

MILITARY CHARTER SCHOOL OPENS

A new program uses uniforms and drills to tighten discipline

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"No pimp walking, no duck waddling, no heads moving, so it looks like one machine."

Watching a classroom video of Marine Corps drill, Santos Campos explained the good and the bad moves to his students.

"Notice the pivots, focus on the footwork. That's what we're working toward," he said.

Campos, 44, is commandant/principal of a military-based program with a tighter structure and stricter discipline for at-risk youth. The goal is to catch youths falling through the cracks: those who have been suspended expelled from other schools, are on probation, homeless or in foster care.

The charter school, the first of its kind run by the Riverside County Office of Education, opened earlier this month in the Moreno Valley Regional Learning Center at 13730 Perris Blvd.

The \$13.5 million state-funded, 31,000-square-foot building will house 200 students enrolled in a variety of programs: independent study, pregnant parenting, dropout recovery, nursing, health and for the visually impaired.

The military school has accepted 11 students, all from Moreno Valley, with a capacity of 25 for the Class of 2015.

"The goal is to help them be successful," said Campos, a retired Marine Corps officer with a shaved head and perfect posture. He and Eric Lahti, a retired Army officer, teach the basic curriculum, along with leadership training, formation and drills.

Nick Tuttle, 15, said he believes he's found his niche after "wasting his



Cadets in the Riverside County Office of Education's military school run out to the blacktop to work on a drill.

time" at a traditional charter school with little supervision and constant discipline problems.

The school rewards every student who shows up for 10 consecutive days with another piece of the required camouflage battle dress uniform, provided through support from March Air Reserve Base and the California Cadet Corps.

Christian De Paz, 14, said there were too many distractions at the regular charter school he attended. "I can concentrate more here, I learn more and I like the uniform."

Despite the military emphasis, Campos said the students are not being groomed for service and have no obligation to enlist.

"I didn't know what to expect," he said of the group, named the 322nd Battalion Alpha Company. "But most get excited about the uniform and want the boots."

One of two girls in the program, Amelia Samoodi, 14, loves the convenience and no-brainer aspect of donning one outfit.

"I can't wear my own clothes," she

said, "but it was a drag getting ready for high school. This way, I can sleep in later."

Irving Valera, 15, finds that the military emphasis creates a more relaxed environment free of peer pressure and rowdy behavior.

He likes being in one intimate classroom without a big campus to navigate.

"There aren't a lot of students, so we all get along," he said. "Everyone has to wear the same thing, so no one can judge you."

Campos said the program opened Sept. 26 in the former Red Maple Elementary School in before moving into the learning center Oct. 17.

"It's not that easy to get into," Lahti said of the program.

There's a waiting list. Enrollment is voluntary, students must agree to wear the uniform and sign a contract.

"It's strict, but it's not like a boot camp," said Fabian Sanchez, 14, who said he wants to stick with it. "You come for your own good."

Anyone interested in the program may call 951-826-7232.