

# Utah County's LDS-aligned private schools eye expansions as they continue to see growth

Daily Herald | Nov 3, 2019



*Bethany Crossley draws using a light table beside Kelsey McClain, both 15-years old and freshmen, during an art class at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork.*

American Heritage School has big plans. Multimillion-dollar plans. And it has the funding to get it there.

“We are doing everything we can to keep this accessible to all families,” said Grant Beckwith, the school’s principal.

Those plans involve continuing through its phases of expansion, which have already included opening new athletic facilities and creating an indoor arena. Additional phases, which include creating additional classrooms, a student commons and spaces for the performing arts, will begin in the spring.

The school has 900 students, with another 400 who come after school for specialized programming. More involved in the school’s online distance education program. It makes the American Fork school the largest private school aligned with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the state and, Beckwith assumes, the nation.



Students are reflected in an American-flag display as they walk between classes in a hallway at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork. Isaac Hale, Daily Herald

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Isaac Smith, 6, makes a game out of stepping between colored and non-colored tiles as he and his kindergarten class walk between classrooms at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork. Isaac Hale, Daily Herald

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Jacob Burr, 18, a senior, flips through pages in his textbook as he works with his classmates in a sports medicine class at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork. Isaac Hale, Daily Herald

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Caitlyn Penrod, a child's mother, reads to her child's kindergarten class, typically led by teacher Cynthia Bingham, at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork. Isaac Hale, Daily Herald

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Students work together as they sketch skulls during an art class at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork. Isaac Hale, Daily Herald

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James Gifford, 17, a senior, paints during an art class at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork. Isaac Hale, Daily Herald

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Jared Warren, a facilities specialist, mops surfaces in the high school's gym at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork. Isaac Hale, Daily Herald

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Jeff Hymas speaks to students as he teaches a U.S. history class at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork. Isaac Hale, Daily Herald

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Nathan Andersen, 15, a sophomore, draws a skull during an art class at American Heritage School on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019, in American Fork. Isaac Hale, Daily Herald

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But while American Heritage School has enjoyed increased popularity as Utah County continues to grow, it is only one of two accredited, physical, Latter-day Saint aligned private schools in the area.

There are more than 2.1 million members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints living in Utah, making up about 68% of the state, according to numbers from the church. The church runs a handful of institutions of higher education, including the 30,000-student Brigham Young University in Provo, but does not currently own or operate K-12 schools.

Many Latter-day Saints, few Latter-day Saint schools

Latter-day Saint youth at the high school level have the choice to participate in seminary, a church-run scripture study program that counts as release time on the students' high school schedules.

Seminary gives students a part-time religious education option, but for families looking for something more comprehensive, choices are slim.

And while other religions — like Catholicism — have a plethora of private school options across the nation, there are very few Latter-day Saint-aligned schools, especially in Utah.

“I think there is a prevailing view in Utah that public schools are religiously-orientated schools, because so many teachers are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and that is only marginally true,” Beckwith said. “Even if those teachers are very faithful Latter-day Saints, it is difficult for them to teach that way, and certainly there are legal restrictions and policy reasons why they can't.”

It's the same reasoning Jordan Long, the administrator of Liahona Preparatory Academy in Pleasant Grove, has heard.

Latter-day Saint-themed schools exist and thrive elsewhere, he said, because there isn't that same assumption.

"There are LDS schools in Arizona and in the Las Vegas area that are thriving because members of the church down there, they don't have that false pretense of, 'Oh, everyone is LDS, so everything is fine,'" Long said.

Another reason, Long said, is that it's hard to make a religious private school viable.

"It is really hard to make a private school successful from the get go," Long said. "The reason it worked so well for us is because of our distance education program."

He said many people have asked him for help in starting a Latter-day Saint-aligned private school in the area, but that the schools close within a year or two.

Beckwith also receives calls from people outside of Utah who want an American Heritage School in their area, sometimes going as far as to say they'll donate the building and the land as long as the school runs the facility. Beckwith thanks them, but then says that American Heritage School has decided to dedicate its time and effort to its existing campus.

"We don't feel that franchising education works that well," he said.

With its campus directly across the street from the Mount Timpanogos Utah Temple, and students who come from as far as Nephi, Bountiful, Midway and Saratoga Springs, Beckwith sees its current site as its only one in the area.

"Our board has considered multiple offers and opportunities, and we don't see a second location in Utah County in our foreseeable future," he said.

### Growing in faith

American Heritage School began in 1969 in a chapel in Pleasant Grove. Fifty years later, those old pew benches still decorate the halls of the modern American Fork facilities.

The school's standard rate of tuition ranges from \$4,140 a year for half-day kindergarten to \$9,360 a year for high school students.

The school's students agree to abide by an honor code of conduct similar to BYU's. Pupils wear uniforms and participate in a thriving arts program.

About \$500,000 was collected at its recent gala to fund student aid, and the institution has raised more than \$76 million in donations since 2001. Beckwith said the school is completely debt-free and only pays for expansions when it has already secured the funds to do so.

The Latter-day Saint temple is visible from nearly everywhere on campus, especially in its new Patriot Arena, where large windows peer out at the structure. The temple, Beckwith said, stands at the forefront of everything

the school does. Parts of American Heritage School are even designed to mimic architectural themes from Latter-day Saint temples.

The school heavily celebrates American patriotism and teaches what it refers to as America's Christian history.

Each classroom includes a timeline of Christian history, which becomes more detailed in the upper grades.

"We really define history as His story," Beckwith said, referring to Jesus Christ.

Beckwith came to the school in 2005 after working on the east coast as an attorney at an international law firm. At the time, the school had 300 students in kindergarten through the eighth grade. It's since tripled its enrollment, added a high school and included a distance education program.

Families have lined up to enter the program as the school has expanded.

"I think that we have a product that puts Christ at the foundation of our learning, and I think we have families who are starting to recognize that that is real education," Beckwith said.

But the school knows it won't grow forever. American Heritage School plans to max out its enrollment when it completes its expansion project at about 1,600 students.

Beckwith said the school's model works because its families and employees are all dedicated to it. He said employees get unlimited personal leave, and that they come for cause-orientated teaching that aligns with their beliefs and values.

"We say, 'Play on all the keys of the piano,' and that to them is what really draws them," Beckwith said.

The school has seen visitors from some of the highest ranks of the church. Quentin L. Cook, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and Dallin H. Oaks, the First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, have spoken at the school, along with BYU presidents and then-UVU President Matthew Holland.

"American Heritage isn't just a school, it's a movement," Beckwith said. "It's a worldwide movement of a rising generation who will not fall away from the faith of their mothers and fathers and who recognizes how hope is the most essential thing for this world. Not hope in commerce, not hope in their career, but hope in something that is greater than themselves."

He's thankful for other faith-based schools. He sees them as similar, but at different stages in their histories.

"What some of those other schools are doing is what we were doing 20 years ago, and that is scrimping and saving and budgeting paperclips per teacher because it is hard to run a private, faith-based school without tax funding," Beckwith said.

Liahona's new direction

A few miles away, Liahona Preparatory Academy in Pleasant Grove is on a trajectory to double its enrollment within a few years.



The school currently has about 150 students, with more in its online distance education program. It hopes to break ground on a new addition that will bring in more classrooms and introduce a 460-seat theatre that will include a rotating stage, elevated lifts and a fly system.

The school was founded in 1998 by Brent and Kolleen DeGraff as a distance education program. Enrollment continued to grow until dropping in half in 2012 after the owners' son was arrested and charged with sexually abusing two students. Long, the school's current administrator, was a teacher at the time and thought the school was going to close. Instead, parents voted to keep it open.

The school's enrollment has grown back to its original levels since then, has new ownership and has adopted additional precautions to prevent a similar incident from happening.

Long and his family bought the school earlier this year.

"There are hundreds of students around the world who rely on us for their education and I didn't want it to go away," he said.

If he hadn't bought it, Long said the school was going to be sold to an investment firm that planned to turn it into a charter school.

"This school needs to exist," he said. "We are the only ones who do what we do."

Long signed the paperwork to purchase the school in February — the same day his wife went into labor with their newest child.

Liahona Preparatory Academy uses what it calls Restoration Education to infuse Latter-day Saint beliefs into its curriculum. Tuition varies on multiple factors, but ranges from \$3,000 a year for pre-k taught twice a week to \$6,800 for full-time academy students.

Uniforms aren't required, the school week lasts four days, class ends at 1:15 p.m. and rooms are decorated to look like movie sets in order to be appealing for students who are watching online. No homework is assigned.

"We believe a good teacher can teach what they need to teach in 50 minutes," Long said.

Its distance education program started with the school mailing VHS tapes to students, before transitioning to DVDs and then online.

Its expansion will bring its first theatre, but for now, tape in the hallway marks a makeshift stage where students perform. The school didn't have a theatre program when Long was a teacher in 2008. Now, 75% of the student body participates in a theatre class and its students consistently win theatre awards.

The academy gained accreditation about 10 years ago.

Unlike other private schools, Long said Liahona Preparatory Academy doesn't accept large donations.

"We will not do that, because when you take on donors, you also take on their desires and what they want, and we feel very strongly that we want the education of this school to be unadulterated and unchanged and we want it to be exactly what we want it to be," Long said.

His vision for the school's future involves finishing the expansion and then adding small, family-like campuses in Farmington, Bountiful, Arizona, Nevada and southern California.

He sees the school and its students as the Liahona, a device Latter-day Saints believe was given to the religion's ancient prophets from God to direct and instruct. Long said that while the first spindle pointed to where the religion's ancient prophets should go, the Book of Mormon doesn't say where the second spindle points. Long believes it points to the students, who he said will change the world.

"There are people out there who absolutely, 100% need you in their life," Long said. "And we think it is absolutely crucial we raise these children to understand that and to understand that every little thing they do has an impact and they need to find those people who need them."