

# Desert Choice Schools Provides Special Education Program to HUSD



Special needs students in the Desert Choice Schools program in the Higley Unified School District can stay right on campus for their school day, instead of spending up to two hours a day being bused to and from a day school. *Submitted photo*

BY ALISON STANTON

Thanks to an innovative program from Desert Choice Schools, special education students in the Higley Unified School District are getting the help they need on their school campuses.

Rick Weathers, president of the Desert Choice Schools advisory board, said traditionally, many students with special needs are transported out of the district to private day schools.

In some cases, Weathers said, the students would spend up to two hours a day on a bus traveling between campuses.

"This meant students were losing quality instructional time," he said.

In an effort to keep special needs students on their home campuses and not spend valuable learning time on transportation, Weathers said the Desert Choice Schools program takes place at the students' school.

HUSD is one of the two school districts with which Desert Choice School is working; the other is the Buckeye Unified School District.

"We started with one classroom in the Higley Unified School District and our program has been very successful," Weathers said.

This year, 36 students from the district are part of the Desert Choice Schools program.

**One benefit of the Desert Choice Schools program, Weathers said, is that it works along with the school administration, teachers, parents and students to make sure the children's needs are being met without placing a burden on the already financially challenged school system.**

Another bonus, Weathers said, is that students who are part of the program are more likely to be reintegrated back into the mainstream classrooms.

**"Our student reintegration rate is as much as 30 percent. In a lot of cases, students were struggling for years, but we have been able to meet their needs and help them succeed," he said.**

**Dr. Diane Bruening, HUSD's executive director of special education,** said the three dozen students who are part of the Desert Choice Schools program range in age from kindergarten through seventh grade.

"It's all about providing very high quality teaching and support for the special needs kids who are found in most schools," she said.

"Desert Choice Schools provides laser-like support to our high needs population, and the student support is more intensive than our schools' programs."

Bruening said parents have been very pleased with the Desert Choice Schools program and their children's results.

"I no longer have to have conversations with parents and students about busing them to another city," she said.

"Parents are very comfortable that their child is still in the Higley Unified School District, and Desert Choice Schools has a schedule just like ours, so if parents have more than one child in our district, it just works beautifully for that."

**Brueing said she is very pleased that HUSD is working with Desert Choice Schools.**

**"We have had very few problems or issues, and I get calls from parents that are reporting good news," she said.**

**"Parents routinely tell me about the success that their kids are having."**