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# JUST FOR THE KIDS

## Final Report for Eastridge Community Elementary School

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Prepared by:

**Joan Clay, Research Assistant**  
**David Thomas, Research Assistant**



**Research and Development Center  
for the Advancement of Student Learning**

222 West Laurel  
Fort Collins, Colorado  
970-491-3179; 970-491-3180 (FAX)  
[www.cahs.colostate.edu/r-dcenter/home.asp](http://www.cahs.colostate.edu/r-dcenter/home.asp)

**Colorado State University / Poudre School District  
Collaborative**

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# FINAL REPORT

## For

### Eastridge Community Elementary School

#### INTRODUCTION

The school studied for this report was Eastridge Community Elementary School located in the Cherry Creek School District. The research was conducted in the spring of 2004. The school configuration includes grades Kindergarten – 5<sup>th</sup>. The school is year-round and has four tracks rotating in a general pattern of 9 weeks on and 3 weeks off over the course of a year. Eastridge view this as an advantage in that there is less “down time” when students are not in an active learning environment. The Cherry Creek School district encompasses a varied socio-economic area. The community served by Eastridge Community Elementary School is in the north area of the district and includes a variety of familial representations. Over the past 10 years the community has become more ethnically diverse and has seen significant growth in the English Language Learners population with over 40 languages spoken by students. The 2003-2004 School Report Card lists the breakdown of ethnicity in the table below.

**Table 1 Student population by Ethnicity**

<b>Student Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Percentage of School Population</b>
Native American	0.8%
African American	33.3%
Asian American	7.9%
Hispanic American	16.7%
White	41.3%

The community developed about 35 years ago and several generations of families have now attended this community school. A number of changes have been witnessed over time including: socio-economical and mobility (now over 40%). The socio-economic status of families has expanded from white upper middle class and middle class and includes families that qualify for free and reduced lunch (47%). Other major changes that have occurred over the past three years are an increased number of English Language Acquisition students (over 40 different languages within current student population), increased number of students eligible to participate in free and reduced lunch and an increased number of students entering school at lower achievement levels. The principal describes the teachers as highly qualified and energetic with over 75% of the teachers holding master’s degrees or higher. The faculty is

invested in staff development that moves them forward and keeps them current in research best practice. Administrators, teachers, and parents are committed to providing excellence and equity for all students attending Eastridge.

## **PROTOCOL OF THE STUDY**

The overall structure of the district has three central stakeholder relationships.

- District, including board of education and central administration
- School, including principal and instructional staff
- Classroom, including teacher and students and parents as partners.

Individual school and classroom-level interviews were conducted for this study. Individuals interviewed included a member of the Cherry Creek Board of Education, the superintendent of the Cherry Creek School District, the coordinator of staff development for the Cherry Creek School District, the principal of Eastridge Elementary School, and the media specialist for Eastridge Elementary School.

There were three focus group interviews including teachers, parents, and students. The nature of this study was to identify factors and variables affecting the school's performance on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) in comparison to their demographic peers. Therefore, certain criteria were used to determine those interviewed. Two teachers had at least three years experience at the school, while four other teachers, who participated in the focus group, had varied lengths of experience. The six parent focus group participants had been associated with the school for at least three years and have had their children participate in at least two years of elementary level CSAP testing. The eight student focus group participants were all fifth graders who had been at the school for at least three years.

## **CURRICULUM**

Analysis of the data revealed a curriculum focus on three themes. Those themes emerged as major areas in which curriculum decisions are based. These themes were consistent from district to school to classroom. The sub categorical themes are (1) Student achievement (2) Staff development (3) Colorado Student Achievement Program (CSAP) testing. The main priorities at Eastridge Elementary and in the Cherry Creek School District are closing the achievement gap and providing equitable education for a diverse student population. The mission of the Cherry School District is *“to inspire every student to think, to learn, to achieve and to care”* and was reiterated by the superintendent in response to an interview question.

### **Alignment of Standards/Professional Development**

The process of curriculum development has been refined in the last three years transitioning from site-based to a combination of site-based and district-led efforts. Professional development opportunities for teachers in the district align to the state instructional standards. According to the Cherry Creek School District Coordinator of Professional Development, the process for professional development includes: description

of specific goals, objectives of the goals, and the intended impact on student achievement. If the training is site specific, the specified goals must reflect school improvement goals. This process focuses on direct links of professional development that connect to student learning. To enhance and assist the professional development process, a district website provides information on a variety of opportunities professionals can participate in. At Eastridge, teachers have multiple opportunities to attend staff development that is provided at the school. Teachers eagerly participate and are committed to updated professional growth. Teachers at Eastridge Community Elementary School recognize the indisputable link between student achievement and staff development. Teachers are encouraged to read professional books and participate in topical discussion sessions.

In addition to professional development for teachers, the Cherry Creek School District engaged administrators in regular meetings. Principals meet in levels groups (elementary, middle and high school) and collectively in large groups to address academic and administrative issues on a monthly basis. Cherry Creek Board of Education members are also engaged in professional development through meetings organized by the Colorado Association of School Boards. Occasionally, the board members attend national conferences.

Parents are excited and encouraged by the professional development offered to teachers and by teachers for parents. The teachers use professional development opportunities to provide a variety of information to families and to effectively improve student achievement.

## **Assessments**

While the CSAP scores are important, they provide only one source of data about student achievement. A body of evidence is what truly assesses achievement levels. The use of CSAP test data to inform instruction is limited because test results reported to districts happen after the academic term begins. Therefore, multiple informal assessments are given to assist the progress of informed decisions related to instructional needs. The Cherry Creek School District has a system (RAD) that guides teachers through data driven instructional planning for individual students. This is one assessment source that provides specific information relative to achievement.

The Eastridge Community Elementary School uses a looping model in which the same teacher teaches the same students for two grades in a row. This allows the teacher to thoroughly understand and assess the academic needs of the student and to develop and implement an instructional plan for academic growth. Looping also allows the teacher to use the test data received well into the academic year. Additionally, the year round model provides on-going learning with short academic intersession classes. The teachers also participate in yearly articulation discussions to facilitate the transition of students from one grade to the next. Teachers take responsibility for the learning of all students at all levels. The CSAP exams are relevant to all teachers because at some point all students are tested. Primary teachers take responsibility for providing foundational skills and speak directly to intermediate teachers about individual and group progress.

The CSAP scores have provided teachers with information on strengths and weaknesses, which is an important guide for professional development and instruction. Teachers use a variety of diagnostic tools to assess the academic needs of students. There is a grade level agreement and plan for meeting student needs. The assessment of student progress in the primary grades for reading includes the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Intermediate grades use the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI). Teachers also use running records for ongoing assessment and progress monitoring in grades K-5<sup>th</sup>. The entire faculty utilizes the Six Traits writing criteria to assess student writing. Teachers have high expectations for students and diagnostic tools provide data that guides individual student instructional needs.

## **Challenges**

The greatest challenge is meeting the needs of students from diverse ethnic groups. Included with ethnicity are over 40 languages spoken by the ELA population. Many of the students are immigrants just entering the country. Some of the students have non-academic issues that pose more challenges for the teachers and administrators. For example, there are students at Eastridge who have experienced being detained at refugee camps. In many cases there has been little or no educational background. Teachers must rely on added support to expedite learning. Parents are not able to help due to their lack of English language knowledge. This is particularly challenging for teachers who realize that the parents want to help their children. The parents simply lack the communication skill to help.

The mobility rate at Eastridge is 47% and the school averages 140 transfers per year. The transient student population poses a problem for teachers who have students for only half a school term in some cases. Another challenge is building space due to the yearly influx of more students. The school utilizes every part of the building, including converted closets and hallways, for instructional purposes. To alleviate this problem next year, a building renovation and addition is planned.

There is a well-documented achievement gap between white and non-white students. The principal encourages teachers to address this issue. There is a specific effort at Eastridge Community Elementary School to meet the academic needs of African American and Hispanic males. The principal established a group called Eastridge Scholars. The purpose of the group is to encourage minority male students to believe in themselves and to develop leadership skills, thus influencing academic achievement.

Other challenges are family situations and conditions that influence student development and academic performance. The teachers are impacted due to the many social-emotional needs of the student's academic performance. Teachers are challenged to find effective instructional strategies and ways to give emotional support that ensure progress.

## **Student Achievement**

Demonstrating student achievement as mandated by the state accountability system poses a challenge. The school accountability system that includes rating and ranking schools does not take into consideration small gains made in schools with struggling student populations. The media specialist wrote a letter to the governor about the school rating system stressing these variables of consideration.

At Eastridge Community Elementary School, the implementation of a School Improvement Plan determines goals for the school year. The goals serve to increase success in reading, writing and mathematics. The CSAP scores are adversely impacted as the school is confronted with many challenges: growing ELA population; high mobility; large free and reduced lunch population; and children who enter school lacking basic literacy readiness skills. Many students lack the prerequisite skills and experiences for academic success as measured by the state accountability system.

Parents also defined academic success as meeting the needs of all students. Programs for below proficient and remedial students like Reading Recovery, Title 1, SUPR and others are seen as needed and appreciated. Other parents complimented programs that challenged academically advanced students. The responses also included attributing success to the caring nature of administrators and teachers. The parents were impressed with the Blue Ribbon distinction, but they were more encouraged by the high expectations placed upon all students by the staff.

Parents believe that the Average rating on the state accountability report is a result of numerous factors, especially the mobile student population. Eastridge has a mobility rating of 47% so students are constantly transferring in and out of the school. Consistency of attendance at Eastridge of 1 year or greater demonstrates higher achievement scores on CSAP and other standardized measures.

Parents were supportive of the year-round school model because it enabled students to return to school in reduced lengths of time resulting in greater retention of academic skills. Other parents appreciated the on-site childcare (ECP) available during track off periods. These programs provided working parents with options for childcare that are economically reasonable. The students are also engaged in meaningful academic and recreational activities while in attendance.

## **COMMUNITY**

### **School Culture/Leadership**

The culture at Eastridge Community Elementary School operates within a “Helping Relationship” and is student focused. The administrators and teachers seek to encourage the academic, social, and personal growth and development in each student. The teachers nurture children and eagerly develop positive inter personal relationships. Warm hugs and compliments are frequently given to children. This nurturing climate is encouraged and supported by the administration. Even the custodian participates. Each adult in the building targets one student to informally mentor and encourage throughout the year. The adult’s

address students by name and engage them in conversation on a weekly basis. This caring attitude extends to discipline. Students receive discipline in a nurturing manner. Discipline is specific and students are reminded that it is a natural consequence of inappropriate behavior.

The faculty and staff are cognizant of the needs of students from diverse ethnicities. The staff focuses on cultural appreciation and building self-esteem. Special attention is given to considering practices that inform and celebrate different ethnic experiences. A concerted effort to welcome families from other countries is on going.

The culture of caring is a reflection of the principal's personal philosophy. The media specialist stated in her interview that the principal seeks staff members who have a "servant's heart". The principal models this expectation and teachers at Eastridge display qualities that are nurturing and caring as well. Part of this caring is also a school wide discipline system to enforce school rules. Students obtain tickets as rewards for positive behaviors and conduct tickets for negative behavior. In a climate of success, announcements over the public address system include acknowledgement of student accomplishments. The consistent plan for discipline helps students develop self-control and understand boundaries. Students receive constant praise for positive behaviors and are given consequences for negative behaviors. To reinforce these actions the school uses Bully Proofing, and Character Education programs to reduce and eliminate aggressive and negative behaviors.

Parents report a culture of caring and of a Helping Relationship. An example of this is grade level field trips where additional funds are solicited for students whose parents could not afford fees. This allows all students to attend field trips regardless of the family's economic status. Also, cultural assemblies held at the school enhance student learning and awareness of others in the school community and sensitivity to their needs.

Teachers consider parents as partners and stress parent/teacher communication. Teachers communicate activities and events in the school newsletter, make phone calls and send emails on a regular basis. Teachers are willing to release personal phone numbers to facilitate communication with parents. Meetings are scheduled and parents along with their child's teacher become partners to determine consistent support.

## Parents

District-wide parent council meetings are well attended. 70%-80% of Eastridge parents are working families. This limits their ability to be involved during the day. Parents may lack time to provide support at the school but they are supportive of school policies and programs. Parental involvement generally takes the form of fund raising. Parents who can volunteer tend to be a core group, some retirees, and grandparents who have the time to help at the school. Parents speak positively about the school and are proud to have their children attend a "Blue Ribbon School of Excellence."

There is an outstanding attendance record at evening school events. Parents typically go to events that feature student performances and family entertainment. Family skate night and Fall Festival are on going attractions that gather families together.

The PTCO operates from a budget of approximately \$20,000.00 and provide grants to teachers for instructional materials and supplies. The group believes the adage “it takes a community to raise a child” and tries to provide for all children at Eastridge.

Parents in a focus group discussion stated that they chose Eastridge Community Elementary School because it welcomed students from diverse ethnic populations. Classrooms teach and embrace the students’ culture. Parents were also encouraged with a Hispanic male principal and female assistant principal. One family specifically moved to the Eastridge Community so that their children could attend school with other children of color. It was important that the children felt welcomed and nurtured.

The school climate is enthusiastically welcoming to new parents, the staff, warm and friendly. One parent noticed a stark contrast to the predominantly white catholic school they had attended. The diversity in the student population was a welcomed change. The physical building included artwork from the students that reflected their cultural diversity.

## **Businesses**

The Public Education Business Coalition (PEBC) provides support to schools by providing expert consultants in various academic areas-Library, Power, Literacy, Writing, Math and providing fiscal support through grants. Parents and teachers eagerly seek to expand relationships with local businesses.


## **SUMMARY**

The Eastridge Community Elementary School offers a culture of a “Helping Relationship” for its students. The philosophy of the principal that challenges each teacher to “have a servant’s heart” fosters a learning community inclusive of teachers and staff who focus on student growth and success. The school is invested in the academic, social and emotional growth of all students. Academically, the faculty provides instruction that is data driven, diagnostic, and individualized. Socially, the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences are appreciated, and celebrated. Culturally, the school community embraces.

Parents stated that Eastridge provides an education of excellence. District personnel such as the Superintendent and the Director of Elementary Education offered positive feedback about Eastridge Community Elementary School.

Stakeholders communicated their support of the school’s mission, vision and values. All stakeholders acknowledge the challenges of a constant changing student population. There is a concerted focus on meeting the academic needs of all students. Immersion classes help address the mobile student population. Title I and other funds help to reinforce the academic programs. Programs like Reading Recovery and Immersion classes have an immediate impact on students’ academic growth.

Future planning includes enhancing business involvement, seeking to hire male teachers to fill a void of male role models in the lives of the students, and adding physical space to



accommodate increasing enrollment. Stakeholders are committed to increasing student learning opportunities and maximizing student growth at Eastridge Community Elementary School. One teacher defined a successful student as a “happy student”. Producing happy, well-adjusted students meeting their highest potential academically best describes the intentions of the faculty and staff at Eastridge Community Elementary School.