

# A GLOBAL SCHOOL

## IN THE HEART OF ARIZONA

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Photos provided by **Verde Valley School**

**Verde Valley School isn't your typical New England boarding school.** Founded on an approach to education that prioritizes world citizenship, environmental stewardship and experiential learning, students at Verde Valley School encounter a unique approach to learning that prioritizes academic excellence, local involvement and international participation in equal measure.

It all started with a love story and a shared vision for a better tomorrow. When founders Hamilton and Barbara Warren met, they dreamed of a school that could bring students together from around the world. They wanted to create a space where students felt safe to engage in debate, learn from the land and explore ideas regardless of where they came from. "The nation, indeed the world, needs a school that will bring together children from many nations, many cultures, all races and religions, not simply to study and tolerate one another, but to learn from and celebrate their differences." These were the words of Hamilton Warren, shared as he opened the doors to Verde Valley School in 1948.



Coming off the heels of World War II, the Warrens believed in a vision for education that celebrated divergent perspectives and the complexity of the human experience. They made it their life's mission to nurture a place that welcomed forward-thinking ideas and meaningful conversation. Nowadays, while nearly 73 years have passed since Verde Valley School first opened its doors, not much has changed in regard to the institution's guiding principles.

Current students are met with the same ongoing commitment to rigorous and vigorous academics while learning to become the next generation of global citizens.

"There's no more important time in the world [than today], for a school like Verde Valley School to exist," says Head of School, Paul Amadio. The school's aim is to have students walk away with a sense of responsibility not only as a citizen of their local community but of the world, to want to make a difference and believe they have the power to evoke change.

The school accomplishes all of this through a unique educational structure they call IB+DIRT. The IB part of this format may be familiar to some. It refers to the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, a challenging curriculum that's largely considered the gold standard in terms of application and flexibility in providing education.

However, it's the DIRT part of an education at Verde Valley School that truly sets this institution apart from other IB programs. It represents a belief that all students learn best when they're in real-world situations, using their knowledge to develop ideas and formulate practical and feasible solutions outside the traditional classroom setting. "The DIRT part [of the curriculum] is so expansive, but at its core its kids rolling up their sleeves and getting involved in more," explains the school's Director of Advancement, Donita Coburn-Amadio.

Students experience this hands-on, experiential approach to learning in a number of ways. For instance, they often spend at least two weeks of the year on the road taking part in what the



school calls expeditionary learning. Students visit places like Guatemala or Mexico, where they have the opportunity not only to investigate different environments and cultures, but also explore ways in which they can provide service to the global communities they visit, have meaningful conversations, and develop relationships with people from around the world.

And while academics and stewardship take on leading roles at Verde Valley School, the campus' spectacular outdoor surroundings offer a constant reminder of balance, encouraging students to play just as hard as they work. You won't find your standard gymnasium though, instead students take part in activities like mountain biking, horseback riding, rock climbing and trail running, challenging themselves while cultivating a deeper appreciation for the natural world.

Fundamentally, students at Verde Valley School are shown the rewards of their hard work, instilling them with a belief that their knowledge

and skills can make an actual difference in the world around them. And they're just as active at home in Arizona as they are globally, prioritizing local action and community support with equal vigor.

**“We look at our relationship with Sedona, I think, differently than some schools. We look at it from [the perspective of] what can we do as a school to help support the community,”** shares Amadio. Rather than looking outwardly at how the community can help the school, they turn inwards, encouraging students and staff members to reflect and explore how the school's resources can provide pillars of support and add value to the local community.

Some of this involvement comes through the school's work with Arizona's food insecure. Students collect and organize food donations from the local community as part of the Green Bag Project and each year they host an interactive dinner called The Hunger Banquet, which





raises funds to help prepare meals for kids that may not have enough food at home. Students are also taught the value of locally sourced, farm to table growing through the school's beyond organic farm which uses feral farming techniques to create a symbiotic and sustaining ecosystem of plants and wildlife. Overall, students and staff help maintain the growth of over 100 different plant species, with one-third of what's grown going back into the school's dining halls, one-third being donated to local farmer's markets and restaurants, and one-third going to the community's food insecure providing nourishing food options to those without access.

With such a strong sense of community, it's no surprise that alumni feel a continued connection to their VVS roots, and the school continues to develop new opportunities for alumni and current students to engage and interact. In recent months, one of these opportunities has developed in the form of Thought-

ful Thursday, a virtual book club where past and present students come together to discuss monthly book choices that cover a range of social justice topics. "This kind of virtual opportunity is actually one of the better things that has happened [this year]," shares Amadio who says they've seen involvement all the way from current students to those who graduated 60-70 years ago.

It's certainly no secret that the world's ability to come together through open conversation and thoughtful action is still a work in progress. "We would have a better, different planet if tomorrow's leaders were the kind of kids that come out of Verde Valley School," Amadio summarizes. To see places like Verde Valley School teaching students the value of global citizenship and the power that comes from rising as a collective is undoubtedly a refreshing energy amidst today's ever-divisive landscape. And with the type of leaders Verde Valley School is creating today, it's clear our tomorrows are going to be a little brighter. ES

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