

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

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[X] Public or [ ] Non-public

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

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

Official School Name Carson Elementary School  
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 5420 East 1st Avenue  
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Denver State CO Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 80220-5801

County Denver

Telephone (720) 424-9090 Fax \_\_\_\_\_

Web site/URL https://carson.dpsk12.org/ E-mail mirriah\_elliott@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.net  
(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**

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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

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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):
  - 112 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 31 Middle/Junior high schools
  - 43 High schools
  - 2 K-12 schools

188 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	0	0	0
K	78	0	78
1	77	0	77
2	80	0	80
3	74	0	74
4	73	0	73
5	82	0	82
6	0	0	0
7	0	0	0
8	0	0	0
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
<b>Total Students</b>	464	0	464

\*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
  - 3 % Asian
  - 5 % Black or African American
  - 9 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 75 % White
  - 8 % 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: 3%

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.

<b>Steps For Determining Mobility Rate</b>	<b>Answer</b>
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	9
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	7
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	16
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	464
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.03
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	3

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

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 5 %  
24 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 12 %

Total number students who qualify: 56

8. Students receiving special education services: 2 %

41 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>3</u> Autism                  | <u>4</u> Multiple Disabilities                 |
| <u>13</u> Deafness               | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment                 |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness          | <u>3</u> Other Health Impaired                 |
| <u>3</u> Developmental Delay     | <u>6</u> Specific Learning Disability          |
| <u>1</u> Emotional Disturbance   | <u>3</u> Speech or Language Impairment         |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment      | <u>1</u> Traumatic Brain Injury                |
| <u>0</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: 1

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.

	<b>Number of Staff</b>
Administrators	2
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	23
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	7
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	8
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 18:1

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

<b>Required Information</b>	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016
Daily student attendance	96%	95%	96%	96%	96%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2020.

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

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.

Yes  No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

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

To target and ensure a minimum of one and half years of academic growth for students who have chronically struggled and historically been left behind.

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.

Carson Elementary started off the year fully remote as did all Denver Public Schools due to the pandemic. By mid-October we started to offer orientation for grades Kindergarten through second grade and started a gradual transition of inviting students back to school with our entire K-5 community invited back on October 26th. Students were back in school for seven days before our whole district went remote again through January 8th. We have offered a hybrid model this year where students have the opportunity to stay home and learn remotely or come and be in person learners. Our school has fully remote teachers for grades Kindergarten, First and Second in addition to our in person teachers (because there was enough demand for that) and both live streaming and in person teachers for grades third through fifth.

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

Carson used to be a magnet school for GT/HGT (Highly Gifted and Talented and Gifted and Talented) students. However, in the last year, our school decided to transition out of being a magnet school and opt for a neighborhood school model instead, while continuing to house a center-based program for D/HH (Deaf and Hard of Hearing) students. We still serve our GT/HGT community, however, that is not our emphasis. Just like any DPS school, students can choice into our school if they provide their own transportation. Parents can prioritize their student’s top preferences and rank them on a School Choice application. Students can apply for up to twelve different schools. The school choice window opened this year at 8:00

am on January 15th, 2021 and ends February 16th 2021 at 4:00 pm. This is also a second round of applications if students do not get their first choice. Carson accepts students who choice into our school if we have spots available to accommodate the request.

## **PART III - SUMMARY**

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As Carson Cougars, we aim to embody the Denver Public School’s vision of creating joyful, rigorous, and personalized classrooms. Carson Elementary is nestled in the Hilltop neighborhood, just southeast of downtown Denver, CO. Hilltop has recently gained appeal with families because it is a safe community in close proximity to downtown, and for Carson Elementary, a respected, rigorous neighborhood school at its heart. Carson is proudly defined by our broader community, who collaboratively strives to support the social-emotional wellbeing, academic growth, and excellence of our students. The community is highly involved, social, and engaged in building an ongoing support network for all families, and remains dedicated to helping their neighborhood school thrive through an active Collaborative School Committee (CSC) and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). Strong partnerships with students and families are perceived as crucial for student success. To note, Carson is honored to have received multiple awards in November of 2019, including The John Irwin Award from the Colorado Department of Education, the Governor’s Distinguished Improvement Award, as well as a letter of recognition from Senator Michael Bennet.

Carson Elementary is a community of diverse learners and families. We are the home of one of Denver Public School’s Center-Based Programs for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH) that supports students from all over Denver. Over the past year, Carson leadership made the decision to pivot away from operating as a Gifted and High Gifted and Talented (GT/HGT) magnet school in favor of making GT content more accessible to all students in the spirit of equity and inclusion. The decision not only addresses specific learning needs for GT/HGT students in general education classrooms, but inserts academic rigor and opportunity for growth for all students. This highlights the Carson philosophy that all students are general education students first, no matter the level of support they require to feel successful. This inclusive perspective normalizes differences for students and families alike.

Educators at Carson are professional and bring diverse experience into the classroom and through special services. They are held to high levels of accountability by the community, and expected to use a culturally responsive lens to deliver the latest research-based practices that support both social-emotional and academic growth. Lesson planning is responsive and based on student data and reflective practices. As a result, educators feel respected, valued, and empowered to lead their classrooms in an authentic style using their expertise. Since turnover is low, staff members have the opportunity to form lasting, supportive relationships with students, families, and coworkers. Staff members are encouraged to maintain a work/life balance, whether personally or through school-lead efforts. We are collaborative and use the strengths of team members to problem solve together, especially during these unprecedented times. Due to measures taken to foster the well-being of students and staff, Carson feels safe, small, and like a school family.

At Carson, we place emphasis on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) that is elevated to the importance of providing academic rigor. It is our belief that if students are not ready to engage in learning, then minimal learning will occur despite engaging content. Our robust character education program is designed to teach students critical traits that guide them to make inclusive, empathetic, and reflective choices that support the diverse needs of their peers and positively impact the school community and beyond. Students can expect to hear consistent language referring to the character education trait of the month, and also from the curriculum, The Zones of Regulation, a framework that is designed to foster self-regulation and emotional control. Designated SEL time is scheduled throughout each day, and interwoven into instruction as needed. Classroom environments are arranged so that students have the tools and space to self-regulate. Positive reinforcement is provided through Cougar Bucks and Character Links for students exemplifying character traits. Some virtual teachers even created Bitmoji classrooms to mimic physical classrooms and house SEL resources to assist with emotional control in any environment. Last, we participate in the DPS Parent/Teacher Home Visit Program in an effort to strengthen student and family partnerships.

Students are encouraged and challenged to meet their full potential at Carson through multiple avenues to not only feel successful in school, but also in life. Primarily, this potential is met through four key components. First, as previously mentioned, we place emphasis on SEL. Second, students are given access to rigorous and engaging content through “Dynamic Differentiation”, which entails utilizing multiple strategies to differentiate instruction, including shifting instruction from whole-group to small-group



instructional settings, and modifying curriculum by enhancing and compacting to ensure that student understanding and achievement guide next steps. Third, we deliver Data Driven Instruction (DDI) using consistent, on-going assessments to create focused, differentiated, and flexible groupings. Finally, we introduce next grade-level standards once grade-level mastery is achieved to increase rigor and engagement.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the strength in character of the Carson community has prevailed amidst the dynamic uncertainties that have surfaced almost daily. Not only has the community adjusted to the challenges of the pandemic, but it also welcomed new leadership, a new Principal and Assistant Principal, at the onset of the 2020-21 school year. Despite these adjustments, the right for students to receive a rigorous and engaging education was never lost. Educators and leadership have made student wellbeing and family partnerships a priority, maintaining a flexible mindset to support all permutations of learning this year. Our continued success is due to our willingness to put our egos aside, show our vulnerabilities, and hold each other up while navigating this new frontier. In doing so, we have highlighted the need for grace and acceptance of the human circumstance that is needed in education not only during the pandemic, but going forward.

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

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### **1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.**

Carson’s core curricula include: Expeditionary Learning, Orton Gillingham, Bridges Mathematics, Amplify Science, InquireEd Social Studies, and Zones of Regulation. Each curriculum has a differing scope and sequence and is modified through data cycles within each grade-level team to ensure they meet the rigor of grade-level standards. At the onset of each module or unit, grade-level teams meet to create a backwards plan to extend, modify, or compact lessons to meet the diverse needs of every student. Foundationally, each curriculum supports teachers as they create exemplars and success criteria in their instruction.

The shifts between remote and in person instruction this year have challenged our staff to develop their technological skills, using our curriculum as a foundation on which to build adaptable lessons using the Seesaw and Google platforms accessible to all students. Our strong weekly data cycles have allowed teams to collaborate and draw on the experiences and successes of other staff members in this new environment.

Instructionally, Carson uses intentional small groups to meet the needs of our learners. We have continued to refine and hone our practices based on regular data cycles of reflection, analysis, and adaptation of instructional practices. What distinguishes Carson is our purpose: to meet the needs of each individual learner through small group instruction in each domain. Our primary drivers of design improvement, data analysis, differentiated instruction, and feedback lead to our expert instruction.

We have identified past inequitable practices and have worked to develop solutions, including small group instruction, which allows us to teach groups for support, on track, and extension of standards mastery. We can identify what mastery looks like within a unit or module, as well as over the course of a year. For example, third grade math includes a standard to “multiply and divide within 100”. Mastery of this standard is different in August, January, and May. In addition, for each small group, teachers can ensure that a student needing support to reach this standard is also being exposed to rigorous strategies used by students working on standards extension.

For the 20/21 school year, our instructional skill sets have been continuously challenged by the ever-shifting environment. Teachers have remained flexible and vigilant to provide high-quality instruction to our students. Both school-wide and by grade-level we have worked to shift our instructional practices. Explicit instruction, for example, is key for young readers working on developing phonemic awareness. In the upper elementary grades, instruction includes project-based learning as students develop their own solutions to problems in their community.

Carson’s primary use of assessment is to drive our small group instruction and modify what is needed for individual students. At the onset of a unit or module, we use pre-assessment data to help inform upcoming instruction. Then, we start a weekly data cycle process to analyze data and adjust instruction through a final post-assessment. We also spend this time designing tasks that are rigorous enough to meet the standards and that allow students to engage in productive struggle. Design starts with the curriculum as a foundation and we modify accordingly. Modifications can include using supplemental materials from platforms such as Illuminate and iReady or writing our own exemplars using standards from the grade-level above and vertical student trajectory.

A unique aspect of our assessment is how directly connected it is into the immediate adjustment and implementation of instruction. We strive to keep our small groups flexible as each student has a different level of mastery of standards within a domain. Therefore, by using targeted assessments, we can hone in on student strengths and shift groups consistently. This model remains adjustable and can shift to meet the needs of each grade-level team and our development.

This past school year has provided us with unending opportunities to redesign our approach. More so than in prior years, we have been able to offer a social-emotional lens when teaching and assessing student’s standard mastery. While striving to maintain rigorous assessments, we have been able to design targeted tasks. A previous years’ four page assessment, for example, can instead be 3-4 questions that give us needed

data. As educators, it is our responsibility to be mindful of what is truly needed to better assess student understanding.

In addition, we recognize that students are kids. While spring of 2020 included a crisis response in education, we used summer and fall for intentional planning. Teachers were provided more time to design targeted assessments balanced with our firm belief that every student is resilient and capable. This last year has placed stresses on families and kids to varying degrees. With this in mind, teachers have been responsive to the needs of their students. We hope to continue to teach test-taking skills and stamina while recognizing that a child's social and emotional needs must be prioritized. In this regard, Carson has woven assessment data into weekly cycles so that we may remain flexible to meet the needs of our students: both in instruction and with social-emotional learning at our core.

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

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

**2. Other Curriculum Areas:**

At Carson, we pride ourselves on the rigorous art, physical education, music, library, and character ed curriculum we provide our students which has continued despite changes in the school operating schedule. These programs have all been designed to support students' acquisition of essential skills and knowledge. This year, students participate in the arts, physical education and music from their homes in a virtual, asynchronous teaching model through the Seesaw platform, where they have activities to complete daily. The library and character education programs have continued both in-person or through virtual meetings and the online library catalog system.

The arts help to support creativity and expression of oneself. Through Seesaw, students are introduced to a curriculum which allows for the study of artists, expression of oneself through creativity, and use of varying mediums to explore different artistic outlets.

Physical education promotes student's health, movement and physical well-being. Through thorough online, standards-based lessons presented on Seesaw, students have been given the opportunity to continue their physical education practice and learn about health.

Music teaches expression of music, musical literacy, counting and beats, and performance skills. Music lessons at Carson meet state standards by teaching students the expression of music which is the process of practice, refinement, and performance of acquired musical knowledge and skills to communicate a range of thoughts and emotions. Carson students have the opportunity to create music where they are able to demonstrate learned skills in the composition, improvisation, and arranging of music. Students also work to understand the distinctive language, conventions, mechanics, and structure of organized sound.

Library supports fostering a love for reading, reinforcing character education, reading aloud and using the library catalog system. The library tech at Carson ensures that students are acquiring essential skills and knowledge by continuing to offer students the opportunity to request books through our online catalog, which can be accessed both at school and from home. Our library tech delivers collections of books requested by classroom teachers to help support student research and also reads aloud to our students both in person and virtually. Read alouds often align with our character education program so students are able to access support of character development in multiple disciplines. Operating in this new way with schoolwide scheduling changes has taught students how to use online resources as well as our catalog to reserve books.

Lastly the character education program at Carson supports students' mental health, respect for self and others, a love for community, and emotional intelligence. Character Education is something that we at

Carson take very seriously. We begin our mornings by reciting a pledge to ourselves. This sets the tone for the day at Carson where students express how they believe in themselves. As you walk down the hallways of Carson you will see large banners hanging from ceilings with the words that represent our schools character traits. These traits are: respect, responsibility, kindness, acceptance, perseverance, integrity, and courage. Each month students study a specific character trait which is taught in detail during morning meetings, read alouds, and parent volunteer lessons. At the end of each month the school has a character education assembly where students from each class are awarded for demonstrating strengths around the character trait being studied.

Students at Carson are fortunate to have an extra curriculum that is well established in which teachers were able to pivot despite changes in the schools operating schedule.

### **3. Academic Supports:**

All students at Carson have consistent access to rigorous grade-level and above-grade-level content. This is accomplished through targeted small-group instruction. Teachers plan and implement small group instruction at all grade levels in both literacy and math content areas. The small groups in which students participate provide access to rigorous standards-based instruction meeting each student where they are academically. The grouping of students is ever changing, based on pre-assessment and on-going formative assessment data. This data is not only used to create appropriate groupings of students, but is also used to design differentiated lessons which ensure all students master grade-level standards.

Teachers meet weekly and work collaboratively with their grade level team as well as with data teams to analyze the success of the differentiated lessons and flexible groupings. These Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings are utilized to determine which learners have already met standards and which need additional support. Formal student progress toward meeting academic standards is reviewed every six weeks and groups are adjusted as needed. For those students whose academics are in need of additional support beyond the classroom small groups to ensure mastery of content, we utilize an intervention academic support plan to tailor plans for further instruction. This begins with our youngest learners. Kindergarten students work in differentiated reading intervention groups that support struggling readers to help them reach their end-of-year goals or to push those reading at a higher level to extend their reading abilities.

In first through fifth grades, Carson employs a reading intervention teacher to support students who need extra support to meet their reading goals. Carson offers acceleration grouping in math that allows students to join class within the next grade-level if they have already demonstrated mastery of their current grade standards. This allows students to remain challenged and work at a rigorous pace to meet their needs. Based on our analysis of the most recent mid-year diagnostic testing from the iReady testing platform, Carson has learned that the school is showing more than a 10% difference in a few subgroups. This is found in those identified as Hispanic/Latino, overall race, and multi-language learners in both literacy and math. Other groups that were listed as "not reported" (so we had no data for) are special education and free/reduced lunch.

Carson is working diligently to close these achievement gaps by continuing to put focus on our small groups and intervention work. Students performing below grade level will continue to be supported by reading intervention pull out and small group instruction for both reading and math. Students in special education receive small group support from our special education teacher. Those identified as GT/HGT are pulled out and supported by our gifted and talented teachers. Those students who are identified as having a disability such as those students who are in the D/HH program work with their small group D/HH teachers and interpreters as well as push-in to their grade level class for instruction within the traditional classroom. Students at Carson who are identified as our English Language Learners work in their classroom settings but also work in a

small group setting with our ESL teacher. Our priority at Carson is to see all students meet their academic goals and close the achievement gap at our school. With our continued hard work at tailoring our small flexible grouping, intervention instruction, and collaborative work around data team meetings, we know that at Carson we will meet this goal.

## **PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE**

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### **1. Engaging Students:**

The three key components included on the Carson seal: Character, Community, and Knowledge, highlight how Carson students remain engaged and motivated. These elements help foster a positive environment for students to become life-long learners, and have remained at the forefront of our mindset through the pandemic.

Carson’s robust character education program teaches character traits needed for success in school and life. Students become leaders and exemplars of Courage, Respect, Responsibility, Perseverance, Kindness, Acceptance, and Integrity. These traits are part of the daily Carson vernacular, and students regularly receive recognition and awards when they display these qualities. Every month, students who exemplify these characteristics are selected to join Character Ed’s Crew. The recipient’s families surprise them in an award assembly, which is a true badge of honor. We have pivoted this year to host virtual assemblies and send virtual awards to students displaying these traits. Through the Character Ed program, Carson students learn to reflect upon their choices, and become intrinsically motivated to strive towards excellence, both academically and social-emotionally. Fifth graders leave Carson with a strong sense of self, and an awareness of how their choices impact their own learning as well as the learning and experience of others.

In addition, maintaining a strong community, especially during the pandemic, has been critical in helping students remain engaged and motivated. Our community partnership of all stakeholders and consistency in supporting social-emotional and academic learning to the level we have always provided has helped establish a sense of safety and normalcy for students during these unprecedented times, whether they are attending an in-person or virtual classroom. Virtual classrooms intentionally make accessible the resources that in-person students receive to help them maintain a sense of community. This access occurs through online SEL tools, the facilitation of online games or breakout rooms on Google Meet for small-group collaboration, virtual meetings with students, families, and teachers, or “socially distanced” visits with individual students or learning pods, for example.

Finally, Carson educators help students obtain a foundation of knowledge through rigorous and dynamically differentiated instruction so that students feel a sense of agency about their academic abilities and connection to the material. Through targeted, small-group differentiation, students can access and understand content, and envision themselves as scholars. Educators use curriculum as a guide, and adjust in whatever way is necessary for students to understand the content and make real-world connections.

By fostering a positive environment that encourages character, community, and knowledge, Carson educators have helped students remain engaged and motivated throughout the pandemic. Importantly, we carry the mindset that student engagement is the educator’s role to maintain just as it was during pre-pandemic times, and we will go above and beyond to ensure that students feel successful despite the daily challenges we have faced during the past year.

### **2. Engaging Families and Community:**

At the core of Carson’s success is the staff-wide recognition that educating children is indeed a communal effort and responsibility. Our commitment to a team approach is evident in our horizontal and vertical grade-level communications, but the broader scope of family, neighborhood, and community partnerships provides our strongest foundation.

Every year begins with welcoming family phone calls (now virtual meetings) to begin building relationships. Principal Coffees - again, now virtual - are held on a regular basis to provide a forum for questions and answers. The Cougar Pride Newsletter, from school leadership to all families, is the weekly source of information, so vital with the shifting information and circumstances this year. Prior to the pandemic, classroom teachers sent monthly updates. That has now become a weekly occurrence to keep families informed and connected. With the shift of focus for our GT/HGT programming, parents had

concerns and questions that were answered with scheduled meetings with both school and district level personnel in attendance. Our parents are actively involved as committee members, classroom liaisons, Character Education class leaders, organizers, fundraisers, and cheerleaders.

This year our mid-year “student led conferences” could not be held in classrooms, so teachers devised outlines and activities for at-home versions of the conferences. Together families and students looked at work, discussed progress, and set goals for the remainder of the year.

Family response has been positive, grateful for the opportunity regardless of format. Every year our Character Education Committee works with 4th grade students in developing a school-wide outreach activity that will support a local nonprofit or organization. This year our Chapters for Children’s has our student body gathering sponsors - and then money - to be donated to Children’s Hospital. Raising reading volume and raising funds - truly a win-win! Prior year efforts have benefitted a local women’s shelter, Denver Dumb Friends League, and a military unit overseas.

This year, we are partnering with National Honor Society students from George Washington High School to provide students with classroom support, story reading, or additional social interaction.

Many of our families are employed or have businesses in our neighborhood and are, therefore, stakeholders as community members in a broader sense. It is, however, their role as part of the Carson School Community that is of primary importance - a role we cultivate, honor and depend on every day.

### **3. Creating Professional Culture:**

The professional culture of Carson is particularly strong. It is a wonderful blend of independence and autonomy with support where teachers really need it. This year has carried a tremendous amount of additional responsibility, planning, and flexibility with our school staff to meet the needs of our students. Our administration created a plan to encourage grade level teams to start the year in a team-teaching model where each member of the team planned one content area. This allowed teachers to become subject matter experts and plan high quality lessons in a remote environment for every student. As more students returned to in-person learning, our administrative team gradually released teachers to plan their whole day and empowered them to create engaging lessons and utilize their team members for ideas and planning in Professional Learning Communities (PLC).

Teachers feel appreciated at Carson in many different ways. One clear example is our star coworker award. Teachers can be nominated for a star coworker from their peers and they will receive the best parking spot in the school for a week and recognition through our weekly announcements that are streamed to every classroom. In addition, every Friday, our weekly newsletter, The Cougar Chronicles, has the opportunity for weekly shout outs where teachers are lifted up for their positive efforts.

Finally, teachers are extremely supported at our school through their work with their instructional coaches and weekly PLC. Our instructional coaches meet with teachers to collaboratively plan, co-teach, observe, and give feedback. This model creates a sense of trust between the teacher and their evaluator and allows a teacher to grow their practice rather than simply being evaluated. This year we took a step back from our traditional professional development to lighten the lift on teachers and plan more strategically for next year. PLC are a place where teachers can meet as a grade level team and analyze data, backwards plan their curriculum, and make team level decisions.

Professional culture is throughout Carson from administration, to the senior team leads, and team specialists, to teachers and support staff. Each member of our community holds a certain standard of excellence. Professional development has focused on equity, social and emotional learning, and new READ act required training. Each of these critical content areas is applicable to the instruction that happens at Carson every day.

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

Carson is built upon a distributive leadership model. All stakeholders partner to provide students with a joyful, rigorous and personalized education. The Principal works with the School Leadership Team (SLT), who is elected by teachers each year, to review and collaborate on the instructional programming and practices within Carson, and teacher professional standards. The Principal also partners with the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) to plan and facilitate professional learning, build instructional skills, create curriculum and assessment strategies, develop and monitor strategic plans and priorities, and set a vision for and maintain school culture. The ILT comprises Principal, Assistant Principal, Senior Team Leads (STL), Team Leads (TL), and Team Specialist (TS). TSs lead weekly Professional Learning Community meetings focused on planning and data-driven instruction and provide professional development to our staff. In addition to the responsibilities of TS, our TLs teach half time and coach half time. They coach their colleagues by observing in classrooms and participating in feedback cycles. TLs provide partial evaluations to teachers. In addition to all of the roles of TS and TL, STLs provide full evaluations to teachers. The principal also collaborates with the Collaborative School Committee (CSC) composed of teachers and parents who represent our various programming structures, such as our traditional classrooms, Highly Gifted and Talented Magnet, and our Deaf and Hard of Hearing Center program within Carson. The CSC is an advisory committee to the Principal.

At Carson, teachers are empowered to build and strengthen their leadership capacity through a shared vision and supported school community. Teachers take ownership of the structures and school systems. A culture of trust is built by having others to lead and trust their contributions towards our common vision. Teams have autonomy to teach their grade level standards and beyond with the methods that work best for them and their students. At Carson, everyone has something to contribute as a leader and we all learn and grow together. The expertise is in the building and we rely on one another as thought-partners and collaborators to ensure student success. We are currently working on establishing our shared vision so all stakeholders know where we are headed. All stakeholders contribute to getting us there. We value voice and choice among our stakeholders. Many decisions are made through consensus such as which teachers would teach remotely and who would be in person during the pandemic. Families have choices whether to send their children to school or keep them at home for virtual learning. We want input from all voices. We recently sent out a survey on diversity, equity, and inclusion at Carson to each of our families and staff members. Because we are tracking who has filled it out, but not correlating the data to individuals, we are reaching out to all families to ensure representation from all stakeholders. We strategically hire to ensure we are creating dynamic teams committed to our vision. Together as a team, we celebrate what is going well and analyze what needs adjusting to ensure continual success of our students and staff.

During the pandemic, Principal and Assistant Principal created our safety and health plan in collaboration with ILT and SLT to ensure students are able to stay in school as much as possible to provide student success. We used district guidance to prepare and implement strong and clear guidance and protocols to follow during COVID-19 to help keep all staff and students safe. The Principal works every day to ensure coverage for absent staff members, including a day when eleven staff members were absent. Our school has kept running safely. Carson Our SLT coaches have been flexible during the pandemic to best support students and teachers in ways that individualize need. PLC were formed for the first time this year to support teachers engaging in collegial conversations around students, shifting away from operational discussion into instruction and data. Our teams have also provided students with essential social and emotional support through the pandemic.

## **5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:**

Carson takes a lot of pride in creating an equitable environment for all learners. This year we created an equity team and in accordance with our district we started working on a Black Excellence Plan by creating a survey around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our administration supports this initiative in lieu of all the current events that have transpired in this last year. Further, our equity team has led professional development about how to translate communications to families in multiple languages to leverage all stakeholders within our community.

In addition, there is a strong emphasis this year on social and emotional learning from both our



equity team and our instructional leadership team. Our use of the social and emotional curriculum, the zones of regulation creates equitable and restorative practices for all students to use in and out of the classroom. Emily Bussey, former PTA president and co-chair of the Collaborative School Committee writes, "After exploring many school options, both public and private, we knew that Carson Elementary was the right choice for our family. No school, no matter the resources, can guarantee that your child will grow into a well-rounded, thoughtful, kind, and successful human being; but, at Carson, we know that our daughters are seen, encouraged and given the building blocks with which they can grow their mind and whole person. Among neuro-diverse peers who face different challenges and yield different strengths, they are learning the most important lessons they need to learn as elementary school-age children: responsibility, respect, kindness, acceptance, courage, perseverance and integrity. These are the cornerstones of Carson's Character Education program, and they are pervasive throughout our school and community. "

Our social and emotional curriculum is embedded into our teaching practices at Carson. We actively teach students about character and how to regulate their emotions and bodies so they can really exemplify those character traits. Students are so respectful of one another because of the purposeful attention placed on teaching character. Every morning, in addition to saying the pledge of allegiance, Carson students also recite a pledge to themselves: I pledge allegiance to myself and who I want to be. I can make my dreams come true if I believe in me. I pledge to stay in school and learn the things I need to know. To make the world a better place for kids like me to grow. I promise to keep my dreams alive and be all that I can be. I know I can and that's because I believe in me.

## **PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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During the 2019-2020 school year, Carson adopted the Zones of Regulation as a school-wide framework. The Zones of Regulation or “The Zones”, written by Leah M. Kuypers, is a curriculum and framework used to teach kids self-regulation and emotional control.

This was an impactful transition, needed more than ever during this unprecedented school year. Using this system to categorize the complex feelings and states of arousal kids experience has improved their ability to recognize and communicate feelings in a safe, non-judgmental way. Students are empowered to self-advocate for what they need in order to learn. We also see students clearly communicating their feelings and needs with one another. Perhaps most importantly, we see a shift in school culture.

The Zones shifted our focus from punishment of “problematic” behaviors to a trauma-informed and more culturally responsive approach that focuses on prevention by teaching and modeling self-regulation and positive coping strategies. We take care to note that everyone experiences ALL of the zones – the Red and Yellow Zones are not the “bad” or “naughty” zones. All of the zones are expected at one time or another.

This year we refined The Zones for both remote and socially-distant in-person settings. We developed a virtual “Cougar Cave,” to “visit” and explore coping strategies for various Zones or emotional states. In addition to daily dedicated SEL instruction, staff use the vocabulary throughout the day. Staff is encouraged to comment aloud when experiencing a difficult moment so students understand that it is natural to experience difficult emotions, and to then use strategies to regulate ourselves. For example, “This is really frustrating. I feel like I am in the yellow zone. I will take some deep breaths to calm down.” Families have also been encouraged to create a home Zones check in and use the vocabulary so students are more likely to internalize these skills.

To adopt this effectively, it was critical for our community to have an understanding of how and why we use this approach. Using Ross Greene's mantra, "kids do well if they can" (The Explosive Child, 2006), we began to shift our mindset to teaching students’ skills to control their behaviors versus being punished for lacking the skills. We learned that point sheets, level systems, etc. do not address the core issue of building underlying skills. It is an evolving process and we learn, problem-solve, and share resources as a community.