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Cabazon Elementary is a great place to learn

By GAIL PAPARIAN

I recently had the opportunity to visit the six-year-old Cabazon elementary school, the newest in the Banning Unified School District.

It's bright and cheerful, and the people I met definitely pride themselves in what and how they teach their youngsters. I was given a tour of the school by Principal John Curtis, Curriculum Coach Lynn Miller and English Language Specialist Sonya Balingit.

Curtis was quick to share the school's mantra of the year which is to employ "Best practices." The goals are relatively simple: maximize teacher- student interaction, maximize student instruction and maximize student engagement.

Of the approximately 300 students, about 60 percent of them are English language learners. Balingit said that ELD (English language development) is a specific time, set aside daily; to assist second language learners in improving their proficiency in English.

As I toured the school, I saw students learning in various group sizes. As Miller explained, the students are clustered by their language and academic proficiency allowing educators to assist students in smaller groups.

According to the district website: "Banning Unified School District has made a concerted effort to staff classrooms of English Learners with fully credentialed teachers.

"Newly hired teachers are asked to sign a teacher contract to agree to obtain a state-approved authorization. In order to assist current teachers, the district continues to provide training leading to proper certification for teachers of English Learners. In a concerted effort between the school sites and the district office, BUSD has created four English Learner specialists positions.

"These Teachers on Special Assignment are based at the school sites: Cabazon Elementary /Hoffer Elementary; Central elementary/Hemmerling Elementary; Coombs Intermediate/Nicolet Middle; and Banning High School /New Horizons High School. Banning Unified School District also provides bilingual instructional aides to sites whose students are in need of primary language support."

There are many challenges to educators including being under the gun to constantly improve test scores. This is not always easy when youngsters are forced to compete on a test when they are not yet English-proficient.

Cabazon runs before and after school programs for reading intervention. The before program extends the day by an extra 30 minutes. "Think Together" is an after school program with a focus on homework, enrichment and physical activities.

It is easy to see why Cabazon Elementary is one of the best kept secrets in Riverside County.