

***U.S. Department of Education***  
***2022 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program***

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[X] Public or [ ] Non-public

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

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

Official School Name Frank Defino Central Elementary School  
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 175 Route 79  
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Marlboro Township State NJ Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 07746-1034

County NJ

Telephone (732) 972-2099 Fax (732) 332-0521

Web site/URL https://dces.mtps.org/ E-mail dstratuik@mtps.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. Eric Hibbs E-mail ehibbs@mtps.org  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Marlboro Township Public School District Tel. (732) 972-2000

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

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 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 2016 and each tested grade must have been part of the school for the past three years.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 or 2021.
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. The nominated school has, or is subject to, a nondiscrimination policy (provide either a link to the policy or submit a text of the policy), is committed to equal opportunity for all students and all staff consistent with applicable law and does not have any outstanding findings of unlawful discrimination. The U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s nomination and/or rescind a school’s award if unlawful discrimination is later discovered.

12. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

**The U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school's nomination and/or rescind a school's award if one of these eligibility requirements is later discovered to have not been met or otherwise been violated.**

## PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

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Data should be provided for the current school year (2021-2022) unless otherwise stated.

**DISTRICT** (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools. For charter schools: If a charter school is part of the public school system, information should be provided for the public school district. If a charter school is considered its own district or part of a charter district, the information provided should reflect that.)

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 6 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 2 Middle/Junior high schools
  - 0 High schools
  - 0 K-12 schools
- 8 TOTAL

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

2. 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

3. Number of students in the school as of October 1, 2021 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	30	38	68
1	38	47	85
2	43	33	76
3	50	45	95
4	50	39	89
5	66	48	114
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>	277	250	527

\*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
  - 33 % Asian
  - 2 % Black or African American
  - 7 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 56 % White
  - 2 % 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 2020 - 2021 school year: 7%

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, 2020 until the end of the 2020-2021 school year	19
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2020 until the end of the 2020-2021 school year	18
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	37
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2020	518
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.07
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	7

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

Arabic, Bengali, Burmese, Chinese, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Japanese, Kannada, Korean, Punjabi, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tamil, Telugu, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 3 %  
14 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 6 %

Total number students who qualify: 29

8. Students receiving special education services with an IEP or 504: 17 %  
91 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 with an IEP or 504 should be reflected in the table below. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>11</u> Autism                 | <u>3</u> Multiple Disabilities                 |
| <u>0</u> Deafness                | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment                 |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness          | <u>13</u> Other Health Impaired                |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay     | <u>21</u> Specific Learning Disability         |
| <u>1</u> Emotional Disturbance   | <u>39</u> Speech or Language Impairment        |
| <u>1</u> Hearing Impairment      | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury                |
| <u>2</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 3
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.	39
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	14
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	18
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	6

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.

<b>Required Information</b>	2020-2021	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017
Daily student attendance	98%	97%	96%	96%	97%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

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

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2021.

<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 provide a safe, nurturing environment of mutual respect while inspiring children to achieve their academic potential. Students are valued for their individuality and diverse capabilities and are taught to face the future and contribute to society with compassion, courage, knowledge, and vision.

16. Provide a URL link to or text of the school’s nondiscrimination policy.

<https://www.straussesmay.com/seportal/Public/DistrictPolicy.aspx?policyid=5755&id=381521499991483693f72c2c1580dae6>

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

Defino Central Elementary school is one of five elementary schools in the Marlboro Township School district. The students attend Defino based on their residency within the township boundaries.

## **PART III – SCHOOL OVERVIEW**

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Frank Defino Central Elementary School is located in the Monmouth County suburban town of Marlboro, NJ. We are one of five elementary schools in the Marlboro Township Public School District. Defino is home to over five hundred students in kindergarten through fifth grade, and we celebrate and honor our differences while ensuring that everyone feels included and welcome. We are a multicultural school, made up of students who come from different races, nationalities, and ethnicities; our diversity is united by the shared belief that everyone deserves respect and kindness.

Defino, as our school is commonly referred to, has a motto that truly reflects the type of school community we are and strive to be: "Defino Dolphins are helpful, respectful, and kind." From the moment students walk through our doors in the morning to the second they leave in the afternoon, they are greeted by friendly and respectful teachers and staff members who care deeply about them. The Defino staff is one of a kind. They are a family of educators who work collaboratively to best meet the needs of all of our students and they continually go above and beyond to ensure student success.

Our school prides itself on our character education program. Each month we celebrate and learn about a specific pillar of character. We have six pillars of character that are a primary focus, which include respect, citizenship, positivity, kindness, responsibility, and honesty. Through these monthly pillars, students learn a variety of social-emotional skills such as, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making, and conflict resolution. Each month our school counselor collaborates with the staff to integrate character lessons, videos, books, and other resources focused around that month's pillar. Our fifth-grade ambassadors, a group of exemplary fifth-grade students, work together with the school counselor to infuse the pillar of the month into the fabric of our school. They produce videos, interview teachers and students, put on skits, and work together to model appropriate behavior within our school community. Any communications produced by our 5th-grade ambassadors are shared schoolwide via our very own school news network, DDN.

Defino Dolphin News, also known as DDN, is our daily video morning news/announcement program led by 5th-grade students. DDN includes the lunch and snack menu for the day, weather, sports, highlights from our character education program, and student recognition. DDN is shared each day via Twitter with our community, so that parents and community members can get an inside glimpse of our school as we continue to strengthen the home-school connection.

Navigating changes brought about by COVID-19 required resiliency and creativity -- thankfully, those two traits permeate every facet of Defino Elementary School. Defino, like many schools, faced challenges during the pandemic; however, we were blessed to have one-to-one technology already in place for our students. Our existing infrastructure enabled us to hit the ground running when schools went virtual in March of 2020. Together, we facilitated the effort to get a device in the hands of all students who needed it, including going to the homes of students to drop off Chromebooks. The Defino faculty quickly became experts in online learning to ensure that students continued to have success when they were not physically in the school building. In order to maintain a schoolwide connection, we continued with our morning Defino Dolphin News led by our principal. We also worked to ensure that our tiered support (RTI) continued so all students would receive the support they needed.

Defino hosts a number of special education programs, and we pride ourselves on offering multiple opportunities for general education and special education students to interact and learn from each other in different settings. A few of our unique inclusion programs that help facilitate friendships and social skills for our students with different needs, include Circle of Friends, Peer Buddies, and the Defino Diner. These programs are designed to support students with social-emotional learning competencies through a variety of activities including role-playing, obstacle courses, arts and crafts, games, and food preparation.

Finally, our professional development is varied and often teacher-led. Through our professional development initiative, Teacher Passion Projects, teachers had a voice and choice in their professional development as they selected topics of interest from a variety of book clubs to projects focused on creating a

sensory path or beautifying the school. In the spring, we had an afternoon where staff shared what each team of teachers learned about and accomplished. Teacher passion projects engaged all staff members, regardless of their position, in meaningful professional learning that directly improved our school and the community.

Defino Central Elementary School is a special place where educators, parents, and the community unite to create a positive and inclusive learning environment for children. One of the character pillar quotes that adorn our hallways states: "Citizenship is the chance to make a positive difference in the place where we belong." Through our collaboration with our supportive and dedicated community, our emphasis on strong character, and our appreciation and celebration of individuality, we strive to achieve our goal of making a positive difference in the lives of students here at Defino while ensuring that everyone feels like an important part of our Dolphin family.

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

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

#### **1a. Overall approach, which may include overarching philosophy or approaches common across subject areas:**

Defino, and our school district as a whole, have invested significant time and resources toward implementing personalized learning through a workshop model. In our core curriculum areas, we follow the workshop model of instruction. This model often includes whole group instruction followed by small group instruction, independent practice, partner work, conferencing, and formative and summative assessments.

We believe strongly in the power of authentic assessments and spending the time to thoroughly examine and analyze student results so that we can identify specific strengths and areas for growth. In both literacy and math, we have district-created common assessments that are administered at least once each marking period. Our school process is to ensure that each of these assessments is utilized to drive and inform instruction and identify any specific learning gaps students may have so we can work together to support them and move them forward. We meet as collaborative learning teams following each district assessment and analyze the data to make determinations about remediation and enrichment. We also share strategies, resources, and techniques that have been successful for students based on the data.

Finally, we have common grading expectations for each of the subject areas to ensure that there is equity in our grading practices across the school and district. The commitment to common grading expectations is important as it impacts all of our related services from special education to our RTI (response to intervention) supports.

#### **1b. Reading/English language arts curriculum content, instruction, and assessment:**

Defino follows a balanced literacy model of instruction in English language arts. The goal of the program is to develop proficient readers, writers, speakers, and listeners equipped with the skills needed to engage in independent lifelong learning. This approach includes instruction in fundamentals of reading and writing skills, such as decoding and fluency; research-based best practices in strategies of comprehension; the development of increasingly sophisticated engagement with literary and informational “texts” in various genres and media; and, writing in different formats and genres, on varying topics, for specific purposes and audiences (including narrative, explanatory/informational, and opinion/argumentative writing). Vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and handwriting are taught through direct instruction in the context of engagement with authentic texts.

Defino’s approach is predicated upon a workshop model of differentiated small group instruction. Whole group direct instruction is complemented with a variety of daily experiences in reading, discussion, and written expression providing the scaffolded learning opportunities needed to develop the cognitive and social-emotional processes involved in becoming a proficient, literate individual. This includes independent work, collaborative work with partners, small group activities, and regular one-on-one conferences between students and the teacher. Differentiated instruction is required in all English language arts (ELA) classes and is accomplished by using a variety of texts; online texts adjusted algorithmically to individual student reading levels, including lexiles in programs, such as Achieve3000. We offer accelerated instruction in tiered fourth and fifth grades ELA classes and multiple gifted and talented programs, including Gifted Literacy K-3.

In addition, our school has a dedicated literacy coach who provides instructional support for colleagues, promotes district literacy initiatives, and provides Response to Intervention (RTI) intervention for students. The coach conducts data meetings with teachers presenting the results of district-created common assessments and writing tasks, administered in each of four marking periods, for discussion and as a guide to needed remediation and/or instructional planning. Teachers have continuous access to student data to inform instruction from multiple online programs (Smarty Ants, SIPPS (Systemic Instruction in Phonological

Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words), Achieve3000, IXL-ELA, etc.)

Comprehensive ELA curriculum guides are fully-aligned with New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS). Distilled from these 800-plus pages, are Units of Study ELA K-8 which are much more manageable for teacher planning and instruction. The Units of Study provide a coherent body of standards-aligned subject matter focused on major concepts, topics, and processes spiraling through the continuum of scope and sequence in literacy. The Units of Study include resources, such as: scoring rubrics; district-approved instructional programs; teacher-recommended texts, videos, websites; approved leveled reading lists; suggested text-dependent and higher-order thinking questions for formative assessments; and, teacher-created instructional activities. In addition, concepts and topics in science and social studies from the curriculum for those subjects are provided for each month to encourage interdisciplinary connections focused on engagement with challenging texts to foster critical thinking. The ELA K-8 Units of Study are active documents to which resources are added and revisions made on a continual basis. To our knowledge, we are unique in having done this.

### **1c. Mathematics curriculum content, instruction, and assessment:**

The overriding goal of mathematics education in Marlboro Township Public Schools is to enhance all of our students with the skills, understandings, and attitudes that they will need to be successful in their careers and daily lives. The curriculum emphasizes higher-order thinking skills to compute routine algorithms to help students become problem solvers. The curriculum takes a developmental and sequential approach; a concept is introduced, subsequently developed, and mastered.

American Mathematician William Paul Thurston once said, “Mathematics is not about numbers, equations, computations, or algorithms: it is about understanding.” Teachers at Defino Central Elementary School facilitate in helping students understand that mathematics is a dynamic, coherent, interconnected set of ideas. Student achievement is accomplished by carefully designing lessons that meet all students needs through scaffolding concepts through concrete, representational, and abstract ideas. Students, as mathematicians, are given the opportunity to explore skills in a way to develop a true understanding, in a way that makes sense to them, and making the connection between concepts and procedures. Mathematics instruction is focused on the big ideas and building a strong mathematical foundation in number concepts.

The New Jersey Student Learning Standards of Mathematics are used as the focus and foundation of the district units of study for instruction. Embedded within the units of study is the district curriculum, content sequence, and pacing guide. EnVision 2.0 is available to teachers as an instructional resource while also aligning identified skills within the main district math online programs of IXL, Study Island, and ST Math.

The school utilizes the district common assessments for each unit as summative data to inform instruction. In collaboration with the school instructional math coach, teachers reflect and analyze student results and use trends in the data to devise a plan which includes remediation and enrichment to promote student achievement. Teachers also use formative assessments more frequently in the classroom as a means of measuring content mastery. The data is used to guide further instruction for that particular skill. Differentiated and individualized small group instruction is implemented

### **1d. Science curriculum content, instruction, and assessment:**

Defino Elementary school utilizes the Bring Science Alive (Exploring Science Practices) program from TCI. This innovative and engaging program allows students significant opportunities to develop an understanding of concepts and processes through scientific inquiry, activities, STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and math), engineering, design, and experimentation. Primary grades focus mainly on life, earth, and physical sciences. Concentrations are focused in the areas of plant and animal survival, materials, and the Earth’s surface. STEM is integrated into all areas by the use of grade-specific design challenges. This program utilizes the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). They are based on A Framework for K-12 Science Education which was written by a team of scientists, engineers, and science educators. The program’s performance expectations guide assessments and are supported by details in the disciplinary core ideas, practices, and curriculum concepts. Disciplinary core ideas focus instruction on the foundational

knowledge that students need to be successful at every grade level. These core ideas build upon each other from year to year, from Kindergarten through Grade 12. Science and engineering lessons expand on the abilities that students should develop to excel in STEM activities. The practices ingrained within this program allow students to ask questions and define problems, plan and carry out investigations, analyze and interpret data, and use mathematical and computational thinking, as well as construct explanations and design solutions. The Next Generation Science Standards address engineering design as a process similar to scientific inquiry. Science experiments are conducted to practice the steps of the scientific method and to make thoughtful connections. For example, students in 5th grade dissect an owl pellet to identify the types of foods consumers eat. The students develop and use models to describe the movement of matter among plants, animals, and the environment. Experiences like the one mentioned above allow for students to further develop an understanding of scientific concepts that can rarely be seen in nature.

**1e. Social studies/history/civic learning curriculum content, instruction, and assessment:**

The social studies program utilized at Defino Elementary school, Social Studies Alive!, reflects our changing society and its relation to the world. Through a variety of learning experiences and by linking the past to the present, students develop an appreciation of the continuity of the human experience. Our goal is also to help students realize that each individual has a contribution to make to society. In the primary grades, our social studies curriculum includes topics, such as communities, geography, map skills, economics, diversity, citizenship, government institutions, and practices. Students are given the opportunity to explore content through project-based learning and the application of skills. Social Studies Alive is aligned with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy (CCELA) to ensure that students develop literacy skills through Social Studies. The Social Studies Alive curriculum is not only engaging, but it also helps students read and comprehend text that is more complex and at a higher level than typical text for their age and grade level. The curriculum covers four main disciplines which have been identified by the National Council for Social Studies in its C3 (College, Career, and Civic Life) Framework. These disciplines include Civics, Economics, Geography, and History. In the pre-COVID learning environment, class trips provided an opportunity for students to enhance their learning. For example, students, teachers, and parents would visit the Washington Crossing Historic Park in 5th grade. The curriculum for 5th grade includes the Revolutionary War. At the park, students would rotate through a variety of stations to learn about life in colonial America and important events that occurred during that time period. These types of experiences allowed for real-world connections to the curriculum. In the past, students in 4th grade have visited the Gateway National Recreation Area in Sandy Hook. The students engage in a variety of activities that showcase how the native people of the Lenape tribe used local natural resources to maintain their way of life.

**1f. For secondary schools:**

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

**2. Other Curriculum Areas:**

**Band:** One of the many highlights of being an upper elementary student at Defino is the opportunity to join our instrumental band. The band program begins in 4th grade and continues in 5th grade. We have almost 100 students between both grades who participate. Students receive instrumental band lessons once a week for 30 minutes. Fourth graders learn how to play their chosen instrument in same-instrument groupings. In 5th grade, experienced students are mixed into small “mini-band” ensembles before we put them all together in a “big band” for the Spring concert. We offer students the chance to play any of the wind and percussion instruments (including more specialized instruments, such as French Horn, Oboe, Bass Clarinet, and Euphonium to name a few). In the past, we have received incredible feedback about our band from professional musicians who visit or listen to our band via recordings. These musicians are always very pleased with the quality of sound our young musicians have obtained in a short amount of time. Through the

leadership and skill of our talented band instructor, our Defino bands typically perform music at a much higher level than one would expect from an elementary band.

Visual Arts: All of our students receive art instruction weekly. Lessons can run from just one week to an entire marking period depending on the complexity and scope of the project. During art class, students are consistently challenged through rigorous content to create “meaningful artwork.” The creation of meaningful artwork takes several avenues in the acquisition of essential skills and knowledge. These essential skills and knowledge cover the NJ Visual and Performing Arts standards and also connect to areas like Social Studies or Workplace Readiness Skills. Students are routinely asked for informed aesthetic responses and to explain what they believe a piece of art is communicating. This leads to deeper discussions connected to how individuals can disagree on the merits of artwork. These discussions and disagreements must amplify the six pillars of character that Defino Elementary teaches students and engages the students in respectful and meaningful dialogue. These discussions help form the essential skills of expression, dialogue, and respectful debate.

The artwork portion is the overall product of the lesson. Products span multiple art mediums like painting, sculpture, printmaking, and drawing. The production portion of art stresses five factors: staying on task, exemplifying craftsmanship, following directions, meeting objectives, and showing creativity. While these five factors are all important, there is a unique focus on craftsmanship and creativity. The art room instills in each student a sense of pride in their work and the importance of individual creativity. Even though all students are given the same general task, each piece of art contains their own creativity through problem-solving and decision-making. Students gain essential skills like problem-solving, personal growth, expression, and taking responsibility and pride in one’s own work. Every art product is also created through a multicultural lens. Printmaking is not just printmaking; it becomes Gytaku, a form of Japanese printmaking. Drawing can take the form of Mehndi art from South Asia. Each lesson is steeped in a new culture, and students learn about that culture through their own artwork. Students acquire knowledge of various cultures and races to become better global citizens and to gain a deep appreciation of cultures other than their own.

#### Physical Education/Health/Nutrition

The Physical Education/Health program at Defino Central Elementary School teaches the importance of taking personal responsibility for one’s health by living an active, healthy lifestyle that fosters a lifelong commitment to wellness. The program focuses on physical health, social health, emotional health, mental health, lifelong fitness, teamwork skills and strategies, sport-specific skill development, and problem-solving tools. Students love participating in the various challenges presented in the gymnasium on a weekly basis.

One of the physical education programs we've implemented through the years is The Dolphin Fit Club which encourages students to be more physically active outside of school (bike riding, walking, joining a sports team, etc.) and provides rewards for their efforts.

Another major event and fundraiser that is facilitated through the physical education program at Defino is The Kids Heart Challenge. Partnering with the American Heart Association, this initiative focuses on heart health, emotional well-being, and whole-body wellness. This year, the Kindness Pillar of the Month was combined with heart health and focused on being kind to the mind, body, and others. Students chose a month-long challenge to be kind or be active. Students were given weekly challenges to practice mindfulness, spread kindness and respect to others, and to take care of their physical health. We raised almost \$15,000 dollars through this challenge for the American Heart Association.

The Lifelines Prevention Curriculum is embedded into the fifth grade Health curriculum. The staff was trained by district counselors. The program is designed to empower school personnel to be better prepared to address the range of mental health concerns and needs presented in comprehensive youth suicide prevention. Using an evidence-based curriculum, the program sends accurate messages about suicide that are grade-level appropriate and emphasizes the importance of help-seeking behavior.

Along with the district schools, Defino Central Elementary School participates in a Wellness Week, designed by the Health and Wellness Committee, focusing on four goals - goals for nutrition promotion, goals for nutrition education, goals for physical activity, and goals for other school-based activities.

### Foreign Language (Spanish)

Marlboro is a multilingual and multicultural community that understands the importance of learning a world language at a young age. At Defino Central Elementary School, students in grades 2-5 participate in the World Language program and are enrolled in Spanish classes. The overall goal is to prepare the students for World Language in middle school. The students learn correct pronunciation, the culture of Spanish-speaking countries (geography, capitals, Cinco de Mayo, Day of the Dead, etc.), and general vocabulary words surrounding the following basic themes: greetings, weather, food, seasons, numbers, time, and family. Students enjoy learning an introduction to the Spanish language.

### Technology/Library/Media

Technology is a natural part of the fabric of learning at Defino, thanks in part to our 1:1 ratio with iPads in kindergarten and Chromebooks in grades 1 through 5. Defino's students are the definition of 21st-century learners, as they conduct online research, practice coding, and produce original videos. Our students utilize a wide variety of Google for Education apps to showcase their learning on a daily basis. Students express their creativity while making Google Slides and creating Google Sites. They practice skills for mastery with online programs and strive to improve their typing skills with daily practice.

In the early grades, students learn how to login to their device, access Clever, Google Classroom, and/or SeeSaw. Students in our intermediate and upper grades create original pieces of work, collaborate with peers, and delve deep into all that our district technology has to offer. Students learn about maintaining a clean digital footprint and the appropriate and safe ways to conduct themselves online.

Teachers collaborate with their grade level colleagues and district tech coach to create engaging, motivating, and innovative lessons/projects using Pear Deck, Flipgrid, WeVideo, and a host of other websites and programs. The tech-savvy nature of both the staff and students eased the transition to virtual learning during the pandemic. Our teachers and students have been utilizing Google Classroom for years to access links, class assignments, and homework. When the pandemic hit, it was very easy for Defino's students and staff to transition to accessing their work in Google Classroom. Students were already assigned to Google Classrooms for their homerooms and related arts classes. While learning from home was a big adjustment, learning online was not.

In library media, students are first guided and then taught how to independently develop their academic and personal interests through book selection and research. Students learn how to use the library in order to find books that help them explore their interests. Students practice responsibility through book checkout and book care and genuinely enjoy the freedom to choose books. Through our read-alouds and lessons, students are exposed to different authors, book genres, and themes to help them develop and expand their reading selections. In Media, students are also introduced to computer coding. Each year, we explore different coding apps, so students can build on their computer programming skills from K-5th grade. We also incorporate STEAM challenges into our media program, in which students work with one another to solve problems, test solutions, and reflect on their work.

## **3. Academic Supports**

### **3a. Students performing below grade level:**

Defino uses the Response to Intervention (RTI) process to help close the achievement gap. Students are first identified through data collection and teacher recommendations. Students may be referred at any time throughout the year. Teachers advocate for students by completing initial paperwork and referring a student to the RTI committee. Teachers, instructional coaches, child study team members, and administrators then work together as a team on an Intervention & Referral Services Committee to identify a student's needs and

place the student on the appropriate instructional tier.

The level of support (Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3) is based on each student's needs. Through a collaborative model, the teacher and RTI teacher create an instructional goal. Modeling and coaching is provided to teachers to help support Tier 1 and Tier 2 goals within the classroom. Students identified as needing the most support are provided Tier 3 instruction by the reading or math coach in a pull-out program. Student progress is closely monitored. Instructional goals and instruction are adjusted if the student is meeting or is not meeting their goal. Movement within tiers is fluid, and students may move at any time to best serve their needs.

### **3b. Students performing above grade level:**

Defino utilizes a block schedule in order to offer advanced classes for students in fourth and fifth grades in both literacy and mathematics. This accelerated instruction model is designed for students who meet specific criteria and who require an additional challenge above the already rigorous grade-level expectations. The goal is to ensure that all students are appropriately challenged.

In addition, we have a comprehensive gifted and talented program that provides enrichment, critical thinking, and extensions to the grade-level curriculum. Gifted and talented instruction is provided for students in Kindergarten through fifth grade for students who meet set criteria. In Kindergarten through third grade, a Gifted Literacy program and a Gifted Math program are offered. From second grade to fifth grade, a core-comprehensive and interdisciplinary model is offered consisting of thematic units with universal themes. These programs foster collaboration and critical and creative thinking skills.

### **3c. Special education:**

Defino takes pride in providing an inclusive environment for students with disabilities that meets both the academic and social and emotional needs of each individual student. Defino has a child study team that includes a psychologist, learning disabilities teacher consultant, social worker, speech therapist, occupational and physical therapist, and a behaviorist on staff to support our school community. The child study team provides support that may include counseling, social skills, behavioral training and professional development.

In addition, Defino offers a wide variety of programming for students with disabilities such as: in-class resource (ICR) where two teachers co-teach together, pull-out resource (POR), language learning disabled (LLD), and multiply disabled (MD) program. Our self-contained programs at Defino incorporate functional life skills into the core content instruction. Students are provided with unique opportunities, such as the "Defino Diner" where students incorporate life and social skill activities through meal preparation. Further, inclusive activities, such as our "Peer Buddies" program, allow students with disabilities to partner with neurotypical peers to develop core competencies such as self-awareness and social awareness.

Our co-teaching program is blessed to have teachers who specialize and demonstrate expertise in the co-teaching model. They not only provide additional support, modifications, individualized strategies, techniques, and smaller group instruction for special needs students but also aid in bridging the gap for general education students who are struggling with specific skills. In addition, our Flex Period is built into our daily schedule and provides additional one-on-one and small group time to further bridge any learning gaps.

### **3d. English Language Learners, if a special program or intervention is offered:**

The goals of the English as a Second Language (ESL) Program at Defino Central School are to enable the English Language Learner (ELL) to acquire the necessary foundational English skills to become mainstreamed into the academic and social context of their school environment. Specifically, the goals of the program are to provide developmental English language instruction in order for the ELLs to achieve success and sustain positive self-esteem. We provide a program that fulfills each individual's needs and abilities. Emphasis is given to the whole student (cognitive, social, emotional, and physical), which dictates

flexibility in the program. The program takes into consideration: previous school experience, age, literacy level, culture, native language, interests, and self-concept. We address the individuality of the learner and care for each student as a whole person and provide academic content support based on World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards and the New Jersey State Learning Standards (NJSLs). We endeavor to include the parents and community so both students and their families feel a strong sense of belonging and involvement. The ESL Program is a combination push-in/pullout program for grades K-5. Each student at the K-5 level receives a minimum of thirty minutes of instruction per day. All students that are new to the country with no English language skills will receive a high-intensity program. Class sizes are small and instruction is individualized.

**3e. Other populations (e.g., migrant, homeless), if a special program or intervention is offered:**

Defino cares deeply about our greater community and strives to ensure that all of our students are supported, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally, through efforts like food drives and holiday giving. Our school population is very diverse, and we have a number of families who face difficult financial situations. These financial hardships are often exacerbated around the holidays. Each year, we partner with our Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) to facilitate food and gift drives during the holiday season. The school Social Worker and School Counselor work together with teachers and staff to compile a list of families in need. Non-perishable items are collected for a period of time; and, then we work together to create boxes of Thanksgiving and winter holiday meals for each family. The younger students in the building participate by decorating the food boxes being delivered to each family, while the older students help to sort and box the various foods collected. Once we have a list of students, we share the needs with our PTO and collect gifts/gift cards to create a holiday package for each family. Our MTEA (teachers union) representatives also organize a gift drive during this time, collecting gifts and gift cards for additional families in need. The generosity of our staff and families is incredible and we look forward to this season of giving every year.

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

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

The past couple of years have been challenging to navigate as we have moved from virtual learning to a hybrid format to full in-person instruction -- but despite any COVID-related challenges Defino has continued to work hard to inspire, engage and motivate our students. This starts with a school environment that is warm, welcoming, inclusive, and supportive. Fostering this environment requires a committed team of professionals all working toward the same vision. One of the primary ways we engage and connect students is through our character education program.

Two Pillar of the Month activities which really speak to this collective effort were our Positivity and Mindfulness initiatives. In December, Student Ambassadors assisted with a school-wide “Positivity Presents” activity and distributed present templates to each classroom, and encouraged students to write a positive quote or saying and decorate their present. They then collected and redistributed all the decorated presents so each student at Defino would be given a “Positivity Present” prior to winter break. In March 2022, leading up to International SEL Day, each classroom took the “Commit to 1% Challenge” where they committed 10 minutes each school day to a mindfulness-based SEL activity. By making this commitment, teachers taught the skills of accountability, responsibility, and honesty. All classrooms that participated in the challenge earned an extra recess period to encourage the development of healthy minds and bodies.

Throughout the course of the school year, School Counselors and Child Study Team members provide push-in SEL Second Step lessons in all classrooms. In addition, we provide small group Lunch Bunch, Circle of Friends, and Social Detectives groups for students to participate in. All of these continued virtually during school closures, to allow students to remain connected to their peers and to assist with inclusion. These groups provide opportunities for students who may struggle with making friends and engaging in social interactions. The focus is for students to have the opportunity to interact with peers on a daily basis and practice social skills while feeling accepted at school.

The Second Step guidance curriculum is a comprehensive curriculum designed to incorporate four main topics: Skills for Learning, Empathy, Emotion Management, and Decision Making. These four critical topics are broken down into manageable lessons. Each topic comes with video clips, activities, and take-home materials so the topic can continue to be discussed with parents and guardians. Second Step uses catchy songs, role-plays and engaging videos to target the specific topic of the day. Each lesson builds on the previous lessons, so students are able to see the progression and understand how all of the pieces work together.

Wraparound summer counseling sessions have been offered to students receiving in-school counseling services and the opportunity to remain connected with school counselors. This also assisted with transitioning students back into school from fully remote learning environments prior to the 21-22 school year. We also have staff members on the district-wide crisis team in order to continue to stay abreast of new protocols and policies in order to keep our staff and students safe.

School Counselors also work collaboratively with the RAD (Responsible Actions & Decisions) Club in the middle school to provide mentoring from older students in the district. The RAD Club comes to Defino annually to provide our fifth graders with strategies and tips for navigating middle school, friendships, and peer pressure. This collaboration is one that our fifth graders love because it provides them with a sense of belonging as well as gives them a glimpse of what middle school will look like.

In addition, Defino has been the pioneer for groups and events to assist with inclusion opportunities for special education students. For Peer Buddies, 5th-grade mentor students complete an application including recommendations from current and previous teachers. Once selected, they are trained by staff to help facilitate conversations and help lead activities for special education students in our Self-Contained programs with various disabilities who need support in making friends and practicing social skills. Each special education student has at least one “Buddy” who serves as their connection to the larger Defino

student community. In addition, Defino has partnered with Chartwells Cooking Program to create Dolphin Diner to support our children socially and academically. Students write the recipes for their snacks, learn to apply their math and reading skills to perfect their recipes, apply and generalize their social skills with their classmates and peer buddies, and bring their recipes home to share with their families.

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

Defino Elementary School has a very close partnership with the Defino Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO); and, we collaborate regularly on ways that we can improve our school and the community through collaborations with local businesses and organizations. We have worked with local community businesses to sponsor school events like our Fun Run which raises funds for special school projects and initiatives. We have also worked with larger organizations, such as the American Heart Association, where we engage students and families in the Kids Heart Challenge each February in order to raise awareness and promote heart-healthy choices.

In our partnership with the American Heart Association, every February we engage our Defino students in the Kids Heart Challenge. This past year, students took on the challenge to be active or kind. At the conclusion of the Kids Heart Challenge, the school raised almost \$15,000 and was awarded \$500 for new gym equipment due to the outstanding participation from our students and families. Most importantly, we raised awareness about the importance of heart health. The American Heart Association also recognized Defino as one of their top 25 school partners in the country!

In addition, we also regularly partner with local food pantries when organizing our school food drives. In collaboration with our PTO, many local restaurants partner with us for #DefinoDays where our Defino families support our community businesses by going out to eat at local restaurants. These same businesses give back to our PTO by providing a portion of the proceeds. It is a wonderful partnership that is mutually beneficial and has resulted in many positive additions to our school.

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

One of our guiding principles at Defino is to support the staff in every and any way we can so they, in turn, can support the students and do their jobs to the best of their abilities. Teachers at Defino know they can approach the administrators with anything, and feel comfortable doing so. We truly have an open-door policy. We can be reached at any time, for any reason. We support teachers in any way we can; personally, emotionally, and instructional. While we believe family comes first, we also have high expectations for teaching and learning. We problem solve as partners, as equals, together to determine the best plan of action for our students. During remote learning, we often engaged in phone calls with teachers, video conferences, sitting in on virtual lessons if need be. We met with students and/or parents to help support the difficult task of teaching young learners remotely and continuing to impact their lives academically and socially, despite not physically present in the school building. As we transitioned back into the building, we continued to support teachers in any way we could. Due to this, we had a smooth transition from remote learning to our hybrid model and eventually, to a full day in school instruction.

Defino Elementary School is not only a place for students to learn; it's also a hub for ongoing professional development and learning for staff. Here at Defino, we believe in lifelong learning; so we are committed to continuous improvement and growth as professionals. To support teachers in this endeavor, we provide many professional development opportunities for staff. This past year we asked teachers to choose a project to promote their own professional learning. These "Passion Projects" allowed teachers' choice and voice. They were able to choose a project they were passionate about and research and explore it on their own time. Towards the end of the school year, teachers shared their projects and what they learned with the entire staff at a faculty meeting. In addition, through the years, we have had staff participate in numerous PLCs, professional learning communities, that focused on a specific book. One, in particular, focused on the professional development book, *Math Workshop In Action* by Dr. Nicki Newton. Led by our math coach, the PLC met monthly to discuss ideas and instructional strategies in the shared reading and think of ways to incorporate these techniques into daily instruction. The teachers left these meetings excited to try new approaches to teaching mathematics and knew that the administrators supported these instructional risks. In

addition, our math and English language coach holds monthly professional development meetings by grade level to discuss instructional strategies, collaborate, support teachers' instruction, and provide resources. Teachers look forward to these meetings so they can collaborate with their colleagues to discuss solutions to common problems. Supporting the staff, while giving them the freedom to guide their own learning, has been very successful at Defino in helping teachers to feel valued, supported, and an integral part of our community.

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

Leading with empathy and understanding has been the approach of the school leadership team at Defino Central Elementary School. The administrators of Defino have worked hard to remove obstacles to teaching and learning (by minimizing or mitigating paperwork and streamlining processes that do not directly connect to student learning). This has been especially important given the challenges of the past couple of years. The principal and vice-principal have an open door policy and are always open to feedback, suggestions, and ways that we can improve as a school. There has been significant investment from leadership in building relationships, keeping morale and spirits high, and strengthening trust which has resulted in a positive culture and climate at the school. The school leadership is keenly aware of the significant demands placed on the teaching staff on a daily basis, some of which can impact lesson preparation and planning and delay meaningful feedback to students. The focus of the Defino Leadership team has been to support teachers, honor their expertise, and treat them as professionals. This is accomplished by ensuring that meetings are meaningful and necessary and that professional development is differentiated and varied so that everyone feels included.

The master schedule at Defino includes common grade-level planning periods to facilitate grade-level collaboration on a consistent basis. We also have FLEX remediation and enrichment blocks, which occur at varied times throughout the school day in each grade level, so that our specialists (math, reading, related services) can work with students on a consistent basis at the same time each day.

Finally, our approach to professional learning values the concept of teacher voice and choice. On a district level, we provide funds for teachers to engage in professional learning that they are interested in and that aligns with their specific needs. One example of a district-wide offering is our Ed Camp style of professionally learning where teachers have a multitude of options and attend sessions that interest them and are relevant to their specific roles. Additionally, we have been very successful with our Teacher Passion Project initiative. Teachers first work in teams to identify projects of interest (whether it is a book club, school beautification, or a sensory hallway). Staff then select projects that they are passionate about via a school-wide survey. These selections became our teacher passion project teams, which unlike grade level collaborative teams could include related arts team members, special services, and related services staff and administrators. The culmination of this initiative was a day of learning where colleagues shared their experiences, learnings, and the end products. The feedback from Teacher Passion Projects was extremely positive as staff felt they had a direct impact on the school and community, while also having a voice in their professional learning. We believe that our teachers are incredible, intelligent, and creative individuals -- we honor that belief by giving teachers the freedom to choose their learning path -- this approach has resulted in significant gains and positive outcomes our students and families.

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

At Defino, we believe that fair isn't always equal. Every student gets what they need to be successful- academically, socially, and emotionally. Our character education program teaches students to celebrate and respect our differences. It is our differences that make us unique. Academically, we use data-driven instruction to meet the needs of all students. We use the small group instruction model to meet students where they are and move them forward. Through our social studies curriculum, we teach children tolerance and diversity. We learn about different cultures, religions, holidays, and ethnicities. Luckily, here at Defino, we have a very diverse population of students, with a variety of needs, so children learn firsthand what it means to be tolerant. When it comes to teaching young children about current events, we make sure to do so in a very age-appropriate manner. We provide staff with resources for talking about sensitive topics but also trust their professional judgment.

We have a significant ESL population at Defino Elementary and the program is designed to provide comprehensive support to students and their families. The ESL Family Literacy Workshop provides the opportunity for ESL students, their families, and teachers to join together to reach their educational goals. The event has activities that are designed to build literacy skills, provide language practice, enhance self-esteem and confidence, and encourage appreciation of literature. We also regularly highlight influential figures during Black History Month, Women's History Month, and Spanish Heritage Month through DDN, our video morning news program.

As a school that has multiple self-contained special education programs and a variety of special education needs, we have a plethora of activities during disabilities awareness month in April. A few of which include assemblies featuring the importance of inclusion, school-wide bulletin boards celebrating and honoring differences, a walk for change to raise awareness and funds for our special education initiatives, and a chalk the walk for students and staff to write positive and inclusive messages to all of our students. As a school community, we are committed to ensuring that every child and family feels at home here at Defino. We continue to look for ways to grow and deepen our understanding of cultures and ensure that we are guided by best practices in culturally responsive instruction.

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

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Selecting a singular strategy that has resulted in the greatest positive impact at Defino Central Elementary School is not an easy feat. We have a comprehensive and successful Response to Intervention (RTI) program with embedded 30 or 40-minute RTI blocks in every grade level, a committed team of professionals who provide intervention strategies and guidance, a math coach and reading coach who provide support to teachers and struggling learners, and the school counselor and child study team members who provide individualized support for students and staff with social-emotional and academic needs. We also have an approach to professional learning, Teacher Passion Projects, which honors the voice and needs of teachers, and results in differentiated options for improving teacher practice and growing our school as a community of learners. That being said, at our core, it is our character education program that unites us and connects to everything else that we do as a school.

We have worked with Rutgers University to implement a character education program that focuses on a different character pillar each month. These character pillars are designed to align and connect with our curriculum in other subject areas so that we have multiple opportunities to infuse character education in our school. One example is that our social studies curriculum starts the year focused on the topic of citizenship, this looks different across grade levels, but it connects directly with our character pillar for September (which is also citizenship). Students learn what it looks like and sounds like to be a good citizen and what actions you can take to demonstrate citizenship. In addition, our literacy program (Collaborative Classroom) anchors the beginning of the year around building a classroom community, which also integrates beautifully with our citizenship focus. We often link classroom read alouds to our character education program and at the beginning of each month, our counselor provides each staff member with a list of grade-appropriate activities and lessons focused on a particular character pillar.

Our student-led video morning news program celebrates great character by recognizing students, and their specific actions, so that all students can see examples of what our character pillars can look like across different grade levels and situations. The instructional component of our character program and our celebrations of great character are both critical components of our character program; -- however, we also have it embedded throughout the school visually. We have street signs in each hallway that are named after our character pillars, a few of which include: Respect Road, Honesty Highway, and Citizenship Court. In those same hallways, we have quotes and murals adorning the walls (e.g. Honest Highway has a famous quote about honesty). Our character education program is woven into the fabric of Defino Central Elementary School and helps us ensure that our mantra, Defino Dolphins are helpful, respectful, and kind, is not only something we say, but it is a tangible part of who we are that can be seen and felt in the words and actions of our students each and every day.