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Teaching outside the box

Education: SCVi offers students a unique educational experience

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When it comes to medieval history, students at Castaic's Santa Clarita Valley International school aren't just reading about it. They're recreating the era with a modern spin.

The seventh grade class of Elizabeth Rydall is putting on a medieval health fair, complete with research on specific diseases and treatments then versus now, in January.

"Kids are put on teams and everyone has a different job, such as artist, doctor or researcher. We'll be comparing all different issues, from disposal of waste to the food pyramid," Rydall said. "A wide percentage of the population relates more to a project than a textbook, particularly aesthetic learners. You can see it in class. They're engaged and happy to be there."

That was the whole goal with creating SCVi, according to Amber Raskin, founder and executive director of business development and operations. Raskin, a former television line producer, was a frustrated parent who didn't find the traditional public school system to be of benefit to her children.

"I felt there had to be more to teaching than just passing tests," Raskin said. "I had no background in education, but I started researching about schools and what I wanted for my kids."

What she found was information on charter schools and project-based learning, which promotes hands-on learning through research and team building exercises. Inspired, Raskin led the grassroots effort to begin the Santa Clarita Valley's first charter school.

SCVi opened its doors in 2008 and currently has about 725 students in grades kindergarten through 10.

Eleventh and 12th grade classes will be available in 2012 and SCVi is also in the process of applying to become an international baccalaureate school candidate.

"What makes us special is we're really working hard to teach our kids to be fearless leaders. The knowledge base is increasing in the world and there's no way anyone person can know it all. We teach kids how to research and synthesize information, rather than fact-based knowledge, which is no longer really a critical skill," Raskin said.

While it 's independently operated, SCVi is overseen by the William S . Hart Union High School District, according to Raskin. There are no tuition costs or zip code restrictions. Students are accepted on a lottery basis after an application is completed by parents.

"The choice aspect is a huge thing. In education, one size does not fit all and different things are good for different kids.

The ability to choose based on what 's best for your situation is really important," Raskin said.

That was certainly the case for Judy Cox, of Newhall, and her son Daniel. Cox kept Daniel back in the second grade at his traditional public school, but decided to home-school shortly thereafter .

"He just didn't test well," Cox said. "I have kids that are 42, 32 and 30. Daniel came later. For all my other kids, public school was great, but not for Daniel. He needed a different kind of teaching. "

While home schooling fulfilled the educational aspect Cox had previously found lacking, after a few years, she felt Daniel was missing out an important aspect of traditional schools.

"I saw Daniel was becoming a man and felt he needed to be a little more independent of his mother. He needed to build relationships, other than with me and his extended family," Cox said.

Daniel started SCVi in the fifth grade, one month prior to school ending. Starting him at that time secured Daniel a place for the sixth grade school year.

It was hard to send Daniel off on his own, Cox acknowledged, but she was immediately put at ease by SCVi's staff .

"I must have called or emailed the teachers every day. When I home-schooled, I had full control and I wanted everything to be perfect," Cox said. "The teachers were in constant communication with me — and Daniel just flourished. "

Now in seventh grade, Daniel continues to excel at SCVi.

"I kind of like going to SCVi more than being home-schooled because I need to be free, because I needed to start making friends, which I didn't really have before," Daniel said. "It 's like a family to me. I just love it."

His favorite project to date, in language arts, was called "A Slice of Me," which had students use a pizza box to express themselves.

Daniel's also been the team leader on several other projects, which he found gratifying.

"That's really teaching you about how you'd do it in real life. When you summarize learning into a project, it 's much better than 'OK, read this chapter , do this chapter , and this is going to be your report'," Daniel said. "Basically you can just get a good grade or you can use your imagination and do research. I love using my imagination."

As Raskin noted, project -based learning and critical thinking are high atop employers'

criteria for hiring. This was confirmed during a recent field trip to Apple Computers, where students had the chance to interact with management.

"They told us they want employees that think on their feet, that are knowledgeable, compassionate risk-takers," Raskin said. "We want all of our graduates to find their passions and become leaders in whatever area they choose to go into."

For more information on Santa Clarita Valley International School, visit www.scvcharterschool.org or call (661) 705-4820.

<http://archive.signalscv.com/archives/56822/>