



Traditional schools thriving in Valley

by [Chelsea Schneider](#) - Jan. 18, 2009 12:00 AM
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Traditional academies relying on age-old curriculum methods paired with a structured learning environment are thriving in school districts Valley-wide.

Laveen Elementary School District opened a [traditional elementary school](#), and the Madison Traditional Academy in Phoenix is in its second year.

The majority of schools with traditional curriculums are elementary schools, but next year Chandler junior-high students will be able to benefit from the education style when a new traditional school opens in the Chandler Unified School District.

Parents asked for the junior high to bridge the gap between the district's four traditional elementary schools and high schools.

At most traditional schools, students are taught as a whole group with the teacher in front of class giving direct instruction. Desks are in neat rows facing the front, not in clusters that some public schools use. Students wear uniforms, and homework relating to the day's lessons is given usually every night.

"I'm a firm believer in the traditional philosophy," said Casey George, principal of the Madison school. "It creates a solid foundation and leads to a higher level of critical thinking."

Accelerated learning

The curriculum at several of the schools is also accelerated.

At Chandler's traditional elementary schools, students work about a year ahead in math. Expectations are high, and teachers push beyond state standards, said Don Shelley, the brainchild behind Chandler's traditional schools. He'll also serve as the [junior high's](#) principal.

"Kids can do more than they are currently doing if they are given the chance and are expected to do it," Shelley said.

Traditional schools throughout the Valley post high scores on AIMS. At Alhambra Traditional School in Phoenix all the school's third-graders passed the math and reading portions of the state standardized test in 2008. The state average for the grade was 71 percent passing in math and 69 percent in reading.

Traditional schools, tied to public school districts, offer parents a choice in how their children are educated. A traditional school

AIMS test scores

Traditional schools generally fare well on state standardized tests. Here is a sampling of 2008 scores by percentage of students passing:

GRADE	MATH	READING	WRITING
Alhambra Traditional School			
3rd grade	100	100	95
6th grade	100	100	98
Chandler Traditional Academy (Independence campus)			
3rd grade	95	92	98
6th grade	95	97	100
Franklin Elementary School-Mesa			
3rd grade	80	80	83
6th grade	96	94	96
Madison Traditional Academy			
3rd grade	77	84	96
6th grade	*	*	*
State averages			
3rd grade	71	69	76
6th grade	67	68	72

* Madison Traditional Academy does not have a sixth grade yet.

Source: Arizona Department of Education, azcentral.com.



opened in Mesa Public Schools 31 years ago. Now the Benjamin Franklin Elementary Schools has four campuses.

Parents grew concerned of decisions public schools were making that strayed from long-held practices such as phonics and self-contained classrooms, said Gayle Householder, principal of Franklin East [Elementary School](#) in Mesa.

Most traditional academies in Phoenix use the Spalding Method, an integrated language-arts approach based on phonics that's used to teach reading comprehension, spelling and penmanship.

At Alhambra, students aren't called out of class, and assemblies and field trips are limited.

"We use every possible moment of the day dedicated to teaching and learning for teaching and learning," said Tracey Lopeman, the school's principal. "We see state standards as our floor. Not the stopping point but the beginning."

Looking forward

When Chandler Traditional Junior High opens next year, it will serve sixth- and seventh-graders. Grade 8 will be added during the 2010-2011 school year, and when school enrollment reaches a certain

point, Grade 6, already offered in the district's traditional elementary schools, will be phased out.

The school, to be located at the Pathways Learning Center near Arizona Avenue and Chandler Boulevard, fulfills a longtime need for parents. When the district's first traditional elementary school opened several years ago, parents were already asking for a junior high.

"Some parents see this as a great opportunity to carry on with what they've grown to love," said Shelley at a Chandler [Governing Board](#) meeting in December.