



**ISDA**

International Sonoran Desert Alliance

# **Working to preserve and enrich the environment, culture, and economy of the Sonoran Desert**

## **Workforce Development**

### **GED and Work Study Program**

We believe that the economic success of individuals, and hence of the whole community, begins with education. ISDA provides an afternoon GED Program with a Work Study Option for young adults aged 16-24. An evening GED program is also available to all adults lacking a high school diploma. No other agency in our remote community is willing or able to provide a GED program, crucial for community economic development.

The GED Program and Work Study Option provide local youth with education, jobs and life skills. Students who choose Work Study earn a small income as they work with local businesses. By attending classes, they prepare for the GED test and develop life skills in a safe environment away from the drugs and violence prevalent in their lives.



ISDA/Jewel Cleanwater

GED students work in informal classroom settings like this, and have work study opportunities in the community where they learn important life skills.

### **Demographics**

There is a strong correlation between low levels of educational attainment and high levels of poverty, especially for women. According to census data, no woman in Ajo is living in poverty if she has some college education, an associate's or bachelor's degree, or higher degree. By comparison, 31% of women with a high school diploma or GED certificate live in poverty, and 57% of women who did not attain a GED or high school diploma live in poverty. Thirteen percent of men with a high school diploma or GED certificate live below the poverty level, and 30% of men who did not attain a high school diploma or GED live in poverty.

Our local unemployment rate reaches almost double the rate of Tucson or Phoenix, and the local poverty rate is 23%. Similar to many other rural communities, life circumstances lead to a high rate of high school dropouts, which creates further risk of unemployment. Some of the youth who participated in our program were on probation, had been on probation, or have a court record. Indeed, some enroll in the GED Program because of a court mandate to do so, while others are there by choice. Work opportunities are scarce, especially for teenagers living in the small rural community of Ajo, even though many are eager to work and earn money.

### **Academic Program**

Our low income, at-risk ABE and GED students learn best with the small teacher-to-student ratio our program provides. In fact, this safe, intimate setting is crucial for their learning. They come with little family support, have had negative educational experiences and lack confidence in their ability to learn. We engage students by reading aloud together in all subject areas, discussing what we read and often writing about it. The students respond well to this collaborative form of learning, and this process yields positive results.



To maintain our low teacher-student ratio is crucial. Class size is capped at ten students. To date, we have served more than 200 students.

### Work Study

Helping students develop job skills through real work experiences is a key component of our GED program. We partner with local businesses to offer meaningful work opportunities. So far, students have worked on maintenance of the historic Ajo Plaza, in the Ajo Community Market, Ajo Resale (a local thrift store), Ajo Flower Shop, and on a project to beautify the town in which local community members work with students on landscaping and painting buildings in Ajo.

Our work-study coordinator and supervisors from the local business community serve as mentors to the students to help them build life skills including being on time, calling employers if they're unable to work, and good decision making—working through any difficulty that arises during their work day. We maintain close contact with each work supervisor to make sure that students are learning well and

doing a good job. The positive community perception of this program and the students is critically important. Our goal is for the youth to be connected and productive members of our community, to maintain a job, and through this experience, learn crucial job-preparedness skills.

### Innovations

We combine the GED program with a work study option to prepare students for employment and learn other life skills. We practice writing resumés, interviewing skills. Community business owners are important mentors.

In addition, we expose students to various forms of art, which provide students alternative ways of self expression and skills development.

The pottery studio provides the GED students with creative time and the potential to earn additional money. They have exhibited and sold the pieces they made in the studio at the ISDA Gallery Gift Shop.

