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Making the Homeschool Connection

Homeschooled students in Arizona's Kyrene School District spend one day a week in a public school setting.

Mark G. Eley

Homeschooled students can come to the CASA Vida Homeschool Enrichment Center to supplement their home curriculum and interact with other students.



Photos by Trudy Adams

It's Friday morning, and Sharon Morgan is getting her two younger children ready for school. Joshua, 7, is last, as usual. Rebecca, 11, was ready 30 minutes before everyone else, eager to get to school and chat with her friends. The two siblings pile into the family van with their mother and brother Derek, 13, and

head off to school. Joshua and Rebecca's day will include instruction by certified teachers in such subjects as science, technology, Spanish, oral communication, art, music, and physical education. What is different for these students is that their instruction Monday through Thursday takes place at home. The Morgans are one of many families customizing their children's education by combining homeschooling and public school instruction.

The Arizona legislature's commitment to choice in education has encouraged a proliferation of private and charter schools and other education alternatives. In response to this competitive education market, the Kyrene School District, a K-8 district with an enrollment of approximately 19,000, has developed creative programs and made them available to its 350 homeschooled students.

One such program is the CASA (Community-Assisted Schooling Alternatives) Vida Homeschool Enrichment

Center. This K-6 center provides public school resources to students who receive their core instruction at home. Students enroll at CASA Vida on a quarter-time basis, attending six hours each week, and study subjects that were identified by the homeschooling parents as areas in which they welcome extra support.

CASA Vida students attend classes with their homeschooled peers in a multi-age setting. Divided into kindergarten-1st, 2nd-3rd, and 4th-6th grade groupings, a total of 120 students attend during the three weekdays that the program is open. Kyrene del Milenio, a district school with a strong commitment to community involvement and partnerships, has made four rooms available for the center and allows open access to the school's library, cafeteria, and other resources. All teachers have state teaching certificates, and approximately half of the center's staff members have homeschooling experience.

The district's community education department provides administrative support, including an assistant director to supervise and evaluate the program and its staff. All CASA Vida teachers are subject to the same performance standards and evaluations as other district teachers.

Students and families in the CASA Vida program enjoy several benefits. CASA Vida provides educational activities that involve larger groups of children or groups of similar-aged children. Students in the 4th-6th grades, for example, often give presentations to their peers and to groups of parents.

Students also have opportunities to interact with other homeschooled children in a formal school setting. Their parents, who participated in the original design team and subsequent community



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meetings and planning committees, have customized the CASA Vida program to their needs.

In addition to networking with other homeschooling parents and using the curriculum resource library, parents can consult with staff members on teaching strategies and on their homeschooling curriculums. Sharon Morgan uses the day to provide individualized instruction for 7th grader Derek. Many parents find that having a day to plan instruction for the rest of the week has a positive impact on their home instruction.

The Kyrene District benefits in other ways, too. The relationship between public schools and homeschoolers used to be wrought with mutual distrust. CASA Vida has facilitated a new cooperative partnership and sense of trust between the district and the home-

schooling community. The public school is available to teach all students, and homeschooling parents recognize their public schools as a community resource.

Many homeschooling families are initially skeptical about CASA Vida, but once they have visited the program, they are eager to participate. Ninety percent of CASA Vida's participants in the inaugural year, 2000-01, have returned for the second year. Some students did not return

because they enrolled as full-time students in the district schools.

CASA Vida is not a tuition-based program, nor does it have a negative impact on the district's financial resources. Arizona's school funding formula provides 25 percent funding for students enrolled quarter-time, so CASA Vida's expenditures are paid for by the revenue that student attendance generates.

The district is excited about this opportunity to support the learning of 120 students with whom it would not otherwise have had contact. The center is exploring the possibility of expanding the center to 7th-8th grades.

As the Morgan children climb into the family van to head home, Sharon Morgan thanks the center's teachers. A CASA Vida teacher invites Derek to share with her students the PowerPoint presentation that he created at home on photosynthesis. The center's teachers thank Mrs. Morgan for choosing CASA Vida to be a part of her children's education, wave goodbye, and head back to their classrooms. ■

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