

Davis School for Independent Study attracts students with a wide variety of needs, interests

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy | Enterprise staff writer | September 15,2009:08

When it opened back in 1991, the Davis School for Independent Study was warehoused in a couple storage rooms in a back corner of the school district's offices on B Street.

Lucy Boland was one of the first DSIS teachers and remembers those days clearly.

'We were in the book storage wing of the district office,' Boland said. 'There were two rooms, and we were in one with ceiling-to-floor bookcases.'

Responsible for overseeing seventh- through 12-graders on independent study, Boland at the time 'had a desk in the doorway, with a two-drawer file cabinet next to me and maybe 15 kids.'

Eighteen years later, Boland is still teaching at DSIS, but things have changed.

'Walls have been knocked down, things have been added and the program keeps growing,' she said. 'It's so nice compared to what it used to be.'

In addition to much more room on the south end of the school district offices - complete with library, computer lab and several classrooms - DSIS last year took over several rooms and an outdoor play area on the north end of the block. The new section houses the program for K-6 homeschoolers, while secondary independent study students utilize the old space.

On a recent morning, Boland could be found in her 'teaching area,' one of a number of cozy cubicles throughout the school, meeting with 12th grader Camille Powell and going over Powell's economics assignment.

Powell has gone back and forth between traditional school campuses, DSIS and a mix of the two, known as 'split site.'

Her goal in life is to make it to the Olympics. Her specialty: The 3-day equestrian event.

A straight-A student who also has designs on going to a good college, Powell said DSIS makes it possible to pursue both dreams.

'This is great school,' she said. 'It teaches you everything you need, but you have time to focus on other things. Right now, my days consist of school work and riding.'

Students like Powell follow the same curriculum as their counterparts on the other campuses in Davis, meet the same standards and take the same standardized tests. But independent study gives them more flexibility on when and where they do their work. Each student meets weekly with a DSIS teacher, and many also take classes at DSIS. Currently, biology, algebra, geometry and a number of other classes are taught to groups of 6-18 students in the small classrooms at the school.

There are 143 students currently enrolled at DSIS, said principal Kim Wallace, 'and every single kid is known by every adult on campus.'

'It's the most amazing place in public education,' she said. 'We know the strengths and weaknesses of

each individual. We know their needs.'

'We're very much like a family,' she added.

Ann Campbell agrees.

She has two children attending DSIS: Son Connor, 15, and daughter Regan, 11.

Connor has been at DSIS since fourth-grade. Because he is vision-impaired, the one-on-one instruction and small class sizes 'are ideal,' Campbell said.

'He can come up front and copy off the board,' she explained. 'It's easier to make sure that he's got what he needs by having a small setting with direct access to a teacher.'

Her daughter Regan, **11**, just started at DSIS last spring and is happy as can be.

'It's fabulous for her,' Campbell said.

Regan previously attended North Davis Elementary School, 'but the classroom setting isn't really her style,' Campbell said. 'There's a lot of down-time, and she likes to keep busy.'

Like other DSIS students, Regan takes advantage of the many workshops offered by DSIS teachers.

'She attends the writing workshop, the science and social studies,' Campbell said. 'She likes them so much she attends the workshops for grades 4-6 and 7-9.'

Workshops are clearly a draw for the youngest students too.

On a recent sunny morning, a group of kindergartners and first-graders gathered for a workshop on animals taught by Amy Thomson, a 15-year veteran of DSIS.

Kim Welborn's children were among the youngsters studying fish that day, and like Campbell, she raves about the DSIS experience.

'The teachers are amazing,' she said. 'They are very hands-on, and there's an intimate relationship between teacher and student. We feel so supported here. I wouldn't have had the courage to home school on my own, but this is wonderful.'

Although DSIS offers a variety of classes and workshops, parents still take on much more of a teaching role with homeschooling and independent study, and the initial transition can be daunting.

'When we first started way back, it was a little stressful because you don't know what you're doing,' Campbell said. 'But it works. You get to spend a lot of time with your kids and we have fun.'

Said Welborn: 'As a parent, you teach your children from the beginning, so it's a natural progression. We use some of the standard curriculum at home and supplement that with what (my daughter's) interested in. Right now that's Greek mythology.'

Students are drawn to DSIS for all sorts of reasons. Some like equestrian Powell have an extracurricular activity that demands a more flexible school schedule.

Problem was, with rehearsals happening as often as five or six times a week, something had to give.

Similarly, DSIS made it possible for McKinley Carlisle, 15, to pursue her theatrical career without sacrificing schoolwork.

'School is really important to me,' said the longtime Davis Musical Theater Company performer. 'I wanted to do well in both theater and school.'

'You have to get to (the theater) so soon after school that there was no time to do homework first and I'd be doing homework until midnight every night,' she said. 'This has been working out great. It's much easier to complete my work.'

Others have special needs for which DSIS is just the answer.

Chronic insomnia led to truancy problems at Davis High School for Justin Carson, 16.

'My attendance was really bad,' he said. 'This has definitely worked out better. I have more time to finish my work and my grades are way better.'

'We do have kids here who probably wouldn't have graduated if they weren't here,' Boland said. 'But we're not a school for kids who can't handle school. We're here for all kinds of kids.'

According to principal Wallace, 'most families come to DSIS for enrichment.'

'We meet the needs of those who want flexibility but need some guidance,' she said.

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