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FIRE THREATENS LEWIS CENTER

Firefighters, school staff get handle on blaze

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DEVASTATION: President and CEO Rick Piercy, of the Lewis Center for Educational Research in Apple Valley, evaluates the scene of a fire that turned into a three-alarm blaze that burned in the Mojave River along the perimeter of the school on Friday afternoon.

APPLE VALLEY • Hands-on learning is a way of life for teachers and administrators at the Academy for Academic Excellence.

So when a fast-moving fire popped up in the brushy Mojave River bottom just west of the school Friday afternoon it was only natural for them to grab hoses and shovels and pitch in to help firefighters put it out.

The fire started about 3 p.m., just as the school's 720 students were about to go home for the day, said Chip Kling, principal for the project-based-learning charter school. It quickly turned into an evacuation when winds of about 10 mph pushed the blaze toward the back of the school.

"This one came out of nowhere," Kling said, noting that a fire burned the same area in 2001. "But it came at a good time, right when we were letting out of school. So the kids were being dismissed and evacuated at the same time."

The fire had burned about 15 acres by the time firefighters started getting a handle on it at about 4:30 p.m. About 60 firefighters in 15 units and one waterdropping helicopter were used on the blaze, Jennifer Eisenbrey, spokeswoman for the San Bernardino County Fire Department, said.

The cause of the fire was under investigation.

Eisenbrey said there were no injuries and no structures seriously threatened; nor were the train tracks that run through the Mojave River Narrows between Victorville and Apple Valley. Train whistles blared through the dark smoke that rose over the school while firefighters battled the blaze.

Firefighters didn't only get help from some of the school's staff. Students long graduated made their contribution to keeping the campus safe by clearing thick brush and dead trees between the school and river last winter, science teacher Matthew Huffine said.

Seniors led a group of student volunteers in helping Fire Department Explorers clear out about four acres of brush, he said. Huffine said firefighters told him Friday the clearance was critical in helping to save some of the school's structures.

Much of the nervous time for staff came when flames neared a mock mining town called Mineral City. A living-history exhibit, the town is modeled after a California mining town of the 1850s, where students on field trips from other schools can come and experience a little of what life was like back in the Gold Rush, Linda Piercy said.

Piercy, an accounts payable administrator at the school, was one of about 15 school staff who stayed behind to help fight the fire. Most of them stuck around the wooden buildings of Mineral City with hoses and shovels, beating back flames.

"It's made out of very dry wood," she said. "And we want it to stay that way for a while."



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HELPING OUT: Faculty of the Lewis Center for Educational Research in Apple Valley used shovels and garden hoses to help firefighters battle the blaze as flames came close to outbuildings on the campus Friday afternoon. The three-alarm fire that burned in the Mojave River along the perimeter of the school blazed through more than 15 acres. The cause of the fire is under investigation.