

‘ VERY DIFFERENT SCHOOL ’

Thriving Santa Fe School for the Arts hopes to expand campus

By John Sena

The New Mexican

It's easy to miss the Santa Fe School for the Arts while driving on Jaguar Drive, but it's hard to forget the little private school if you take the time to visit.

Stashed behind a coyote fence on an unassuming campus, the school uses a few portable buildings and a converted house to educate 100 or so preschool through middle-school students.

Walk into the main building, which contains a few classrooms and an administrative office, and the first things you'll notice are shoes.

Not on the feet of students, but laid out in front of lockers. Students take them off in the Japanese tradition of showing respect for the place they're entering. "It's a very different school," said eighth-grader Beth Christensen, " but different in a good way."

The difference is evident in the curriculum

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John McCarthy, center, jumps from behind a curtain as Noa Noa LagetHudson emcees a show to teach first- and secondgraders about numbers at Santa Fe School for the Arts. The show was videotaped and will be used as a learning tool for future students.

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School: \$150,000 needed for new building

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— every student can learn American Sign Language, middle- school students can choose from electives that include filmmaking and robotics, and all students participate in at least one after-school club.

All students take part in community outreach. Some volunteer at César Chávez Elementary, others at a horseback- riding therapy program.

Students also produced a public- service announcement about homeless teens in Santa Fe.

“One of the problems in Santa Fe that not so many people know about is homeless teens,” said Beth, who is part of the school’s Peace Jam club, which made the commercial. “We’ve been trying to get the word out.” The group was concerned that the only homeless teen shelter in Santa Fe had shut down. The announcement aired on a number of channels and prompted the city to reopen the shelter, if only on a part-time basis.

The students used what they had learned in class to work on their idea, and it’s that autonomy and guidance that students really like about their school.

“They definitely give you the freedom to think for yourself and try new things,” said Corrina Leatherwood, a sixthgrader. “You get a say in what you learn.”

The school also prides itself on a diverse population that comes from all over the world.

There are students from Tibet, China, Russia, Italy and the Philippines, to name a few. The mix provides a welcoming environment for all students.

“We sometimes feel discriminated against (in Santa Fe),” said Cecilia Gonzales, who is from Mexico and whose son, Fernando, attends the School for the Arts. “(School staff) make us feel so good.”

Fernando made the honor roll at Ortiz Middle School last year as a sixth-grader. But he felt more comfortable at the School for the Arts after attending a summer program there, Gonzales said.

At his new school — his family received scholarship money — Fernando is learning French and doing even better in school, his mother said.

Tuition costs \$3,000 to \$7,000 a year, depending on the grade and the number of days a week the student attends, said Rayna Dineen, the school’s principal and co-founder.

About 30 percent of students receive some financial assistance.

With all the school’s successes, officials are concerned with one thing. They need a little more space for students.

There are plans to build a 2,500-square-foot building for additional classroom space. The only problem is that even with a discount from a builder whose children attend the school, the school is about \$150,000 short of the \$350,000 needed, Dineen said.

Students and parents have held fundraisers and local organizations have donated money, but the school still needs more.

Students, too, said they would like it if their school was a little bigger. But mostly, they enjoy being at a place where, as seventh- grader Malia Byrne put it, “It’s encouraged to be a little different.”

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