

An Educational Jewel in Tierra Contenta

By Daniel Koenig, Associate Editor

Though little known by many Tierra Contenta residents, Santa Fe School for the Arts & Sciences (SFSAS) located at 5912 Jaguar Drive, just one block east of Chavez Elementary School, has been there for eleven years. Hidden from view by an uphill driveway, it consists of a number of small buildings, home to 116 students (pre-kindergarten through eighth grade) and a core faculty of 12 teachers. The principal and co-founder of this remarkable institution is Rayna Dineen who has been teaching for over thirty years. "Our vision," she said, "is for each child's talents to be fully developed, leading to a life-long passion for learning and exploration. Our children flourish in a caring environment which gives them the courage to be themselves and reach for their dreams. The school embodies the values of compassion, leadership, world citizenship and service."

This private, non-profit school is one of a growing number of Expeditionary Learning schools in the country, supported by the Melissa and Bill Gates foundation and endorsed by the Obama administration. It scores high above the national average in academic testing. Expeditionary Learning schools inspire the motivation to learn, engage teachers and students in new levels of focus and effort, and transform schools into places where students and adults become leaders of their own learning. School leaders and teachers are provided with special professional development, curriculum planning resources and new school structures to boost student engagement, character and achievement.

To achieve these goals, SFSAS employs multi-age classes where for example third and fourth graders share the same class, and have the same teacher for two years, and similarly for fifth and sixth graders. According to Rayna, combining grade levels encourages the older student to mentor the younger one to the benefit of both. Multi-age classes also allow students to learn at their own pace. Expeditionary Learning schools teach by using 'expeditions', which are similar to integrated thematic units; expeditions integrate several subjects at the same time, such as math and science, or language arts and theater etc.

An important part of the school week for several classes, involves spending hours providing community services, such as giving a hand at food banks, tutoring other children, etc. "We have been tutoring children at Cesar Chavez Community School for eight years," added Rayna. "We also have many community partners including veterinary clinics, the New Mexico School for the Deaf, Las Golondrinas, New Vistas Early Childhood Center to name a few."

In addition, every student has the opportunity to study the arts whether visual, music, dance, theater and other. To that end the school offers private and group music lessons (piano, violin, cello, guitar, marimba, chorus), as well as lessons in dance, drama, film making and more. For middle school students, it offers a two-year program of foreign languages including Spanish, French and Japanese.

Eighth graders can participate in a mentoring program with professionals in the community to learn about a potential profession. "We have found that this program makes a powerful difference in the

lives of our students. Several of our mentors have been so impressed with our students that they offered jobs to them following the completion of their mentorship," explained Rayna. Some of the current mentorships include learning about criminal law, computer repair, electronic music recording, world banking and therapeutic horseback riding.

SFSAS offers an extensive after-school program which is open every day from 3:15 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. to children from all schools in Santa Fe and homeschooled children. This program offers participants a host of activities including tutoring in most core subjects, music classes, Irish and swing dance, knitting, life drawing, ceramics, robotics, film making, sports (soccer, lacrosse, playing chess) or a quiet environment in which to do homework.

The school also offers a wide variety of week-long summer camps available to all children. The list is too numerous to include here, but here are some examples: comic book writing, filmmaking, back country wilderness hiking, international folk art, cooking, save the animals, and many more.

To provide all of these programs the school employs a staff of some twenty, highly qualified, part-time teachers. One might think that, in light of the extensive disciplines that SFSAS offers its students, it is one of the most expensive private schools in Santa Fe. In fact, it is one of the most affordable, due in part to its generous financial aid program provided by the New Mexico Children Youth and Families Department, and by Educate New Mexico. Non-registered students can also benefit from substantial financial aid for the after-school programs and summer camps.

For more information about SFSAS call 505-438-8585 or visit www.santafeschool.org.