

James Anderson leaves a legacy of learning for all to follow

Published: Monday, Nov. 15, 2010 12:00 a.m. MST

It's a school that smiles. It's an Ellis Island in our midst. It's the Statue of Liberty reaching out to all. And it works. Ninety percent of its students go on to higher learning (about 50% with scholarships) or to work.

It's a school where 30 languages are spoken, where nonperforming students from other schools are referred and where youth and adult students from other countries come to learn. It's safe, and it's clean. It hasn't been painted since it opened 21 years ago. That's what happens when students feel it's their school. It has no bells; no teacher or student desks. It has a caring staff that learns and eats with students. It has no faculty lounge; no special parking.

What makes it work is the culture its first principal James Anderson created when he started Horizonte Instruction and Training Center in Salt Lake School District 21 years ago. His recent retirement celebration said it all. You would have thought you were at the United Nations headquarters. There were dancers from varied cultures found at the school. The school's name, Horizonte (horizon), captures its motto, "As far as the eye can see, as far as the mind can reach."

James came to Utah after deciding West Point Military Academy was not a fit for him. He made the trek to Utah where he graduated from Westminster College with a teaching degree. His first teaching job was in 1975 at the former Horace Mann Middle School where he asked to take the "trouble-making" students. It was the genesis of what was to become Horizonte. He quickly demonstrated that all students, if treated with respect from someone who believed in them, could thrive. It became the vision for a school that welcomed all, including those students who did not seem to fit in the traditional schools.

Horizonte is an open-entrance/open-exit school that offers grades 7-12 and adult level education that is customized to meet students' life circumstance and learning styles. It's a school that "walks the talk" — students come first. All aspects of the school focus on a learning environment created to make sure learning happens. No PA interruptions; no bells. Soft music tells when classes change. This atmosphere makes sure learning is revered and honored.

James created an environment where students and teachers both look forward to coming and to learning. Two main things make it possible. Teachers develop a relationship with students through a daily advisory period where each teacher knows the student as an individual. When a student has a problem, the focus is on helping him/her solve it rather than blaming the student. Second, teachers are constantly supported and helped in meeting the needs of their students. Horizonte has a leader who has passion and is committed to its purpose and, Horizonte's culture is defined by his actions. James surrounded himself with good people, encouraged them to use their creativity and helped them further the mission of the school — to help students move on to the next level.

James has made Horizonte a touchstone and an icon for our community, and he knows that the success of Horizonte is because of the support the Salt Lake School Board, administration and community have given in putting students first. James leaves knowing his legacy will live on: a place where learning and individuals are cherished.

It does take a village to make a school that smiles.