

# JUST FOR THE KIDS SCHOOL STUDY REPORT

**Madison Elementary School  
Weld County 6 School District**

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## INTRODUCTION

The school studied for this report was Madison Elementary School in Colorado's Weld County 6 School District. The research was conducted in May 2003. The principal was completing his second year of administration at Madison. The teacher on special assignment (TOSA), who is the in-house curriculum specialist, was completing her first year. The classroom population was 580 students, 52 teachers representing both full-time or part-time status, and 15 paraprofessionals.

Madison's Hispanic population, approximately 75% of total student population, is higher than the district average of 45%. English Language Learners (ELL) comprise 48% of the student population exceeding the district average of 17%. Teachers interviewed mentioned that, *"depending on the year and the student's family situation, mobility can range from losing a few in number to a lot of students during a school year."*

The overall hierarchal structure of the district was described as three central stakeholder relationships: a) district, including board of education and central administration; b) school, including principal and instructional staff; c) classroom, including teacher and student. District administrators who were interviewed for this study included the superintendent, the associate superintendent, the director of schools, and a board of education member.

Individual school and classroom level interviews were conducted with the principal and two teachers. There were three focus group interviews, one with teachers, another with parents, and the third with students. The nature of this study is the identification of schools that over time outperform their demographic peers on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). Therefore, certain criteria were used to determine those interviewed. The two teachers each had at least three years experience at the school, while the five 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 student(s) 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 central theme focused around curriculum development and includes four subcategories that emerged and have meaning for the district, school, and classroom levels of the schooling process. These four subcategories can be further subdivided into two pairs that appear to influence each other. One of the pairs is the alignment of standards across the district with the expectation of those being adhered to at the school and classroom

levels, and various assessments of student achievement. The other one is staff development and effective delivery practices that embrace both curriculum priorities along with various learning styles. A matrix (see Figure 1) has been prepared to represent who influences and implements the development of curriculum.

## **Alignment of standards and assessments**

The Colorado Model Content Standards provide the basis for the district-wide scope and sequence curriculum development at Weld County District 6. The district's board of education changed the structure of the implementation of standards from being site-based at the school level to being data driven based on student assessment at the district level. As a result, each course has a set of standards with another set of components of intended learning, which are matched with student achievement.

A member of the board of education recognized that high performing school data do support “site-based decision making” as an important strategy in assisting low-performing schools. However, there were key curriculum components that needed to be district wide. This philosophy was supported by the district-level and school-level staff due to the high mobility of students who frequently change schools in the district.

A new central administration position—Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment—was created with primary responsibilities to help the school board members, the principals, and the teachers understand and interpret the data. The reality of the CSAP exam process was another factor that guides this district to change their curriculum development. Data from this exam are used to inform areas of instruction that need to have more emphasis in the classroom. All those interviewed at the district level and those involved with instruction at the school level noted that the areas of concern are reading, writing, and math.

Historically, the district community has struggled with the outcome of CSAP only reflecting what students have learned and not the academic growth of a child. Therefore, it is also important to note that all those interviewed for this study wanted it known that CSAP was not the only factor. There are two district-wide assessments, Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) and Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), used as supplemental assessments to better inform the instructional staff and parents on the growth of a child. NWEA is given in the fall and spring of each academic year. The fall reports are used for the first parent conferences. QRI's are given on a continuous basis throughout the year and take about 20 minutes per assessment. Based on these three assessments, the district-wide student achievement priorities are reading, writing, and math. One of the administrators interviewed stated,

*“Student achievement is always a part of the conversation with principals. This is driven from top to bottom: board of education → central administration → principals → teachers → students.”*

The board of education member added,

*“The ultimate, bottom line goal for the board is that successes are each and every one of our students achieve to their full potential.”*

The superintendent and building principals are accountable for continuous improvement of these priorities being addressed in the classroom. The district has also been experiencing steady, but slow improvement on their CSAP scores. However, some teachers expressed frustrations that English Language Learners are expected to be proficient in a certain time allotment that is not research proven.

Another key component of the district-wide, data-driven curriculum is the use of the same textbooks across the schools. This provides the best opportunity to focus on key vocabulary and concepts in order to maintain a common vocabulary.

In order to meet the needs of all the students, differentiated instruction has become the norm at the school, and the staff feels that students are benefiting from this change in instruction. The homogenous groups are fluid and responsive to changes in students’ needs and behavior.

## **Staff development and delivery practices**

There seemed to be a general attitude at both the district and school level that the entire staff development process was in need of modification. The main concern appears to be the lack of a good accountability system to ensure that the district is targeting the right area of improvement, and those in the classroom are given resources for implementation.

The majority of those interviewed felt that the district-wide book study on poverty issues was informative and useful on how to deal with the many families impacted by this socio-economic status. Presently, principal development is the main priority in order to attain strong leadership within the schools.

Staff development at the school level is mainly data driven using all three assessments—CSAP, NWEA, and QRI. Each year there is a focus on one primary skill, i.e., reading, writing, or math. Individual teachers also have the opportunity to obtain some funding through the district performance pay system for self-identified needs. However, there was some disagreement between teacher and central administration of the equity in the funding provided for this activity. Teachers also stressed that they needed more time for communication and collaboration with the “specials” teachers.

The former TOSA at the school was mentioned by several individuals as being key to the high quality of instruction that is currently in place. This individual helped the school develop a strong culture of inspecting performance and introducing cooperation and collaboration as a way of changing how the school delivers instruction. She did this by understanding how to use the data and coached the teachers on how to provide quality instruction based on this significant information.

Another area that changed under her leadership was a community arrangement model, which was incorporated in the school. The school divided itself into two K-5 and two 1-5

“family” strands. Each student stays within a strand during his/her entire education progression so that both the families and the instructional staff can get to better know and trust each other. Students loop with their teacher at grades 4 and 5, meaning they remain with the same teacher at those grades. The other grade levels are more traditional with students changing teachers. However, there was some talk of looping grades 2 and 3. Another positive attribute of this type of delivery practice is that the teachers share what is working for them at grade level and within their strand.

The main priority in delivery practices is to constantly seek ways to improve instruction in order to close the student achievement gap. Each school in the district provides tutoring for fourth and fifth graders through a program called Extended Learning Opportunities. This is a supervised activity for students who require help with their homework. At Madison, PEAK is the gifted and talented program and teachers, parents, and students believe it to be quite effective. There is also instruction provided for the English Language Learners, and dual language classrooms are available for K-3. Further, Soar to Success is a reading intervention program that teaches students different strategies while reading.

## COMMUNITY

Weld County School District 6 is one of the fastest growing districts in northern Colorado. This increasing enrollment is adding to both the level of diversity and mobility of the community. Two separate groups pose diversity challenges within the community. There are two subsets within each group—Hispanic and Non-Hispanic, and English speaking/non-English speaking. Although this division exists within the community, a district staff member stated that these

*“...two separate communities all have the same goal and want their kids to have a good life and school to work for them; however, it is defined differently.”*

A matrix (see Figure 2) has been prepared for analysis of the school community and the three main subcategories of culture/leadership, parents, and businesses.

### Culture/Leadership

The school board member and district staff agreed that all students are capable of learning. Madison school staff—principal, teachers, parents, and most importantly, the students—echoed these sentiments. The theme of high expectations appeared as the central and repeating theme among the instructional staff and parents. Student achievement was measured beyond assessments, with the personal growth of each and every child held as a valuable influence on their future. The students understood this to be true and used words such as, happy, safe, and valued to describe how they knew their teachers cared about them. Interestingly, the

parents interviewed also used those same words and feel the school is really trying to help every child succeed.

There was also a strong climate of respect between teachers and students, and this behavior influences Madison having a good reputation for proper student conduct. This reputation was a sense of pride for both teachers and students due to the positive feedback that they continually receive after field trips, and especially from individuals outside of the school community.

The high quality and stable teaching staff at Madison is a major contributor to the positive and energetic climate. The principal indicated that only 10% of the entire staff was new that school year. During the teacher focus group interview, one of the teachers stated that good teaching is,

*"...knowing that students are learning, academically or socially."*

The students repeatedly mentioned the importance of after-school activities as an important factor in their lives. Some of these activities include choir, art, intramurals, and Odyssey of the Mind. Two summary quotes by students about the principal and teachers are as follows:

*"(The) principal understands kids, like he knows how it feels like when you're left out or something. And he tries to help, he knows how it feels."*

*"They (teachers) want us to grow up and be a very smart person who is really nice and cares about others more than themselves."*

## **Parents**

There is concern about the lack of parental involvement throughout the district and at the school level. The district now requires that each school implement a policy that specifies parental involvement is an expectation. According to the principal, Madison's philosophy is

*"to involve parents more by removing barriers and providing more bridges."*

This is done by having interpreters on staff, sending out a principal-initiated monthly newsletter, and having more family nights at the school. The school is challenged by the reality that many of the families have several stressors in their lives, including effective communication among Spanish-speaking families. The staff also understands that many parents work, which makes it hard for them to support the school.

The parents discussed in detail how they appreciated that homework is assigned on a regular basis so they have an awareness of what their child is working on at school. The parents appreciated that the school requires the students to read 10-15 minutes every night due to the reading statistics presented to them, which indicate this amount of reading time moves students from a low percentile to at least the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile.

## **Businesses**

The district in collaboration with the local chamber of commerce formed an alliance to have each school adopted by a community business. These relationships have provided more resources for the schools, along with expectations of skill sets that students need for various careers. This has also given businesses more awareness of the affect the poverty and English Language Learners have on student achievement. The businesses believe that education is a key to success of a community and have a teacher recognition banquet to honor their commitment.

Madison has been adopted by the Kiwanas Club and members volunteer their services to help with reading and math tutoring. They also purchase books for needy students. In addition, the local university provides the school with tutoring and classroom assistance.

## SUMMARY

An excerpt from the interview with the associate superintendent paints the best representative picture of Madison’s success:

*“...the overarching thing that they would all tell you is the reason for their good success is their high level of expectations. And they do hold high expectations. It’s not OK to not achieve at that school, it’s just not OK. And they’ve just – it’s so much a part of their being they don’t even have to say it, but every kid knows it, that you need to achieve, that’s why you’re there. You better get after it or someone’s going to get after you! So you know, they just took all the good ingredients from school reform and put it together in a package and it’s working there. And even dropping a new principal in there kept that going, so it was very, very strong and I give a lot of credit to the former TOSA and her ability to work with that staff and coach that staff to get that level of instructional quality.”*

The good ingredients referred to in the quote are the resources in place in order use the data to better inform instruction. These resources start with the support of the school board, who instilled the need to have a new central administrator position—Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. One of the responsibilities of this administrator is to work with schools to help them understand the data. Madison has been able to successfully interpret this information and develop a delivery model through the community strands arrangement that provides students an environment where learning and achieving are expected.

Madison should be proud of the high level of quality instruction they provide. They also extend this to the social welfare of the families that are a part of the Madison community. The district support provides the impetus for this success, and the leadership at Madison clearly understands how to make this work for the instructional staff, students, parents, and business community partners. The researchers are grateful to the Madison school community for participating in extensive interviews, thoughtful reflection, and for opening hearts and minds to the children they serve.

Figure 1 What Everyone Talked About

**Curriculum**

	Alignment of Standards	Assessments	Staff Development	Delivery Practices
District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State mandated</li> <li>• District-wide scope and sequence</li> <li>• Data-driven</li> <li>• Priorities are reading, writing, and math</li> <li>• High rate of family mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colorado Student Assessment Program (state funding)</li> <li>• Northwest Evaluation Association (Fall/Spring)</li> <li>• Qualitative Reading Inventory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board is self-identification</li> <li>• Central admin needs a better system</li> <li>• Principal development is a priority</li> <li>• Poverty issues</li> <li>• Process is in need of modification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closing achievement gaps</li> <li>• Improving instruction</li> <li>• TOSA's are curriculum leaders</li> <li>• Extended Learning Opportunities (tutoring)</li> </ul>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District holds schools accountable</li> <li>• Everyone knows the expectations</li> <li>• Focus on key vocabulary and concepts</li> <li>• Focus of teacher evaluation</li> <li>• Basis of principal evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CSAP only one reported</li> <li>• CSAP scores are not reflective of social issues</li> <li>• Difficult for bilingual learners to succeed in expected short period of time</li> <li>• Formal and informal methods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data driven, plus some input from staff, and parents</li> <li>• Need to use time allotted more wisely</li> <li>• Focus on a skill per year</li> <li>• Former TOSA was key to coaching for high quality instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific blocks of time for literacy, math, and writing</li> <li>• PEAK</li> <li>• Gifted-Talented Program</li> <li>• Strands</li> <li>• Looping 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade</li> </ul>
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differentiate instruction to concentrate on every child</li> <li>• Fluid, homogenous grouping</li> <li>• Students are benefiting from change of instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NWEA Fall reports used for parent conferences</li> <li>• CSAP is stressful for students</li> <li>• Teachers work hard to help students feel successful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need more time to allow teachers and specialists to communicate and collaborate</li> <li>• Individual teachers have self-identified needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodate students who struggle</li> </ul>

Figure 2. What Most Talked About

### School Community

	Culture/Leadership	Parents	Businesses
District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community focused, proactive board of education</li> <li>Traditional organization structure</li> <li>Principals are instructional leaders</li> <li>Believe all students are capable of learning</li> <li>Instructional staff support is needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two distinct, individualistic groups, Non-Hispanic and Hispanic, with an additional layer of English Speaking and Non-English Speaking</li> <li>Lack of parental involvement is a challenge</li> <li>Policies that reflect parental involvement is expected.</li> <li>Poverty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each school has been adopted by a business</li> <li>Recognition of staff</li> <li>Mentor/reading programs</li> <li>Resources</li> <li>Career skill sets needed</li> <li>Education is key to success of a community</li> </ul>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student achievement and personal growth</li> <li>Good reputation of proper student conduct</li> <li>Principal understands kids</li> <li>Stable staff</li> <li>Open door policy</li> <li>Teachers respect and collaborate with each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interpreters available</li> <li>Monthly newsletters from the principal</li> <li>Minimal family/parental involvement</li> <li>Philosophy is to involve parents more by removing barriers and providing bridges</li> <li>Families have many societal stressors</li> <li>Small PTO group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principal's focus is more on community agencies that provide after school activities</li> <li>Kiwanas adopted school and provide many volunteers for reading and they also purchase books for needy students</li> </ul>
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High quality and stable teaching staff</li> <li>After school activities important to students</li> <li>Teachers are kind</li> <li>Teachers and students are respect each other</li> <li>Students are happy, safe, and valued</li> <li>High expectations based on ability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appreciate that homework is assigned so know what child is doing in the classroom</li> <li>Students required to read every night and parent signs</li> <li>Many parents work making it difficult to support teacher</li> <li>Language issues makes it hard for some to help their child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kiwanas member helps with math in a particular classroom</li> <li>Local university provides tutoring and classroom assistance</li> </ul>