

# VISTA: Magnet middle school shines

## Students at new school earn highest scores in district

By STACY BRANDT - Staff Writer | Saturday, September 13, 2008 4:59 PM PDT ∞



Sixth grade science teacher Chris McGregor and sixth grade math teacher Michelle Duncan stand by their classrooms as they wait for their students to return from lunch break at the Vista Magnet Middle School in Vista on Wednesday. (Photo by Hayne Palmour IV - staff photographer)



Seventh-graders Nataly Osuna and Paul Mears work on math problems while in class at the Vista Magnet Middle School in Vista on Wednesday. (Photo by Hayne Palmour IV - staff photographer)

VISTA ---- In its first year, Vista Magnet Middle School did better than any other school in the Vista Unified School District on state tests, according to state numbers released last week.

Why this happened is a matter of perspective.

The small school's impressive 871 out of 1,000 on the state's "academic performance index" topped scores at the district's other middle schools by at least 26 points.

When Principal Jose Villarreal saw the score for the first time, he thought it was a mistake, he said.

"I didn't know what to think," he said. "I knew that we were good; I didn't know we were this good."

The school's 200 students were tested this spring, as were all other students in the district. Vista Unified's other four middle schools in the district earned scores between 677 and 845.

Officials said the score at the magnet school, which has a curriculum focused on math, science and technology, is especially impressive considering the relatively high percentage of students learning English and from low-income families at the school.

Those two groups typically get much lower test scores than schools with wealthier students and with more students who are native English speakers.

Last year, 52 percent of the students at the school qualified for free or reduced-price lunch; 29 percent were learning to speak English. At Madison Middle School, the second-highest scoring middle school in the district, 31 percent of the students qualify for the federal lunch program; 11 percent were classified as English learners.

### **No magic pill**

So, why did students at the magnet school do so well?

Students there say it's all because of the teachers; teachers credit the school's unique scheduling and collaboration.

Villarreal said he thinks it's a combination of those and other factors.

"We've not found the magic pill," he said. "That's for sure."

Educators at the downtown campus have worked to tailor the curriculum based on the needs of their students, Villarreal said. What has worked at his schools may not work at others, he added.

For students, the test was a way to show off the hard work they had done throughout the year, said Orlando Corcuera, a seventh-grader at the middle school.

"It feels good to know that our school has just begun and we're already doing so well," he said.

Teachers at the school go out of their way to give students any extra push they may need in order to understand something, said Victoria Serafini, another seventh-grader.

"They sacrificed their time to help us learn, which was so nice of them," she said. "And it really did pay off."

For teachers, the secret was working together and never losing focus on their students, said Margaret Jacobsen, who teaches English at the campus.

Every Wednesday, students go home early while teachers stick around to discuss teaching strategies and how to incorporate hands-on lessons into classes.

"It's a day for us to check ourselves," Villarreal said. "Think of it as half-time at a football game."

### **A growing school**

The school's relatively small size has also contributed to its success, Villarreal said.

The magnet school opened last year with 200 sixth-graders on the downtown Vista campus that once housed Lincoln Middle School.

Administrators added 200 sixth-grade students this year. By 2009, school officials expect to have roughly 600 students in grades six through eight.

Even at full capacity, the school's enrollment would be smaller than the district's other middle schools by hundreds of students.

As a magnet school, it's open to students from throughout the district. That promotes more diversity than most schools have, teachers said.

In addition to being relatively small, the school has a unique schedule that allows for longer class periods. This allows teachers to go into more depth with their lessons and ensure that students fully understand the content, science teacher Jessie Estrada said.

For Estrada, the test score simply validated what she already knew: By working together, teachers at the school were able to push students to do their best.

"Yeah, that number is nice," she said, "but to see the individual kids' progress, I know that's what tugged at my heart."

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