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Mike Mullen Correspondent

Students from the Creative Planet School of the Arts of Baldwin Park perform in January.

Holistic approach to learning

By Tracy Garcia Staff Writer

When it comes to private schooling, it seems there's something for everyone in the San Gabriel Valley — whether parents want their children to reconnect with their French heritage, fortify their religious beliefs or dive headlong into the creative arts.

But at their core, officials said, private schools share a few of the same basics: low student-teacher ratios, specialized curriculums and a closely knit community that lends itself to strong relationships among students and parents.

"It's like a gift you're giving to your children," said May Si, director of L'Heritage Francais, a French/English preschool and elementary school in South Whittier that teaches both California and Quebec academic standards.

Typically, L'Heritage families place their students at the school to help preserve their French heritage, officials said. Some simply want to give their kids a bilingual boost in their education.

Preschoolers are taught solely in French, and the use of English is gradually increased in the later grades. The school has about 30 children in preschool through first-grade.

"It's been proven that when you learn a new language before the age of 8, it's stored in the same place in your brain as your mother tongue," Si said. "In children who are here full time, after one month, we've seen that they are capable of understanding French."

In Baldwin Park, the 70-student Creative Planet School of the Arts not only offers a varied curriculum, but an affordable price: \$300 per month.

And for families who can't swing that tuition, financial assistance is available.

"We are sort of our own category of school —

we're a private, nonprofit arts magnet school, and we cater toward low-income families and at-risk youth," said Michelle Benton, director of outreach and education.

At the K-8 school, kids are taught academics from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., then take dance, acting, music or visual arts classes until 6 p.m. Several of the school's graduates have gone on to attend the prestigious Los Angeles County High School for the Arts on the campus of Cal State Los Angeles.

"We try to infuse as much of the arts into the academic day because we feel kids who do well in the arts also excel academically," Benton said.

"It also gives them self-esteem and creative problem-solving skills," she said. "So we believe that students who have success in one area generally have success in the other."

In Pasadena, teen girls at the 300-student Mayfield Senior School get a rigorous academic program that's infused with arts, athletics, community service and spiritual growth.

Founded in 1931 by the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Mayfield Senior School is a Catholic, independent, college preparatory school for young women in grades 9-12.

"Christian service is an integral part of our program," Director Rita McBride said. "We also celebrate the artistic and athletic gifts of our young women."

The school offers 22 Advanced Placement and honors courses, as well as advanced studies in creative writing, dance, photography, visual arts and vocal music. The school also supports 18 athletic teams in 11 sports.

Officials say last year's graduates are now attending universities such as Yale, Stanford, Harvard, Georgetown, University of Notre Dame and USC. LH