

Armadillo Technical Institute starts anew with fresh staff, fresh curriculum

The small public charter school sets its sights on improving state assessments

By **Sanne Specht**

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Armadillo Technical Institute, a public charter school in Phoenix serving sixth to 12th grades, is rising from the ashes of the state's lowest education ranking by making major changes, including a new curriculum and new staff members, said Executive Director Kim DeCosta.

"We replaced half our teaching staff, so we have three new teachers in math, science and language arts," DeCosta said.

Armadillo received a Level 1, the lowest score in a new five-tier rating system unveiled by the Oregon Department of Education earlier this month. The Phoenix-Talent School District's other four schools were ranked in the middle of the pack of Jackson County's 59 schools. Talent Elementary scored the highest mark, a Level 5.

The report cards take into account teacher training, attendance, student test scores, student poverty levels and graduation rates, among other criteria. The new system replaces previous ratings of "outstanding," "satisfactory" and "in need of improvement." But they don't tell the whole story, said Jeffrey Johnson, special education teacher and intake coordinator.

The school closed its GED program in June because the state doesn't recognize those graduates. Because a large percentage of Armadillo students were enrolled in the GED program, the school was hit hard by the state assessment scores, Johnson said, adding the decision to close the GED program was a concession Armadillo made to receive its charter status.

Earning a GED will still qualify students for federal assistance with their college education. However, a student who leaves the school without a standard diploma is considered a dropout by the state, said Josh Bald, a language arts and social studies teacher.

"Our graduation rate was skewed to 12th-graders who weren't going to earn a diploma," Bald said.

Armadillo students typically report feeling disenfranchised in standard schools. They also report a lack of success, said Johnson.

"They are often a very creative type person who didn't feel supported in their self-expression," DeCosta said. "They may have been harassed for their hair color or outfit in a mainstream school."

The school's current enrollment is about 80. DeCosta hopes to bump that to 100.

The school works to design its curricula and class schedules around student needs, said Mandy Engler, language arts and special education teacher.

Engler and Bald are the school's reading specialists. Each day starts with 15 minutes of reading. Students fill out an "interest inventory" listing subjects from auto mechanics to poetry to history to outer space. They circle the types of genres they prefer to read, and there is a space to discuss their idea of a perfect book.

"I had a student in the 10th grade who told me, 'This is the first book I've finished since the third grade,' " Engler said.

The school has embraced "a culture of reading," Bald said, adding the library has been revamped thanks to \$800 in donations received in the past six months.

"The kids are really responding to the reading assessments. And, as we know, the more you read, the more you want to read," Bald said.

The small staff makes it possible to work in conjunction with other teachers to reinforce learning, said science teacher Jesse Stonewood.

Stonewood and math teacher Jenelle VanRooyen recently coordinated their lesson plans in graphing to show its different applications, he said.

"We're a small staff, and we talk a lot," Stonewood said.

Not all learning happens in a classroom. The students completed a four-day field study last week, DeCosta said, attending a play at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, taking tours in Medford, visiting the Mail Tribune, hiking Pilot Rock and creating "poo haiku" after learning the ins and outs of a local wastewater treatment plant, she said.

"Our students behave themselves," DeCosta said. "They're respectful."

If caught up on their lessons, students qualify for "self-managed Friday," she said, adding the students go out in the community and perform internships, volunteer, or participate in sports or music classes.

Students who are not caught up on their lessons work with teachers in smaller classes.

"She might have five students in the class, rather than 15," said DeCosta. "Or it might be one-on-one instruction."

Because, at the end of the day, there are the state's testing requirements.

Students can take practice tests as long as they feel the need. And they can take breaks during the testing sequence, Bald said.

Armadillo students have a 95-percent participation rate in the state testing, DeCosta said.

"We're really trying to stress the importance of these tests," she said. "We're trying to help the students not just get tired and frustrated and blow them off."

Staff will block off a week of mornings for the state's week-long testing this year. They will also come in early and make a healthful breakfast for the students, said Bald.

"It's important for them to try and pass," Bald said. "It really helps set the mood."

The lowest scores for Armadillo students, as a group, came in math, said Bald.

"Our students were typically about three years behind in math progress as compared to an average student," he said, adding academic challenges can breed confidence issues.

The smaller class sizes provide a good teacher-to-student ratio, which creates a more supportive environment for students and teachers, said Jen Brinson, language and social studies teacher.

"Our students want to come to school here," Brinson said. "We all want to come to school here."

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Armadillo staff

Kim DeCosta - executive director

Jeffrey Johnson - special education and intake director, teaches reading and math

Josh Bald - language arts, social studies, reading, math

Jen Brinson - social studies and language arts

Jesse Stonewood - science

Mandy Engler - language arts, special education and art

Jenelle an ooyen - math and business