

**U.S. Department of Education**  
**2017 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program**

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[X] Public or [ ] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [ ] Title I [ ] Charter [ ] Magnet [ ] Choice

Name of Principal Mr. Kent Cruger

(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name Bear Creek Elementary School

(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 2500 Table Mesa Drive

(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Boulder State CO Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 80305-5746

County Boulder County

Telephone (720) 561-5520 Fax \_\_\_\_\_

Web site/URL http://bce.bvsd.org E-mail kent.cruger@bvsd.org

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent\*Dr. Cynthia Stevenson E-mail cindy.stevenson@bvsd.org  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Boulder Valley School District No. Re2 Tel. (720) 561-5487

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Superintendent's Signature)

Name of School Board  
President/Chairperson Mr. Sam Fuqua  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature)

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

*\*Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, write N/A in the space.*

## **Part I – Eligibility Certification**

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The signatures on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school's eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. The school configuration includes one or more of grades K-12. (Schools on the same campus with one principal, even a K-12 school, must apply as an entire school.)
2. All nominated public schools must meet the state's performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group and all subgroups, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
3. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2017 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
4. If the school includes grades 7 or higher, the school must have foreign language as a part of its curriculum.
5. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2011 and each tested grade must have been part of the school for the past three years.
6. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, or 2016.
7. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. The U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school's application and/or rescind a school's award if irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state.
8. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as "persistently dangerous" within the last two years.
9. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
10. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
11. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution's equal protection clause.
12. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

## PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

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Data should be provided for the most recent school year (2016-2017) unless otherwise stated.

### DISTRICT

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 33 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 10 Middle/Junior high schools
  - 7 High schools
  - 1 K-12 schools
- 51 TOTAL

### SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located:
- Urban or large central city
  - Suburban with characteristics typical of an urban area
  - Suburban
  - Small city or town in a rural area
  - Rural
3. Number of students as of October 1, 2016 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent in applying school:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	0	0	0
K	30	30	60
1	35	31	66
2	35	31	66
3	43	46	89
4	37	33	70
5	35	52	87
6	0	0	0
7	0	0	0
8	0	0	0
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
<b>Total Students</b>	215	223	438

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school:
- 0 % American Indian or Alaska Native
  - 7 % Asian
  - 1 % Black or African American
  - 6 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 77 % White
  - 9 % Two or more races
  - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2015 – 2016 school year: 2%

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

Steps For Determining Mobility Rate	Answer
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2015 until the end of the 2015-2016 school year	4
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2015 until the end of the 2015-2016 school year	7
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	11
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2015	441
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.025
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	2

6. English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 3 %  
11 Total number ELL

Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):  
Spanish, Chinese, French, Swedish

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 4 %  
Total number students who qualify: 16

8. Students receiving special education services: 5 %  
22 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- 1 Autism
- 0 Deafness
- 0 Deaf-Blindness
- 2 Emotional Disturbance
- 0 Hearing Impairment
- 0 Mental Retardation
- 0 Multiple Disabilities
- 0 Orthopedic Impairment
- 9 Other Health Impaired
- 5 Specific Learning Disability
- 9 Speech or Language Impairment
- 0 Traumatic Brain Injury
- 0 Visual Impairment Including Blindness
- 1 Developmentally Delayed

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 13
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below:

	<b>Number of Staff</b>
Administrators	1
Classroom teachers including those teaching high school specialty subjects	17
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading, math, science, special education, enrichment, technology, art, music, physical education, etc.	5
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a licensed professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	3
Student support personnel e.g., guidance counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	1

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 25:1
12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

<b>Required Information</b>	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014	2012-2013	2011-2012
Daily student attendance	96%	96%	96%	96%	96%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**  
Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2016.

<b>Post-Secondary Status</b>	
Graduating class size	0
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	0%
Enrolled in a community college	0%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	0%
Joined the military or other public service	0%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.  
Yes  No  
If yes, select the year in which your school received the award. 2006
15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school's mission or vision statement.
16. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

## **PART III – SUMMARY**

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Twenty years ago, Bear Creek Elementary was a dying school. Not because of the quality of the staff or the love of the community for the school, but simply because the neighborhood was getting older and there were not enough students living within its boundaries to fill the school. Enrollment had dwindled to under 300 students, and there was great concern in the Bear Creek community because the Boulder Valley School Board was considering closing (and eventually did) a number of schools of similar size.

Because the school was the heart of the community, staff and parents rallied together to re-energize interest in the school by reinventing itself as a Math, Music and Science Focus School. This focus attracted parents from outside the boundaries through open enrollment who cared deeply about the quality of their child's education and were willing to invest their time and talent to help the school thrive through events such as math nights, science presentations, and interdisciplinary music programs. It also placed the school ahead of the curve in a commitment to STEM-based and cross-discipline teaching. The school enrollment grew.

Fast forward to 2017 and the school is alive and thriving. Bear Creek is now one of the largest elementary schools in the district. Families have moved back into the neighborhood, due in large part to the success of the school. There is no more space for open enrollment. Bear Creek now serves its local south Boulder neighborhood population of 450 students in kindergarten through fifth grades.

Although the school looks very different than it did 20 years ago, the success and commitment of the staff at Bear Creek has never wavered. The Math, Music and Science focus has broadened to an intense commitment to all facets of learning and the learner, but there are some common threads that have withstood the test of time that serve to connect a strong past to our optimism for an even stronger future.

Bear Creek is a place that fosters belonging. Hundreds of students show up at school early in the morning and stay after classes to participate in fitness, music, art, and engineering clubs. Parents fill in gaps as regular reading, writing and math mentors. They run our community garden program and carnival club, and they fundraise to support technology and additional paraeducator support. Teaching candidates and guest experts from area and university programs become part of the fabric, too.

We believe that one of the essential strategies that has led to the long-term success of the school is staff's dedication to collaboration. We each bring strengths to our job, but we are better when we work together. The open space environment, with only partial walls separating classrooms, lends itself to a collaborative culture. Teachers are in each others' classrooms frequently and on-the-fly.

Students see the model of a collaborative workplace and are the beneficiaries of our collective effort. Intervention plans are only the beginning when we work to serve learners. Implementation often involves close interaction with our principal, office staff, special education teacher, counselor and teaching teams. Our principal demonstrates the commitment to students every day in every way, from spending lunch and recess with them to problem-solving in hallways. Students' needs are addressed on the spot and in a culture of respect and caring.

The Bear Creek teaching staff embraces positivity and professionalism. They engage in deep conversations and write action plans around school-level improvement goals that they identify as important. They are willing to try new ideas and evaluate their effectiveness. Their positive attitudes have resulted in early and widespread adoption of innovative learning approaches, which are enthusiastically embraced by students and prepare them as they become 21st century graduates.

Over the past ten years, the teaching staff at Bear Creek has become more dynamic and diverse, and this has helped us better reach all learners. We have been open to hiring new teachers and supporting them to the same level of success and parent satisfaction as that achieved by our most veteran teachers. We also work closely with teacher education programs in the area, including one that places several teaching candidates in our classrooms for a full year. These relationships keep teachers in touch with educational trends and the minds of the next generation of teachers.

Receiving the Blue Ribbon School Award in 2006 was an important acknowledgement of the commitment and results that Bear Creek achieved and has added to the trust from the community. When we received this award, we were still a small school working out of a squat, dark building with a double metal door entrance and a cramped little office. A few years later a district bond for remodeling schools passed. The Blue Ribbon Award and respect we had gained over the years emboldened our architectural committee to redesign our old school into a dynamic, new facility. Our building now has an expanded gym, flexible spaces modeled after business workplaces of the 21st Century, and a more functional cafeteria -- all with windows to the mountains. Perhaps most appreciated of all is the entrance to our school, a long, wide, sunlit walkway that transports students and families to the welcoming world of our school.

## **PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

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### **1. Core Curriculum:**

The Boulder Valley School District Curriculum Essentials Document outlines for our school a comprehensive scope and sequence in all content areas that serves as the framework for the core content we teach. In addition to being a very systematic and easily accessible curriculum, teachers find it to be a curriculum that engages our students and challenges them at a high level. The curriculum has been continually updated and re-examined by a wide variety of stakeholders in order to maintain its relevancy and the most current thinking on best instructional practices.

In the area of math, our primary resource is Math Expressions, a nationally recognized K–6 elementary math curriculum that aligns with common core standards. Math Expressions emphasizes deep understanding through real-world problems, modeling, Math Talks, and exploration in order to build ideas that make sense to students. We know that “the person doing the talking is doing the learning” and this program encourages a great deal of student talk in order to maximize learning.

Teachers supplement this resource with lessons from other proven resources, as well as by using technology such as Front Row math and Khan Academy which is interesting to students not just in the bells and whistles it provides, but also because it can be adapted and differentiated for the level that matches the student. Teachers in the primary grades are purposeful about building strong foundational mathematical proficiencies and consistently incorporate hands-on manipulatives to develop underlying concepts.

In the past couple years a teacher-leader we have named our “Mathemagician” has been critical in leading our staff to create a plan of differentiation for our advanced math learners across all grade levels so our top students are not bored. This is a typical model our district uses to support teacher learning -- teachers who are passionate about subjects learn from our district experts and then serve as the teacher-leader within our school to offer in-house, job-embedded PD.

In language arts we are again fortunate to be guided by a very strong district outline of scope, sequence and best practices. Similar to math, standards are outlined in the Curriculum Essentials Document and best practices for instruction are included in the BVSD Literacy Instructional Framework. The basic premise of our reading and writing program is to start by assessing what students know and are able to do using assessments such as the Benchmark Assessment System, Reading Plus and the iReady assessment. The data guides teachers to teach to the needs of each child. Many teachers use a Daily Cafe model as a structure to organize the literacy block and to meet with individual students.

This all sounds well-intentioned and thoughtfully structured, but the bottom line is that our goal is to get students to love to read and write. In order to achieve that goal, teachers constantly share with students their love of reading and exciting literature. And, they are creating writers by showing students the power of the written word. Teachers devise writing projects that are authentic, and enlist parents as writing mentors -- especially for expository writing. Imagine the impact when a student’s carefully researched and crafted essays on later bedtimes, lower voting ages, and banning the r-word receive an individual adult mentor’s help to turn them into editorials, letters, PowerPoints, and Teddy Bear Talks.

Science is hands-on, fostered by the district FOSS kits and extended by the teachers and parents at school. In just a few weeks our Bear Creek students will choose seeds to plant in our beautiful Bear Creek garden that they will study, cultivate, and harvest in the fall. Some of the plants will not survive. This is not seen as a failure but a natural learning opportunity when an inquiry-based approach is used. This year all teachers read Stone Soup, and then enough stone soup was made with vegetables from the garden so all 450 students were able to get a taste.

We are fortunate to be surrounded by a plethora of science resources literally right outside our classrooms as we are walking distance from the National Institute of Science and Technology, National Center for Atmospheric Research, and hiking trails that skirt down to riverbeds and climb up to uncover different

biomes. These hands-on learning experiences culminate in a 3-day overnight trip for our fifth graders to the Calwood Outdoor Learning Center.

Social Studies follows the district progression of American History content, brought to life through simulations and drama at Bear Creek. In fifth grade, for example, student teams research Native American and Explorer motivations and movements in preparation for a Grand Encounter that they script and perform in costume with props they have made themselves, such as Kachina dolls, astrolabes, and longhouses. For the U.S. Constitution and Government unit, they conduct a Bear Creek Congress and write authentic bills, challenged by our president (principal) and followed up by a visit by a Supreme Court justice (parent/attorney). In second grade, students start the year by building their own classroom community and culminate the year by using the collaboration skills they developed as part of our social emotional learning to build a community out of milk cartons to represent all the components of the larger community in which they live.

Creative teachers and curious students are a powerful combination at Bear Creek. Across the grades, teachers provide experiences for students to exercise choice in topics and authentic products in projects. Examples include a lounge pants construction and runway show in fifth grade math blocks, watershed tracking projects in fourth grade, field trips to Colorado History sites in third grade, community family field trips in second grade, lunchtime poetry and environmental puppet shows in first grade, and nature hikes and open-ended studies in kindergarten.

## **2. Other Curriculum Areas:**

The Bear Creek community strongly believes in developing the whole child, and that subjects such as art, music and physical education (PE) are not “add-ons” but essential components of our school day that energize children and often are the reason they spring out of bed in the morning to come to school.

As one parent relates, “I have a hard time getting my child out of bed in the morning to get ready and get to school by 8:30, but on intramural sports days it’s different. I was hesitant to let my child sign up, because intramurals start at 7:45am. But on the first morning of intramurals, I came to wake my child up, and he was already in the kitchen. He had made himself breakfast -- a first! And it’s been the same every Thursday and Friday morning since.”

Our students attend one specialist class every day for 50 minutes, rotating through art, music, and PE. Bear Creek found a creative way to add minutes to the art program to make it equal to the minutes for music and PE. In addition, we changed our schedule three years ago so every grade level has a common specials time every day. This is a tougher schedule for the specialists because they teach a class from every grade level, every day. But it provides common collaboration time for our classroom teachers every day. This unique schedule was so successful, it will be implemented in all Boulder Valley Elementary Schools beginning next year.

A common theme of our specialists is that they meet regularly with classroom teachers and connect their program to the content learning students are doing in the classroom. When the students are learning about space in their 4th grade science class, they may be singing and creating body percussion to songs about the elements of the solar system. When our 2nd graders are learning about insects, they are creating beautiful and anatomically accurate three dimensional bugs in their art class and composing “bug sound” pieces in music. As the PE teacher creates obstacle challenges for students to solve through teamwork, he often sets the challenge in the context of a book the students are reading.

In PE, there is a focus on building active and lifelong healthy habits. Boulder is an incredibly active community, and Bear Creek students’ level of fitness is equally impressive. In the past several years, our staff, and particularly our PE teacher, has learned about the positive impact of exercise on learning. So the PE teacher implemented opportunities before school for exercise. All students are invited to Jump Rope Club one day a week, and our 3rd-5th graders have the opportunity to attend intramural sports two mornings a week. Older students volunteer in the gym and redeem “gym rat” prizes they earn through a positive behavior incentive program.

In music class, students engrossed in very active learning, with movement an integral part of every class. In addition, the music teacher focuses on students' creativity. Instead of presenting to students "how things are done," students are constantly creating their own songs, dances, and movement to go along with music. The culmination of units is often expressed in a musical performance for the community, which gives students the opportunity to feel the excitement of being on stage and to share their learning. Like the PE teacher, the music teacher offers a before-school drumming club, a chance to be in the choir in the fall, and a musical performance in the spring. Fifth graders have an additional two days a week to study a musical instrument.

The beautiful art that adorns the hallways of Bear Creek is a testament to the work of the art teacher who believes in the expressive abilities that live within each child. Students create art that tells stories (stop-motion animation with clay figures they have created), that takes a stand (Pinwheels for Peace project), that are integrated with other subject areas (interactive constellation project), and that unite the whole school (joy bots). A set-design club before school is offered as well.

Finally, our librarian sees her role in the 21st century as a media specialist. She has been critical in helping us understand Google tools and platforms and to effectively implement our one-to-one device program. As we brave this uncharted territory, she leads our school in safe digital citizenship. When you walk out of the library, you may notice her helping some 3rd graders create a green-screen reader's theater reenactment of a Shakespeare play they just finished reading.

### **3. Instructional Methods, Interventions, and Assessments:**

While Bear Creek teachers follow state and district guidelines about what to teach, over time we have held steady in the belief that teaching is a craft. Every teacher brings unique strengths and ways of reaching the students in their classroom. This diversity of teaching style brings excitement and newness to each new teacher the student experiences. The commonality that binds Bear Creek teachers is the belief that every child can succeed and the personal responsibility we each take to ensure this will happen.

We are also guided in our instructional techniques and practices by our understanding of the developmental levels, interests and abilities of our students. Our students tell us what to do by how they react and engage with us. We know that they need to move, so we have brain breaks, have never decreased the amount of recess for students, and have bought alternative seating options such as stand up desks. We know that they are driven by social interactions, so teacher talk is limited. Instead, students work on collaborative tasks which develop their oracy as well as their social skills. We know students are more motivated when they have choice in their learning, so we began teaching students how to do passion projects and have seen tremendous growth in engagement, collaboration, problem solving, critical thinking, and student responsibility for their own learning.

There are processes in place that help structure our systems of support. We are guided by a Multi-tiered System of Support that begins with quality universal instruction for all students. Most of our students make significant progress with Tier One support, but systems are in place to catch students who are not making adequate progress.

The first step is to regularly assess student achievement and student growth. Teachers use formative and summative assessments created within our school, chapter tests from textbooks, common district assessments, norm referenced tests such as the Benchmark Assessment System, iReady and AimsWeb, and state testing results which include PARCC and CMAS. In addition to academic assessments, our school psychologist supports us with tools we can use to ascertain students social-emotional health and growth.

The principal, special education teacher, specialist teachers and other interventionists meet on a rotating basis with classroom teachers so that every six weeks we check in about students who are not making significant progress. At these grade level intervention meetings, we strategize interventions, accommodations and differentiation ideas to put in place immediately.

For some students we decide to take an additional step, and we schedule a Student Support Process (SSP) meeting. We invite parents to attend a meeting to contribute their insights and ideas. We spend more time

delving into the strengths and areas of concern for each child, and we make a specific intervention plan to implement for 6-8 weeks. With targeted interventions, many students make the progress needed to catch up. For those who don't, we may investigate additional supports through a 504 or a special education evaluation.

It is important to note that within this process we continue to look at students' strengths as a means to build them up and to balance their areas of struggle. We are also looking not only at the students who are struggling, but those who need additional challenges and differentiation at the top end of the spectrum. Although we are a high-achieving school, we are conscious of not settling for the status quo and are continuously looking at data in order to ascertain changes we should make. This year we reallocated school resources in order to focus attention on our advanced learners. An additional support staff member was hired who "pushed into" classrooms to differentiate for students who were ready for additional challenges. He also modeled STEM-based, problem-solving challenges that appealed to all students and encouraged creative thinking.

## PART V – SCHOOL SUPPORTS

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### 1. School Climate/Culture:

In the fall of 2012, 9News selected Bear Creek as one of five schools in Colorado to be featured on a segment about the most successful schools in the state. When the assigned reporter arrived at our school, he told us that in the next couple hours he would figure out the essential component that helped this school achieve such dramatic results. Imagine our surprise when he announced on national TV the next day that what made this school tick was that the staff loved to have fun.

It was quite unexpected and initially even a bit disappointing. We were hoping he would point out something a bit more profound, or something that included more educational-speak such as Bear Creek staff were “life-long learners” or “committed to differentiation.” Fun? That’s it?

But as we considered it a bit more, it made sense. The Bear Creek culture starts with staff that truly enjoys their jobs, are excited to come to work, approach students with joy and laughter, are amused by the daily happenings of our students, and are eager to have fun with our students every day. When staff are excited to come to school, it clearly rubs off on our students. There is no question that when the Bear Creek Staff decides to do an Ice Bucket Challenge on a day when it is pouring rain, or is willing to take the risk of performing a Lip Sync dance in front of 450 students, they are actually purposefully creating a positive school climate.

We are also thoughtful about using a strength-based approach modeled on the Positive Behavior System (PBS). We focus on catching kids doing the right thing rather than the wrong thing. The constant praising, building up, focusing on the positive, and recognizing that each student excels at something has enormous effect on individual student behavior and on overall school culture. We feel that 99.9% of the time, students are cooperative, respectful and engaged in learning, and this is where we focus our energy.

We seek to get know each child’s interests and passions, and incorporate those interests as we teach students. Whether students are completing passion projects modeled after the Google format of “20% Time,” writing about activities that are important in their lives, or being able to choose their own focus area to study as part of social studies unit, it all leads to greater student connection to their learning.

Finally, the same freedom for students to follow their passions is embraced by teachers and the principal. There is a culture of trust among staff, who encourage and support each other to try new strategies and techniques. At a recent staff meeting, a new Bear Creek teacher took the risk of leading a staff of many veterans in a discussion about gender stereotypes in literature. She finished by offering a selection of picture books teachers could read with their own class if they so chose. The fact that every teacher read one of the books within the next two weeks was a strong message of support to the new staff member for her risk-taking.

### 2. Engaging Families and Community:

At Bear Creek, we often think outside the box when it comes to developing partnerships with our families and with the community, because every family is different and feels varying levels of comfort with traditional ways of engaging in school. From Science Nights where we invite parents with expertise to join CU students in sharing their enthusiasm for hands-on science, to Lip Sync where parents work with small teams of students to create a short act for the show, we consistently include our parents and community.

While advances in technology have helped us reach out to more parents, face-to-face, personal connections remain the hallmark of connecting with our parent community. One of our most successful programs has been the implementation of an incentive-based Walk-to-School program that won the national John L. Oberstar Award for “The school in the country with the most outstanding achievement in establishing a Safe Routes to School program.” (2008). Our Walk-to-School program increased the percentage of students choosing a car-free commute to school from 25% to 70%. Elementary school parents typically walk to

school with their children, which translates to face-to-face connections with staff just about every day.

We have also embraced technology as a way to connect with parents. Two years ago our PTO created a Facebook page that nearly 75% of the parent community has accessed. It is used to highlight activities, happenings, and celebrations of the school. The principal sends frequent communications through distribution lists. These communications are not just informational, but include requests for feedback and insights from parents. A Bear Creek parent created Help-at-School, an online program that makes it very easy to see and sign up for volunteer opportunities at the school.

Data on homework in elementary schools indicates it can cause rifts between the school and home. A non-differentiated, repetitive “homework packet” can become a battle between parents and children rather than an effective practice tool and a positive connection to the school. Therefore, this year, our entire school embraced a new philosophy on homework. Homework is limited to specific tasks that are targeted to a student’s needs. Students are still encouraged to read each night, but now have additional time to pursue their own passions and interests. Students will sometimes now (voluntarily) create projects about things they learned at home, and bring them to school to share with their teacher and classmates. Additionally, the principal creates monthly “Unhomework” challenges that are designed to get students out into the community and are shared via social media.

To support extracurricular learning, teachers provide a wide range of clubs before and after school including Spotlights (singing), School Play, Set Design, Intramurals, Jump Rope, Yearbook, Student Council, Lego Robotics, Math team, and Drumming. As students get to know other students outside of their classroom, our community grows stronger and more integrated.

### **3. Professional Development:**

Recent professional development in the area of technology demonstrates the robust and exciting way professional development typically happens at Bear Creek from the ground up and feeds our passion as lifelong learners.

There was a time a few years ago when Bear Creek was at the bottom of the heap when it came to effective use of technology by our students. How did we move beyond that? Our first step when considering a focus for professional development is to assess the potential benefits for our students. As a group of Bear Creek teachers built their own background knowledge around technology use in education, they were able to provide the rest of the staff with information that showed significant benefits of effective technology use by students: learning could be better differentiated, more engaging for students, flexible, better related to their interests, and more authentic by connecting students to worlds far beyond our neighborhood. These teachers worked collaboratively with other Bear Creek staff members who were early adopters of technology to offer a course to their colleagues. Rather than have to go outside of the school to get PD that staff were unsure would relate to them, teachers jumped at the chance to learn from colleagues who they knew understood their needs and the needs of their students.

As teachers learned new ideas, they began to take risks implementing projects in which technology played a large part in enhancing student learning. As they did, they received ongoing support from their colleagues. Our open space school design encourages teachers to see, hear and be in each other’s classrooms and support each other in the moment and pushes our staff to reach an exceptionally high bar for performance. Honestly, when teachers see a “cool activity” happening next door, their first instinct is to jump on the band-wagon and want to try it as well! Our common planning time allows for frequent debriefing and support for teachers who are just starting to try new techniques.

Finally, as teachers started helping students use technology more frequently and more effectively, the parent community saw this and supported our efforts through a coordinated donation drive that provided additional technology tools, apps, and professional development. Today, Bear Creek is considered on the cutting edge of effective technology use in our district, being the first elementary school to have a device for every student in 1st-5th grade. The devices are used for tasks ranging from daily handwriting practice

and monitoring reading comprehension to researching Google-proof questions that our students asked Kjell Lindgren via NASA video-link as he orbited the Earth in the ISS.

#### **4. School Leadership:**

In our efforts to create the next generation of leaders, it makes sense to us to first recognize the role students play in leading the school. We thoughtfully and purposefully provide opportunities for our students, in ways big and small, to gain experience in leadership roles. Teachers frequently turn to their students to lead the learning, to run a discussion group, or to explain a challenging concept to the whole class.

And, while most elementary schools may have a Student Council, Bear Creek gives these leaders the freedom to truly pursue their own ideas and to have ownership of their focus. For example, this winter Student Council decided to organize a food drive for the Emergency Family Assistance Organization. The Student Council wanted us all to gain compassion and to understand the necessity of this drive. So, twenty-five copies of *Crenshaw*, a children's chapter book about the struggles of a homeless family, were bought and circulated through the community as community-read book. In the spring as students were deliberating how to help students who were feeling left out at recess, the Student Council decided to raise money to buy a Buddy Bench for the playground.

We also give students leadership roles in whole school music productions, as captains in intramural sports, and through open communications with the school staff about changes they want to see at the school. The school's Comment Box is frequently used by students, and the principal reads student insights over the intercom in the morning. Sometimes the student suggestions are immediately incorporated into a change. For example, when a student argued with several well-written paragraphs that we should allow skateboarding to school, we changed our policy to allow it.

Parents take on a variety of leadership roles at school through the PTO, our School Accountability Committee, and by coaching student groups such as the Carnival Committee and by supporting a variety of school initiatives such as the construction and maintenance of the learning garden. As big school issues come up, such as the remodel of the school or as we are adding an autism program to the school, parents are invited to discussion groups to solicit their input and wisdom.

The principal's philosophy with teachers is one of shared decision-making as he recognizes that for every topic we tackle, there is always someone with more expertise than him, that best ideas often come from open brainstorming, and that ultimate buy-in needs to come from the teachers as they shoulder the biggest burden of carrying out school initiatives. This philosophy has created an environment where every teacher takes on leadership roles within the school. Teachers take the lead on professional development, curricular changes, budget decisions, and areas of focus as a school.

## **Part VI – STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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When someone asks us how Bear Creek has achieved such high academic success over such a long period of time, we respond that we begin with supporting students' social emotional needs. By social emotional needs, we are not speaking about a "fuzzy, feel-good" quality where children are simply happy in school. Instead, we are purposefully, systematically and thoroughly helping students strategize how to make friends, manage their emotions, advocate for themselves, and understand how to prepare themselves in the best possible way to learn every day.

We focus a great deal of time and energy on the social emotional growth of our students because we know that every minute of effort in this direction yields academic results that are tenfold what we would normally achieve without these efforts. Over time, we have used a variety of resources to help us meet this need. Currently one of our main resources is the Second Step curriculum, which we use at all grade levels so we can have consistent language and strategies to support our students' growth.

Another belief among our staff that drives our practice is that we set the bar high for ourselves. Educators frequently talk about high expectations for their students, which is a good aspiration, but we begin with the core belief that we need to have high expectations of ourselves and of each other. Anyone, even the worst teacher or school, can expect a lot of students, but those expectations will only flourish if nurtured by a teacher and school that works hard, with tenacity, and is driven by purpose and hope. It is common practice to strive for "a year's growth in a year's time" for students. This drove us to ask ourselves, is each of us making a year's growth every year? This question serves as a challenge that motivates us to improve every year.

Finally, we have embraced a Growth Mindset -- the belief that the capacity of the brain is not fixed, but like a muscle can get stronger and can grow through hard work and practice. This drives our work because we truly believe in the possibility that any student can achieve if we provide them meaningful instruction. Growth mindset advocate Carol Dweck advises educators to replace "can't do" with her favorite two words, "not yet." Whenever a student is struggling at Bear Creek with a task, it doesn't mean they have failed, just that they have not yet mastered it.

With this in mind, we humbly conclude that we have "not yet" gotten 100% students to achieve 100% of the time. Not yet. But please check back in with us in another 10 years. We know at that point we will be even closer.