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## **FOCUS ON BASICS ELEVATES CHARTER IN NORTH COUNTY**

### **Escondido's Heritage K-8 recognized as best in state by USC researchers**

**Author(s):** KAREN KUCHER U-T **Date:** June 25, 2011 **Section:** Local

#### **Escondido**

**Heritage** K-8 Charter in **Escondido** is a 700-student school where class sizes are small, traditional values are stressed and more parents than needed tend to volunteer.

**Heritage**, which is housed in a former business park, also is considered the top charter school in the state, according to researchers at the University of Southern California. They weighed 12 factors, including student performance, academic productivity and financial resources.

The No. 1 ranking out of the more than 800 charter campuses in California was a welcomed surprise at the school, which was started in 2003 as part of the **Escondido** Charter School District. No other school in the county made the top 10.

**Heritage** stresses a back-to-basics approach and an emphasis on traditional American culture and values, with students saying the Pledge of Allegiance every morning before class and at school assemblies, said Dennis "Coach" Snyder, a founder and executive director of the charter district. The entire school marks Sept. 11 with a "patriot day" assembly and also holds other special events that "celebrate American exceptionalism," Snyder said.

"We talk to students all the time about taking individual responsibility for your actions. Don't blame other people, showing respect, taking the individual initiatives," said Snyder, who runs the nearby **Escondido** Charter High School.

Snyder said the school's top ranking provides outside validation that it is doing a good job. Charter schools are publicly financed but independently operated schools that are free of some education codes and union rules, giving them more flexibility when it comes to hiring and academics. Teachers at **Heritage** made an average of \$40,600, compared with the state average of \$68,200, according to 2008-09 state accountability report card figures. The highest teacher salary at **Heritage** that year was \$43,000 while the state average in the same category was more than \$87,000.

"It comes down to the team members you surround yourself with," Snyder said. "What we are looking for are people who are passionate. Their first question isn't, how much am I going to be paid? They are passionate about what they are doing and they want to make a difference in people's lives."

About 460 students are enrolled in its traditional classroom program and 250 students are in its digital sixth-through-eighth-grade program. The school, which is on summer break, also offers an independent study program.

School director Palma Holland credited **Heritage's** "very dedicated teaching staff and very supportive parents" for its top showing. "Our mission is simple, which is just to improve pupil learning. That's our mission statement," Holland said.

She said the school focuses on reading and math and tries to prepare students to be strong writers through a writing program that runs from

kindergarten through the sixth grade.

This is the fifth year that USC has put out the report, but it is the first time it has ranked the state's top 10 charter campuses. Researchers looked at academic measurements, school productivity and financial indicators to come up with the rankings.

"People want some kind of comparison or benchmark so that's how we came up with the top 10," said Priscilla Wohlstetter, director of the Center on Educational Governance at USC and the lead author of the report.

Researchers used information the schools already were submitting to the state. "Our mission was to take that data and transform it into information," she said.

The report can be found online at [school-performance.usc.edu](http://school-performance.usc.edu).

**Heritage** ranked high in most categories, including school productivity, direct classroom spending and liquidity. It scored 910 on the Academic Performance Index in 2010, earning it a rank of 9 on a scale of one to 10, and a rank of 10 against similar schools.

The school already attracts more students than it can serve.

Last year, 200 applications were submitted for 66 kindergarten slots, with students being chosen by lottery. The school has a waiting list of about 400.

All four of Kari Coe's sons have attended **Heritage**, with her youngest two about to start the seventh and eighth grades in the fall. She said she was considering home schooling when she heard that **Heritage** was opening in 2003.

"Everybody knows my kid, whether the nurse or the principal. They know all the kids. They know all the parents," said Coe, who lives in Valley Center. "My kids have gotten a great education in a great environment. We are just very happy."

Snyder said he will make sure the school continues to push for excellence.

"As an old football coach, the first thing you think about is complacency," he said. "Let's gear up and let's get ready to compete again next year because next year is a whole new season."

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