

## **VISTA: Magnet schools still flourishing, officials say**

Despite budget woes, district officials plan to maintain unique programs

**By STACY BRANDT - sbrandt@nctimes.com | Posted: Saturday, March 20, 2010 5:35 pm**

Vista Unified School District officials say they're committed to maintaining the unique programs at the district's four magnet schools, but they may have to get creative with funding as unprecedented spending cuts eat away at school budgets across the state.

The specialized schools, which draw students from throughout the district, are facing the same cuts as other campuses. In addition, they're dealing with dwindling grant money that now must be split in more ways than in the past.

Principals at the campuses said they plan to seek additional grants and do whatever else they can to keep their schools unique.

"I'm hoping it's going to impact us as little as possible," said Mary Contreras, principal at Vista Academy for Visual and Performing Arts, a school founded in 1992 that offers an arts-focused curriculum to students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

"Because we are different as magnet schools, we know we want to keep those special differences," she added.

In addition to the performing arts campus, Vista Unified's magnet schools include an elementary school called The Casita Center for Technology, Math and Science; Mission Vista High School, which focuses on arts and science; and Vista Magnet Middle School, which has a technology-heavy math and science-themed curriculum.

For students who have specific interests or learning styles, the magnet programs can help them succeed and become more connected to school, educators have said.

"Magnet schools aren't better than other schools," said Rodney Goldenberg, principal of Mission Vista High School. "They're different."

Although the schools have some teachers who specialize in arts or sciences, those themes are mostly incorporated into regular classroom instruction, said Jeanie Luckey, assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum and instruction for the district.

"They are teaching through the themes," she said. "It's the leaders of the school who pull this together with the teachers."

For example, at Casita, teachers reinforce lessons in a variety of subjects with science experiments and computers. At Vista Academy, the arts are interwoven with other subjects to help the children learn in different ways.

The specialized programs often require a few more teachers and can cost a bit more than typical schools, officials said. However, it's worth the extra money to be able to offer more choices for parents and students, Trustee Carol Herrera said.

"This is a priority for us," she said. "Magnet schools provide parents and children with options, and that's what school districts should be about."

The magnet schools have been popular with parents over the years, with waiting lists some years at Vista Magnet Middle School and Vista Academy.

Still it's nothing new for magnet principals to deal with changing or dwindling funding, the principals said.

When Vista Academy and Casita opened in the early 1990s, each school received about \$700,000 in special grant money to start and maintain the unique programs that made them magnets. That amount has dwindled over the years and with four magnet schools now operating in Vista, each campus is getting a smaller piece of the pie.

With less money coming in and more campus to split it, each school now expects to get between \$100,000 and \$200,000 a year through that funding, which is now known as Targeted Instructional Improvement Grant money.

Despite the challenges, school officials said the magnet programs aren't going anywhere.

"Magnet schools still have a positive outlook," said Laura Smith, principal at Casita Center. "Even though we're in this hard financial time, we're still going to be here. We're still going to offer a different curriculum."

### **Vista Unified School District magnet schools:**

Casita Center for Technology, Math and Science

260 Cedar Road, Vista, CA 92084

[www.vusd.k12.ca.us/es/casita](http://www.vusd.k12.ca.us/es/casita)

760-724-8442

Mission Vista High School (temporary location)

740 Olive Ave., Vista, CA 92083

[www.vusd.k12.ca.us/highschools/mvhs](http://www.vusd.k12.ca.us/highschools/mvhs)

760-758-6800

Vista Academy for Visual and Performing Arts

600 N. Santa Fe Ave., Vista, CA 92083

[www.vusd.k12.ca.us/vapa](http://www.vusd.k12.ca.us/vapa)

760-941-0880

Vista Magnet Middle School

151 Escondido Ave. Vista, CA 92084

[www.vistamagnet.com](http://www.vistamagnet.com)

760-631-4500

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