, house alternative programs on the same campus.

Alternative education is a major component of California education, with 395,196 of 6.3 million students enrolling in alternative education programs throughout the state, according to the California Department of Education. In Riverside County, 32,077 of a total of 413,059 students are in alternative education.

For Desert Sands, the idea took root about 11 years ago, Gillund said.

Then, the district's independent study offerings were just single a program - not the Horizon School that it is today, Gillund said.

And 11 years ago, the district's population was not the 29,000 it is today either, Wilson said.

"We just simply outgrew that area," she said.

At the district office, where Horizon School had been located, things were too crowded, she said. They needed the space to expand the district's technology department and a home for a new continuation high school.

Indio's Amistad High School, the district's first continuation high school, did not have enough room for all of

will open this fall.



Marilyn Chung, The Desert

Principal Douglas Gillund sits in his office by a drawing of a mountain lion, the mascot of the new Alternative Education Complex.



NEW ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

Horizon School offers independent study, home schooling and opportunity classes for students. Opportunity classes are for students who may have problems with attendance, discipline, academic or all three areas. They are taught in a 15- to 20-student, self-contained classroom where they learn to remain focused and not be distracted from their school work. Summit High School is the district's second continuation school. It is for students who are deficient in high school credits and

the students.

"We swelled beyond capacity just to provide access to as many students as possible," Amistad principal Bob Blinkinsop said.

As of October 2006, 570 students were enrolled at Amistad - about 100 more than the school's capacity, Blinkinsop said. Besides those 100, another 100 could not get into the school.

Wilson also said Amistad's location in east Indio could have provided transportation difficulties for parents who live in Palm Desert or La Quinta.

This year, about 210 to 240 students will enroll at Summit, Gillund said.

Amistad will remain open, too.

Another 600 students will be at Horizon. That also does not include the nearly 1,000 students who might pass through the school's doors to attend their adult education classes.

The complex also comes equipped with all the latest technology: projectors in the ceiling, smart boards and the ability to conduct video conferences and to stream videos.

"Just to watch a teacher integrate all the technology into a lesson is pretty amazing," he said.

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not on track to graduating or for students who want to graduate early.

Desert Sands Adult School offers a variety of classes to adult Seniors may also be able to take classes in addition to high school courses.

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