

Vista Magnet Middle School off to good start, educators say

By: STACY BRANDT - Staff Writer
Parents are already signing students up for next year

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VISTA ---- When Vista Unified School District opened its new magnet middle school last August, district officials said they wanted to see it become a source of pride for the district and set an example for using technology to teach students.

The evidence that they are succeeding is found in recent enrollment rates and business partnership deals, administrators said last week.

Since registration opened two weeks ago, school officials have signed up 60 students for next year, Principal Jose Villarreal said. It took them more than a month to sign up that many students last year, he added.

"Everybody was a little unsure of how it was going to work out, and I think everybody is thrilled with the way it's going," teacher Barbara Franklin said.

The school, which focuses on math and science instruction, opened last year to 200 students on a portion of the downtown Vista site that once housed Lincoln Middle School.

Administrators hope to add 200 sixth-grade students ---- 50 from each of the district's four middle school boundaries ---- by the end of registration in May. They would join the students attending this year. By 2009, the school is forecast to have roughly 600 students in grades six through eight.

Growing pains

Mixed in with the success have been a few growing pains, including limited extracurricular options, educators and students at the school said.

Student Shane McNary said he hopes the middle school has a music class soon.

Dana Butler, whose son Mason attends the school, said she also would like to see more art and music at the school, though the small size and focus on technology is what drew her to the campus in the first place.

"It's exactly what I wanted for my son," she said. "It's putting the kids into the future."

Because the school is so small, the principal said he is waiting until it grows a bit to start music and sports programs.

Even with the limited offerings, students have jumped at the opportunity to get involved

with whatever activities are available, including drama, yearbook and academic clubs, teachers said.

"Our kids are so enthusiastic. They want to join everything," Franklin said. "You name it, and they want to do it."

Academics

Over the last six months, educators at the school said they have worked to fine tune academics at the campus, which has a different schedule from other district campus and even has its own student dress code. As a way to help prepare students for the business world, they're required to wear collared shirts and name tags every day, while science teachers wear lab coats to class.

The schedule is unusual for a middle school, with students attending 89 minute periods, nearly twice the time of a typical class. Teachers said the extra time allows them to get deeper into their lessons without having to break them up between separate days.

In order to make these longer periods work, the school is split up into two groups of 100 students. These groups attend the same classes with the same teachers.

Because of this, teachers are able to work together to integrate classes and help with students who are falling behind, said Jennifer Eckle, a teacher at the school

"They really get to see where the different subject areas come together," she said. "They're not learning the subjects in isolation."

Partnerships and programs

Villarreal said he has worked to forge ties with local businesses and colleges, including partnerships with engineers, teachers and other students.

Through an online connection, students at the middle school have interacted with teaching students at Cal State San Marcos as they worked on science experiments.

Villarreal said he was happy with how well the partnership has worked and hopes to have his students give a presentation to the college students before the end of the year.

Starting this week, students will work with engineers from the local office of the El Segundo-based engineering firm Northrop Grumman.

Company engineers hope to use the wood and metal shop on the campus to show students how to design and fabricate machine parts, said Mark Evilsizer, an engineering planner with the company, which has similar partnership with schools in Poway.

"I hope it provides them with a real-life example that all of this stuff they're learning in math and science has direct applications in the world of engineering," Evilsizer said.

The deal could also benefit the company, he said.

"We're a little bit selfish in our attention, in that we're hoping that we'll attract some of the best and brightest kids to us when they graduate from college," he said. "We don't want to go to China to recruit educated and highly skilled people."

Contact staff writer Stacy Brandt at (760) 901-4009 or sbrandt@nctimes.com.