

STUDENTS FIRST

How Vista Adult School makes education personal

By Raul Clement

Adult schools are sometimes excluded from conversations about traditional educational paths. Yet, adult education dates back centuries, providing affordable career training and flexible means for students to continue their education and improve their employment prospects.

Vista Adult School continues that long tradition. Though officially established in 1977, when it began offering high school diploma and GED programs, the school's origins go back to a single, storefront ESL classroom in the 1950s. Since then it has expanded to offer Career Technical Education (CTE) in areas such as business, medicine, information technology and construction. Along the way its enrollment has swelled to over 3000 students annually, making it a fixture of the local education system and wider San Diego County community.

Elizabeth O'Shea-West, principal of VAS, attributes the school's success to its focus on student needs.

"Our whole goal is to put the student first," O'Shea-West says. "What does the student need? How can we meet that need? People come here for more personalized education than they've gotten other places. We're able to provide that because of our approach."

Part of that approach is a commitment to keeping classrooms small, with no more than 24 students per class. O'Shea-West says this makes students feel comfortable from the outset.

"Within the first couple weeks, the students all know each other," O'Shea-West says. "They feel comfortable asking questions. It's not intimidating at all."

Another way VAS makes students feel welcome is through its support services. These include program coordinators, counseling services and transition advisors.

"Our student support team is there from the minute we open to when we close, from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m.," O'Shea-West says. "So if at any time a student has an issue, one of the team members is there. We have people who



Principal Elizabeth O'Shea-West of Vista Adult School says the school offers educational opportunities and affordable career training at a fraction of the cost of other institutions. Photo by Charlie Neuman

will sit down and talk to them about their plan. And if they have any barriers that come up—whether medical, financial, transportation or housing—we have local agencies we can refer them to. The support team makes sure our students are successful."

This focus on students extends to the classes offered. VAS is part of the Vista Chamber of Commerce and attends events with local employers to stay in touch with industry needs. The goal is to provide students with an education that will connect them with good local jobs.

"We have a reputation within our community of preparing students to meet the industry needs," O'Shea-West says. "For our Pharmacy Tech students, Walgreens is right there, ready to accept them once they get their license. Our phlebotomy interns do their internships through Scripps. A lot of times, they get hired. When our local industry needs people, they'll reach out to our CTE Coordinator to find qualified candidates."

In addition to CTE, VAS hasn't neglected its roots as a provider of ESL, high school diploma and GED programs. Like CTE, these programs offer a flexible approach, tailored to student needs. Classes can be taken concurrently or separately, in person or online.

"If something changes in your life, you don't have to stop learning," O'Shea-West says.

VAS and other adult schools also offer education and valuable career training at a fraction of the cost of other institutions.

"We don't want you to pay \$30,000 for a program that would be a few hundred dollars here," O'Shea-West says. "We have high-quality credentialed teachers with industry experience. We have a staff who cares. We have a support team that will help you get through the hiccups along the way." And most importantly, she says, students' needs always come first. "We really believe in our students. We believe in what they want to do. It's our priority to help them meet that goal."

"Anything is possible," she says. "If you want to work hard enough, you can achieve it. Vista Adult School helped me to achieve my goal."

 Vista Adult School

For more information on how Vista Adult School can help you achieve your goals, visit www.vistaadultschool.org or call 760-758-7122