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## **Charter school choices**

### **Parents narrow search for right learning center for their children**

**By GRETCHEN LOSI Staff Writer / Daily Press**

Lauren Highland has twin sons entering high school this fall. She has spent the summer looking for a school that will enrich their minds, compliment their talents and inspire their dreams.

She's narrowed her search down to two — **Academy for Academic Excellence** and Excelsior Education Center.

"It's hard because John is very science-oriented so we think Lewis Center would be a good choice for him. But Matt has ambition to learn business skills, which makes Excelsior the logical choice," she said.

As far as charter schools go in the Victor Valley, those two schools have earned consistent top-shelf scores over the rest.

**At 804, Academy of Academic Excellence, also known as the Lewis Center has earned the highest state score among local high schools.**

At 685, Excelsior is home to the second-highest score among charters and the highest score within the Victor Valley Union High School District.

They also share something else in common.

The two schools have visionary founders entrenched in education, dedicating their lives to making the system work.

A major component in doing so —holding parents and students to a higher standard than mainstream public schools can.

**"We don't have the level of bureaucracy that mainstream public schools have. We can make changes and adopt healthy suggestions immediately,"** said Lewis Center spokeswoman Cheryl Thompson. **"We don't have to go through the district then a board and so on."**

**The school's small size is also a selling point.**

**"Everyone knows everyone. The students and teachers know one another by name. This raises the level of accountability,"** she said.

A high level of accountability is also a major component of Excelsior Education Center's philosophy.

"We hold parents as accountable as the students. They are an integral part of their students education," said the school's executive director Chuck Gehrke.

If a student is eager to learn and the parent supports him in all aspects of this endeavor, then success is a given under Gehrke's philosophy.

"Failure is not an option. If they don't get it the first time, we step in and help," he said. "We know what kids need to learn. If they don't know it we work really hard at stepping in and intervening with not only the student but the parents."

All schools strive for a score of 800 or more in state testing. While these two schools rank highest on state testing, most charters score in the middle of the road with a few scoring far below average.

Sedona and Oasis charters along with High Desert Academy of Applied Arts and Science have the lowest state test scores among local charter schools; Sedona's score being 500, Oasis 580 and High Desert Academy of Applied Arts and Science at 592.

For Highland and her family, it isn't so much the test scores that impress her as much as the praises she hears from other parents.

"At Excelsior the kids run a real bank branch, for pete's sake," Highland said. "How much more hands-on can they get? And Lewis Center has their hands on all sorts of things like JPL and NASA stuff."

It's these types of exciting programs that is causing the stay-at-home mom anxiety over making the choice that's right for her two sons.

Both schools are on opposite ends of the Victor Valley and because they're charter schools, parents have to provide the transportation.

"We haven't made our final choice yet. I figure either way my kids will be in a stellar learning environment," she said.

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