

New Mexico Christian School Noted for Helping At-Risk Students Excel

Rehoboth Christian School has received commendations and grants for helping its mostly Native American student body

Nestled in the high plateau country of northwestern New Mexico, Rehoboth Christian School in Gallup is quietly pioneering a new way for American schools to serve minorities.

The 425-student, K-12 school is located in McKinley County, the third-poorest county in the United States. It serves mostly a Navajo and Zuni student body. Most of these students would be typically considered “at risk” of dropping out of school because they come from single-parent households, live below the poverty line or somehow lack parental support, among other factors.

However, Rehoboth High School Principal Tim Stuart, Ph.D., believes an “at risk” label ends up hurting more than helping children and results in their being treated with an attitude of hopelessness and despair.

“Students do not necessarily identify themselves with labels, particularly ones that predict their defeat,” he told Charisma. “Recent studies have shown children are more optimistic about their future than their parents are. Sadly, it is the adults, school systems and government that label children ‘at risk’ of failure.”

Rehoboth is a noteworthy exception. While just four out of 32

schools in the region have managed to stay off the state's academic probation list, Rehoboth boasts a 100 percent graduate rate, with 90 percent of its students going on to college. More than a quarter of its high school students have ACT test scores above the 90th percentile.

The success of its program also landed the school a \$1.3 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—a first for New Mexico—through which Rehoboth staff plans to match each student with a caring adult and improve their access to technology. Rehoboth also is one of three schools nationwide to be featured in A Culture of Giving, a video by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation that examines a teaching method called service learning and its effectiveness within Native American settings.

Stuart said the school's attitude toward the challenges facing its students—poverty, as well as high rates of alcoholism and teen suicide—has been critical to its success. He said experiencing adversity does not necessarily lead to poor academic performance or a failure to contribute positively to society.

The difference, he said, comes when students receive the appropriate support at school through healthy relationships with caring adults and are encouraged to develop what he has called “promise character.” That includes learning such disciplines as perseverance, responsibility, optimism and motivation.

Stuart discusses this concept in a book he has co-authored with educator Cheryl G. Bostrom, titled Children at Promise: Nine Principles to Help Kids Thrive in an At-Risk World (Jossey-Bass). He was quick to emphasize that Rehoboth was

already using this formula before he joined the staff in August.

“They just didn’t have the vocabulary to articulate it,” he said.

Ron Polinder, the school’s executive director, explained what lies behind the school’s success. “It’s the coming together of God’s people interculturally in a community with all this diversity,” he said. “We have been doing this for 100 years. The staff are very dedicated.

“There is a lot of commitment on the part of the parents. We want to create a model of excellence, diversity and thoroughly Christian education.”

Doug Evilsizor, Rehoboth’s director of development, said the school tries to model the diversity God has created. For example, he said: “There are Christians at all income levels and they all need an education. Rehoboth provides opportunity to a lot of kids who would have no opportunity otherwise. They are kids who fall through the cracks. Rehoboth prides itself on taking kids no matter what their background and giving them the tools to succeed.”

Sean Rivera, 18, and a senior, said he appreciates Rehoboth’s ethnic diversity and strong Christian emphasis. “We get along better because of our common values and Christian beliefs,” he told Charisma. “All of us are in it together. I have really enjoyed the school because of the atmosphere and the friendships I have made.”

Ellen Arrowsmith, 17, said Rehoboth is unique because of its

multicultural focus. She said it is wonderful to be in a school where the most important issue is faith and not one's financial or physical status. "Rehoboth is a Christian community small enough for you to be involved in everything and get individual attention," she noted.

Stuart said as the word gets out about this educational philosophy he hopes both parents and educators will begin to see "at risk" children differently and realize that they are just one step away from being children "at promise."

Jeremy Reynolds in Gallup, N.M.