

U.S. Department of Education
2019 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

[X] Public or [] Non-public

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

Name of Principal Mr. Ray D Helmuth

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

Official School Name Van Buren Elementary School

(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 225 S Shaw Street

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

Plainfield IN 46168-1598
City State Zip Code+4 (9 digits total)

County Hendricks County

Telephone (317) 839-2575

Fax (317) 838-3993

Web site/URL

<https://www.plainfield.k12.in.us/o/van-buren-elementary-school>

E-mail rhelmuth@plainfield.k12.in.us

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*Mr. Scott Olinger

(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other) E-mail solinger@plainfield.k12.in.us

District Name Plainfield Community School Corporation Tel. (317) 839-2578

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. Scott Flood

(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

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. 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, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2019 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.
3. 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.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2013 and each tested grade must have been part of the school for the past three years.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, or 2018.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. 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

Data should be provided for the most recent school year (2018-2019) unless otherwise stated.

DISTRICT

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 4 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 1 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 1 High schools
 - 0 K-12 schools
- 6 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
 - Rural or small city/town
3. Number of students as of October 1, 2018 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent in applying school:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	0	0	0
K	43	48	91
1	46	43	89
2	47	58	105
3	47	42	89
4	41	50	91
5	37	40	77
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
Total Students	261	281	542

*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 0 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 2 % Asian
 - 2 % Black or African American
 - 4 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 89 % White
 - 3 % 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 2017 – 2018 school year: 9%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain.

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, 2017 until the end of the 2017-2018 school year	30
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2017 until the end of the 2017-2018 school year	21
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	51
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2017	541
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.09
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	9

6. English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 1%
5 Total number ELL

Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):

Spanish, Punjabi, Mandarin

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 32%
Total number students who qualify: 175

8. Students receiving special education services: 15 %
80 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.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>2</u> Autism | <u>0</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>2</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>12</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay | <u>22</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>3</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>36</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>1</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>2</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 8
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below:

	Number of Staff
Administrators	2
Classroom teachers including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	24
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher, etc.	5
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	11
Student support personnel e.g., school 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 23:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

Required Information	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014
Daily student attendance	97%	97%	97%	97%	97%
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 2018.

Post-Secondary Status	
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.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school's mission or vision statement.

Van Buren Elementary School's mission statement is, "Bringing Joy to Learning."

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

Since its doors opened in 1956, Van Buren Elementary has been a student-centered school through and through. Located in the original center of this once-sleepy town, the school drew many of its students from surrounding neighborhoods which consisted of older historic homes and newer starter homes. Today, Plainfield has transformed into a vibrant, growing suburb of Indianapolis.

As the town grew, elementary school boundaries changed to accommodate the sprawling subdivisions. School boundaries now include several motels and hotels that serve as short-term, transitional housing for families in times of crisis. While most Plainfield students no longer walk to school, many families still live within a few blocks. More importantly, it still feels like a neighborhood school, with children on the playground and families shooting hoops and playing soccer in the evenings. And it continues to welcome multiple generations of families to school events. Many grandparents love visiting their former classrooms, sharing stories that begin with “I remember when ...”

In August 2012, Van Buren’s leaders introduced a new focus: creating a school where all students could succeed and instruction was highly engaging, resulting in increased joy for both students and staff. This transformation took shape via four key initiatives. First, traditional honor roll recognition was replaced with the TEAM award, that acknowledges students for effort that exceeds the norms. The TEAM (Try challenging work. Even when your work gets hard, don’t give up. Always care for and respect others. Make Van Buren a better place) award is accessible by any student with a good work ethic, regardless of academic ability. Second, the school implemented one all-encompassing character education program, based on the children’s book by Carol McCloud, “Have You Filled A Bucket Today?” By encouraging students to build up one another through kind actions and words, they learn that these behaviors also build their own self-esteem. We reinforce this concept with posters and graphics throughout the building, and by using a common bucket-filler language. Students are expected to be bucket fillers outside of the classroom as well. During recess, for example, teachers promote non-competitive games that emphasize the bucket filler traits of good sportsmanship, cooperation and teamwork. Third, staff became more intentional about bringing joy to learning, challenging themselves to be more creative in their instruction. One example of what has evolved is that teachers plan highly engaging, often unannounced activities most weeks. This creates anticipation among students while encouraging teachers to seek new, more interesting ways to deliver lessons. Finally, we shifted our focus from performance to growth. Together, teachers read Carol Dweck’s book, “Mindset,” and began a journey to provide students the tools to become confident learners. We teach our students two important truths in education: errors are inherent in learning and an open mindset is conducive to intellectual growth.

The results? Student and parent satisfaction increased based on surveys, disciplinary incidents dropped dramatically (most notably acts of aggression), and attendance improved among students with chronic absenteeism. Student academic performance began to improve, leading to an uninterrupted streak of “A” ratings and Four-Star awards by the Indiana Department of Education. And although we cannot concretely attribute this to our new initiatives, our Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) membership and parent classroom volunteers grew significantly during the same time period, suggesting increased support of our school. While our staff is proud of the recognition that comes with good ratings, there is far greater joy in witnessing the tremendous growth our students achieve, especially the students surpassing our benchmarks for the first time.

Growing the whole student through emotional, academic, physical, and intellectual development is a school-wide priority. This was evident six years ago when several teachers created an after-school club for students who were homeless or living in transitional housing. The club drew volunteers from local churches, the public library, civic groups and local police and fire departments. Together, this eclectic group of adults provided care and nurturing for these children in crisis, and served as a valuable motivator. The club met two days a week, and participants rarely missed school on those days. Likewise, discipline incidents among these students dropped and important social skills improved. Lastly, parents reported that conflicts at home began to decrease as students practiced the skills they learned at school. The club continues today under off-campus leadership and with a new name: The Just Be Kind Club. It has expanded its mission to serve both

underprivileged children and others in our community with greater needs than their own.

A walk through our school reveals joy in many shapes and sizes. Laughter. Accomplishment. Challenges met. Friendships. We know that we have succeeded as educators when our students go home each day and share memorable experiences with their parents. After all, it is our belief that, “a school day not remembered is a lost opportunity.”

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum:

1a. Reading/English language arts:

Van Buren Elementary educators believe that literacy competency is the cornerstone of all future learning. This is why the lion's share of the instructional time is spent developing literacy skills and fostering a love of literacy. While our standards-based curriculum provides students with practice in phonics, fluency, and comprehension, it is our teachers' passion for reading that encourages even the most reluctant readers to pick up a book. Daily student reading time and exposure to a wide range of genres is our primary approach to expanding the students' core vocabulary.

Most literacy instruction happens in small groups. Students rotate through stations focused on academic standards and growth areas identified through Renaissance STAR assessments. Teachers supplement instruction with high interest, leveled books to increase engagement. Guided Reading strategies and Pearson's My Sidewalks resources are used with small groups to teach and assess reading skills. Primary grade interventionists also use Lindamood-Bell LIPs techniques to help struggling readers during a daily 30-minute intervention period. At the same time, the other students participate in enrichment activities such as literacy circles, Greek and Latin vocabulary studies, and reader's theater to promote their growth in reading. Writing instruction is delivered through a workshop approach that entails a teacher-guided mini lesson, self-guided writing practice, and teacher conferencing with students both individually and in small groups based on instructional needs. To increase engagement, students are encouraged to write about their passions and interests. The period wraps up with students sharing and celebrating their work.

A big challenge we face is finding ways to motivate students to read. Our staff help develop a love for reading and literature through classroom challenges, which include Accelerated Reader goals, school-wide Drop Everything And Read (DEAR) time, the annual Battle of the Books competition, and a very popular and well-attended after-school Reading Festival.

1b. Mathematics:

Math education at Van Buren is anchored by the Pearson Envision Math program which was adopted eight years ago, based on its rigor, embedded depth of knowledge activities, focus on problem-solving using multiple approaches, and spiral review of the academic standards our teachers know students need for future success in the workforce. Students master the math standards through daily hands-on problem solving and engaging instruction delivered to small groups as part of a rotation of varied learning stations. Smaller groups give teachers opportunity to differentiate, while math stations give students fact fluency practice and challenging problems to solve.

All students participate in 30 minutes of daily intervention or enrichment. Interventionists use Heads Up Math, Math Seeds, I Know It and Moby Max to work on students' skill deficiencies identified by the STAR assessments. Students ready for enrichment use the adaptive web-based Math Seeds and Moby Max programs to challenge themselves with more rigorous problems. Math high ability classes use the Envision Math curriculum. Students in grades K-3 access challenging enrichment activities, while fourth and fifth graders receive accelerated instruction, working through two years of math standards each school year.

A cornerstone of math learning at Van Buren is fact fluency. We work at this through a school-wide effort to help all students achieve multiplication fluency by mid-year in fourth grade. With multiplication facts under their belts, students are ready for the complex processing skills needed for abstract and quantitative reasoning and constructing viable math arguments.

Fourth and fifth grade students who love a challenge can participate in regional Math Bowl competitions each spring. These fun, challenging events help promote and sustain student interest in math.

We credit our rigorous curriculum, engaging instruction, solid fact fluency, effective intervention and enrichment opportunities for Van Buren's strong math scores on Indiana's academic assessments.

1c. Science:

At Van Buren, science is taught as a stand-alone subject as well as embedded in interdisciplinary units of study. Teachers use the Science Fusion curriculum as their anchor instructional resource. While it provides a scope and sequence for the science standards, experiential learning is the preferred method of delivery for students. To achieve this, students participate in science experiences within the classroom. Beyond that, students spend one half-day each month at our district's Imagination Lab, where the focus is on exploration, discovery and experiential learning. Many of the concepts they are exposed to there go well beyond the state's academic standards. Hands-on experiences include fourth and fifth grade students spending a day at local parks studying various ecosystems as well as first graders observing and studying chicken eggs hatching in their classroom.

In January 2019, teachers began revising curriculum maps to incorporate design thinking while integrating more Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) activities into curriculum. By August 2020, a significant part of the core curriculum will focus on solving real-world problems using design thinking. A second part of this initiative involves inviting adults from our community who work in STEM fields to talk with students about their chosen profession. We want to open our students' minds to possible STEM careers. We have already noticed an increased enthusiasm for STEM education among students and parents alike as a result of the Imagination Lab experiences. With the expansion of STEM and Design Thinking in our curriculum, we anticipate increased student creativity in the learning process and more interest in pursuing science careers.

1d. Social studies/history/civic learning and engagement

Plainfield, Indiana, home of Van Buren Elementary, has a long and rich history. Our school name is attributed to an incident in 1841 when the coach of President Martin Van Buren overturned under a large Elm tree during a trip through Plainfield. Going forth, the tree became known as the Van Buren Elm.

Students in third grade study the history of Plainfield and take a walking field trip through the community. They visit several key buildings and institutions, and learn about the foundation and development of their hometown. They also learn about pre-Plainfield history through an experiential visit to a nearby settlers homestead, Conner Prairie. A visit to the Indiana State Museum is one of the centerpieces for our fourth grade students as they focus on our state history. For fifth grade students, the pre-Revolutionary War era comes to life when re-enacted by their teachers over a two-week period. As a result, students come away with a vivid understanding of the causes that led to the war and the eventual foundation of our nation. Teachers supplement the social studies textbooks with engaging non-fiction books and a weekly reader that connects current events with the core curriculum.

While our teachers' goal is to teach local, state, and national history, they make certain that students understand the interconnection of the major historical events of their community and state with important events happening across the country and throughout the world. Student understanding of historical and current events helps make social studies more relevant, interesting and engaging.

1e. For secondary schools:

1f. For schools that offer preschool for three- and four-year old students:

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

2a. Art and Music

The Plainfield school community supports the arts by providing schools with the necessary staff, building infrastructure, and resources. As a result, students attend weekly classes in a variety of related arts areas. Art and music are taught by qualified teachers who strive to open students' minds to the world of visual art, music, dance, and drama. The teachers nurture a love of the arts through hands-on experiences in the classroom, studio, and stage. In the end, we hope to increase our students' confidence and encourage them to pursue studies and careers in the arts. Students in grades one, three and five participate in a yearly musical performance in front of a standing-room only crowd of adoring family. And, student artwork is proudly displayed throughout school hallways, and school families are invited to an annual art show that celebrates the work of all students.

2b. Physical Education

Our education philosophy is deeply rooted in the belief that students experience tremendous benefits from daily exercise. To accomplish this, we merged the weekly physical education class and daily recess into a longer daily 35-minute period consisting of three parts. Aerobic exercise at the start of the period, free-play on playground equipment and opportunity to participate in cooperative games. In the spring of 2019, a Ninja-style fitness course designed to increase upper-body strength and balance will be added to the existing playground and to the students' weekly routine.

2c. Computer Science

Plainfield Community School Corporation is a technology-rich district. At Van Buren, students use technology every day, and with each passing year the number of computer devices in the hands of students increases along with the frequency of technology integration into the core curriculum. This reality underscores the importance of educating students on the safe, appropriate use of technology while introducing them to computer science skills. Van Buren follows the district's technology curriculum map and incorporates recently-adopted state computer science standards. To accomplish this, students use a program called Learning.com along with direct instruction during computer science specials' class, which rotates with art, music and library. Van Buren also offers an after-school competitive robotics club for students in the intermediate grades, and a Lego robotics club for younger students. These activities further nurture their interest in computer science and technology.

2d. Imagination Lab

This year, the Plainfield district opened The Imagination Lab, a renovated space designed and furnished to provide hands-on, experiential STEM odysseys to enrich core classroom curriculum. The Imagination Lab provides collaborative work spaces, 3D printers, sound booths and green screen rooms, robots, an interactive, walk-through human heart, an outdoor learning garden, along with many other features. Following a four-week, repeating schedule, all Plainfield elementary students visit the lab for a 90-minute odyssey each month. During each visit, students rotate through stations that focus on exploration, learning through mistakes, and creativity. This highly anticipated monthly experience helps keep students engaged in learning.

2e. Character Education

The Bucket Filler program is the backbone of our school value system and is woven into all classroom behavior plans. Students learn to value all students, treating one other with kindness and respect. They experience firsthand that how they treat others has a direct impact on their own self-esteem. And they learn that all actions and words either build up or tear down others.

Our school counselor teaches monthly character education lessons founded in the Bucket Filler program. Topics include: bucket fillers have good self-esteem; bucket fillers know the right and wrong way to express themselves; bucket fillers are caring people; bucket fillers think before they act; bucket fillers are respectful and honest; bucket fillers are not bullies; bucket fillers are team players; bucket fillers get along with others, and bucket fillers have the power to choose. Discipline needs have decreased in all categories since implementing this program.

2f. Library

Students spend time in the school's bright and spacious library during open check-out periods and weekly classes taught by the school's librarian. Students study library science, explore book genres, use research resources, and discover new books. The combination of a passionate librarian, excellent resources and school-wide commitment to literacy is the key to our success in keeping good literature in the hands of our students.

3. Special Populations:

At Van Buren Elementary we tailor our curriculum, instruction and assessments to several special populations. The largest groups consist of students in special education, students from low socioeconomic families, and students identified as high ability. Smaller populations include students learning the English language, students living in homeless or transitional settings, and students being raised by foster, grand- and great-grandparents.

Teachers successfully address the academic needs of our special populations using five key strategies. First, we commit to growing all students, as demonstrated by our commitment to two 30-minute daily enrichment/intervention periods for math and language arts. Based on Renaissance STAR data, students are grouped into three tiers of enrichment or intervention. Tier One is an enrichment period for students working at grade level or above, where they tackle activities that increase depth of knowledge. Tier Two provides intervention for students with some academic struggles, and Tier Three intervention is for our students with the most severe academic needs. Next, we provide ongoing training to interventionists on best practice instructional strategies. Interventionists are highly-qualified instructional assistants and learning specialists who receive training in the Lindamood-Bell Language Program, Visualizing and Verbalizing, Seeing Stars, and Guided Reading. Teachers doing enrichment have access to resources included in the Pearson math and reading textbook packages designed to engage, challenge, and expand student understanding in each skill area. Teachers who have English language learners in their classrooms receive Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) training, which gives them practical strategies for helping children with limited English proficiency learn in an inclusion setting. The third attribute is the interactive nature of our classroom teacher-interventionist relationship. At Van Buren, intervention and enrichment is shared between classroom teachers and interventionists. Our schedule has time built in for them to meet and plan as needed. Fourth, students are assessed every 2-4 weeks using Renaissance STAR assessments in math and reading. The results provide teachers with data detailing our students' level of mastery in each of the state's academic standards. Finally, a team of teachers, interventionists, administrators, and special education teachers hold monthly data meetings to review and discuss student progress, and when needed, to develop intervention plans.

While our students in the special education population have an achievement gap of 40 percentage points when compared to all students being assessed, the same special population has consistently had a higher percentage of students reaching the benchmark for the first time (30%) on each state assessment compared to the percentage among all students being assessed (11%). We continue to monitor the effectiveness of our approach to intervention and enrichment using student achievement data. While we like the growth we are seeing, we aggressively work at narrowing the achievement gaps using our best strategies and well-trained, passionate educators.

PART V – SCHOOL SUPPORTS

1. School Climate/Culture:

All schools are talking about the safety and security of students and staff. Van Buren Elementary is no different as we strive to be a safe school where all students can thrive. A secure school is a cornerstone to the school's mission of "Bringing Joy to Learning," since children and staff cannot experience joy without feeling safe. With the support of a child-centered Plainfield community, and the strategic vision of our Board of School Trustees, school safety measures exceed those in most surrounding districts.

Over the past four years, the Police Department and Town Council have partnered with the Plainfield Community School Corporation to provide daily police presence in each school. The police provide comfort to parents and staff while building positive relationships with students. Entrance doors are locked at all times and visitors need to be granted passage through two locked doors to reach the student area. When combined with background check for all visitors and improved classroom door locking hardware, we are able to reasonably ensure the safety of our students and staff.

Culture: Van Buren's culture is, simply put, student-centered. This deeply held belief is an expectation that the way we teach and what we teach will be explicitly student-centered and supportive of school-wide rules that promote fairness, safety, and respect for students and staff. School staff receive support in promoting a student-centered culture by participating in regular trainings. Recent trainings include: The Impact of Students' Social Emotional Health on Learning, The Myers Briggs Personality Assessment and Study, Five Things Teachers Should Know About Autistic Students; a workshop based on Phillip Schlechty's "Working on the Work" to promote engaging teaching in the classroom; and a book study of "Mindset" by Carol Dweck. These trainings have promoted engaging teaching practices and increased each staff member's awareness of their own strengths in the pursuit of student-centered learning.

Climate: A safe and caring place where students can learn is the climate we work toward every day. We believe that when children feel safe, cared for, and valued, they learn and grow at a faster pace. We achieve this by building positive relationships with students, teaching powerful character education lessons, and making sure that all staff enforce our norms that promote a safe and caring climate. The Bucket Filler character education program, more than any other initiative at Van Buren, models for students their role in sustaining this climate. It ingrains the concept that all words and actions either build up or tear down others. It also emphasizes that kindness towards others builds one's own self-esteem just as unkind acts towards others depletes one's own self-esteem. When all members of the school are filling each other's buckets, a caring and safe climate emerges.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

In a time when many schools are desperate for volunteers, Van Buren benefits from tremendous parent and community support. During a typical week, 40 parent and community volunteers work with children and assist our teachers. A core group of 15-20 volunteers helps out multiple times each week. And more than 20 Study Buddies (volunteers from local businesses and retirees) spend regular one-on-one time with some of our struggling and reluctant learners. The relationships created by our Study Buddies are incredibly important to the students with whom they work, making a positive impact on both their learning and their lives.

Parent involvement at Van Buren is evidenced by the nearly 100% participation in parent-teacher conferences. Teachers nurture strong relationships with parents through frequent communication. While parents typically hear from teachers once a week, it's becoming commonplace for teachers to reach parents daily using email or real-time communication programs such as DoJo and Remind. Increasing communication between parents and teachers is proving to be a popular and beneficial trend.

Van Buren has a very active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). The group meets monthly with around 20 parents attending. They provide both financial and hands-on support for students and staff. Most recently,

they helped provide funds for student laptops, student-teacher conferencing tables, and have made a commitment to purchase equipment for our future STEM lab. The PTO also organizes and funds the annual Reading Festival, Fall Festival and Grandparent Night. While the Reading Festival is an incentive for students to meet reading goals, the Fall Festival and Grandparent Night are family-focused events that always yield huge crowds. More than 1,100 students and family members visited Van Buren at the last Grandparent Night.

Our community businesses support the school financially during the annual Walkathon fundraiser, with earnings typically exceeding \$13,000. Parents and local businesses work together to ensure a safe, fun and financially successful event. Monies raised from the Walkathon fund student field trips.

Finally, our school receives support from the local education foundation. The Plainfield Community Schools Legacy Foundation makes grants each semester to teachers and principals for classroom projects and school programs, while also funding professional development, equipment, technology, and emergency needs of students.

3. Professional Development:

Ample professional development opportunities available to Van Buren's staff are key to the continuous growth of our teachers. The principal ensures that trainings align with school and district instructional and curriculum initiatives. At the district level, teachers are invited to attend bi-weekly professional development sessions that focus on STEM-related topics. At the school level, nearly one third of Van Buren teachers have been trained in and implemented the Daily Five Literacy framework, a program taught by the Two Sisters organization.

Each year teachers new to the Plainfield district take part in a year-long course that orients them to the Plainfield Schools philosophy and provides them with district-specific trainings. These monthly sessions include a bus tour of Plainfield that not only provides history but also a reference point as to where our students live. Other sessions include Lindamood-Bell and Smekens workshops, changes in education law, and the role of social and emotional learning in classroom management.

In an effort to grow and challenge high ability students, our teachers attend the Indiana Gifted and Talented conference on a rotating basis. Attendees are exposed to proven instructional strategies and innovative curriculum that engage and challenge high ability students, while also networking with other professionals who share the same challenges and successes. The strength of topics and presenters makes this a training that high ability teachers look forward to, confident that their takeaways will improve the academic growth of their students.

On alternating years, the district sends teachers to the Effective Schools Conference in Arizona and a local Summer Leadership Conference sponsored by the district's administration. In both cases, building principals select teachers to represent their schools. In the past year, teachers and administrators have attended presentations focused on the integration of Design Thinking and STEM within our core curriculum. As a result, participating teachers will begin leading and modeling Design Thinking and STEM education with the other teachers at Van Buren.

Teachers also receive professional development during monthly teacher meetings. This past year, they learned about the impact student emotional health has on learning, and how meta-cognition activities improve student learning. As we see more and more students in crisis, it has become increasingly important that we equip teachers with the necessary skills to navigate those emotions and scenarios. Currently, our teachers are participating in a book study on LAUNCH, a resource book that is helping us integrate STEM activities into our curriculum.

4. School Leadership:

Van Buren's leadership team consists of a Principal, Dean of Students, and a teacher leadership team. The principal's primary role is to oversee all school programs, curriculum and instruction, ensuring that they all

align with the school's mission. The Dean of Students works with student discipline and leads staff in the STEM integration initiative. Teacher leaders give counsel to the principal on important matters and help get staff buy-in for new initiatives. This was very helpful when we recently rolled out the school's STEM integration initiative, given the significant amount of additional work it requires of teachers.

Part of Van Buren's leadership philosophy is to hire strong teachers who adhere to the curriculum with fidelity and use student-centered, engaging instruction. In a culture where our leaders empower teachers to be innovative, creative, and student-centered, both teachers and students enjoy school. When there is joy in learning, it becomes easier to gain the support of the school's stakeholders for new initiatives.

Over the past eight years, Van Buren adopted a more rigorous math curriculum, implemented the Bucket Filler program, and are currently in the midst of a STEM integration initiative. We have been successful in these big initiatives because of our broad-based school leadership team, their shared vision with our staff, and the strong student and parent buy-in for the new programming.

Equally important is our belief that students cannot learn, and teachers cannot teach if they do not feel safe and valued. Therefore, it is of absolute importance to our school leaders to create and sustain a safe learning environment, such as the one described above in Section 5a. We are very clear when we say that we cannot promise that nothing bad will ever happen in one of our schools, but we have taken many steps to protect students and staff, and we continue to study, network and look for ways to increase that security.

Finally, our leadership philosophy holds to the belief that student engagement is a very important factor in successful learning. With that in mind, our leaders search to find the best training for our teachers. This year several teachers leaders attended STEM and Design Thinking training through Discovery Education, an organization whose research concludes that students display increased creativity and engagement when design thinking is part of the learning process.

Part VI – STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The single practice that has most influenced Van Buren’s success is alluded to in the school’s mission, “Bringing Joy to Learning.” In the spring of 2015, Van Buren’s leadership team experienced an epiphany of sorts. At that juncture, teachers and students were bogged down by the impending change to more rigorous state academic standards and a more rigorous state assessment, combined with concerns that Indiana’s teacher evaluation rubric was increasing academic expectations. In addition, current research pointed to the need to increase the depth of knowledge questioning embedded in instruction to better prepare students for the complex problem-solving so critical in the workforce. Morale was dropping, especially among teachers in grades impacted by state assessments (grades 3-5), and even more troubling was the increase in requests from those teachers to be moved to lower, non-assessed grade levels. Concurrent to this, our high school counselors and administrators began noticing an increase in student apathy towards school, as well as a decline in students graduating with a desire to continue on in higher education.

On their own, each of these scenarios would be alarming, but when considered all together, our leadership team knew it was time to shift gears. Instead of cramming more and more knowledge into students’ minds every minute of the school day, we began to focus on increasing student engagement and bringing back joy in learning. All teachers committed to use the most effective strategies they knew of and to adhere to the district’s curriculum maps. Teachers focused on student engagement, prioritized building strong relationships with students, and even began surprising students with unanticipated, fun activities to stimulate their creativity and intellect. At the same time, thanks to financial support from our PTO, we increased when possible the number of educational and entertaining assemblies each year, and teachers explored ideas such as virtual field trips to help boost student engagement in learning.

We are convinced that our emphasis on increasing student engagement has, more than any other strategy, improved both student achievement and behavior. In many ways, we have simplified our recipe for success over the past four years. We hire good teachers who teach what is most important using proven methods that engage students in learning. This is why “Bringing Joy to Learning” is both our mission and most effective improvement strategy.