



State group honors school district with Golden Bell

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For most students the traditional model of school works. They arrive on time, listen, learn, grow and graduate. Once they cross that stage, they either go on to continue their success in college, trade schools, or in the work force.

But for others, school is a bit more of a challenge. It is either too fast, too slow, or they lack support.

Ramona Unified School District doesn't want any of its students to slip through the cracks. The district strives to ensure every student's success—even if it means taking school out of the four walls of the classroom and into the future through technology.

For this commitment, the district was awarded the Golden Bell for its online learning program, ACHIEVE (Alternative Computer-based High-school Instruction for Excellence in Virtual Education) by the California School Boards Association (CBSA).

CBSA awards Golden Bells in 19 different categories to selected districts or schools across the state. The organization honors school districts that address students' changing needs and create models that make a difference. Of the 200 entries this year throughout the state, Ramona was one of three awardees in the area of technology and one of nine awardees from San Diego County.

RUSD considers the ACHIEVE program pioneering and innovative, and the nomination form explains why. "It captures students' intrigue with the virtual world in which they exist and offers access to academic courses 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and anywhere in the world there is a high-speed Internet connection. No longer are students limited to learning within the four walls of a classroom. As a result of this ability to work anytime and anywhere, students can work through a course at a pace they choose. Students no longer have to wait for classmates to move ahead, and, conversely, they have the ability to spend more time on difficult content if needed. This flexibility in access and pace creates an environment where every student's needs can be met."

Dr. Cathy Pierce, the district's assistant superintendent of education services, was honored that RUSD received such an award, but she wasn't surprised. She knew ACHIEVE was really working for both students and teachers.

"With the capabilities of technology changing by the minute and with our students constantly engaging in real-time connectivity, RUSD harnessed the technology and captured the students' interest with online learning," she said. "The Golden Bell symbolizes the efforts and willingness of teachers to embrace a new way for students to learn."

She cited one example of a senior, who graduated last year. The student was failing and, when given the opportunity to take his courses online, he began to make great strides. In the traditional classroom, he was not completing his homework assignments but online he was able to complete multiple courses and earn B's and C's.

He attributed his success to being able to move at his own pace, and not spend time on content he already knew. This was possible because the ACHIEVE program assessed his background knowledge before he even started.

The system then customized a standards-based course just for him and removed the content he had already mastered. That left only the content he needed to learn.

Success stories like this show the effectiveness of the ACHIEVE program and assures that RUSD continues to meet its Strategic Action Plan, where it strives to "optimize technology to enhance student learning and to provide all students and staff with the resources and technological skills to succeed now and in the future."

While the program originally set out to add rigor to independent study and home school programs as well as help students who were at risk of failing, it also reaches out to a broader population. Schools are now using the program to give students the chance to retake a course they weren't successful in the first time around and it prevents them from falling behind as well as gives students a chance to take a course that may not fit into their packed schedule.

The future is wide open, said Pierce, and she and her team plan to keep building on this success. She looks

forward to seeing online learning grow and flourish as technology advances and opens doors for students, because, she said, for RUSD that is what it is all about.