
JUST FOR THE KIDS

Report for Mission Viejo 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

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

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INTRODUCTION

The school studied for this report was Mission Viejo Elementary School located in Cherry Creek School District. The school district is in Aurora, Colorado. With approximately 694 students, Mission Viejo enrolls youngsters from seventeen countries and cultures. Within this diversity there are eleven native languages spoken. The staffing design offers a variety of opportunities for students of all abilities and talents: Gifted and Talented (GT), English Language Acquisition (ELA), Reading Recovery, art, music, physical education, Learning Enrichment for Achieving Proficiency (LEAP) and a commitment to maintaining low K-5 class sizes are fundamental features of the school.

The school is the longest running 4-track year-round school in the United States, and as such, incorporates learning experiences into a consistently managed, site-based operation with an emphasis on promoting achievement and success for all students. The school integrates district goals into its individual site planning activities and curriculum development. Currently 18.2 % of the students are eligible to participate in free and reduced lunch. Current demographics by ethnicity according to the 2003-2004 School Report Card are listed in the table below.

Table 1 Student population by Ethnicity

Student Ethnic Group	Percentage of School Population
Native American	1%
African American	13%
Asian American	5%
Hispanic American	11%
White	70%

The principal in her first year at the school supervises a teaching staff of 53 full and part time teachers including eight paraprofessionals. The school welcomed 12 new teachers to the staff in the last year.

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 student.

Individual school and classroom-level interviews were conducted for this study. Individuals who were interviewed for this study included a member of the Cherry Creek District Board of Education; the Assistant Superintendent of the Cherry Creek School District, the Coordinator of Literacy Curriculum, and the Director of Elementary Education for the Cherry Creek School District, and the principal of Mission Viejo Elementary School.

There were three focus group interviews including teachers, parents, and students. The nature of this study was the identification of a school's performance over time on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) versus their demographic peers. Therefore, certain criteria were used to determine those interviewed. The two teachers both had at least three years experience at the school while the four teachers who participated in the focus group had varied lengths of service. 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 seven student focus group participants were all fifth graders who had been at the school for at least three years.

COMMUNITY

Teachers appreciate the supportive community of parents, who perform a variety of activities to support the teachers, and strong business partners that provide support for grants and winning bond elections. One teacher said, "Our local businesses are an integral part of your school community". However, the emotional support the businesses provide to school are critical to its success. As one administrator put it, "It's not just the financial support businesses provide, of course that's important and we appreciate that very much, but they're out there advocating for our district all the time in their business capacities".

Caring Community

Students enjoy their relationship with their teachers and point to how teachers recognize their work with tokens of support such as the 'golden hat' that recognizes student achievement. Students also report that parents and teachers work together in acknowledging a student's work. Report cards, teacher parent conferences, progress reports, and newsletters are examples of specific activities that students find valuable and helpful to their learning.

Students appear to have a sense of attachment to their school and a commitment to each other's learning and progress. For example one student reported, "School is a nice place where everybody gets treated fairly, and teachers teach us a lot, and a nice environment".

One teacher pointed to the school-wide program called "Caring Community" which focuses on students as "being our children" instead of a view that those are your kids and these are my kids. Teachers suggest that the larger community surrounding Mission Viejo is this same way:



“It’s a friendly neighborhood, a great community, lots of children. It is a diverse community where learners or students coming in come in with a wide range of experiences in their background knowledge. A wide range of languages, wide range of academic abilities, as well as academic expectations at home. So we have a wide range of students here.”

DISTRICT

The school district’s structure is one of being supportive. Access to district leadership, communication, and a consistency of leadership are seen as major advantages and motivating factors for teachers and staff. The superintendent’s quarterly meetings called the “*superintendent’s forum*” is an example of the district and schools emphasis on open communication and an attempt to involve employees at various levels. The forum invites principals and teachers to participate in discussions on issues and challenges facing teachers and school administrators.

One teacher claimed that the superintendent is the “most responsive person I have ever met with.” If a person brings up that there’s a light bulb out on their stage, that next day that maintenance department is out there with halogen bulbs.” Teachers report multiple opportunities to participate in a variety of school and district level programs and committees. Teachers appreciate these opportunities as one teacher reported, “They make you feel very important as a teacher, and that you are a voice and a leader within the district as well.”

Changes

Among the most obvious and important changes to the school has been the increasing number of Kindergarten students who have not developed vocabulary and social skills necessary to read and write and do basic math. One teacher put it this way; “I think more and more of our students are coming to school without the skills that you would expect”, thus creating new challenges to teaching and student learning.

Recently the school has focused on CSAP testing with an emphasis on preparing students for testing. Teachers perceive this focus on CSAP as having both a positive and negative impact. One teacher said,

“You know, I think in some ways it helps us focus more on what we need to be working on with the kids. But then on the negative side, I think you end up leaving out things that are important to do with your kids, that you don’t feel like you really have the time.”

Most agree that their focus and emphasis on achievement and student growth remains a key priority that has not changed. Teachers report they want to make sure the school is a safe place for kids, for teachers, for parents, and the community.

Success

While Colorado measures success in terms of standards and national requirements, the school principal emphasizes that these measures do not reflect the whole story of the student or the school. One administrator provided this reflective comment,

“There is so much more that we need to be doing for our students than just making sure that they do well on these standardized tests. We want to make sure that they have the skills to be good citizens, that they understand what it means to be a good citizen, civic virtue, all of those kinds of things.”

The school stresses student exposure to the arts and their ability to express themselves in creative ways. The school recognizes achievement of both students and teachers through the rewarding of teddy bears. Students who contribute to themselves and others in ways that help build a caring community receive teddy bears.

CURRICULUM

The management of curriculum and its alignment to district and school is at the school level. The school implements a school wide curriculum to ensure consistent application and instruction at all grade levels. For example, all teachers use the Six-Trait Writing and the Writing Alive program for writing instruction; however, teachers have some flexibility to select different literature based on their classroom needs

The school accepts district guidelines and standards to serve as its platform for designing and implementing programs that best fit student needs and have a high likelihood for success. New teachers partner with colleagues to review and evaluate curriculum standards and best practices that are consistent with the schools goals. New teachers participate in the schools *Star Mentor Program* that assists new teachers to ensure they are using the appropriate curriculum and the instructional alignment of standards.

Everyday Math, Balanced Literacy program in Guided Reading, Writing Alive, and Six Trait Writing are programs provide good quality instruction for meeting the needs of students. However, reading curriculum remains individualized and customized by the teacher. The school has recently implemented literacy blocks where teachers have a framework of 150 minutes for reading, writing, spelling, and vocabulary in an uninterrupted period. Teachers report they appreciate these literacy blocks because they afford them a way to gain a modicum of consistency in instruction that aids student progress.

ASSESSMENT

Teachers consider a variety of methods in their assessment of student skills and learning levels. Teachers may talk to parents to understand student and family needs. Students may meet with a testing team to determine the need for any further customized instruction. The

classroom teacher will use information gathered from tests and observations to build a plan for student learning. Formal assessments, such as QRI reading assessment, DRA, help identify performance issues over a long period. Primary grades may conduct a series of DRA tests throughout the year depending on the student's progress and her/his goals.

The Reading Recovery program is sixteen-week program providing one-on-one intensive reading instruction by a specialist. Teachers report that reading progress for these students has, "been really good, and they do constant monitoring with those kids throughout the sixteen weeks that they have them, and then they do testing at the end." students who make progress move into the group reading program scheduled for a half-hour of reading every day.

INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF

Teachers report that the biggest aspect of their job is focusing on every child, every day. Further, teachers report they see their job is not teaching to just 25 kids and hope somebody gets it, rather they purport that, "You have to make sure students are getting it. If you have to do small groups or do other things for them to get it, then you have to do that".

Collaboration

Teachers see the increased communication from grade level to grade level rather than just within a grade as a very important aspect of collaboration. Most also agree that between-grade levels collaboration is important and would like more of time for this activity. The benefits of knowing the expectations for students and teachers at all grade levels provide a broad picture of the school and student needs. Time is set aside for teachers to meet informally in vertical teams or grade level teams once a week. Grade level teams meet with the assistant principal and or principal once a month. Formal vertical teaming occurs at staff meetings.

Good Teaching

Good teaching is both conducting both formal and informal assessments of student and ratings of teacher performance. Differentiated instruction helps ensure teachers are doing enough for all their students. One teacher reported, "I would say that we're probably pretty much all on the same general page in terms of philosophy and what is important to do." Another teacher added that, "I think everybody believes in differentiating instruction, meeting kids' needs where they're at, so yeah, I would say in general we're probably of the same general philosophy."

Teachers participate in the recruitment and selection of new teachers. As one teacher claimed, "We play a large role in recruitment." The principal asks teachers what they are looking for in a teacher. The principal then screens candidates to see if they meet those critical characteristics. Successful candidates then meet with a team of teachers who screen

for particular characteristics and skills that fit the school's culture and provide their feedback to the principal.

Evaluation

Teachers conduct annual goal setting sessions at the start of the year. Goals are set that incorporate district goals and personal objectives. The principal observes the teachers behavior and attitudes in meetings, team participation, and classroom techniques. In addition to goal setting and teacher-principal interviews, the school utilizes the Charlotte Daniels system of evaluating teachers. Teachers like the Charlotte Daniels program because, as one teacher put it, "It's based on what the teacher and the kids are doing." Teachers like this process as it focuses on key issues like student success, and what and how are they learning from their instruction?

Professional Development

The school's plan for professional development based upon the needs of the students. The district supports the approach that staff development should be site specific and designed to meet the needs of individual teachers and their students. As one teacher put it, "A lot of our staff development is grass roots, teacher to principal."

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Some described parental involvement as 'mixed'. Others state that 90% of the parents are supportive and appreciative of the schooling their kids are getting. The Parent Teacher Community Organization (PTCO) meets monthly. Teachers appreciate the work PTCO does in recognizing staff and appreciating staff pointing to the variety of grants and other fundraising activities that support teacher efforts. Grants broadcasted to teachers who in turn apply for the funds. As one teacher said, "I couldn't put a dollar amount on the funds, but I think they are a very dedicated group of people and they do a lot of good for the schools."

CSAP

CSAP is a valuable and important tool for both schooling and education. Most believe CSAP delivers a degree of accountability to a standards based education. CSAP results attribute to a focus on using data to drive staff development and instruction. The schools success is primarily as the result of a concerted district-wide effort to gather, interpret, and share data with site principals, who, along with staff, develop both professional development and curriculum.

Teachers communicate with parents regarding the value and use of CSAP. Parents believe that teachers, when given the data and tools, want a collaborative effort that improves student learning and scores. As one parent stated, "The positive thing about CSAP

is that it reinforces teachers wanting to learn more of what the kids need, and it's helpful in promoting staff development.”

One teacher stated that, “CSAP also focuses you in a certain direction and I think that's been good for us. I think it gets us more on the same page”. Students point to teacher preparation and the discipline of taking the test as positives. For example, a number of students reported, “I like CSAP because it's kind of a quiet time where everything is quiet and you can hear yourself think”. Another student indicated that they enjoy the challenge of the test and like how teachers treat them with respect.

Students see CSAP as important because it is a review of what they have learned. Other students see CSAP as “bad” because the results segregate students into different learning groups like Enroll and Challenge. Administrators and teachers attribute their success in CSAP to staff focus, and professional development, and the support systems they have in place. The Colorado Student Assessment Program is important to schooling and education for the process of establishing and measuring state standards. As one teacher stated, “I think CSAP has been extremely important in maintaining high expectations in a changing community...and I also think we use it as an evaluative tool.”

While teachers agree that CSAP is an important tool, they also report that CSAP creates a perception that public schools are doing, “a lousy job”. Teachers generally believe that the focus on CSAP as a major evaluative tool may overshadow the individual student and school growth.

SUMMARY

The school has created a number of assessment tools that help measure and monitor student growth. The school's educational programs focus on building a society of life-long learners through an atmosphere that focuses on student achievement. The school actively promotes interactive involvement with teachers, parents, and administrators.

The school is focused on its goal to ensure that all students become academically proficient, recognizing that not all children learn in the same way. By tracking scores, the school believes they can better identify students who may need extra help and work toward their continued growth. The site based management philosophy in the district is credited to the school's continued student success and teachers' professional development