

Hemet Unified, educational company work to get students back on track

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By **IMRAN VITTACHI**
The Press-Enterprise

HEMET - Room 502 at the old Santa Fe Middle School campus in Hemet houses the new AdvancePath Academy, where students who were in danger of flunking or dropping out of school are busy trying to put themselves back on a graduation track.

The academy is a public-private partnership between Hemet Unified School District and AdvancePath Academics Inc., a Williamsburg, Va., company that has designed credit recovery courses in a nontraditional school setting for students behind on credits needed to graduate.

District officials are looking to the academy as a way to prevent students from dropping out or to help them finish their high school careers with a diploma.

Under its agreement with the district, AdvancePath invested \$250,000 into converting, furnishing and equipping Room 502 -- which used to house a special education classroom and a separate art room -- into an Internet café-style computer lab. In exchange, the district gives the company money it would get from the state through daily attendance for the approximately 140 students enrolled in the program, said Rex Comer, Hemet Unified's area superintendent for educational options and outlying schools.

This money pays for running the program, including salaries and benefits for the academy's staff of teachers, a computer technician, a secretary and a community liaison officer, who are all district employees. If the money isn't enough to cover those costs, AdvancePath pays the difference, Comer said.

AdvancePath has arranged similar deals with seven other school districts in California, setting up academies in San Bernardino, Sacramento, Glendale, Modesto and other cities.



Terry Pierson / The Press-Enterprise

Khaila Yatomi, 17, of Hemet, shares a laugh with teacher Jayne George at the AdvancePath Academy, where students in danger of flunking or dropping out try to earn enough credits to graduate.

"The way it's put together, it reduces the costs so it becomes cost neutral for the district," said John Super, AdvancePath's president, said in a phone interview from Reno, Nev. It usually costs districts a large sum of money to invest in alternative educational programs compared to regular education programs, he noted.

"We are totally accountable to the school district," Super added. "We live under the direct supervision of the school board, the superintendent and the district."

The academy, which opened in late August with the start of the 2008-09 school year, functions under the umbrella of the district's continuation high school, Alessandro High, Comer said. Instead of attending classes at Alessandro for five periods a day, students enrolled at the academy attend morning, afternoon or evening sessions. While surrounded by other students, they essentially are alone with their computer and the teaching staff during those four-hour blocks.



AdvancePath students take individual software-driven classes monitored by the teachers at the academy, which opened in late August with the start of the 2008-09 school year.

It's all about giving students who might struggle in a traditional classroom a sense that they own and control their education, Super said.

On Sept. 24, two students, Edgar Molina-Meza and Levi Dejarnett, became the first to graduate from the new academy.

Inside Room 502

The noise-level in Room 502 is hushed during morning and afternoon sessions, yet it's a hive of concentration. That's when available slots for those sessions are filled up.

All 60 computer-work stations lining the walls are occupied by a student, whose eyes are fixed on his or her computer screens. Each student takes individual software-driven classes monitored by the academy's in-house staff of teachers.

"When you walk in there, it's as quiet as a library," said school board trustee Joe Wojcik, who would like the district to consider opening AdvancePath academies in the district's outlying attendance areas, such as in Idyllwild and Anza. "These kids are engaged, who otherwise probably wouldn't have been engaged."

When he signed up for the program, Milton Gomez, 17, a senior, had completed only 85 of 230 course credits required for graduation. In his five weeks or so at the academy, he has completed 30 more credits, leaving him 115 credits shy of graduation.

Gomez started his high school career, failing out of West Valley High School with straight F's. On his way to the academy, he transited through Helen Hunt Jackson, an independent study school, Alessandro High and Hemet Community School.

"I want to be somebody, so I want to finish school," Gomez said. "Hopefully, I get to graduate from here if everything goes good."

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Open House

WHAT: AdvancePath Academy

WHEN: 9 a.m. to noon Tuesday

WHERE: Room 502, old Santa Fe Middle School, 831 E. Devonshire Ave.