

Learning by discovery Santa Fe schools explore expeditionary-learning concept

By WENDY BROWN *The New Mexican*

At the Santa Fe School for the Arts, students recently learned about animals, not by sitting in a classroom but by welcoming a crate full of chickens to a coop built next to the school.

They learned how to feed the chickens, gather eggs and use the eggs for everything from food to decorations.

The goal at the six-year-old private school on Jaguar Drive, and at other schools that use a concept called expeditionary learning, is to learn as much as possible by doing and to spend less time in the classroom and reading textbooks.

It's an approach that has drawn the attention of Santa Fe Public Schools officials.

When Jody Drew asked the Santa Fe school board this winter for approval to open a public charter school next year based on the expeditionary-learning model, board members liked the idea so much, they talked about stealing it for the district as a whole.

While there are no immediate plans to convert existing public schools to expeditionary-learning schools, local officials are exploring the concept. Superintendent Gloria Rendón and a group of principals have met with a representative from the Expeditionary Learning organization, and Associate Superintendent Paula Dean traveled to Denver to attend a national conference in March.

Expeditionary learning is an excellent model for learning, Dean said. "There's no denying it. They use all the best practices that educators ought to use." However, she noted an obstacle to implementing it here: "It's a pretty expensive thing."

The Santa Fe School for the Arts, near Capital High School and Ortiz Middle School, educates 96 students in preschool through middle school.

The school's director, Rayna Dineen, said teachers started the lessons on animals by asking students what they already knew about animals. From there, teachers asked what the students wanted to learn about animals. Students then learned how they could find out what they wanted to know, such as how a buffalo moves.

"We teach them that you don't have to know everything," Dineen said, "but that they can find out how to learn about anything."

Ruthanne Greeley, spokeswoman for Santa Fe Public Schools, said the only plans in the district to start an expeditionary-learning school are those for Charter School 37, for which Drew received school board approval in January. Scheduled to open in 2006 in Lamy, it will also be a dual-language school — teaching in English and Spanish.

School board member Mary Ellen Gonzales said she will watch to see how well expeditionary learning works in a public school. She also will be looking the school's budget.

Marcy Litzenberg, a fellow board member, said she would like to see more public expeditionary-learning schools because the concept works particularly well with students who have trouble learning. There are three new "R's" that educators pay attention to now — relationships, relevance and rigor — and expeditionary learning provides the relevance, she said.

Scott Gill, southwest field director for the Expeditionary Learning organization, based in Garrison, N.Y., said his organization started with five schools in 1992 and

Expeditionary learning

Spending less time in classrooms and reading textbooks and more time learning through hands-on exploration is the philosophy behind expeditionary learning.

Santa Fe already has one private school that uses the approach, and the school board has given the go-ahead for a public charter school to open next year in Lamy using the

expeditionary-learning concept.

An organization to promote the idea nationally started in 1992 with five schools and now is involved with 180 schools in 27 states.

Northern New Mexico also is home to the expeditionary-learning Roots and Wings Charter School in El Prado, near Taos.

has grown to nearly 180 registered schools in 27 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

While many expeditionary-learning schools are either private schools or charter schools, there are also a number of "regular" public schools that have subscribed to the learning philosophy, Gill said. For example, he said, there is a whole district of expeditionary-learning schools in Phoenix.

Gill said he regularly visits such schools. He was in Santa Fe earlier this month and planned to spend this week in Phoenix.

His organization began under the New American Schools Development Corp., an initiative of the first President Bush, Gill said. The corporation's goal was to identify pockets of good teaching and create more schools with good teachers, he said.

Outward Bound, an organization known for teaching youngsters confidence by taking them into the wilderness, applied for money to start the Expeditionary Learning organization, Gill said. The two organizations remain partners.

To register as an expeditionary-learning school, Gill said, 80 percent of the teachers must agree they want the school to become an expeditionary-learning school, and the remaining 20 percent must say they will not undermine the process. A large component of the process is professional development for teachers, Gill said.

At the Santa Fe School for the Arts and other expeditionary-learning schools, it isn't just students who learn by getting out of the classroom and traveling. Dineen said part of the philosophy is that teachers are learners too.

This summer, science teacher Dave Bailey will travel to Hawaii to study sustainability; fourth-through-sixth-grade teacher Matt Newsum will travel to Alaska to study salmon; and moving-images and math teacher Cathy Weber will travel to Rockport, Maine, to study film. The Fund for Teachers, a nonprofit organization that helps send teachers on summer sabbaticals, will pay for the trips.

Dineen said students studying French at the school have gone to France to learn more about the language, and students studying Japanese have gone to Japan. Students raised money for the trips by holding fund-raisers and selling services such as baby-sitting, she said. Every student went, regardless of his or her ability to pay.



Photos by Kathy De La Torre/The New Mexican

Sara Jen, right, counts plastic eggs Tuesday in Rayna Dineen and Suzanne Shakespeare's pre-kindergarten and kindergarten class at the Santa Fe School for the Arts, a private school that uses the expeditionary-learning approach. From left are Merit Willey, Sarafina Borowska and Berke Borowska. In the background is Adrienne Marquez.



Chime Dolker holds one of several chickens that the School for the Arts keeps in a coop to help students learn about animals. Students feed the chickens and gather eggs, among other activities.