

U.S. Department of Education
2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

[X] Public or [] Non-public

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

Name of Principal Mrs. Sonia Elizabeth Geerdes
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name McKinley-Thatcher Elementary School
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 1230 South Grant Street
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Denver State CO Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 80210-1521

County Denver

Telephone (720) 424-5600 Fax (720) 424-5625

Web site/URL https://mckinleythatcher.dpsk12.org E-mail Sonia_Geerdes@dpsk12.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. Alex Marrero E-mail ALEX_MARRERO@dpsk12.org
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Denver Public School District Tel. (720) 423-3200

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 Dr. Carrie Olson
(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, leave blank.*

PART I – ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION

The electronic signature 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 2021 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 must include one or more of grades K-12. Schools located on the same campus (physical location and mailing address) must apply as an entire school (i.e. K-8; 6-12; K-12 school). Two (or more) schools located on separate campuses, must apply individually even if they have the same principal. A single school located on multiple campuses with one principal must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2015 and grades participating in statewide assessments must have been part of the school for at least the three years prior to September 2019.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 or 2020.
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 current school year (2020-2021) unless otherwise stated.

DISTRICT (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools.)

- Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
 - 115 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 31 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 59 High schools
 - 2 K-12 schools

207 TOTAL

SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools. Only include demographic data for the nominated school, not the district.)

- Category that best describes the area where the school is located. If unsure, refer to NCES database for correct category: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/> (Find your school and check “Locale”)

- Urban (city or town)
 Suburban
 Rural

- Number of students as of October 1, 2020 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent at the school. Include all students enrolled, in-person, participating in a hybrid model, or online only. If online schooling or other COVID-19 school issues make this difficult to obtain, provide the most accurate and up-to-date information available:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	27	24	51
K	24	25	49
1	22	19	41
2	16	13	29
3	11	14	25
4	15	12	27
5	14	13	27
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	129	120	249

*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):
- 0.4 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 2 % Asian
 - 4 % Black or African American
 - 28.2 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 59.4 % White
 - 6 % 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 2019 - 2020 school year: 5%

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, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	12
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	1
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	13
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	249
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.05
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	5

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

Arabic, Spanish, Ukrainian, Russian, and Berber.

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 8 %
20 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 36 %

Total number students who qualify: 90

8. Students receiving special education services: 20 %
50 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. All students receiving special education services should be reflected in the table below. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <u>6</u> Autism | <u>1</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>10</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>10</u> Developmental Delay | <u>38</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>1</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>0</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>4</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>1</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>2</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>2</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 6
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below. If your current staffing structure has shifted due to COVID-19 impacts and you are uncertain or unable to determine FTEs, provide an estimate.

	Number of Staff
Administrators	1
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	18
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	6
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	15
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	3

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 14:1

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

Required Information	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016
Daily student attendance	92%	93%	93%	93%	94%
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 2020.

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.

McKinley-Thatcher Elementary School fosters a love of learning through experiential education, individualized approaches, and supporting the growth of the whole child.

16. Briefly describe how your school has been operating during the current 2020-2021 school year (e.g., open as usual, online only, a hybrid model, etc.)? If different grade levels in your building operate in different ways, include this. If the school began with one model and switched to another partially through the year, include this as well.

During this pandemic year, our goal has been to continue to provide high-quality content and instruction to all students just as we always have. To do this while simultaneously keeping our students and staff’s health as a priority, McKinley-Thatcher began the 2020-21 SY in a remote learning model and has pivoted between remote and in-person learning multiple times over the course of the school year.

During our full remote learning scenario, the schedule included core content delivery with teachers teaching in a live, virtual model for both literacy and math instruction. Teachers have ensured that individual and small group support is consistently provided. Other content, such as social studies/science/STEM, and our “specials” classes are provided through a combination of live teaching and asynchronous learning using the platform Seesaw.

When in-person learning has been available, we continued prioritizing small group and individualized instruction. Roughly 25% of our students opted to continue learning from home, so we are using a combination of dedicated remote teaching for grades K & 1, and live streaming for grades 2 - 5. We are incorporating an ‘all hands on deck’ approach utilizing paraprofessionals, non-instructional staff, and some well-qualified volunteers to ensure we are meeting student needs both inside and outside of the school building. Every core content lesson is coupled with targeted small-group support, thus providing equitable education opportunities that our families and students

expect and deserve.

In order to prevent learning loss, we invest resources into small group instruction. While students are learning from home, small group instruction increases their level of engagement and accountability. When students are in the school building, small group instruction ensures they get targeted support and strong academic feedback.

17. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

Students (and their families) choose to attend McKinley-Thatcher. There are no entrance requirements or selection process by the school.

PART III - SUMMARY

McKinley-Thatcher is a small but growing community school serving approximately 250 students in our early childhood education program through Grade 5. Between 2016 and 2019, we added additional ECE-4, kindergarten, and first-grade classes. We expect to continue expanding over the next several years. Our students and families speak many languages, and approximately half are Latinx, African American, or of other non-Caucasian ethnicities. Some are first-generation citizens of the United States or will be first-generation college graduates. The school is also economically diverse, with about 36% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch.

McKinley-Thatcher's staff, students, and families contribute in equal proportions to a culture of support. Teachers provide philosophical continuity across grade levels, instilling the belief that challenging work, mistakes, and conflicts are invitations to expand our learning. We are proud of the growth mindset fostered at McKinley-Thatcher. This mindset helps set students up for success when facing obstacles and supports them to show kindness rather than judgment, encouragement rather than criticism, and empathy rather than blame. These values are central to our academic and social supports for students and are critical to supporting a positive working and learning environment for adults.

Our families are not content to let satisfaction give way to stagnation. Parental involvement is a significant contributor to the strength of the school community. Family members are invited to serve on our Collaborative School Committee, which is responsible for making budgeting and operational decisions, and partner with the school through a PTA that connects new and prospective community members to resources, champions fundraising campaigns, and helps to support a strong enrichment program that offers daily after-school activities in the arts, fitness, foreign language, and technology. Plus, family members regularly volunteer their time supporting both academic and extracurricular programs, and a few parents have even joined our staff. Our leadership philosophy affirms that the best way to promote learning is through meaningful relationships; therefore, we emphasize collaboration in everything from our curriculum to our discipline policies.

During the 2015-16 school year, four school values were identified to serve as the foundation of the school's positive behavior interventions (PBIS) system: Be Kind and Considerate, Challenge Yourself, Work Together, and Lead by Example. Since we believe intrinsic pride is a superior motivator for character development than external reward, we teach students to recognize character traits associated with these values in both themselves and their peers: attending to the needs of others, doing what's right even when no one is watching, approaching challenges with a growth mindset, finding a balance between sharing our own ideas and considering others' suggestions, and resolving conflicts peacefully. We began allowing students to honor their peers with Eagle Awards during our monthly assemblies. So, when a student receives an Eagle Award, the reward is not only the prize itself, but also the intrinsic pride associated with being recognized for one's character.

We believe in "educating the whole child," which means significant resources and time are dedicated to social/emotional development, and we incorporate social/emotional lessons into our academic curriculum. Teachers, special service providers, and mental health professionals consider themselves responsible not only for the children in their class or on their caseload but also for all of the students in our school. They work together to share resources and provide extra care for students experiencing academic or personal struggles. Our school psychologists collaborated with teachers to familiarize students at all grade levels with the "Zones of Regulation" - a resource that categorizes emotions into four color-coded zones and offers regulation strategies for each. Students can communicate how they feel and what they might need, with anyone in the building, by explaining their zone. Additionally, every class begins the day with a Morning Meeting, during which students are given an opportunity to have a personal check-in with their teacher and classmates. Teachers provide guidance on how to respectfully express disagreement and support one's own opinion while considering, and expanding upon, the points raised by others. These skills transfer to discussing and analyzing problem-solving strategies as part of the Bridges in Mathematics curriculum and when responding to peer presentations as part of our experiential learning literacy curriculum. These discussion skills are also useful when it comes to understanding diversity. We host an annual Culture Night,

during which students and families are invited to share their cultural customs and cuisines; but, we believe such events must be supported by daily examples of how our differences serve as learning opportunities. To ensure that our teachers are providing culturally responsive instruction, our leadership team is committed to providing Professional Development on the subject and programs (such as staff book studies) that further explore our responsibility to equity and social justice.

Our community's passion for education is reflected in our insistence that there is always more to learn-- always a way to ensure our future success exceeds our present expectations.

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

At McKinley-Thatcher elementary, grades K-5 implement a curriculum for mathematics (Bridges in Mathematics) and literacy (Expeditionary Learning) aligned to the Common Core State Standards. These curricular programs embrace student-led learning processes, emphasize academic discourse and the speaking and listening standards, and support the teacher as a facilitator of learning. In addition, both of these curricula provide strong resources and examples of scaffolding and differentiation embedded throughout lessons, units, and assessments. Our third through 5th-grade teachers administer interim assessments in mathematics eight times a year and in literacy three times per year. All classes, Kindergarten through 5th grade, utilize an online reading assessment and responsive intervention program in accordance with the Colorado READ Act, called IStation. These formative assessments have been modified to be given during both the remote and in-person learning models in place this year. Student data is collected and analyzed by teachers frequently. We have moved from a ‘data team’ process this year to an individual review of data by each teacher, sometimes with the assistance of an instructional coach. We have relied heavily on our teachers’ expertise in data analysis that we have been developing over the past six years to support the adaptation of student materials and instructional strategies throughout the pandemic.

To ensure fluidity across scenarios this year, McKinley-Thatcher used consistent online learning tools across all grades. Staff, students, and families are supported by technology training workshops, tutorial videos, and experienced staff troubleshooters to develop proficiency with multiple platforms. Seesaw is the primary learning platform we use in all classrooms, Kindergarten through 5th-grade. Seesaw has enabled students to share their learning progress and demonstrate their understanding in multiple ways. This platform enables teachers to differentiate the process and products of learning for each student. It also allows for teachers, students, and parents to share and respond to feedback on assignments. Google Classroom is utilized by students and teachers for more extensive literacy assignments, allowing for streamlined collaboration, creativity, and real-time feedback and evaluations on learning activities. Amplify Science is used for science instruction for grades K-5 and utilizes video and experiment simulations to bring science to life for students. EdPuzzle is a tool that allows teachers and students to create interactive online assessments by embedding either open-ended or multiple-choice questions, audio notes, audio tracks, or comments on a video. Peardeck slides are very similar to a PowerPoint or Google Slides presentation. Still, instead of simply static, informational slides, our teachers create interactive slides that let every student respond to questions or prompts. FlipGrid is a social learning platform that allows educators to ask questions, then the students respond in a video. Students are then able to respond to one another, creating a “web” of discussion. Padlet is an online virtual “bulletin” board where students and teachers collaborate, reflect, share links and pictures, in a secure location. Common Sense Media is our Digital Citizenship Curriculum providing grade-level lessons that teach students how to be safe online.

Through our continued assessment of student learning in diverse ways (including unit assessments, district assessments, virtual and in-person interviews, and student work samples), teachers can develop a thorough understanding of who each student is as a learner in conjunction with what the current level of skill on each area of the standards. All students at McKinley-Thatcher receive daily grade-level whole group instruction. In most cases, immediately following instruction, students are supported with differentiated tasks, intervention supports and scaffolds that they need, including but not limited to: working at the teacher table with direct support, word banks, sentence stems and frames, picture supports and pull out time with interventionists. With all of these data points, teachers can differentiate instruction and have developed a high level of skill in creating targeted lessons and support for students’ various needs both in-person and remotely.

1a. For secondary schools (middle and/or high school grades):

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

In our ECE classrooms, we focus on developing, honoring, and celebrating the whole child, knowing that the growth of the mind, body, and emotions are all contingent on one another. At McKinley-Thatcher, our emphasis is on the experience of learning. Learning at this stage should feel like an exploration, not a forced curriculum. Our role is to provide opportunities for children to use play to understand their surrounding environments and lives while helping them foster a sense of self. Through hands-on exploration, children are active participants in their learning.

The assessment tool through which documentation is regularly recorded, tracked, and shared with families is entitled "Teaching Strategies GOLD" (or commonly referred to as TS GOLD). TS GOLD's research-based standards and assessment program provides ongoing, observation-based documentation methods to see a child's development across the span of early childhood years. Information gathered from this assessment tool informs many areas of teacher planning. TS GOLD documentation makes children's growth and learning visible to the family, and captures the student's interests, skills, knowledge, and highlights changes as they continue to grow.

The TS Gold standards give us clear targets to work toward with every child, but most of their learning comes through child-centered play. This type of learning engages a child's natural curiosity for exploration and provides ample opportunity to initiate, maintain, and extend learning at an appropriate pace. A majority of classroom time is spent in choice time: the child chooses where to focus. These choices are supported by teachers asking questions and tailoring activities to the child's evolving understanding. This approach emphasizes the importance of a child-centered classroom, one in which children are consistently engaged in meaningful experiences that reflect their ideas and interests.

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

You never know what might spark a student's love and dedication to learning. In order to provide students all possible opportunities to be inspired, McKinley-Thatcher offers a multitude of enhanced curriculum classes that challenge and engage students' minds in diverse ways. All students at McKinley-Thatcher participate in elective or "specials" curriculum. These classes include Visual Art, Music, Physical Education, and STEM. Specials are offered on a rotating schedule, and children attend either one or two of these classes each day Monday through Friday.

Our visual arts program includes hands-on activities from drawing and painting to fabric art and weaving. The art studio has both indoor and outdoor spaces to inspire creativity. McKinley-Thatcher understands that the world operates via computers and technology. To this end, we have made a sizable investment in the students' access to technology in our STEM program. Our newly constructed lab includes state-of-the-art equipment for technology, robotics, and engineering. The curriculum provides laptops for each student for coding, typing, and research; a 3-D printer; and equipment like drones that encourage exploration through technology (the class is for 2nd through 5th grade). McKinley-Thatcher is fortunate to have a full-size gymnasium and a large, updated playground and sprawling sports field. Physical education activities focus on individual and team learning activities including bowling, rock climbing, and a myriad of outdoor sports and activities. Music development is also a key component of our curriculum. Music education includes access to many instruments and focuses on providing unique opportunities beyond choir, such as composing their own music and songs as well as participating in music and dance performances for families.

In addition to these dedicated classes, students have weekly visits to the library, participate in Mindfulness training, and have ample opportunities to experience learning outdoors. Several years ago, our school was flooded, and the library was ruined, but during the recent renovation the library was restored to pristine condition and now has over \$70,000 of brand new books available for students.

Rated one of the nation's healthiest states, Colorado is a state keenly focused on outdoor education. Each year thousands of 5th-grade students participate in an annual "outdoor lab" week in the Colorado mountains. At McKinley-Thatcher, we embrace Colorado's love of the outdoors by offering every student at least an hour of outdoor playtime daily. Outdoor play encourages students to cooperate, move their bodies, and engage their senses, thus enhancing their ability to participate more effectively during classroom learning. We also have three outdoor learning spaces available for teachers to take students and their lessons outside.

McKinley-Thatcher is a diverse and inclusive school. Students that are new to the United States attend daily English as a second language classes. Guardians may also enroll their students in additional language classes as part of our after-school programs.

3. Academic Supports:

In 2016, the new CCSS standards were implemented and the school rating system in Colorado changed. McKinley-Thatcher fell into a “red” achievement zone, indicating the school was not meeting academic expectations. Leadership identified key areas where students were struggling and areas for teacher growth. Throughout the past five years, intensive teacher training and targeted student interventions have helped close the achievement gap between students of color and their white peers and increase overall academic achievement across all student groups. According to the 2019 Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) assessments, students of color achieved a higher level of grade-level proficiency than their white peers (at 68.8% by students of color compared to 68% by white students). In Literacy, we have a 10 - 12% achievement gap in our students' reading scores in grades K-3. In math, our gap on the CMAS tests remains an area of focus at 15%.

Like all schools, we are unsure of the extent of the pandemic's impact on student learning. Still, through classroom observation and student performance, we are confident that students at McKinley-Thatcher are accessing grade-level content with our continued support. Teachers have studied both prerequisite and subsequent standards to know where to fill gaps for struggling learners and how to further extend the learning of our excelling students.

Collaboration is key to our success as a school. Special educators meet weekly with our general educators to discuss the needs and changes in what our shared students need. For some students, we discuss the supports they need to be successful, for others, we work as a team to adapt the assignments they receive, and for others, there are conversations about behavior or how we can motivate and engage students further. Both general and special education teachers share ownership for the success of these students. This model creates an inclusive learning environment where students with special needs thrive.

We connect students experiencing homelessness with resource partners that help build more stability for the whole family. Together with community partners, we ensure that students have the transportation they need to make it to school on time daily and supplies including food, clothes, and toiletries. We understand this is a prolific problem with no easy answers, and we continually work with our families, community, and district to find solutions.

McKinley-Thatcher's mission and vision focus on individualized learning. Students having a voice in their learning. Students work with their teachers to create individual plans for their learning and growth. They set and evaluate academic and social-emotional learning goals. Based on our staff and teachers' holistic training, McKinley-Thatcher creates learners who take ownership of their education and understand how their actions and choices impact their success. Student academic excellence is supported by teachers in a 21st-century learning environment that fosters social and emotional development. All of this is done to create confident, joyful learners that know a feeling of achievement and are excited to explore their world.

PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Engaging Students:

To maintain student engagement during school closures and remote learning, McKinley-Thatcher relied on our school's inherently collaborative culture. A second educator was assigned to every second-fifth grade classroom to facilitate live-streaming, and fully remote classes were formed for kindergarten and first grade to accommodate students whose families opted into our 100% remote program. Even with restrictions on the number of cohorts teachers can work with in-person, we have been able to provide live Specials classes every day by live-streaming into classrooms with paraprofessional support for supervision.

When Denver schools initially closed, we got creative about fostering connections, despite distance learning. As peer feedback is crucial to experiential learning, we immediately began researching and introducing online tools, such as Padlet, that would allow students to continue showcasing their work, and teachers collaborated in a commitment to comment on every piece of work submitted. An additional priority was continuing to provide individualized instruction through small groups. Plus, throughout the distance learning period, we maintained our school-wide tradition of beginning the day with Morning Meetings to support social/emotional learning.

In a few cases, especially for families with unique situations or students with IEPs, attendance initially suffered due to confusion over online platforms and remote schedules. In these instances, staff members arranged home visits to provide technology tutorials, and the office staff was in daily contact with families to provide support.

Finally, to ensure student retention during school closures, McKinley-Thatcher remained committed to its mission of “inspiring joyful learners.” We were not willing to sacrifice a fun learning atmosphere when our learning atmosphere moved online. During the Spring of 2020, classroom teachers were given Fridays as asynchronous planning days, while administrators and support staff organized Friday Fun Days, featuring digital field trips and science and social studies projects that could be executed with simple household items. Our Specials teachers taught lessons about online learning platforms, facilitated “Art Challenges” and displayed submissions in a digital gallery, filmed workout videos, and hosted a school-wide remote Talent Show! Furthermore, we moved traditional celebrations, such as Eagle Award assemblies and Culture Night, online, with new, exciting features such as student-presented awards for peers and staff members, and an at-home Argentinian cooking class.

McKinley-Thatcher’s success in maintaining student engagement during school closures and remote learning can be largely attributed to the routines and systems in place before the pandemic. You can take us out of McKinley-Thatcher, but you cannot take McKinley-Thatcher out of us!

2. Engaging Families and Community:

The community of McKinley-Thatcher, which includes staff members, students, families, PTA, and community businesses, is undeniably vested in the success of our students. In response to the pandemic, the PTA raised funds to secure temporary, outdoor shaded learning spaces and chairs for each student so that in-person learning could be reestablished as soon and as safely as possible. Community restaurants and businesses often host a day where a percentage of proceeds are donated to McKinley-Thatcher Elementary. Our school is humbled by the generosity of our surrounding community; this kind of involvement and support is unique and invaluable. Beyond that, the parents, guardians, and families of our children are devoted to student success.

Before the pandemic, McKinley-Thatcher teachers and staff were already using ClassDojo to share their students' messages, highlights, and achievements. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this tool became an important way to quickly and effectively message parents regarding students' needs and help keep families informed of online learning tools and schedules. Through Seesaw, teachers are able to comment on student work and share examples or post examples of student achievement. Our community also looks forward to

the weekly “News from the Nest” that is published on our website and emailed to families outlining upcoming events and important issues. Urgent details and important information are updated frequently on our website to explain the ever-evolving COVID-19 policies, procedures, and timelines.

During in-person learning, students attend multi-cultural festivals, back-to-school events, talent shows, holiday festivals, and other activities provided by the staff and families at McKinley-Thatcher. During the switch to online learning, our educators presented students opportunities to attend virtual field trips, be part of virtual talent shows, virtual field day, and families were welcomed to virtual assemblies where students received awards and interact with the entire school. Our children continue to face the challenges of this pandemic, and we recognize that no two students have responded the same or had the same experience this year; therefore, our school psychologist team has offered a virtual nurse’s office and virtual calming room providing students have a safe space to process and connect.

3. Creating Professional Culture:

At McKinley-Thatcher, our leadership team understands that teacher development directly impacts the outcomes of our students. Teachers meet weekly for professional development to enhance their teaching practices. Each year professional development cycles are implemented to enhance an area of our teaching and learning school-wide. Our most recent focus was designed to increase teachers’ effectiveness in student questioning. Our goal is to have students who are able to explain their thinking, be the owners of their learning, and have respectful discussions with their peers. Through training on strategic questioning, we can create students who are able to justify and explain their thinking, support their peers’ understanding, and become analyzers of their own level of understanding.

In the past, we have structured PD around the observed areas of growth for both students and teachers. During the adoption of the new curriculum, we have strategic professional development involving backward planning for an entire unit. This process allows teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the standards and how to include scaffolds, modifications, and adaptations to help all students achieve on grade level.

Just like we differentiate instruction for our students, we also differentiate professional development for our educators. During one professional development cycle each year, teachers who are masters in one area of their instruction provide professional development opportunities to our school. These opportunities allow teachers to decide where they would like to focus their learning and to identify an area of growth for themselves. Time is also dedicated to allowing teachers to observe each other and learn best practices from their peers.

During a typical year, teachers undergo coaching cycles from a member of the school leadership team. The teacher or leader requests these coaching cycles based on where a teacher can improve their practice. These coaching cycles are tailored to the teacher and include a series of observations and debrief conversations over a short period of time. They are meant to quickly and effectively transform teaching practice.

Through the transition to remote teaching, teachers were provided with examples of best practices by the district. McKinley-Thatcher took this one step further to highlight the amazing practices that the teachers in our school were using. Teachers meet weekly to adapt their teaching, both synchronous and asynchronous, learn how to engage more students, and ensure that our teaching (online and in-person) is accessible to all of our learners.

4. School Leadership:

The principal’s leadership philosophy is rooted in a deep commitment to creating an environment where students and adults are empowered to be active participants in their community and learning. To better demonstrate this philosophy, we reached out to staff, families, and district leaders to provide insight into the principal’s leadership style.

"The principal's leadership style is inclusive and open-minded. The principal has been able to acquire a complete community perspective to inform decisions that are in the best interest of our school. The staff

embrace the Mission and Vision of the school; it can be seen in the classroom instruction with the students, in communications between teachers, and among parents in the PTA meetings and events." - Parent.

"McT is a small school with very few formal leadership titles or positions. The principal has leveraged this as an opportunity to expand the definition of what it means to be a leader. Individuals on the team are valued for their strengths and are given the space and trust to lead from their role. I have seen teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, facilities managers, and students rise up as leaders. Students are the center of all work in our shared vision of authentic, empowered, experiential learning. Authentic conversations ensure students co-create a safe space where risk-taking and mistakes lead to high-level learning." - McT Parent and Denver Public Schools Director of Principal Development.

"During non-pandemic times, McKinley-Thatcher is a well-run school with student outcomes at the forefront of every decision made. During the pandemic, every staff role has shifted, but the focus has still been on student outcomes. The principal was one of the first DPS school leaders to reach out to our educational technology team to learn how to best use live streaming and also provided multiple opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning on virtual instruction, digital tools, and student engagement." - DPS instructional coach.

"The principal has done a tremendous amount to keep the school safe, functioning at a high level, and focused on instruction. She has designed professional development for staff to learn best practices in teaching remotely, created and implemented health and safety procedures for in-person student instruction, and established ongoing mental health support for students and staff. The principal and the staff have done a remarkable job constantly adapting and shifting to the needs of the community this year, and every year." - DPS Regional Instructional Superintendent.

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:

The past year has been an extremely challenging time for everyone, especially for families of color and families living in poverty. Our students, families, and staff are living through a global pandemic and a civil rights movement simultaneously. It is important that we, now more than ever, support our students' social and emotional well-being. We have focused on creating classroom communities that feel safe for students to voice their thoughts and ask questions to gain clarity, develop their own opinions, and make sense of what is happening around them. It is our job as educators to give them the tools, strategies, and support they need so that they can process their emotions and react in a healthy way. We know that if we support the whole child and hold students to high expectations, we will continue to close the achievement gap.

Professional learning over the past two years has focused on the text "Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain" by Zaretta Hammond and has included exploration of instructional practices that are relevant to all students and critical for our students of color. A small group of staff has participated in a book study on "I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness" by Austin Channing Brown. We have also explored texts from the book "Teaching When the World Is On Fire" edited by Lisa Delpit. Our staff have been using the metaphor of a journey to talk about our collective learning about race, equity, and systemic oppression. We are all at different places in our journey, but we are all taking steps to learn about teaching, leading, and serving in a way that moves our school and our society toward becoming a place of justice and freedom for all.

Sadly, gun violence continues to plague Denver and surrounding Colorado communities. This year, violence against Black and Asian communities has repeatedly impacted our community. The McKinley-Thatcher staff, families, and partners are committed to anti-racist education and support for all of our students and families. We know that hate crimes have risen dramatically in the last year, so we proudly stand up for what is right and just because our children learn the most from

watching what we do.

In our school values, we use kid-friendly language to teach our students to be kind and considerate, including a clear statement that “EVERYONE matters, and we include everyone.” We offer this language to families to use as a starting point for talking with children about the events happening in our community and across the country. We believe that our diversity strengthens our community, and makes us better people. Multiple times this school year we have provided resources to families to support talking with children about race and anti-racism. We are committed to doing the difficult work needed to create more inclusive environments – for our students, our community, and our nation. We will continue to strive to ensure our school is a place where our children all experience and learn acceptance and belonging.

PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The success of the McKinley-Thatcher community is derived from individualizing the student experience. Our mission and vision center on individualized education and focus on the whole child. Students attend McKinley-Thatcher from ECE through 5th-grade, allowing teachers, administrators, and staff to know their personalities, needs, and strengths. These relationships span years and are unique because they support academic growth as well as social and emotional support.

The COVID-19 transition was challenging for many reasons, but primarily because relationships drive our work. Students at McKinley-Thatcher are served in small groups multiple times a day to meet individual needs. When we initially pivoted to remote learning, our school struggled with the lack of connection with individual students. Our work was suddenly asynchronous, with little to no daily interaction with our kids. We quickly realized what was missing and completely shifted our plans. Every member of our community pulled together to get kids back into small groups so we could individualize instruction and re-establish the connection that our school is built on. Specials teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff, and even the principal began working with small groups of students.

This practice was refined and improved when we returned to school remotely in the fall of 2020. Throughout the summer, a group of educators and our parent guidance committee met (virtually) to create a plan that would best support our students. All students received two daily specials as they did in person. Core literacy and math were taught to the whole class, but a second educator was assigned to each class to support the learning of small groups of students, particularly students who were learning remotely.

The return to in-person instruction proved to be simultaneously beneficial and challenging. A majority of our teachers worried about the impact that time out of school would have on students, both academically and socially. Due to our leadership team's extensive work, teachers, and paraprofessionals, our students adjusted quickly to the return to school. Soon we were thriving. We adapted to this new version of schooling and began focusing on small group support and student relationships. The past year included many challenges, but we improvised, pivoted, and were able to recreate our method, one that has proven to be successful each year: educating each child as an individual. Now in the Spring of 2021, we see McKinley-Thatcher students flourishing and we celebrate the continuing growth and success of our learners.