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Adult School to close

BY BILL HOBAN INDEX-TRIBUNE MANAGING EDITOR

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The Sonoma Valley Adult School has been educating Valley residents since 1938. But when it closes its doors after the current school year, it will be closing for good.

The adult school is the victim of budget cuts that the Sonoma Valley Unified School District board made last week.

No more will adult students be able to earn their high school diploma or their GED. No more will immigrants be able to take English-language learning classes. No longer will the aspiring quilter learn how to craft a quilt.

The \$267,000 it cost to run the school will help pay for other programs in the district.

"The community doesn't realize the impact of closing," said Pam Garramone, the school's principal.

The school serves more than 500 students in the adult education program, the English as a second language program and its computer and technical education courses; and another 750 or so people in its community education programs that include quilting and screenwriting and the retail sales clerk classes.

"It's going to make a big impact on our adult secondary students," Garramone said, "because it's going to be hard to find someplace to finish their classes."

She pointed out that only Napa and Petaluma have adult school classes anymore and both have been impacted by the budget crunch and have a commitment to serve their own communities first.



PAULETTE ROSS teaches a Level 4 English-language learner class at Altimira while student Robert Sanchez lister
Bill Hoban/Index-Trib

“Over the years, the adult schools had their own source of funding,” she said. But during the state budget crunch in 2008, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger moved the adult school money into the general fund and allowed school district to decide whether or not to fund them.

“The legislators didn’t realize what they had voted for,” said Garramone.

Prior to 2008, there were six adult schools in Sonoma County serving more than 9,300 students. That year the Sonoma Valley Adult School served more than 2,200 students. Currently, Garramone said, the Petaluma Adult School serves 3,100 students and it has a waiting list.

While many people are aware of the English-language learner classes, a number of people are enrolled in the adult secondary program that covers adult literacy, the GED program, SVHS concurrent students and the high school diploma program which served 175 students in the 2010-11 school year.

“The high school diploma program is real low profile,” Garramone said. “A lot of people are there on the ‘hush.’ We had a woman last year who was a grandmother. Her family never knew she didn’t get her high school diploma.”

The English-language learner classes served 270 students at two sites, Altimira and La Luz.

Some of the ESL students are parents who want to be able to help their children while others are taking the classes for employment.

“Literacy is what we’re really teaching,” Garramone said. “Literacy is what we do.”

Paulette Ross has been teaching ESL classes for the adult school on and off since 1997 and is currently teaching a Level 4 class for advanced learners.

“We used to have a lot larger (student) population,” she said. “A lot of them are going on to SRJC. I’ve even had one that ended up at Sonoma State.”

While the majority of her students speak Spanish as a primary language, Ross has had students who spoke Japanese, Nepalese and one who spoke Portuguese, and has a student this year from Indonesia.

“They all come for different reasons,” Ross said. “Some are here to help their children, some are here to get a better job – or just to get a job.”

Ross has taught all four levels but prefers Level 4. “It’s terribly rewarding,” she said.

The classes meet for two hours a night on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

Another aspect is the school’s computer and technical education program that serves about 75 students a year. Students are mostly older adults who are trying to catch up with the computer world. There are classes on, among other things, Microsoft Office and Quicken.

“Our computer classes have become very popular lately,” Garramone said. “People are looking for computer literacy.”

And the school has also worked with various businesses bringing classes into the workplace.

The school also offers community education classes such as quilting, jewelry or cooking classes that are fee based and have to pay their own way. Garramone said between 700 and 800 students a year attend the classes.

“But we can’t do the community education by itself,” she said. “The numbers are strong. But if the adult school isn’t here, it can’t run.”

Garramone, who is also the principal at Creekside High School, which is right around the corner from her office on the Sonoma Valley High campus, has run the adult school since the 2004-05 school year and was the Napa Valley Adult School for 10 years prior.

“This has been a wonderful school district to work for,” she said. “It’s going to be really hard to close.”

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