



## A distinguished school

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APPLE VALLEY — The Academy for Academic Excellence has been named a 2007 California Distinguished School.

Seven other secondary schools in the San Bernardino County were recognized, but AAE is the only High Desert honoree.

Principal Gordon Soholt credited the “rigorous” academic program; caring relationships among teachers, students and families; high test scores; and the school’s uniqueness.

The school teaches with a lot of hands-on experience.

Students test water flow and quality in the adjacent Mojave River in partnership with the Mojave Water Agency.

The biology teacher instructs them on birds in the Narrows.

There’s a digital filmmaking studio and a quality visual performing arts program.

And, of course, there’s the science center, run in partnership with NASA, where students collect radio data from deep space and give it JPL.

The idea for the school originated in part with Rick Piercy, now president and CEO of the charter school.

In 1985, Piercy was a kindergarten teacher at Mojave Mesa Elementary School.

The principal let him run an after-school science program. Students built rockets, and Piercy saw so much growth in the kids through hands-on involvement that it was a catalyst for Piercy to rethink education.

The K-12 school takes in 1,000 students, which Piercy and Soholt said is intentionally small so that everyone knows each other.

“There’s a caring atmosphere,” Soholt said, “and a concern for both the quality of the education and the individual student that separates us from other schools.”

Remarkably, the school does not see itself as an institution designed for the talented and gifted.

Some students come to AAE as a last resort, and 10 percent of the students receive special education, Sohlt said.

Piercy says he is “90 percent pleased” with AAE because there is always room for improvement, and he ought to know, as he is constantly on the lookout for new ideas.

He’s excited about the school’s plans to build a gym, something it has gone without.

The school just announced a partnership with St. Mary Medical Center to help students study childhood obesity, diabetes and other health problems common in the young.

Piercy wants to develop a nursing program for 11th and 12th graders in partnership with Victor Valley College.

And the school just received the only countywide charter.

Next year, they will open another K-12 school, Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy, in San Bernardino.

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