

Rehoboth Christian School emphasizes community during strange times

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
Friday, 08 May 2020 05:38



Even after the campus was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the staff at Rehoboth Christian School is doing everything possible to keep in touch with students and their families.

Bob Ippel, the executive director of the school, said this is a strength that comes from being a smaller private school.

“[Fewer students] gives you more agility in terms of being able to respond to their needs more quickly,” Ippel said April 10.

COMING TOGETHER

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Ippel said Rehoboth has always been known for being seen as more of a family than just a school, a fact he wants to celebrate.

The bonds shared between students, teachers, and their families would face a big test when the pandemic arrived at their doors and forced them apart.

Part of being able to respond to student needs quickly was being able to quickly set up distance learning programs.

“We don’t want students to just have the option of not doing it. It’s an expectation of all of them,” Ippel said.

He added students can lose a lot of what they learn when they are not in school. But the combination of distance learning and committed staff at Rehoboth helps to alleviate those concerns.

The bond with students was also emphasized by Rehoboth high school history teacher Kellie Wright.

“The smaller classes allow us as teachers to really get to know our students well,” Wright said April 28. “I love being a teacher here because of the small community feel it has.”

Wright has been teaching underclassmen history courses at Rehoboth for four years. She is originally from Pennsylvania.

She also teaches a number of upperclassmen courses, which means she could have some of the same students from prior courses. This quality helps make Rehoboth unique, she added.

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“You get to watch kids grow on their journey in high school. You can interact with them in a tangible way,” Wright said. “We all look out for each other’s needs.”

LEARNING FROM AFAR

Providing students with a good education is important for Rehoboth, Ippel said.

“We want to have our kids be people who go out into the world and transform it,” he said. “We don’t want them to just make a good paycheck, but to make a good difference in the world.”

Part of achieving this goal is a program at Rehoboth called Teaching for Transformation.

“The question we ask there is, ‘How do you give the kids experiences in real life, real world projects to help them make a difference in their community?’” Ippel said.

Becca Hibbler, who has taught third grade history at Rehoboth for six years, is one of the teachers involved in this program.

She recalled a project last November in which her students thought about endangered species on the Navajo Nation and got to learn about them from local experts.

“We went to Navajo Zoo and learned about various species. The kids from there each chose a species to study,” Hibbler said.

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As part of the project, the students researched information about what the species was, about why they're endangered, and how the students can help.

"The kids learned a lot of great research skills, how to find good sources, how to take notes," Hibbler said.

But even though the project was supposed to end with the students giving a presentation on their findings, Hibbler said the class wanted to take their findings much further and share them with a larger audience.

"After the Christmas break, we started doing more research on why the species are losing their habitats, and why pollution is a big deal for those species," Hibbler said.

As her students researched these topics and became even more interested, Hibbler said the class held a "Save the Planet" challenge in February. The challenge involved students sharing how they can do their part to reduce pollution and preserve the areas where the endangered species live.

"It's amazing, the amount of work they put into challenges, or their missions as they called it," Hibbler said.

Right before spring break, and before the pandemic would upset the community, the students held a gathering at Churchrock Chapter House to show what Gallup could do to solve the various problems.

Hibbler said they invited families, community members, and some local officials, some of whom even attended the gathering, she added.

"It was such a cool experience," she said.

ADAPTING TO CHANGES

Once the pandemic arrived in Gallup in mid-March, all local schools were closed indefinitely and the students were told to stay home for their safety.

“It’s hard to not be with my class of 21 students,” Hibbler said. “We are currently communicating via phone, or video chats, but it’s also cool to know they can do quite great work on their own.”

Elmer Yazzie, whose teaching career spans 44 years as well as coaching numerous sports including cross country at Rehoboth, said the transition to distance learning required multiple changes and directions.

“It’s a different way of thinking,” he said. “It is a whole collaborative effort by Rehoboth to take the learning experience that’s normally in the classroom out to the community we live in, Gallup and McKinley County.”

Part of this effort involves keeping the students aware of their weekly, monthly, and semester goals, which Yazzie said was in place before the schools closed.

“The goals make the learning experience and the progress from it visible to the students,” Yazzie said.

Yazzie added, so far the students have responded positively to the change to learning online, which shows personal growth and self-discipline on their part.

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Wright said figuring out how to make distance learning work has revolved around one central challenge.

“We have so many families of students that have internet access, but we also have some families that don’t have it,” she said. “It’s about figuring out how to teach students equally and provide the same academic experience wherever they are.”

The shift to distance learning was a big learning curve for the teachers, Wright said. It also showed many of them that people can take in-person communication for granted.

“I feel like this situation has made the teachers and some of the students more grateful for the community we have,” she added.

As another part of the sense of community, Wright spoke about how an upcoming Student Alternative Curriculum Week had to be canceled because of the new circumstances, which she said upset many students.

The SAC Week, as it is also called, is a week where either the Rehoboth choir or band head out on tour for a week, and the rest of the students at the school are given a week of class that is different from their normal curriculum.

In the past, students have been given lessons in self-defense, learning how to make podcasts, how to do coding, cooking, playing a guitar, or doing automotive repair, according to Wright.

“That’s a week of school in the spring that’s so much fun, because there are so many things the kids can do,” Wright said.

More than being able to learn a number of alternative skills, Wright said the students feel the SAC Week is a chance to break up the routine and occasional drudgery of a school year.

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“The SAC Week makes them think, ‘School’s fun, we like to be here.’ It gives them energy to keep going,” she said.

These alternate curriculums are another chance for students to bond and learn something about themselves and others, Wright added.

“We’re always looking for ways to build that school community, so kids feel like they’re a vital part of it,” she said. “We don’t want anybody to feel left out, which I think is one of Rehoboth’s biggest strengths.”

FOR THE COMMUNITY

More than just students and their families, Ippel and the various teachers have emphasized repeatedly they want to help the community.

To that end, Ippel also described some of the relief efforts Rehoboth is performing to help people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We’re housing pilots who are flying PPE and food for the Navajo Nation,” Ippel said. “We’re a distribution center for the Eastern Agency of Navajo Nation.”

Ippel also discussed how Rehoboth received a grant from World Renew, a church based out of Grand Rapids, Mich., that they have used to provide and transport water and groceries for families who cannot make it to Rehoboth.

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This is in addition to providing hot meals for students and faculty members, he added.

“We want to try to live out this idea of serving and loving the world,” Ippel said. “We don’t want just our kids to talk about it. We want to show it through the school.”

The teachers shared Ippel’s sentiments.

“We can have fun, and have good academics, but at the end of the day, it’s how we are building the students up and making sure students are in that positive circle,” Wright said.

Hibbler hopes the students can learn from the faculty and staff’s actions and apply them on their own.

“The way we’re seeing it now is we’re a part of the community, and that we’re here to support the community and they support us,” she said.

Yazzie said the work Rehoboth has done for the surrounding community and the Navajo Nation is something to be proud of, especially since they have continued to have people wanting to volunteer.

“We have people come to us, and they don’t want to get paid. They want to serve others,” he said. “It is a great story of life and how we should be all the time.”

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