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# Bridging Policy and Education: How Elementary Students are Impacted by Reform Efforts

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Bridging Policy and Education:  
How elementary students are impacted by reform efforts

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Morgridge College of Education  
University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
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March 2009  
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Title: Bridging Policy and Education: How elementary students are impacted by reform efforts  
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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on how state policies that encourage school reform impact student experience. The paper demonstrates what students in these reformed schools experience and what lessons we can learn from their experiences. In particular, the research focuses on engagement levels and the matching of intentions to student propensities. A goal of the paper is to help bridge the policy and educational worlds by shedding light on what is happening in four school-of-choice classrooms.

A mixed methodology is used; data from an Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism, an engagement measure, and interviews are triangulated. The research was conducted at two school-of-choice schools located in the Denver Metro area. The Expeditionary Learning school is a K-12 school and the Core Knowledge school is a K-8 school.

The study found high levels of engagement and learning in schools of choice where propensities and interest are matched to the five dimensions of a classroom: pedagogy, curriculum, evaluation, structure, and intentions.

Several themes emerged from the research. The first is that students and teachers at both schools had learning propensities and philosophies that were aligned with the intentions of the schools. This alignment helped create a strong community. The second theme is that interest is an important element of student learning and engagement. The third theme is that

having a clear mission and intentions improves learning. Fourth, engagement is an important indicator of school success and high levels of engagement should continue to be a goal for schools to meet. I found that engagement is high in the two schools and reflected what was taking place in the classroom. The fifth and final theme is that students have different learning needs, and thus flexible state policies should allow for more variability to allow for a wider range of learning needs to be met.

Data indicate that when the five elements of schooling match the students' propensities, they are interested and engaged in the learning process. It is, therefore, important to create flexible state policies that allow more schools of choice to be created.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Once upon a time the animals decided they must do something heroic to meet the problems of a “new world,” so they organized a school.

They adopted an activity curriculum consisting of running, climbing, swimming, and flying. To make it easier to administer the curriculum, ALL the animals took ALL subjects.

The duck was excellent in swimming—in fact, better than his instructor; but he made only passing grades in flying and was very poor in running. Since he was slow in running, he had to stay after school and also drop swimming in order to practice running. This was kept up until his web feet were badly worn, so then he was only average in swimming. But *average was acceptable in school, so nobody worried about that except the duck.*

The rabbit started at the top of the class in running, but he had a nervous breakdown because of so much make-up work in swimming.

The squirrel was excellent in climbing until he developed frustration in the flying class, where his teacher made him start from the ground up instead of the treetop down. He also developed “Charlie horses” from overexertion and then got a “C” in climbing and a “D” in running.

The eagle was a problem child and was disciplined severely. In the climbing class he beat all others to the top of the tree, but insisted on using his own way to get there.

At the end of the year an abnormal eel that could swim exceedingly well and also could run, climb, and fly a little had the highest average and was named valedictorian.

The prairie dogs stayed out of school and fought the tax levy because the administration would not add digging and burrowing to the curriculum. They apprenticed their child to a badger and later joined the ground hogs

and the gophers in order to start a successful private school. (Reavis, 1993, pp. 93-95)

The history of United States school reform dates back to the creation of the first public school; from the start, Americans have questioned schools' goals, curricula, and teaching methods. As Americans, we put an incredible amount of faith in (and therefore pressure on) the public schools and their ability to change all that is wrong with society (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). We have experimented and explored different methods and are now at a time in history when school accountability has a whole new meaning—that of high-stakes testing and school closings. For the most part, what appears to have been forgotten is what should be at the heart of the reforms: the student experience.

Throughout the years, research has proven that the process of change, especially educational change, is a lot more complex and difficult than expected (e.g., Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Berends, Bodilly & Kirby, 2002; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 2007). Experts have been designing and implementing both small and large-scale reform efforts for the past century, yet the structure of the American school remains largely unchanged (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

This study is important for several reasons. First, while there are countless studies and books on K-12 school reform (an ERIC search returns 3,726 hits for a keyword search of “school reform”), little has been done to link the world of policy makers with the world of educators. Fullan (2007), an expert on school reform, explains:

We have a classic case of two entirely different worlds—the policymakers on the one hand and the local practitioner on the other hand....To the extent that each side is

ignorant of the *subjective* world of the other, reform will fail and the extent is great. (p. 99)

This study is meant to help link the educational research and policy research on the effects of reform and to evaluate how the policy decisions impact the actual experience for the students.

This study also examines what takes place when these reforms are done at the younger grades. If we can foster a classroom environment that encourages engagement and a positive student experience early on, it is highly likely that the issues such as staggeringly high drop-out rates and high truancy rates so common in high school will diminish (e.g., Audas & Willams, 2001; Newmann, 1992). In addition, little research has been done on elementary reform efforts (an Eric search for “elementary school reform” brings only 7 hits while “high school reform” returns 184 publications). In a landmark study, Goodlad (1984) researched what was taking place in the American schools. Among other things, he found that the elementary years were incredibly formative: “Somewhere, I suspect, down in the elementary school, probably in the fifth and sixth grades, a subtle shift occurs. The curriculum—subjects, topics, textbooks, workbooks, and the rest—comes between the teacher and the student” (p. 80). This study allows us to better understand the engagement levels and experiences of elementary students in schools that have gone through a school of choice reform.

Furthermore, this study examines the events that unfold behind the closed door of the “reformed” classroom, as little attention has been paid to the daily existence of students attending schools that have completed the reform process. It therefore helps answer the question of what students in these reformed schools experience on a daily basis. If

schools truly exist to educate children and to provide them with opportunities for learning and development, it is imperative that the student experience be examined as a part of school evaluation. Erickson and Schultz (1992) summarize: “In sum, virtually no research has been done that places student experience at the center of attention,” (Erickson and Schultz, 1992, pp.467-468). It is time to recognize that student experience should be the focus of the research. Ted Sizer (2004), a leading educational reformer, states, “One should do so humbly, recognizing that the student is the crucial actor. Whether we adults like it or not, he or she decides what has been purveyed and how it has been transformed in the purveying” (pp. 97-98). To truly appreciate the repercussions of educational change, we must understand how reform impacts students.

Finally, this study is important because it connects student engagement levels with student experiences. Thiessen (2006) explains that students themselves can help us learn how they become engaged in a classroom:

As researchers (and for that matter, teachers) extend their appreciation of students as thoughtful, inquisitive, caring people, they further reconfigure ideas about who students are, what students can and should do, and what it means for students to be and to become productive and engaged in classrooms and schools. (p. 7)

Experts are looking for ways beyond test scores to assess change. Student engagement levels are one possibility for evaluating school reform. In the review of the Manitoba School Improvement Program, which has been working for 15 years to improve student experience, researchers found that motivated and engaged students are one of the key elements in lasting school improvement (Pekrul & Levin, 2006). Therefore, it is important to determine if students in these two reformed schools are engaged and active in their schooling.

This study allowed me to better understand what is actually taking place in the elementary classrooms of schools that have gone through a school-of-choice reform, in particular the engagement levels and student experiences at these two schools. In Colorado, a state policy permits and therefore encourages the creation of schools of choice (see Appendix I). This gives parents, students, and teachers an opportunity to choose an educational model that they believe fits both their ideologies and interests. Choice should ideally allow for increased student interest and engagement, leading in turn to higher student achievement. This research, which offers a window into four classrooms, will allow policy makers and educational specialists the ability to have a better understanding of how policy directly and indirectly affects student experience.

### **Research Questions**

There are four guiding questions of this study; a brief outline of each one follows. An explanation of how each question will be answered is found in the study design section (page 38).

*1. What happens in the classrooms of elementary schools that have gone through a school-of-choice reform?*

In order to understand what the repercussions of reform are, we need to know what is happening on a day-to-day basis in the reformed schools. This question is rooted in the desire to understand the experience of the students that attend schools of choice. How do the intended reform models play out? What types of learning environments are created? In particular, what pedagogical conditions are provided because of the chosen

reform model? We can learn significant lessons about the consequences of school change examining the student experience rather than depending solely on test scores.

2. *How does the policy play out at the classroom level?*

We know that state policy decisions either encourage or inhibit school-of-choice schools to be created (Palmer & Gau, 2003). What is not fully understood is how these changes affect the day-to-day experience of students and teachers. How do the intended improvements work? At the time of the study, the two schools chosen had been in existence for more than ten years. They have then, in theory, made it past the initiation and implementation phases of reform. As Fullan (2007) states, researchers tend to agree that there are three main stages of the reform process: the initiation, implementation, and institutionalization phases. He continues:

Implementation for most changes takes two or more years; only then can we consider that the change has really had a chance to become implemented. The line between implementation and continuation is somewhat hazy and arbitrary. Outcomes can be assessed in the relatively short run, but we would not expect many results until the change had had a chance to become implemented. In this sense, implementation is the *means* to achieving certain outcomes; evaluations have limited value and can be misleading if they provide information on outcomes only. (p. 67)

Since the majority of schools fail to ever successfully implement the reform model (e.g., Fullan, 2007; McLaughlin, 1978; Vernez, Karam, Mariano, & DeMartini, 2006), I selected two schools that had been in existence for more than ten years and were both doing well on state accountability reports. My intention is that these schools offer exemplary models of institutions that have implemented the intended reform model. Additionally, the schools chosen for this study were either a K-8 or a K-12 school. This

was so that the schools were able to reach the students from the beginning of their school career. I intentionally chose classrooms in the elementary years and ended up using one classroom from the primary years (grades 1-3) and one from the intermediate years (grades 4-6) in both schools. Learning from the two schools about what is working well will help others repeat their successes.

*3. What levels of engagement are found in classrooms of schools that have gone through a school-of-choice reform?*

The majority of research on school reform, especially charter schools, relies on test data to evaluate whether a school is successfully reaching students. However, test scores do not allow us to truly understand how the policy is playing out in the classroom. Understanding engagement levels and the day-to-day experience of students in these schools provides insight into how policy impacts student experience. Current research is showing a strong correlation between engagement and academic success; therefore, it is important to consider the role of engagement in school reform.

*4. What lessons can policy makers and educational professionals learn from these reform examples?*

The ultimate goal of the study is to help make future educational change more successful. It is, therefore, important to determine what we can learn from previous attempts at change. From investigating the experiences of those at the heart of the matter, we can learn how to make change more advantageous. The two schools in this study have successfully managed change. What lessons can we garner from their experience? By questioning the stakeholders and better understanding what their experiences are, we can help others achieve a higher level of success. This study allows for a deeper

understanding of the relationship between engagement and student achievement, resulting in a better appreciation of the impact of reform on student learning.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of the Literature

In order to make school reform successful, it is important to understand all aspects of the reform process. The ideal world would provide an understanding and collaborative relationship between educators and policy makers. Decisions would be based on enhancing the student experience. However, policy makers and educational specialists are often not working to support each other. What exists is a culture of blame with little evidence of successful change (e.g., Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 2007). It is important that all people involved understand the positions of the other; in particular, the policy makers and the educational specialists need to become aware of one another's responsibilities. One necessary element that will allow for this to happen is to have a better understanding of the realities of the classroom. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) promote:

To bring about improvement at the heart of education—classroom instruction, shaped by that grammar—has proven to be the most difficult kind of reform, and it will result in the future more from internal changes created by the knowledge and expertise of teachers than from the decisions of external policymakers. (p.135)

Furthermore, if people do not work together and understand the other side, the reform will not be as successful. Fullan (2007) states:

The difficulties in the relationship between external and internal groups are central to the problem and process of meaning. Not only is meaning hard to come by when two different worlds have limited interaction, but misinterpretation, attribution of motives, feelings of being misunderstood, and disillusionment on both sides are almost guaranteed. (p. 100)

In a related argument, Cuban (2001) argues that since so much time is spent talking about reform, less action is possible:

Because so much work is involved in mobilizing support and resources for fundamental changes, there is far more success in talking about major reforms than in designing and adopting the planned changes. And there is even more gap between the policy actions taken by public officials and what principals and teachers actually put into practice. Because of these gaps among talk, action, and implementation, intended fundamental changes get incrementalized and become another enhancement to the existing organizational structures and processes. (p. 47)

Fullan (2007) further argues that often the efforts put forth by policy makers are misdirected. He claims that governments can push accountability, incentives and/or foster “capacity-building,” but he argues that too many are focusing on the accountability side, therefore ignoring the ability to build capacity (Fullan, 2007, pp. 236-237).

Furthermore, in the landmark Rand Corporation study on the relationship between policy and educational practice, Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) found that reforms that aim to change teaching and learning have weak effects (Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988, p. v). They conclude that one way for future reform to be successful is for policy makers to recognize the need to be open to variability. Furthermore, their report states that policy decisions need to encourage flexibility rather than penalize it (Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988, p. 61). Different communities have different needs, and policies that encourage variation better allow for the distinct needs.

## School Reform Efforts

Just now, more than 100 years after the first American public school was founded, we are beginning to realize that educational reform is a lot more complex and difficult than people originally realized. This complexity has resulted in a fairly consistent and resistant educational system. As Fullan (2007) states:

The *pressure* for reform has increased, but not yet the reality. The good news is that there is a growing sense of urgency about the need for large-scale reform, more appreciation of the complexity of achieving it, and even some examples of partial success. The bad news is that in some countries, such as the United States, we are losing ground—the economic and education gap has been widening at least since the year 2000. At this point, we know what needs to be done, but there is neither the sense of urgency nor the strategic commitment to do the hard work of accomplishing large-scale, sustainable reform. (p. 6)

In order to encourage change, we need to learn from what we know and promote action rather than more talk. Summarizing the previous studies, there are several things to consider when planning effective school change: first, change is difficult; second the school system is a complex network involving a lot of different people and perspectives; third, stakeholders need to be included; and finally, school reform will not happen if it does not meet the needs of the teachers and students.

Research has proven that all change requires adaptation and struggle. Fullan (2007) explains this point: “While there is a difference between voluntary and imposed change, Marris (1975) makes the case that *all* real change involves loss, anxiety, and struggle” (p. 21). It is, therefore, important to recognize that with forced change and high-stakes accountability, change becomes even more stressful. Supporting this idea, Richard Elmore (2004), the director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE),

a group of universities engaged in research on state and local education policy, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, states:

Cultures do not change by mandate; they change by the specific displacement of existing norms, structures, and processes by others; the process of cultural change depends fundamentally on modeling the new values and behavior that you expect to displace the existing ones. (p. 11)

With the recognition that change itself is difficult, it is also pertinent to realize that change is more effective when it is modeled, instead of forced. When we look at the school as a system for change, we see just how multifaceted and complex it is. In his dissertation, Jenger (2006) summarizes the literature on school reform:

Since the 1970s, perspectives and evidence have steadily developed that indicate that schools are complex, unanalyzable, open systems, loosely coupled, with means, ends and measures that are uncertain, ambiguous and contested. (p. 6)

When a school can get all members supporting change, it is a lot more effective. Clarke (1999) found, “Our study suggests that cross-boundary interaction is essential to systemic change in a high school. We found that system change becomes possible when individuals with different roles—students, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers—interact around a shared concern for student learning” (p. 7). Along these lines, reform efforts do not work without buy-in from staff members. In an article on re-making the American high school, Vail (2004) puts it succinctly: “Reform models that transform high schools also seek to transform teaching and instruction. And as with any reform effort, if the teachers don’t buy into it, it’s not going to work” (p. 4). Since the teachers are responsible for the day-to-day change, they must be supportive of the plans.

Another lesson that we can learn from others that have gone through a school-of-choice reform is that all stakeholders must be in agreement. Manual High School, in

Denver, demonstrates what can happen when this is not the case. In his review of what went wrong at Manual, Lichtenstein (2006) recounts, “One lesson that might be learned from the Manual experience is that when external reform agents are pitted against a district, the district inevitably wins. Or more precisely, no one wins” (p. 2). Knowing that school reform is more complex, involves more people, and requires agreement and support from all stakeholders forces researchers to reevaluate the process.

Research indicates that the implementation phase is extremely important. However, studies have found that many schools never get past this stage. Berman & McLaughlin (1978) state that a large part of the failures of past reforms is due to a failure to implement: “Past federal policy failures can be traced to unrealistic expectations, incorrect assumptions about local school district behavior and poor implementation” (summary). In fact, the implementation stage is frequently not ever successfully completed. In her dissertation on small schools, Dubkin-Lee (2006) summarizes:

They found that adoption was much more dynamic than previously researched.... A survey of participants in the center revealed that 56 percent of the adopters of an innovation adapted it in some way or only used part of the original planned intervention. (p. 45)

A main reason why many schools do not get past the implementation stage is that this process is a lot more complicated than experts originally thought. Fullan (2007) explains:

There are at least three components or dimensions at stake in implementing a new program or policy: (1) the possible use of new or revised *materials* (instructional resources such as curriculum materials or technologies), (2) the possible use of new *teaching approaches* (i.e., new teaching strategies or activities), and (3) the possible alteration of *beliefs* (e.g., pedagogical assumptions and theories underlying particular new policies or programs). All three aspects of change are

necessary because together they represent the means of achieving a particular educational goal or set of goals. (p. 30)

One of the main reasons that the implementation stage fails is because teachers are not convinced of the legitimacy of the changes, and thus fail to make the changes in their own classrooms. Klein (1989), a graduate student of Goodlad's, reminds us of his results of his seminal study: "Without commitments and considerable effort directed toward change by the local school faculty, desired changes from up high do not seem to be implemented behind the classroom door" (p. 5). Originally, evaluators believed that implementation required a strict adherence to the original plan. Now researchers are recognizing the importance of flexibility in the implementation stage (e.g., Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 2007).

Another reason that schools fail to implement reform efforts is a lack of the minimum resources. In the Rand Corporation study on Comprehensive School Reform, Vernez, Karam, Mariano, and DeMartini (2006) explain:

However, most schools did not have the level of implementation support that model developers deemed necessary. On average, teachers received about half of the recommended initial training and about one-quarter of the recommended ongoing professional development. Similarly, both the prescribed levels of external assistance from model developers/consultants and the time allocated to an internal school staff member to facilitate and coordinate model implementation fell short. (p. xix)

It is often a lack of resources, rather than a lack of desire that leads a reform effort to fail. Because so many schools never make it past the implementation phase, it was imperative to select two schools that have been in existence for at least ten years and are scoring high according to Colorado accountability standards.

A goal of this study is to help bridge the policy and educational worlds by shedding light on what is actually happening in the classroom. This understanding and collaboration will help reform become more successful. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) claim:

But if teachers work collaboratively with each other and with policy advocates, sharing goals and tactics, supporting each other in assessing progress and surmounting obstacles, then such an approach to school improvement could work better than mandates from above. It could produce what Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Joan E. Talbert call an “integrated reform strategy [of] seeking policy coherence at the classroom core,” in the everyday interactions of students and teachers around content. (p. 83)

It is, therefore, important to understand that change is more likely to occur when all stakeholders are involved in and supportive of the proposed change.

Ultimately, the teachers and the students are the ones who are most intimately impacted by the reforms. Reform decisions must take into account what the local community wants. Sizer (2004) warns:

But care should be taken to remember both that the details of any curriculum must reflect the community and the students served and that any “course of study” represents only one point on the triangle of student, teacher, and subject. Alter any one and the others shift—or the triangle breaks. (p. 230)

We need to recognize all of the people involved, rather than aiming to just change the curriculum.

Research suggests that because of the reasons above, many schools never make it past the implementation stage. Again, this is why it was important to select schools that have been in existence for long enough to successfully implement the desired reform.

## **Schools of Choice**

For the purposes of this study, I am using the State of Colorado's definition of schools of choice (Colorado Department of Education, 2008). Colorado offers a range of options; the options and a definition of each type follow. The first is charter schools. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) defines charters as public schools operating via a contract with the local school district. The second option for schools of choice in Colorado is home schooling. The state has developed a plan for the education of a child at home. The child's school district has limited supervision and control of the education. The third type of choice is institute charter schools. These schools are public schools operating via a contract with the State Charter School Institute. The fourth option includes magnet, focus, option, and contract schools. These are schools that are operated by a school district with a special focus, for instance, an arts-based school. The next type of choice is online learning. This option comprises K-12 educational programs delivered via the Internet. Colorado also has an open enrollment program. This is a law that allows students to enroll in schools that are not their neighborhood schools. Private schools are another type of school choice offered in Colorado; these include nonpublic private, parochial, and independent schools. Another choice option is School Programs. School districts offer alternative educational programs that operate under the umbrella of a neighborhood school. An example would be a school for pregnant teens. The final option in school choice is called School Within a School. These are special programs, such as International Baccalaureate, operated within a traditional, neighborhood school setting (Colorado Department of Education, 2008).

A main goal of the choice movement is for parents and students to have the ability to choose the school that will best meet their educational needs. The 1990s saw the beginnings of the comprehensive or systemic school reform efforts. These reforms meant that schools would attempt to completely revamp the essential elements of the school. As Vinovskis (1996) explains:

Systemic reform recognizes the central role of teachers in any reform effort and calls for providing adequate resources and training for their professional development. Thus, systemic reform attempts to align the curriculum, student assessment, and teacher preparation into a coherent and comprehensive effort to help all students achieve high standards of excellence. (p. 66)

In 1991, the United States saw the first Charter Law in Minnesota. Charter schools were created to offer alternatives to the traditional school. According to Malloy and Wohlstetter (2003) charter schools were originally intended to improve professional development and innovative teaching. The twenty years of charter school history has been marked by controversy and political disagreements. Oftentimes, political disagreements have dominated the debate rather than the student outcomes. As Vergari (2007) summarizes:

Charter school politics are battles about competing definitions of the concept of public school—what a public school looks like, how it is financed and governed, how it operates, and how it is held accountable. p. 32

A large reason for the political argument is because the American public has not agreed on what the true outcome of a public education should be. The idea of choice has brought this awareness to the public front. Some argue that charter schools are complimentary to public education and that they will fill the gaps and enhance public education. Others see charter schools as competition to the existing public school system

(e.g., Medler, 2007). Those that believe in competition believe that because of the economic principle of supply and demand, students will leave the failing schools and enroll in the new charter schools. The argument continues that existing schools will need to improve to compete. However, regardless of the view on charter schools, both have the potential to meet more needs. As Medler (2003) summarizes:

Both frames emphasize the importance of diversity and choice in approach to education. They both hold that: children learn in different ways; each school can succeed best by implementing one form of schooling well, rather than trying to be all things to all people; families should be able to match their chosen school to the way their child learns; and small, independent charter schools, freed from unnecessary rules and regulations, can implement their chosen model and meet the needs of individual students better than larger, bureaucratic systems. (p. 198)

The Center for Education Reform estimates that there are now around 4,000 charter schools in the U.S, serving more than one million students. The following facts, from the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), shed light on the current state of charter schools:

In the 2004–05 school year, there were 3,294 charter schools in the jurisdictions that allowed them (40 states and the District of Columbia), compared with 90,001 conventional public schools in all of the United States. Charter schools made up 4 percent of all public schools. The population of students served by charter schools differed from the student population served by conventional public schools. Charter schools enrolled larger percentages of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students and lower percentages of White and Asian/Pacific Islander students than conventional public schools. A larger percentage of charter schools (27 percent) than conventional public schools (16 percent) had less than 15 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), in Colorado there are 1,736 schools of which, 135 are charter schools. The Colorado Charter Law is described in Appendix I. So despite the fact that charter schools have caused a political divide with some believing that they are complementary to public schools and others believing that

they are competing with public schools (e.g., Medler, 2003), the number of charters is growing.

The research on the success of charter schools is mixed. Most studies rely on test scores and find mixed success across the different charter schools. Bierlein (1996) summaries that the research is split on the academic success of the charter school movement; however, it has been found that choice builds commitment. In a research project that examined three schools that have gone through a reform process, Wagner (2000) explains:

Rather, we need choice because the act of choosing to associate with a school promotes the sense of commitment and community that lies at the heart of all good schools. Choice also allows, students and families to pick programs that reflect their interests and values—critical motivational elements in improving student achievement. (p. 303)

In addition to these positive attributes, the benefits of a smaller learning community have been encouraging. Tasker (2004) reviewed the small-school literature to support similar change in England; she states:

The research supporting smaller learning communities is clear: they are safer; the student achievement gap between poor students and the well-off is narrowed; discipline problems and drop-out rates go down and student attendance goes up, as does participation in extra-curricular activities; teacher and parent satisfaction and student affiliation increase; college-going rates increase; the cost per graduate (from high school) is lower. (p. 70)

Overall, researchers have had a difficult time evaluating charter school data. The NAEP 2003 Pilot Study on America's Charter Schools highlights some of these difficulties. One reason for this difficulty is that many schools have just recently opened and some last only a few years. Another reason is that the student population is different, "For example, in comparison to other public schools, higher percentage of charter school

fourth-grade students are Black and attend schools in central cities” (NAEP 2003 Pilot Study on America’s Charter Schools, p. 3).

Recent data show that the charter schools and small-school movement have made improvements in the school experience. Keating and Labbe-DeBose (2008) found: “According to a *Washington Post* analysis of recent national test results for economically disadvantaged students, D.C. middle-school charters scored 19 points higher than the regular public schools in reading and 20 points higher in math.” Further research needs to focus on the connections between choice and student achievement.

In summary, the goal of the schools-of-choice movement is that students are more likely to find a school that meets their learning needs. Today we have a range of possibilities that are considered schools of choice. Research suggests that choice has been linked to increased commitment, a stronger community that reflects student interests and values, and a decrease in behavior problems. (e.g., Bierlein, 1996; Tasker, 2004; Wagner, 2000). Flexible policies allow for more variability in the types of schools available. It is, therefore, vital to understand the role of state and federal policies.

### **Impact of Federal and State Policies**

The most significant reform effort of the 2000’s was the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) by the U.S. Congress. NCLB is one of the most comprehensive federal efforts in the educational arena. Because of this, it has also had many unintended consequences, Darling-Hammond (2007) explains:

Other dysfunctional consequences derive from the law’s complicated accountability scheme, which analysts project will label between 85 and 99 percent of the nation’s public schools “failing” within the next few years, even when they are high-performing, improving in achievement and closing the gap. This will happen as states raise their proficiency levels to a national benchmark

set far above grade level, and as schools must hit targets for test scores and participation rates for each racial/ethnic, language, income and disability group on several tests—often more than thirty in all. (p. 3)

Many believe that the pressures of NCLB have actually hurt instruction and, therefore, learning. For instance, Easley (2005) found:

They attributed this effect to the forward-mapping of NCLB, of which formal assessments tends to play out as a control mechanism for teachers' strict adherence to top-down curricular scripts. Not only was teachers' work intensified by the new demands for the school to make AYP; students also began to feel the pressures of high-stakes testing. Teachers contended that students were left with little down time during the school day. Students are left emotionally ill by the public results of standardized tests. (p.169)

Federal laws, for example NCLB, drastically impact state and local decisions and are reflected in the classroom. In particular, the pressure of the high-stakes testing has impacted local flexibility.

In order for school-of-choice schools to be as successful as possible, they need the ability to be innovative. State policies that limit this flexibility often lead to negative consequences (Mead & Rotherham, 2007). Mead and Rotherham (2007) continue that the resulting choice and customized learning that is possible with charter schools is what we need:

Increased choice, customized teaching and learning opportunities, and competition within public education offer the promise of better educational outcomes for youngsters for whom public schools are not working well now. (p. 17)

As previously mentioned, The Center for Education Reform (2008) found that more than 4,000 charter schools exist and there are charter school laws in 40 states and the District of Columbia. It is estimated that more than 1.2 million children are enrolled in charter schools. A good deal of the charter school research focuses on whether state

laws encourage or discourage charter schools. The Center for Education Reform categorizes the states' laws into three categories. These classifications are displayed in the following table.

Table 1:

*Charter School Laws by State from the Center for Education Reform*

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Type of Charter Law by State	States
Strong to Medium-Strength Laws (Grades A-B):	Arizona; California; Colorado; Delaware; Florida; Georgia; Indiana; Massachusetts; Michigan; Minnesota; Missouri; Nevada; New Jersey; New Mexico; New York; North Carolina; Ohio; Oklahoma; Oregon; Pennsylvania ; Washington, D.C.; Wisconsin.
Weak Laws (Grades C-F):	Alaska ; Arkansas ; Connecticut; Hawaii; Idaho; Illinois; Iowa; Kansas; Louisiana; Maryland; Mississippi; New Hampshire; Rhode Island; South Carolina; Tennessee; Texas; Utah; Virginia; Wyoming.
No Charter School Law:	Alabama; Kentucky; Maine; Montana; Nebraska; North Dakota; South Dakota; Vermont; Washington; West Virginia.

It becomes evident how much the strength of the law impacts the creation of charter schools when one examines the breakdown of charter schools by state. Of the top eleven states for number of charter schools, ten of them have strong to medium-strength laws (see Appendix H). There are 3,452 charter schools in the 22 states with strong to

medium laws and only 761 in the 19 states with weak laws. Ten states have no charter schools. (Center For Education Reform, 2008) That means that on average there are 157 charter schools in states with strong to medium laws and 40 in states with weak laws. It is clearly easier to create schools of choice when the political system supports rather than hinders the process.

### **Engagement**

The limited view of reform offered by test scores makes it imperative to determine other ways to accurately measure the success of school reform efforts. Classroom engagement levels may provide this answer. Researchers believe that engagement is a key factor in student success (e.g., Audas and Willams, 2001; Connell, Spencer, and Aber, 1994; & Finn, 1989; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Marks, 2000). Engagement is generally thought to have three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. The behavioral side is reflected in participation in school and extracurricular activities; the emotional element is reflected in relationships and reactions to teachers, peers, and the school in general; and cognitive engagement is typically defined as the effort put forth in academic tasks (Fredricks et al., 2004). In their review of engagement studies, Fredricks et al. (2004) state that engagement should be seen as a “multidimensional construct that unites the three components in a meaningful way. In this sense, engagement can be thought of as a ‘meta’ construct” (p. 60). While many studies have researched the different aspects of student engagement, few have investigated how engagement levels reflect the success of the reform process. Fredricks et al. (2004) explain:

Although evaluations of these reforms do not specifically measure it, engagement may be the mediator that links reforms to outcomes. Including engagement measures in these intervention studies can provide insight into the degree to which engagement is responsive to variations in the environment and can point to the specific school and classroom changes that have the largest effects on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. (p. 74)

Engagement might, therefore, be the measure that determines whether a reform is successfully reaching students.

Typically school reform evaluations have focused on test scores. However, engagement provides a richer picture of what is taking place, and research suggests that it may be a stronger indicator of successful school reform. Finn (1989) found that students who identify with their school have an internalized conception of belongingness and that these individuals value success in school-relevant goals (p. 123).

According to Joselowsky (2007), engagement has been tied to motivation, intrinsic rewards, and increased retention. Understanding engagement as a multifaceted dimension that impacts student experience can enable reform efforts to better meet student needs. Fredricks et al. (2004), continue, “The study of engagement as multidimensional and as an interaction between the individual and the environment promises to help us to better understand the complexity of children’s experiences in school and to design more specifically targeted and nuanced interventions” (p.61).

When something is engaging and interesting, people are more likely to find it intrinsically motivating. Wagner (2000) describes what schools should offer students:

*Every* student needs to feel known, respected, and cared for by adults. *Every* student needs to feel that he or she can be a “winner”—can succeed at something worth doing. And *every* student needs to know that learning is not merely a means to the ends of giving the teacher what is expected, passing a test, or getting into a good college, but rather intrinsically interesting and rewarding for itself. (p. 62)

It follows that when students are enjoying an activity they are more likely to want to learn more. Researchers have not decided how to decide and who should determine whether a student is engaged. Fullan (2007) acknowledges that too few studies have actually asked students about their experiences. Studies are just beginning to ask students what helps them become engaged in an activity. Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) found:

The students' comments indicate that teachers can create classrooms that foster engagement regardless of any outside influences and are supported by Ames's (1992) findings that the characteristics of certain classroom tasks "foster a willingness in students to put forth effort and become actively engaged in learning." (p. 42)

Along these lines, engagement is important because it is one thing that school reforms can target. Ainley (2004) found, "Consistently across the countries where data were collected, school climate was shown to be an important factor in students' engagement with schooling" (p. 3). Unlike socioeconomic, family, and racial influences, school climate is one thing that can be impacted by school reform.

If teachers have the power to create these captivating environments, then they need to be encouraged to do so. In their book on engaging schools, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004) list the following elements of effective instruction:

- Personally relevant
- Access to native language
- Authentic, open-ended problems and involvement in mathematical discussions
- Peer collaboration
- Rigorous and challenging instruction with frequent assessment and feedback
- Access to technology. (p. 80)

The fact that teachers have the ability to change the engagement level through effective instruction is important. In a related study, Munns and Martin (2006) found:

At a meta-level, intervention designed to enhance students' motivation and engagement involves improving students' (a) approach to their schoolwork, (b) beliefs about themselves, (c) attitudes towards learning, achievement, and school, (d) study skills, and (e) reasons for learning. (pp. 2-3)

Both of these studies give educators and policymakers real goals to strive toward because engagement levels are something that are possible to impact. Additionally, motivational research suggests that schools can provide a climate that promotes a positive attitude and thus encourages engagement in all students (e.g., Hudley, Daoud, Hershberg, Wright-Castro, & Polanco, 2002).

Evaluating engagement is important because the risks and costs associated with disengagement are too important to discount. Students who are not engaged in school are more likely to drop out early and to exhibit criminal behavior (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). Lochner and Moretti (2004), estimate that a high school diploma decreases the probability of incarceration by 3.4 percentage points for African Americans and 0.76 for Caucasians. They continue by estimating that a one percent increase in graduation rates would save the United States around \$1.4 billion dollars a year. Additionally, on average, students who drop out make significantly less than high school graduates. For example, the U.S. Census approximates that over their career, dropouts will earn \$270,000 less than high school graduates (Cheeseman-Day & Newburger, 2002). Swanson (2004) states that drop-out rates are especially significant considering that only approximately 68 percent of 3.9 million students entering ninth grade in the academic year 2000-2001 earned a regular high school diploma in the standard four years. Considering the loss in earning potential, this translates to a loss of \$263 billion in national and state income from this group of dropouts alone.

One would expect that engagement levels would be high in schools in which the design is meant to meet the needs of individual students. Therefore, one purpose of this study is to determine what engagement levels are in two successful school-of-choice reformed schools.

### **Elementary Focus**

Another reason for this study is because it investigates reform at the elementary level. Research suggests that students begin the process of disengagement and dissatisfaction with school in the early years. While many recognize its importance, literature in the area of elementary reform is limited (as mentioned in Chapter One; an ERIC search finds 7 hits for “Elementary School Reform” while “High School Reform” returns 184 hits). This lack of literature exists despite the evidence of the importance of the early years. In their review of the literature, Slate and Jones (2005) explain:

Similarly, the results of the Texas Education Agency (1999) showed that students in the elementary and middle school grades were more adversely affected by school size than were students at the high school level. Thus, students in the primary, intermediate, and middle grades are likely to benefit academically from smaller schools, whereas secondary school students may benefit from the advantages offered by large schools. (p. 7)

Research in this area is especially important because it is a vital time in a student’s life. Fredricks et al. (2004) summarize the research on rejection in the early years of education:

In contrast, children who are rejected during the elementary school years are at greater risk for poor conduct and lower classroom participation, both elements of behavioral engagement, and lower interest in school, an aspect of emotional engagement. (p. 76)

Along these lines, Entwistle and Hayduk (1988) found that early experiences in school and at home have been found to be more influential on student achievement than

cognitive ability. Therefore, if positive patterns are established early, students are more likely to do well throughout school. And Audas and Willms (2001) found that: “Dropping out of school is not a single act of defiance, but is better characterized as a process that in many respects begins at birth and can cover many years of an individual’s life” (Audas and Willms, 2001, p. 1). Therefore, the pattern for dropping out of school begins early on, so for reform to be as successful as possible, it needs to stop this process from beginning. Ensminger and Slusarcick (1992) agree that experiences at a young age are crucial because they have a significant impact on whether a child will leave school before graduation:

The child’s initial adaptation to school may establish patterns of classroom performance and academic expectations and career that are maintained over a significant proportion of the student’s schooling....Early behavioral or achievement problems in school may begin a cycle of maladaptation that schools provide little opportunity to change, so the child is at an increased risk of continuing school problems and failure. (p. 98)

The elementary school years are vital to the creation of positive patterns of learning. It is during these years that students develop relationships and habits that will shape the rest of their school careers. Therefore, it is essential that more research is done to shed light on how reform impacts students in these grades.

### **Connecting Literature Review to Current Study**

Despite the difficulties inherent in school reform, the goal of this study is to select two schools in which a flexible state policy allowed for a successful venture through the implementation and continuation processes of a reform effort. The research aims to answer the questions of what can happen when school reform is done during the

elementary years. It is meant to describe the daily lives of the students that attend an elementary school that has adapted a school-of-choice reform model. In particular, the study will examine engagement levels in two schools. The key goal is that policy makers and educational decision-makers learn more about the day-to-day experiences of elementary students who attend school-of-choice schools so that ultimately the educational experience is bettered for all students.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

For my study, I combined several different methods. The first is Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship (hereafter called educational criticism), a method created by Elliot Eisner. In addition, to the educational criticism data, I collected data from interviews and a school engagement measure.

#### *Educational Criticism*

Eisner's educational criticism (1994) builds off of John Dewey's (1934) idea that we need to "lift the veils that keep the eyes from seeing" (p. 324). In Eisner's (1994) words:

Effective criticism, within the arts or in education, is not an act independent of the powers of perception. The ability to see, to perceive what is subtle, complex, and important, is its first necessary condition (p. 215).

Eisner designed the method in the late 1970's to offer an alternative method of evaluation. There are strong histories of educational criticism at Stanford University and the University of Denver. In fact, two recent educational criticism dissertations from the University of Denver have won the Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Award from the

American Educational Research Association. In addition, educational criticism is now used in a growing number of academic disciplines and is being used around the world.

Elliot Eisner is emeritus professor of Art and Education at Stanford University, and has won numerous awards throughout his career. These include a 2005 Grawemeyer Award, a Fulbright award, the Palmer O. Johnson Memorial Award (from the American Educational Research Association), a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, and five honorary degrees. In addition he has served as the president of American Educational Research Association, the National Art Education Association, the International Society for Education through Art, and the John Dewey Society. He has published dozens of books and hundreds of articles

There are two main components to this type of inquiry. The first, connoisseurship, is the art of appreciation; and the second, criticism, is the art of disclosure (Eisner, 1994). In keeping with a wine connoisseur who is able to detect subtle differences, a researcher must have enough educational knowledge to “see” what is taking place in a classroom. The criticism element is then necessary to point out where improvement is possible. According to Eisner (1994), the goal of the method is to answer “How can the results of educational evaluation be communicated so that the complexity *and* ambiguity *and* richness of what happens in schools and classrooms can be revealed?” (p. 189). Eisner believes that the end goal is to accomplish these three things so that we can help improve education. For this reason it is a perfect methodology for my study; it allowed me to observe and communicate what is really taking place in these school-of-choice classrooms, in the hopes of ultimately improving the American school system.

Educational criticism has four components: description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics (Eisner 1994). Eisner recognizes that these four are often merged in practice more than they are in theory. With that being said, there are specific elements of each. The description part is the first element; the goal of this phase is to create a vivid and accurate rendering of what is taking place in the four classrooms in this study. In order for it to be successful, it must portray the essential elements of the classroom. The reader should be able to imagine the experience of the students. The second element is interpretation. Eisner (1994) created three questions to respond to for the interpretative phase of the method: “What does the situation mean to those involved? How does this classroom operate? What ideas, concepts, or theories can be used to explain its major features?” (p. 229). These questions are most often answered through application of theories from the social sciences. The goal of the interpretation is to provide what anthropologist Clifford Geertz, calls a “thick description” of what is taking place (p. 230). Rather than just explaining what is taking place, the interpretation has to explain why it is taking place.

The next stage is evaluation. With this element the critic attempts to determine the value of the experience. According to Eisner (1994), unlike other areas of study, education has a personal and social good (p. 231). The point of educational criticism is to improve the educational experience, and therefore value must be inferred. Eisner (1994) believes that the key question becomes, “Are the children being helped or hindered by the form of teaching they are experiencing?” (p. 231). The final element is thematics: “The thematic aspect of educational criticism provides the reader with a kind of summary that enables the reader to grasp the essential point” (p. 233). In this study, the thematic stage

should be especially interesting, as combining the educational criticism with the data from the other measures will allow me to validate the found themes. It is these themes that I believe will add to the existing literature.

In an attempt to meet reliability, validity, and generalization concerns, Eisner (1994) discusses that while quantitative researchers may argue that the educational criticism method is difficult to generalize, “there is no value-free mode of seeing” (p. 218). For example, quantitative researchers still have to decide which questions to ask—so no research is completely objective. “Educational criticism illuminates particulars, but it is through particulars that concepts and generalizations are formed that are then applied to new situations” (p. 243). Additionally, to address the concerns about consensual validity, Eisner (1994), mentions two items: “structural corroboration and referential adequacy” (p. 237). Structural corroboration is similar to triangulation, in which different data are compared to make sure that they are consistent. “Evidence is structurally corroborative when pieces of evidence validate each other, the story holds up, the pieces fit, it makes sense, the facts are consistent” (p. 237). In this study, the observational data were compared with the engagement measure data and the interviews. I looked for themes that were found across the different sources of data. The finding of similar themes helped prove the accuracy of the results. The second item is referential adequacy; this is when:

We use the critic’s work as a set of cues that enable us to perceive what has been neglected. When the critic’s work is referentially adequate we will be able to find in the object, event, or situation what the cues point to. (p. 239)

The method is effective when the researcher accurately describes what is taking place and allows others to see what they did not previously see. Again, this is an essential element of my study; in that one of the goals is for those outside of the classroom to garner a better understanding of what is taking place inside classrooms that have gone through a school-of-choice reform.

### *Interviews*

In addition to the educational criticism, I collected data from a series of formal and informal interviews (Seidman, 1991). The interview questions, similar to the observations, were based on five dimensions that affect classroom life: the *intentional*, *curricular*, *pedagogical*, *structural*, and *evaluative* (Eisner, 1998 & Uhrmacher, 1991). I interviewed the current principal/director of each school and the principal/director that was the change initiator (see Appendix C). These interviews allowed me to garner background data on the reform effort and the role of the administration in both cases. The interviews also allowed me to understand the support system and general educational philosophies of the school leaders. I also interviewed four teachers from each school (see Appendix A). The plan was to talk to teachers who have been at the school for all different phases of the reform process. With that being said, it ended up that one teacher from each school was new this year, one had been there from the start of the school, and the others joined sometime in between. This allowed me to get perspectives from a range of experiences. I wanted to understand what brought people to the school at different phases and how the experience differed for the different teachers. I also wanted to talk to the teachers about their experience in a reformed class in comparison to previous teaching experiences.

In addition to the teacher interviews, I interviewed a range of students at each school. Students were selected based on teacher recommendation; the goal was to interview a mix of gender, ability, and length of time at the school. In total, I interviewed six students from Amy's class; five students from Kelly's class; seven from Ms. Patsa's class; and seven from Ms. Swasher's class. Despite the fact that the validity of student interview data is often questioned, researchers agree that it is possible to get accurate data from students. As Flowers and Moore (2003) summarize:

In regards to qualitative research, many scholars recommend that qualitative researchers carefully develop their research questions in such a way that they can generate meaningful and useful data. To achieve this objective, often it is recommended that a comprehensive interview guide with open-ended questions should be developed and used. This qualitative data collection technique enables students to conceptualize their perceptions and opinions in their own words. Open-ended questions also help minimize the occurrence of leading or directing students to answer questions in a particular manner. (p. 1)

In addition, court research often focuses on the legitimacy of testimony from children. In a historical review of child testimony, Cici and Bruck (1993) found that although children are susceptible to pressure from adults, it is possible to get relevant information from them. "...it is clear that children—even preschoolers—are capable of recalling much that is forensically relevant" (p. 433). They continue:

If the child's disclosure was made in a nonthreatening, nonsuggestible atmosphere, if the disclosure was not made after repeated interviews, if the adults who had access to the child prior to his or her testimony are not motivated to distort the child's recollections through relentless and potent suggestions and outright coaching, and if the child's original report remains highly consistent over a period of time, then the young child would be judged to be capable of providing much that is forensically relevant. The absence of any of these conditions would not in and of itself invalidate a child's testimony, but it ought to raise cautions in the mind of the court. (p. 433)

In addition, I piloted the student interviews with seven students, grades 1-6, from the school where I was teaching. I did this in order to make sure that the student responses provided rich information. For these reasons, I believe that the student interviews provide rich and valid data. I conducted interviews with five to seven students in each class (see Appendix B). The original plan was that the final interviews would be conducted with parents; I planned on interviewing four to ten parents. The goal of the parent interviews was to get additional viewpoints and to provide structural corroboration to the student and teacher interviews. Because of access issues and the recommendations of the teachers I was working with, I turned the parent interviews into a survey that was both sent home and e-mailed to all of the parents in all four rooms. The survey was an exact replica of the interview questions (see Appendix D). The questions were the same, but parents were able to fill them out and return them at their own discretion. Six parents returned the survey.

The formal interviews lasted no longer than an hour. With written permission, I audio-recorded the interviews, transcribed them, and had the interviewees check the data for accuracy. I used informal follow-up interviews with the four classroom teachers. The student interviews were shorter and more informal than the teacher and administrator interviews.

### *Engagement Measure*

The engagement measure that I used is a three-part survey that includes fifteen questions (see Appendix E). The survey was designed by the National Center for School Engagement. It was created in response to the idea that engagement should consider all three elements—behavioral, emotional and cognitive—of engagement (Fredricks et al.,

2004). The need for the survey grew out of the recognition that no measure existed that considered all three elements. The survey is currently being used in several studies to determine its validity; however, thus far, the reliability has been sound (M. Tombari, personal communication, October, 2007). Students in the four classrooms that I observed were asked to complete the survey in the beginning and at the end of the observation period. The survey took no longer than fifteen minutes each time it was administered, and it was done at times that were convenient for the classroom teachers. It was given two times so that I could analyze the data to see if the results were consistent. The results are considered using a criterion-referenced approach.

Data from the educational criticism, interviews, and the engagement measure were triangulated in order to verify the themes that emerged from each method. Similar themes emerged from all three sources.

### **Study Design**

In this study, I investigated classrooms in two schools that have successfully gone through a school-of-choice reform. For the purpose of this research, I define the school-of-choice reform in a manner similar to the comprehensive school reform (CSR) models in which students and teachers have the opportunity to choose a school that fits best with their natural propensities. Vernez et al. (2006) define how this school reform is defined:

CSR models provide schools with a set of prescriptions—a blueprint—that schools and their staff can follow. Although they share a common focus on changing the “whole school,” they vary in philosophy, curriculum, instructional practices, form of governance, and other relevant academic and organizational dimensions. They range from being very prescriptive, specifying every

requirement in great detail, to being process-focused, merely providing the school with a set of principles and activities to guide the process of change. (p. 30)

While I recognize that the schools I selected may not have implemented the chosen model exactly as defined by the model creators (Vernez et al., 2006), I limited the possible repercussions of this effect in two ways. First of all, I selected schools that are considered successful; I defined success as schools that are ranked as either *excellent* or *high* by the school accountability reports, as reported by the Colorado Department of Education:

In 2002, the top 8% of the rank-ordered schools in each distribution receive an “excellent” rating; the next 25% receive a “high” rating; the next 40% receive an “average” rating; the next 25% receive a “low” rating; and the bottom 2% receive an “unsatisfactory” rating. The lowest value in each performance rating range becomes the cut-score for that performance rating. Because the distributions are not restandardized each year, it is possible for schools to improve their performance ratings over time.

Second, I selected schools that had been in existence for at least ten years: as stated earlier, this should be enough time for the schools to have completed the implementation process. I selected two schools that have chosen different choice models for their reform; one was a Core Knowledge model and the other an Outward Bound/Expeditionary Learning model. I chose schools that have selected seemingly opposite reform models in the hopes of showing that a flexible policy allows schools to select a range of models in order to best meet various teaching and learning propensities, and therefore enhance the learning experience.

Following are my research questions and how I plan to answer each one:

1. *What happens in the classrooms of elementary schools that have gone through a school-of-choice reform?*

This question is answered through a comparison of the data from three different sources. First, two classrooms at each school, one primary classroom (1st-3rd grade) and one intermediate classroom (4th-6th grade), were used for the educational criticism portion of my study. Willing teachers were found through the principal or executive director of the two schools. After I explained my study and what I was looking for, both administrators provided me with names of teachers who would be a good fit with my study. I contacted the teachers and made sure they agreed to participate in my study. All four teachers agreed. After getting written consent, I spent about two and a half hours every other week for the majority of the school year observing in each classroom (classroom observations took place from December to May of the 2007-2008 school year). The goal was to spend enough time in each classroom to accurately portray what was taking place. I based my observations on the observation guide (Appendix F), which included the five dimensions that affect classroom life: the *intentional*, *curricular*, *pedagogical*, *structural*, and *evaluative* (Eisner, 1998, & Uhrmacher, 1991). This framework allowed me to investigate how the flexible state policy that allowed schools of choice to be created affected these five dimensions. The *intentional* dimension focuses on the goals of the classroom; I use intention, aim, and goal interchangeably (Uhrmacher, 1991). I was interested in what the teachers and administrators believed that the aims of their school were and how these matched the model the school had chosen. The *curricular* dimension is interested in the content and activities that the students partake in. In particular, I asked myself the following questions: How does the model of the

school impact these decisions; and since the school was given more freedom in designing the curriculum, is the content student-centered and engaging? The *pedagogical* dimension refers to the ways in which the curriculum is presented and taught. Since each teacher adds his or her own style and personality, I was interested in how each teacher interpreted and presented the material. The *structural* dimension includes the way in which the school day, week, and year are arranged. I was interested in how much flexibility the school and the teacher had in these decisions and how these decisions impacted the learning environment. The *evaluative* dimension includes both formal and informal assessments. In the case of Colorado schools, this will include state-mandated tests.

I paid particular attention to engagement levels, and to a matching of teacher and student propensities and interest. However, I did not want to limit myself to a “*prefigured focus*.” Eisner (1994) discusses that a researcher can enter a setting with a “*prefigured focus*,” or in other words, having pre-determined things to attend to; or can “allow the situation to speak for itself, that is, to allow for an *emergent focus*” (p. 176). Therefore, although I paid attention to the five dimensions, as well as engagement levels, the matching of propensities, and interest levels, I remained open to other explanations.

The second form of data collection was interviews. The interview guides were based on the five dimensions of a classroom explained above (Eisner, 1998; & Uhrmacher, 1991). I interviewed teachers, administrators, and students and surveyed parents. I wanted to interview teachers who had been at both schools for a variety of times. In order to help clarify the teachers whom I interviewed, I have created a chart detailing the interviews that took place.

Table 2

*List of Teacher Interviews*<sup>1</sup>

Name	School	Position	Years at School
Ms. Swasher	Apple Stream Academy	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher	6
Ms. Patsa	Apple Stream Academy	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher	3
Ms. Betta	Apple Stream Academy	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher	1
Ms. Thomas	Apple Stream Academy	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher	11
Amy	Grassy Hills School of Expeditionary Learning	4 <sup>th</sup> /5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher	2
Kelly	Grassy Hills School of Expeditionary Learning	2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher	6
Paul	Grassy Hills School of Expeditionary Learning	Kindergarten Teacher	1
Steve	Grassy Hills School of Expeditionary Learning	Kindergarten Teacher	15

I interviewed all eight teachers near the end of my observations. The interviews ranged in time from 20 to 45 minutes. Informal follow-up interviews took place with the four main teachers in my study. Follow-up interviews were necessary with these teachers to clarify intentions and practices that I noticed. These were conducted through informal conversations and e-mail communication. I also interviewed the current administrator at both schools. These interviews took place toward the end of the school year and lasted around thirty minutes. To compare their experiences to the administrators that were there when the schools were created, I interviewed the two men who held leadership positions

<sup>1</sup> All teacher names have been changed. In keeping with the school practices, teachers at ASA are called by their last names and teachers at GHSEL are called by their first names.

when the schools started. These interviews were lengthy, and both lasted for several hours. Student interviews were done in all four classrooms. Before I began my study I piloted my interview questions with seven kids at the school I am teaching at in order to make sure that the questions made sense to elementary students and that the students gave me answers that helped me understand their experience. Seven students were interviewed from Ms. Patsa's room; seven students from Ms. Swasher's; five students from Kelly's; and six students from Amy's classroom. Again, I have chosen to refer to teachers in the way that the students in their classes do; therefore, the teachers at ASA are referred to more formally, while GHSEL students call their teachers by their first names. The student interviews took anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes. The teachers helped select students who offered a range of qualities including gender, academic ability, and the length of time at the school. After gaining written permission, I audio-taped all interviews. Finally, I had six parents respond to the parent survey that I sent home. I had originally expected to interview the parents in person, but because of difficulties scheduling interviews, I sent surveys home. Parents were given the option to fill out the surveys and return them to the classroom teacher.

The final element of data analysis used to answer this question was an engagement measure (see Appendix E). All of the students in the four classrooms were given the engagement measure on two occasions. I explained the survey to all four classrooms and worked in small groups with the two primary classrooms to assist them in filling out the surveys correctly. The administration took between 10 and 30 minutes. I gave the survey at the beginning (December) of the observations and at the end (May); so that I could compare the answers. I then evaluated the results from this measure in a

criterion-referenced manner. While the engagement data are mentioned here, I save the main analysis for the response to my third research question.

The goal was to compare all of the data to determine what is truly taking place for the students on a day-to-day basis and to better understand how a state policy that allows for variability, impacts the dimensions of a classroom. I wrote four separate criticisms with a section unifying the themes that emerged from the collection. I shared my educational criticisms with the four teachers to allow them to check them for accuracy. The responses from all four teachers are included in Chapter Four.

*2. How does the policy play out at the classroom level?*

This question was designed to see how the reform process impacts different stakeholders. It is answered primarily through the interviews (Appendices A-D) with stakeholders and with the classroom observations. The goals of the interviews were to understand the different perspectives and to learn more about how each person was impacted by the change (for a list of interviews please see above). These first-hand accounts allow “outsiders” to better understand the process and results of school reform.

*3. What levels of engagement are found in classrooms of schools that have gone through a school-of-choice reform?*

This question is answered with the data from the engagement measure (Appendix E), interviews (Appendix A-D) and observational data. Through a triangulation of data, I was able to confirm themes that emerged from the educational criticism with the data from the engagement measure and interviews. Again, recent research points to the need to gather qualitative data on the engagement levels of students to understand how this affects school reform efforts (Fredricks et al., 2004). One would expect that since the

school-of-choice policy allows these schools to match learning and teaching propensities, high engagement levels would be found in the four classes. The actual results help add to the literature on the relationship of engagement and successful reform. High levels of engagement were found and significant differences were found that reflect the missions of the two schools.

*4. What lessons can policy-makers and educational professionals learn from these reform examples?*

The point of this question is to help bridge the policy and education worlds. To restate, we currently have a case of two completely different worlds and until these worlds are merged, reform will fail (Fullan, 2007). This study is meant to help combine the educational research and policy research on the change process and evaluate how the policy impacts the actual experience for the students. Using the interview data together with the engagement measure results and the educational criticism observations, allows me to present a rich description of how the reform process impacts the classroom experience for these two schools. Specifically, it allows me to present stories of the student experiences. These two schools offer a snapshot of successful reform. Understanding the experiences of both schools will allow others to learn how they should attempt reform. Getting inside the school and evaluating more than test scores will offer a broader picture of student outcomes. As Mead and Rotherham (2007) conclude:

Innovative charter schools, charter school networks, and high-quality authorizers have developed more nuanced ways to measure school and student outcomes across a broader range of indicators than simply test scores. (p. 18)

Allowing the voices of all who are impacted to come through in one study sheds light on the whole picture. Ultimately, I analyzed the data for implications of lessons about school reform in particular and education in general.

### **About the Researcher**

If you had asked me what I would be when I grew up I would have never answered “a teacher.” After thinking that I would work in child psychology, I realized that I wanted to help kids before they were diagnosed with “an issue.” I wondered whether it is possible to avoid a lot of the obstacles that children face. About this time, I was introduced to the Waldorf Schools and thought for the first time that maybe I would want to work in alternative education.

I started investigating Waldorf Schools, and alternative education in general, and was impressed with the amount of research and ideas in the field. Wanting to see what was actually happening in the schools before attempting to change them, I decided to return to graduate school to get a teaching license and Masters degree. While I was making the decision to attend either a traditional teacher training program or a Waldorf one, my mom asked me whether I wanted to fight the system or work within one that better matched my educational philosophy. I guess I decided to fight.

In a series of serendipitous events, I found out that an expert in Waldorf Schools worked at the University of Denver, so I applied to DU for a combined Master’s degree and teaching license. Before I knew it, I was hooked and decided to continue with my PhD. Knowing the whole time that I wanted to work in the area of school reform and

alternative education, I have focused most of my research in different areas related to these topics.

I started my teaching career in a traditional K-6 elementary school in a large metro area district. While working there I was constantly frustrated with the way in which students and teachers were treated. In trying to get everyone to fit into one mold, most got left behind. Working in the classroom has confirmed the dire state of our public educational system, and I decided to switch to an alternative program for gifted students. I have been teaching at this school for the past three years. Working in a school that promotes teacher development and a love of learning has been inspirational for me. The needs of the learners are put at the center of every decision, and curriculum is taught in a thematic manner. After my years working in education, I am more passionate than ever to get involved in school change. I believe that despite having a lot of the answers, we continue to fail our students. And it is this process that had led me to my dissertation topic.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Descriptions of School-of-Choice Classrooms**

#### **Introduction**

To portray what took place in the four classrooms that I observed, I have divided the following descriptions into three areas: the student experience, behind-the-scenes, and engagement. I offer a short description about each school and then describe the two classrooms at each school using these three areas.

#### *The student experience*

To describe what these students experience on a day-to-day basis, I utilized three of the five dimensions of schooling: pedagogy, curriculum, and evaluation (Eisner, 1998 & Uhrmacher, 1991). These shaped my interview questions, as well as my observations. The pedagogical dimension refers to the teacher and the ways in which students are taught. Eisner (1998) elaborates:

Teachers teach by example, by covert cues, by emphasizing some aspects of content more than others, by rewarding students directly and indirectly, by the animation and excitement they display in class, by the level of affection they provide to students, by the clarity of their explanations, and more. (p. 77)

For my data collection, I focused on how the teacher presented information whether the classroom instruction related to the school's model (Core Knowledge and Expeditionary Learning), and whether the teacher matched student propensities with classroom lesson/activities. I was interested in the intricacy of the teacher and her

teaching style. In addition, the way in which the room was organized and structured played into this dimension.

The curriculum, according to Eisner (1998), is an essential element to examine. “One of the most important aspects of connoisseurship focuses upon the quality of the curriculum’s content and goals and the activities employed to engage students in it” (p. 75). My research focused on how curriculum decisions are made at both schools. In particular, I was interested in who makes the curricular decisions. For example, was freedom given to the teacher; was curriculum chosen based on student interest; did the administration decide what would be taught; or were decisions made at the district level? In addition, I was interested in the process in which these curricular decisions were made. I also paid attention to whether the curriculum engaged the students.

In addition, Eisner (1998) believes that the evaluative dimension is more than just the testing. “Evaluation concerns the making of value judgments about the quality of some object, situation, or process. Evaluation practices permeate classrooms because of the ways in which teachers appraise students’ comments, their social behavior, and their academic work,” (Eisner, 1998, p. 80). In order to measure this dimension, I was interested in how many different types of assessment are used, what the different forms of assessment used were; how the results of the assessments were used; and how the students reacted to the different types of assessment. I was also interested in how the teachers reacted to situations and the subsequent praising or punishment of students.

In order to tell the stories of what is happening in each of the classrooms, I have included vignettes from my time in each classroom as well as data from student, teacher, and parent interviews.

### *Behind-the-Scenes*

To help explain the other factors that influence the daily experience of the students; I employed the final two dimensions from Eisner's five dimensions of schooling: intentions and school structure (Eisner, 1998, & Uhrmacher, 1991). For the intentional dimension, Eisner (1998) states, "The *intentional dimension* deals with goals or aims that are formulated for the school or classroom. The term *intentional* designates aims or goals that are explicitly advocated and publically announced as well as those that are actually employed in the classroom"( p. 73). The intentional dimension is notable in this study because the schools of choice are inherently different based on their stated intentions. My research focused on how close the classroom environment matched the intentions of the school's model (Core Knowledge and Expeditionary Learning), how the teacher expressed her intentions, and whether the teacher intentionally matched activities with student needs/interest. Research has shown that there is often a discrepancy between what the stated goals are and what takes place in the classroom. Therefore, I was interested to see if I, too, found this to be the case (e.g., Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Dubkin-Lee, 2006; Fullan, 2007).

Eisner (1998) believes, "Understanding the influence of an organizational structure in schools provides a basis for considering its utilities and liabilities, its benefits and costs. It allows us to consider another way of doing things" (p. 75). I was

particularly interested in how the school day, week, and year are organized; who determined the schedule; and how strictly the teachers adhered to the schedule. I was also interested in whether the schools' structures were conducive to engagement and learning.

To help describe the factors inherent in the school structure and intentions, I describe scenes from the classroom, as well as teacher and administrator interviews and research on the two school-of-choice models.

### *Engagement*

In examining the engagement levels in the classrooms, I based my data collection on the three types of engagement detailed by Fredricks et al. (2004). The first, behavioral, is concerned with participation, involvement, and conduct. To measure this, I wanted to know if the students were actively participating in activities; if there was a great deal of time spent off-task; if there appeared to be a lot of behavioral issues; and how punishments were handled. The second type of engagement, cognitive engagement, refers to motivation and effort. For this, I was interested in whether students appeared to understand new content and if students expressed a desire to learn more. The final engagement type, the emotional, refers to interests and emotions. It often refers to relationships within the classroom. To measure this, I examined student-to-student and student-teacher relationships in the four classrooms. This multifaceted definition of engagement is reflected in the description given by Skinner & Belmont (1993):

Children who are engaged show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they

show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest. (p. 572)

I was interested in seeing if the children in these classrooms exhibited these traits and were, therefore, engaged in the activities.

Additionally, my research focused on examining student and teacher interest.

Aware of the strong connection between engagement and interest, I wanted to observe the apparent level of interest demonstrated in the classrooms by both the teachers and the students.

The final area that I was interested in was student propensities. For the purposes of this paper, I am using propensities to mean a natural inclination toward something, assuming that often people have a natural talent in that particular area. In order to assess this area in the four classrooms, I looked for whether a variety of activities were provided (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) and whether students were given a chance to demonstrate mastery in a variety of ways.

In order to detail the engagement levels that took place in these four classrooms, I used data from the engagement survey that was given twice to all students in the four classrooms; teacher, student, parent, and administrator interview data; and observational data. As will be seen in the data analysis, a theme that was evident in all classrooms was a high level of engagement and satisfaction from teachers and students. All four teachers believed that engagement was an essential element in the learning process and were cognizant of it in their teaching practice.

In order to understand the context of the classrooms, it is important to understand about the schools and the models that they have chosen. Following is a brief background on the Core Knowledge school where I conducted my research. The two teachers at the Core Knowledge school follow. I then detail the Expeditionary Learning school and describe the two teachers' classrooms after the school details.

## **Apple Stream Academy, Core Knowledge**

### **Introduction**

Apple Stream Academy<sup>2</sup>(ASA) is a public charter school in one of the metropolitan areas of Denver, Colorado. According to the district website, there are 58 schools in the district and 35% of the students are minority students. According to the state accountability report, in 2007-2008 there were 454 students enrolled and 0% of the students qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch. 90.7% of the students received proficient or advanced across content areas on the 2008 CSAP tests. Apple Stream Academy was founded in 1995 by a group of concerned parents and was the first charter school in this district. In addition to the Core Knowledge model, the school adopted the following mission statement: *“Motivated children and responsible parents working together with dedicated teachers for excellent education.”* The school is currently a K-8 school with a state ranking of *Excellent*. In addition, it was awarded a John Irwin Award for excellence for the 2006-2007 school year. According to the school's website, Apple Stream Academy:

...focuses on higher academic achievement for students including rigorous curriculum, longer school day and year, phonics, uniforms, and expectations that

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<sup>2</sup> Names of the schools have been changed.

each student will reach their full academic potential. Relying on the Core Knowledge Curriculum, students are taught specific knowledge of facts and relationships within the subjects of history, geography, science, art, literature, music, math, language arts, and computer skills. Actual knowledge combined with critical thinking skills enable students to think and function in our literate society. ASA values academic performance, strong parental involvement, parental governance, and a commitment to exceptional staff and administrators.

The school website describes the acceptance process; to be accepted, parents must complete a letter of intent. Names are then placed on a waitlist based on the date the letter is received. There is an established priority list, with children of employees, siblings, and students within the district receiving preference over other applicants. In addition, parents are required to sign a contract and volunteer 40 hours per year for two-parent families and 20 hours per year for single-parent families.

The Core Knowledge curriculum was originally designed by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. at the University of Virginia. The basic premise is that a core curriculum exists, and in the matter of fairness and “cultural literacy,” all students should be taught this curriculum. According to the Core Knowledge Foundation’s website, Hirsch designed the curriculum around the “4 S’s: solid, sequence, specific and shared.” *Solid* suggests the notion that there is a lasting set of knowledge that is important for everyone to know and does not change over time. Because of this, Hirsch reasons that every student should be exposed to this knowledge. *Sequence* refers to the fact that the curriculum builds off of itself and requires that lessons are taught in a particular order. This leads to a structured approach that defines yearly curriculum for all grades. *Specific* proposes that curriculum should cover particular information rather than broad topics. Finally, Hirsch advocates that in order to have a culturally literate society, we need to have a *shared* set of knowledge. The

curriculum offers schools and teachers established content and a set of knowledge that should be taught at each grade level. It has very clear objectives and guidelines for all people involved in the learning process, including the students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

During the interview with one of the founders of the school, I learned that the Core Knowledge model was chosen for this particular school because several parents believed that the current literacy approach in the district was failing students. The founder's own son had a learning disability that was not diagnosed. "This would have been avoided if there was a structured approach to literacy with a focus on phonics." So when looking at models to choose from, the structured approach of the Core Knowledge sequence fit perfectly with the parents' needs.

**Ms. Patsa<sup>3</sup>**

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, Core Knowledge**

#### **Introduction**

Ms. Patsa, a third-grade teacher, has been at Apple Stream for the past five years. She taught for six years in the southeastern United States before moving to Colorado. She described her previous school as "a pretty traditional elementary school. It was not terribly different than teaching here. The only differences are the size and level of parental involvement." While discussing why she took a job here, she commented, "the thing that appealed to me about this school was the curriculum and that the approach to education is fundamental, or back-to-basic. These things fit well with my experience and

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<sup>3</sup> Names of teachers have been changed.

philosophy. I liked that it is a small school with high parental involvement. It was a good fit for all those reasons.”

When you walk into her classroom, it is obvious that everything has a particular place. It appears as if a lot of time was spent determining how and where everything should go. Her classroom reminded me of a well-oiled military machine, with Ms. Patsa at the front as the general. She guided the students through the exercises, offering clear directions, followed with the necessary support and structure. The students were expected to sit quietly and be prepared for the next lesson. Ms. Patsa definitely had a no-nonsense manner with her students; there is a toughness about her that keeps the class on track. However, despite the structure and order, when asked, the students commented that they were supported and happy to be there.

There are 13 girls and 13 boys, a total of 26 students in her classroom. I observed Ms. Patsa’s classroom from December through May of the 2007-2008 school year. I was able to observe Ms. Patsa’s third grade class during their reading, writing, social studies, science, and recess times. Ms. Patsa is in her late twenties/early thirties and is quite thin. Her hair, which she always wears down, is blonde with highlights. She wears stylish glasses and keeps herself well dressed. She has pictures of her and her husband and what looks to be her parents on her desk.

### *The student experience*

The school is located in an old church, and Ms. Patsa’s classroom is located in the rectangular shaped addition. A square-shaped classroom, housed this group of third

graders. Four groupings of six desks pushed together dominated the room; the additional two students sat at separate sides of a table located in the front of the room, near the overhead. Evidence of the different units being studied covered the walls. For example, Native American and human body books and posters filled the room. Windows dominated the northern wall of the room. Below the windows, Ms. Patsa had hung posters of writing techniques, reminding students to proofread their work and use the six traits of writing. A small American flag hung near a large T.V. and DVD player that served as the focal point at the front end of the windows. In addition, a student i-Mac, also on the north wall, sat near Ms. Patsa's desk. The majority of the room was organized and structured for serious learning; however a cozy area for reading and quiet work was found near the windows. Bookshelves created a space filled with pillows and partially separated from the classroom where the students would read quietly and work independently.

On the back wall, books, many of which were *Great Illustrated Classics*, spilled out of buckets above the coat rack. Students kept their water bottles stored above these book buckets. A paper chain hung from the ceiling; clearly made by students, with their favorite words written on the links. The southern wall housed storage cabinets and a large shelf. On the cabinets, Ms. Patsa had a large display with "Want Milk?" posted and then "white," "chocolate," and "no thanks." The students each had a "cow" with their name on it, and they were supposed to put the cow on their choice. So when students came in the classroom in the morning, they moved their names allowing Ms. Patsa to do attendance and milk count. To go to the bathroom, students needed to take a green cone and put it on

his or her desk and then put their name and the time that they left the room on the sign-out sheet.

### *Pedagogy*

Ms. Patsa commented that her teaching style fit well with the school and when questioned, she said this about her educational philosophy:

I think that all students can learn. They may learn differently; that's the challenge as a teacher—to address the different learning styles. This is especially challenging in a traditional setting. It really requires parental involvement. In schools, I believe, the more clear the discipline and expectations are, the better students do. This allows teachers to reach them on their own pace.

When I asked her if her own philosophy lines up with the school's, she answered, "Yes, it matches." Her class was kept inline by her no-nonsense approach to teaching, and she left little room for students misbehaving. In keeping with her beliefs about learning, this strict environment allowed her to focus on teaching instead of discipline.

The most common teaching style that I observed was Ms. Patsa providing information while the students took notes on worksheets or prepared packets. Often the information came from a textbook, with Ms. Patsa and the students taking turns reading the information.

The first social studies activity that I observed was for their Native American unit. Ms. Patsa asked the students to take out their Native American comparison charts. The lesson began with students sharing what they knew. Ms. Patsa told the students that they

could use the information already on their charts but that she preferred answers from memory. A few students offered vague answers, for instance:

“The pilgrims celebrated Thanksgiving with the Native Americans.”

Ms. Patsa listened and then asked them to give more detailed responses. With this probing, and the use of the charts, the students were able to offer answers that satisfied the question.

The ultimate goal of the assignment was to select two tribes and write a paragraph comparing and contrasting the tribes. There were eight tribes on the chart. Ms. Patsa let them know that there would also be a test, “You should fill out this chart well because you can use the chart on the test.”

When the objectives were clearly laid out, the class started reading from a text about the different tribes. As they came to information that the chart required, Ms. Patsa would stop and wait for the students to fill out the sections on each tribe. While sharing answers and filling out the chart, a boy began fiddling with pencils and supplies in his desk. He was writing with a pencil that had been sharpened down so far that there was very little left. Ms. Patsa took the things that he was fidgeting with and told him to replace his “bad” pencil with two new pencils. He immediately went to the shelf where a bucket of pencils sat next to an electric sharpener. The boy picked out two pencils, sharpening them there before returning to his desk. When he was done, the class returned to the Native American research.

While she instructed, Ms. Patsa walked around the room monitoring behavior and keeping students on track. She would ask questions throughout the process checking for understanding and rewarding correct responses.

“Yes, Iroquois means snakes,” Ms. Patsa commented after asking the class what the tribe name meant. She was able to weave the vocabulary words into the instruction, thereby giving definitions as she went. The students demonstrated an eagerness to share, and most had their hands up for all questions. The chart that they were filling out had the eight Native American tribes listed in the first column and then columns for holidays and traditions; where they lived, important historical events, and other information.

When they got to the section that was about holidays and traditions, Ms. Patsa allowed the students to share their own traditions around the holidays. For example:

“We all eat a big dinner for Christmas Eve and then open presents the next morning,” remarked one student.

“We celebrate Thanksgiving at my Grandma’s every year. She cooks a bunch of food,” commented another.

Several other students shared their family traditions. This vocal and personal comparison allowed the students to connect to the different Native American traditions. As they mentioned different traditions that their families partook in, the students began to notice how all of their traditions for the same holidays differed from each other. The students began commenting how differently people celebrate the same holidays.

“We open our presents on the morning of Christmas, not the night before like Sarah’s family,” commented one student.

“Yes, and we open one present the night before when we get back from church,” another student mentioned.

The next section of the chart was about the Cherokee Nation. Ms. Patsa told them that she wanted them to include information on the Trail of Tears. The class had previously read about the event, and so Ms. Patsa asked them, “Were they tears of joy?”

“No,” answered several students in unison.

“Was this fair? How do you feel when things are unfair in your life?”

She allowed students to share about things that they didn’t think were fair; again an opportunity to try to relate their own lives to the Native Americans. The comments ranged from their parents making them do things that they didn’t want to do to arguments on the playground. Ms. Patsa tried to call on different people, allowing a variety of students to share their thoughts. While the situations were nowhere near the severity of what the Cherokees had survived, the thought process of thinking about situations in their own lives that they felt were unjust helped them relate a little more to some of the feelings that the Cherokee people must have felt. During the lesson, students were expected to sit and stay focused. Expectations were clear, and it was evident from their positive behavior that students respected their teacher.

Ms. Patsa encouraged the students to continue the process of reading and filling out the information on the chart, using as many connections as possible to help the material come more alive to the students. She would often refer to the large United States map to help the students locate where the different tribes lived or where different events took place. All of Ms. Patsa’s directions were clear and direct, and she constantly made connections to lessons the class had previously done. This was the norm in her classroom, and all of the lessons that I observed were structured in a manner that matched this clear and direct instruction.

Writing lessons followed this well structured system, having clear objectives and activities organized in a linear fashion. The following lesson on paragraph writing in response to a prompt demonstrates this structure. Ms. Patsa began with the goal for the activity. It was for the students to practice writing a well-structured response paragraph with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Responding to a prompt is a portion of the writing CSAP (statewide achievement tests) and Ms. Patsa let the class know that this activity would help prepare them for the testing. The activity was timed, with each step of the writing process having a set time. To begin, Ms. Patsa gave them seven minutes for prewriting. In order to successfully complete this part of the lesson, the students were given a paragraph-planning sheet. This was a worksheet that had sections for the topic sentence (beginning), the details (the middle), and a conclusion (the ending). The goal of the sheet was for the students to plan what they were going to write. Ms. Patsa explained that writers need to plan what they want to say before writing so that their final pieces are well organized. At the end of the seven minutes the buzzer went off, and Ms. Patsa gave instructions for the next activity, “You are now to begin the rough draft portion of the writing. You will have fifteen minutes to write this draft. You should use your planning sheet to help you with the rough draft. Remember to use the whole time.”

Ms. Patsa walked around during the fifteen minutes, helping students and suggesting what they should be working on. The students silently worked on their rough drafts. As I observed the pieces that were being written, I noticed a good deal of variation in the writing ability that took place. However, overall, the amount of writing that the third graders were able to do was impressive. Many of the students were even writing proficiently in cursive, a skill usually taught, not mastered, early in the third grade.

After five minutes, one student wanted to turn his paper in. Ms. Patsa reminded him of the things that he should be checking on, for instance, misspelled words, indented sentences, and complete thoughts. She announced to the class that she would not be collecting any papers until the end of the fifteen minutes. For the remaining ten minutes, she gave them constant reminders encouraging them with comments such as, “I know that this is a difficult thing to do; writing this quickly. You’re doing great, keep pushing yourselves.”

Another five minutes passed and the students started to get squirmy. Ms. Patsa continued walking around making suggestions out loud as to what the students could and should be doing. Several students stood up and walked over to the ‘Writing Wall’ to use the posters to help. There was one poster titled, “Put away Worn-out Words,” another was, “Need a Writing Idea?” and the third, “Using Sensory Words.” Other students checked words in a thesaurus. I was impressed that they knew where to head for help and did these tasks independently.

The final five minutes of the rough draft portion of the assignment found the students working hard to finish their paragraphs. When the five minutes were over the students were instructed to turn in finished papers; if not finished, Ms. Patsa instructed them to put the paragraphs away to finish during the morning activities. In total, the planning and rough draft took twenty-two minutes; there were a few restless students, but the majority stayed on task and worked hard for the entire time. A strong writing focus is found in the room; the majority of the posters reflect writing ideas and process. CSAP writing preparation is a focus, and the class had plenty of opportunities to practice the test format and content.

Ms. Patsa definitely had a hard-nosed approach to classroom management. There was little room for students misbehaving. However, more often than not, subtle cues and comments got the students back on track without interrupting the lesson. For instance, one time a student was talking. Ms. Patsa simply came over and stood behind him. She quietly got him back on track without saying anything. Another time, a child was not paying attention, and Ms. Patsa asked her if she needed to go sit in the hall. This comment immediately got the student back on track. The school had structured discipline policies and everything from tardies to uniform violations counted toward the policy. The high level of discipline appeared to work, as, for the most part the students were well-behaved. All of the teachers I interviewed at the school mentioned the importance of a strict discipline code. Even during recesses, there were few negative “incidents,” and students generally worked through their own issues. Ms. Patsa used a whistle to signal the end of recess and as an indicator for the students to line up. She usually only needed to call one time for the students to come in. After they were perfectly lined up, Ms. Patsa had them check their shirttails and shoelaces before returning to the class. Ms. Patsa often made sure that uniforms were correct and held them accountable for mistakes. “You need to put your name on the board. I’ve talked to you already about your shirttail today.”

The classroom atmosphere is much more structured than in the other three classrooms I observed. However, within the structure, flexibility was found and Ms. Patsa made an effort to include activities that would engage the students. At times Ms. Patsa would play quiet music for the students, and on several occasions she would use games

and other fun activities to draw the students in. Examples of these types of activities are found in the curriculum section below.

### *Curriculum*

Core Knowledge curriculum is well planned out and teachers are expected to stay within the guidelines created by the organization. When I asked Ms. Patsa how she created lesson plans and generated ideas for curriculum, she replied,

My partner and I work together. The grade level had a strong base when we started, so we worked from there. Science and social studies are Core Knowledge required, but teachers gather their own materials. So science is self-done but now we have a guide for social studies. We try to go beyond it, but it helps to have a guide to start with. Math is very mapped out. Reading is in transition; right now it is very comprehension-focused. We use the Open Court series.

In order to help understand how specific curriculum decisions were decided at ASA, I questioned Ms. Patsa about the process. Ms. Patsa replied,

Since I started here, math is the only thing that has changed. This change was driven originally by the parent senate based on the lower math CSAP scores. The parent senate came to us, as the teacher body, and provided their researched evidence; they had done the research on what they wanted math to look like. Teachers gave some input at this meeting, but I think most felt like they had to go with it. At the grade level, my partner and I made some additions to the third grade reading program because it was weak. We were allowed to do that at grade level; but the big changes come from the parent senate and the principal.

In fitting with the intentions of the Core Knowledge program, there is not a lot of flexibility in the curriculum choices. Ms. Patsa did mention, though, that she tries to make some of the activities more interactive, especially her science lessons. One science activity that I observed was intended to help the students understand the parts of the human brain. The objective for the students was to be able to list and make the three

elements of the brain. The students had been working on the parts of the brain for awhile, and at the start of the lesson they were able to easily list the parts. Ms. Patsa told them that they were going to build a brain. The students got excited because they thought that they were going to make brains out of candy.

“Well, we’re using clay so you probably don’t want to eat them,” Ms. Patsa joked as she gave them each a piece of clay and began with her instructions.

“Take the clay and break it in half to make two neat circles. This is because we have two hemispheres.” She continued by breaking down the word “hemisphere” into its parts and explained that it means “half” and “round.” She also told them that she would be using vocabulary that she didn’t expect them to remember, but that she wanted them to hear the different words. They made the two balls and then made a corpus callosum to connect them.

The activity drew the students in and allowed for a better understanding of the parts of the brain. Ms. Patsa had the students use different colors of clay to help make the parts stand out, and the activity offered a good review of the necessary vocabulary. The behavior of the students was noticeably different for this more “hands-on” activity. The class was louder during this lesson, but despite the increased energy and noise, they remained orderly and well-behaved. When everyone had finished creating the parts of the brain, Ms. Patsa asked the students review questions. Candy was handed out for correct answers. The activity took about 20 minutes. When it was done, Ms. Patsa handed out plates to each table to put the “brains” away. The students then used wet wipes to wipe hands and tables. After a quick transition, the students were ready for the next lesson. The idea to build the brains out of clay was not a part of the curriculum; however, Ms. Patsa

included it because she believed it helped the students connect to the brain more than reading about it would allow for.

The following lesson is another example of Ms. Patsa's desire to try to add an interactive element to the science curriculum. According to the Core Knowledge Foundation's website, the third grade curriculum should include: "Introduction to light, optics, and sound. Sound waves are much slower than light waves. Astronomy: orbit, rotation, gravity. Gravitational pull of the moon, and to a lesser degree, the sun, causes ocean tides on earth." The class filtered in from recess, and the students immediately took out their science packets. A routine had been established, and students did this without a cue from Ms. Patsa. She walked in behind them and immediately began the lesson. "Today's lesson is about plants and light, or photosynthesis," Ms. Patsa instructed. She went on to let them know that together they would read a passage about plants and then answer a series of six questions (fill-in-the-blank). "However, before we do that activity, I want you to put this packet aside so we can do an experiment. The first thing you need is to learn three new vocabulary words." She then wrote the three words (transparent, translucent, and opaque) on the white board.

Anticipating what she was going to ask next, the students put their hands up to read the words off of the white board. They are able to easily read the first two words, but struggled with opaque. Ms. Patsa took the opportunity to explain what opaque meant and used examples from their own frame of reference. "Opaque is when you can't see through something. For instance most solids are opaque while most liquids are not opaque. You can't see through the solids, but you can see through the liquids." Once they appeared to understand, the class read from their packets about these three concepts.

When they got to the transparent section, Ms. Patsa pointed out that the windows were transparent and that is why they could see outside. She then asked the students for other examples of things that are transparent.

The first boy answered, “A plastic bag.”

“No, that is an example of something else that they are going to talk about,” replied Ms. Patsa. She called on other students to share, confirming with a head shake their answers when done.

“Eyeglasses,” responded a girl in the front.

“Drinking glasses,” listed another child.

“A cage,” answered the third student.

“Yes, those are all good examples. Let’s move on to the next section,” remarked Ms. Patsa.

The class continued on in the text book until they reached the opaque section. Ms. Patsa selected a student to read this section. When the student finished, Ms. Patsa gave examples of opaque:

“Remember, it means you can’t see anything through it. That wall is opaque. You can’t see through it, unless you’re Superman and have X-ray vision. It is solid. It doesn’t let light through it. So those are the three words you need to know. You’ll need to know the difference for today’s experiment. We’re moving quickly so we have time for the experiment, but it should all make sense. On the next page, you’ll see this quick experiment we’re going to do.”

On the next page of their packets, the experiment directions were explained for the students. They had to make a prediction about which of the three categories a group of items would fall into. To check for understanding, Ms. Patsa did three examples with the class. First, she held her hand up in the air and asked what category air would fall

into. For the second example, she placed her hand behind a piece of white paper and again asked them to write down what category that would be. The third example involved her hand behind construction paper. She walked around the room, showing the three different ways to see her hand and had the students make predictions. Before sending the students off on their own, she reviewed the answers to make sure that the class understood and were ready to move on. After verifying, she let the class know that the items for the actual experiment were: aluminum foil, wax paper, a paper plate, water, tape, and a Kleenex. Students were instructed to make predictions in their packets and then test their ideas. The class worked through the different items and appeared to enjoy testing their predictions. The added experimental part of the lesson allowed the students to draw their own conclusions and to test their hypotheses, thereby acting like real scientists.

The social studies curriculum for teachers at ASA is structured so that teachers know what material they must cover during the school year. The teachers are given some textbooks and packets, but are supposed to create their own lessons. One of the units that they were expected to cover was a unit on the Colonial America time period. The class used a textbook as the primary reference for this unit. In keeping with many other lessons, the class took turns reading out of the textbook. Ms. Patsa would read a section and then call on individuals to read. The students in the class were strong readers and for the most part had no problem reading out loud. As she would read, Ms. Patsa would check for comprehension by stopping to ask students review questions. The review usually entailed asking the class what they thought about the things that they were reading about. For the most part, students were easily able to answer her questions.

Ms. Patsa would often naturally integrate the lessons with literacy instruction. As one student was reading and not pausing, Ms. Patsa commented, “Okay, watch your periods.”

“Oh, sorry,” the student responded and continued reading.

Later in the lesson, while Ms. Patsa was reading and asking questions, one of the girls had her hand up. “When you have your hand up, you are not paying careful attention,” Ms. Patsa reprimanded, “you need to wait until I ask for a volunteer to read.” At the next reading time, Ms. Patsa called on another student to read. However, the girl who had been so eager got to read the following turn. When students said a word incorrectly, Ms. Patsa would calmly correct them, “Oh, not that, what is it?” Often the students would look back at the word and correct themselves. If they couldn’t, Ms. Patsa would help them sound out the word, and they would continue reading.

When the class finished reading the lesson, the students were instructed to complete a page in their packets. Ms. Patsa walked around and looked at what the students were doing, reminding them along the way to write in complete sentences. After the reminder, several students erased their work and made their answers complete sentences. As they finished, Ms. Patsa told them that they were going to do the “speed round” in a minute, and the students started buzzing. They were obviously excited about the prospect of the speed round.

The speed round meant that each table group was given a question and they needed to decide together on an answer. Once decided, one person from each team was selected to write the group’s answer on the board. They had three minutes to decide and to write the answer on the board. At intervals during the three minutes, Ms. Patsa

announced how much time was left. The groups all furiously discussed answers and worked together to agree on an answer. All of the groups finished with 42 seconds to spare. Ms. Patsa then went to the board to check answers. Several of the groups hadn't put the group numbers by their answers, so she had them come up to label their answers. One group wrote in cursive on the board; however, it was difficult to read, and so Ms. Patsa commented, "I'm sorry but I can't read this." The group told her what it was supposed to say, and she rewrote it for them.

As she read through the answers, Ms. Patsa noted that the first answer was not correct, and asked the class if anyone could provide the correct answer. None of the students could give a satisfactory answer for the problem, so she had them all look back on page 167 of the text. She had them reread the section together and told them that when they heard the answer to the question, they should raise their hand. As the information was read, a student recognized it as the answer and raised his hand. He shared his answer and was rewarded with a marble, the prize for correct answers. The second group was correct, but the third wasn't. When questioned, others from the class were able to answer the third question, so they moved onto the next answer. In the answer, the students had written "oner" instead of honor. Starting to show her frustration with the level of work, Ms. Patsa commented, "Come on guys, you know how to spell honor, it's right there in your packet." She continued on, letting them know that they had the correct answer and then reviewed all four correct answers. She finished with a statement about how they need to have the correct answers in speed round and to not just finish on time.

In following with the school's mission, Ms. Patsa told me that she believes that academic and moral growth are both important elements of the curriculum. Evidence of

moral instruction was apparent in the room. There was always a virtue of the day listed on the board; for example, one day the word was “compassion.” Another time when I was there, they had been brainstorming do’s and don’ts. The list on the board was:

Do’s:  
look out for each other,  
help out,  
be kind,  
use nice words,  
let them play with you,  
loyal,  
show respect,  
be polite and keep secrets.

Don’ts:  
hurt them,  
lie,  
say unkind words,  
brag,  
leave them behind,  
talk behind their back,  
and get angry

In addition, students were taught very specific behaviors and expected to always be on their best behavior. Getting ready for afternoon recess was a good indicator of the structure expected. The students were frequently told that the faster they got ready, the faster they could go to recess. Several of the students would “shush” the others so that their table would be selected to line up first. The class was expected to sit quietly while the leader and door holder were sent to line up. Then the students were called by table to line-up. The students were required to push in their chairs and line up silently. Several times the entire group would be forced to sit back down until they could line up in a fashion that was satisfactory to Ms. Patsa.

Both academic and moral curriculum was explicitly taught in Ms. Patsa's room. She made her expectations clear and modeled what she wanted. During one of our informal interviews, I talked to Ms. Patsa about curriculum. We talked about the Core Knowledge standards and how they align or don't align with Colorado state standards. She explained that the Core Knowledge units cycle in the different years. She mentioned that she didn't really like the structure of the science and social studies curriculum, "We are required to get a lot of our own stuff; there are no text books for the science units." She went on to mention that they don't have a lot of experimental activities and that the activities were pretty structured. "As teachers, we have to move on if students don't get stuff, or we won't be able to get through everything that we are expected to get through." Despite her expressed stress about getting through all of the material, Ms. Patsa expressed several times how she really liked that the material was provided for her. She commented that she was more comfortable with curriculum that was established and defined and appreciated the way in which the Core Knowledge system provided guidelines and materials for her.

### *Evaluation*

When I asked Ms. Patsa about the types of assessment that she used in her class, she responded. "I use mainly written assessment. I also do some performance based and some observations, but the majority are written." I continued by asking her how many of these assessments are mandated by someone or something. She answered,

Well of course, CSAPs are mandated. Other than that, I'm not sure. I don't typically give a pretest, but I always give a post. The tests were handed down to me, so I use them. I believe that we do more daily grading than most schools. I definitely do collect a lot of grades. But this year, our principal's view is that if we feel like we know where students are, it's ok to not grade everything.

Expectations are high for all students, and I was curious about how students were able to maintain this high level of performance. During another informal interview Ms. Patsa and I talked about how this year's class was lower academically than previous years. We continued the discussion, moving to the entrance requirements at the school. I asked her if the students were tested or if there were other requirements to get into the school. She answered that the school did require testing, "...but the work load and expectations are high enough, most students who can't handle it; don't stick around. For instance, I had a student with learning disabilities this year and he only stayed for a week; his sister is still here." An obvious focus on academic excellence and high tests scores is prevalent throughout the building. Tests are frequent, and students are given little leeway in their performance. From an early age, students are held to high standards, and testing is a part of the daily routine.

Supporting this idea, the majority (72%) of the students commented that they were tested a lot. I interviewed seven students from Ms. Patsa's room to get an understanding of their experience. Ms. Patsa helped me select a range of gender, time at school, and personality. I spoke with each student in the hallway outside of the classroom. I began by reintroducing myself, talking about the study, and getting their signatures to audio-tape the interviews. The interviews followed the interview guide (see Appendix B) and lasted around 10 to 20 minutes. In the end, I spoke with four girls and three boys. Their comments included:

"We are usually given bubble-in questions or written tests."

“Ms. Patsa gives a sheet with the answers. We practice at home, and then have tests on Friday. The tests are similar information but there are no answers on the test sheets. We have lots of testing here.”

“Yes, some are multiple choice, and some are written answers. We’re tested every week.”

“We have the ITBS testing and other boring stuff, like CSAPS. And we have a test in the class every time you finish anything.”

A majority of the writing activities that I observed appeared to be in preparation for the state tests (CSAP). There was a lot of pressure around the tests, and Ms. Patsa tried hard to not show her stress to the children. However, at times the anxiety was apparent. For example, one time the students worked quietly on a letter to Ms. Patsa. They were writing the letter on a released CSAP paper. Ms. Patsa walked around the room critiquing the format of the letters, “When you’re writing a letter to someone, do you write the first sentence right after the greeting?” She commented several times that students were doing elements incorrectly, trying to encourage others from making the same mistakes. When questioned, one student tried to mumble an excuse as to why she didn’t skip a line. Ms. Patsa could not understand the student and replied, “Sweetie, talk to me so that I can understand you.” She helped the student correct the mistake and then continued her monitoring of the other letters.

Disapproving comments continued as she checked work, “You guys look like you’ve never written a friendly letter before.” And then in complete frustration, she took the pencil from a student and erased her entire letter so that she could re-do it correctly. Several students began getting squirrely as Ms. Patsa continued aiding the one girl that

was struggling with the letter format. As she labored, a couple of students stared at their classmate. Ms. Patsa stopped working with her and addressed the whole class. “Come on, you know this. You guys. I’m shocked. I thought that this was going to be a lot easier than it is. I thought that you’d have less trouble than last week.” CSAPs are going to be administered soon and it was obvious that the students were not doing the level of work that Ms. Patsa believed they were capable of. When we talked later that afternoon, she expressed this frustration and stress with me, “Last week the letters that they wrote were strong; I don’t know why they struggled so much today. It worries me for how they’ll do on the actual test.”

There is a pressure to do well academically, and assessment is an important element in this classroom. Students are held to high expectations and are tested frequently. Despite this pressure, the students usually rise to the occasion and when asked are happy to share their knowledge.

### *Behind-the-scenes*

#### *Intentions*

To recap, the Core Knowledge model places a great deal of emphasis on both academic and moral growth. There are clear expectations for all grade levels and students are expected to learn material in a linear fashion. When I asked Ms. Patsa what her goals are for the students, she answered,

The number one thing is to achieve academically and to become fluent in third grade skills. Beyond that, I want them to be good citizens. Character development

is important. I want them to be responsible. This grade is when they start shifting from parent responsibility to self-responsibility.

As evidenced above, a palpable value on both academic and character development existed in this classroom. When I asked Ms. Patsa how well her classroom reflected the Core Knowledge goals, she commented,

Well, one thing that is different this year is performance. This group as a whole is lower than other groups academically. But most of the families have been here since kindergarten, and the parents abide well by the values and expectations. The students fit the school well, they are just lower. We have done a lot of remediation this year rather than pursuing new content. So that makes it hard to reach all of the learning goals in the Core Knowledge sequence.

It was obvious that Ms. Patsa deemed that a strong part of the Core Knowledge curriculum was the academic success of her students. Not being able to get through the curriculum as quickly as usual created stress. She mentioned this expectation to do well when I asked her what sets the school apart from others:

The things I've already talked about—parents and curriculum. The charter is specific to what is important. It is clear to parents and teachers what is expected. For instance, parents are required to volunteer for 40 hours each year and single parents need 20 hours.

The fact that the school, as a whole, valued structure and clear expectations was also mentioned by the school administrator. She commented:

I believe that all children are capable and able to learn. Not all models meet all students, and sometimes the parents' needs are different than the students' needs. Children learn well in structure. I believe that this is the most successful way for achievement to be reached. Failure is not an option here. We make it the purpose to be successful. The students have to do their homework, schoolwork, etc. It is not an option to be disengaged.

All levels of the school (administrator, teachers, parents, and students) appeared to support the intentions of the model (high academic and personal growth). Although at times these high expectations caused a stressful situation, the convergence allowed for a strong connection between intentions and actuality.

### *School Structure*

According to Eisner (1998) the structure of a school is indicative of what the school's priorities are. For example, the differentiation of subjects, the time allotted to each subject, and the daily schedule are all important elements to consider. When asked what the typical daily, weekly, and yearly schedules were, Ms. Patsa answered,

It is similar each year. We follow the same scope and sequence each year. Originally it was laid out so that the topics matched across the subject areas. We had the higher interest units toward the end of the year. This year the weekly schedule has changed; we're moving slower with this group, but I am still covering around the same material. For the daily schedule, the core subjects are the main focus. So we have 45-60 minutes for reading; 60 minutes for math; English is 2 to 2½ hours per week; and writing is 25-60 minutes per day. CSAPs influence the schedule, and so we focus on the subjects tested. Science and social studies alternate with 45-60 minutes every other day. We also do phonemic review, but spelling is all homework. We have 45 minutes for lunch and two specials each day. This might change next year with the new curriculum that they're considering.

The schedule was set so that there was adequate time to cover the core subjects, and the fact that the school was created with longer school days and a longer school year aided in the ability to cover more material. When Ms. Patsa finished explaining the schedule, I continued the conversation by asking her how much say she had in the determination of the schedule. Her response was:

Well, that changed this year because the principal is new. We have less input this year because it was easier for her to set that out ahead of time. Up to this year we had a lot of say. The specials schedule was set for us, but the rest of us could change the daily schedule. This year the math block changed schoolwide, which made it difficult because we switch the students around for math.

Despite the fact that Ms. Patsa commented that she had little say in the determination of the schedule, she did not express frustration with the system. In fact, she expressed the opinion that she liked the structure and believed that it was beneficial to the overall learning environment. The traditional structure seemed to fit the members of the community well. Students moved from one subject to the next as Ms. Patsa paid careful attention to ensure that the class stuck to the established schedule. The entire school was run in a similar manner; everything from the volunteer sign-in to the parking and parent pick-up was structured in a way that discouraged variation.

### *Engagement*

When I asked Ms. Patsa how important she believed engagement was in the learning process, she answered that it is critical. She elaborated, “It is the hardest thing as a teacher in a world that’s full of visual stimulation. It’s difficult, they are exposed to so much that it’s hard to keep them as entertained as technology does.”

From both the interview responses and the observations, it was clear that engagement was important to Ms. Patsa. When I asked her to describe for me what she thought engagement looked or felt like in the classroom, she replied,

Engagement is hard to describe; you just know if they are with you or not. Eye contact is huge. Body language is important—if they are sitting up and attentive. Eye

contact is the main gauge. For instance, in the game that we did, students were more involved in what we were doing. I knew because they got materials out faster and we're ready to go. In addition, they were working well together as tables.

The data from the engagement surveys (see Appendix E) reflect that the majority of the students were engaged in all three engagement areas: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. The following chart represents the data from the engagement survey. The survey asked students to indicate whether they agreed with 15 statements regarding engagement. The choices for the statements were: *Never/Almost Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always/Almost Always, or Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.*

I combined the classroom data from the two times the survey was given and averaged the responses in order to present overall findings. Twenty-six students completed the survey the first time, and twenty-five completed it the second time. The points were totaled and an average percentage score for each question is reflected in Table 3.

Table 3

*Summary of Ms. Patsa Engagement Results*

Behavioral Engagement					
Section One: How much do you agree with each of the following statements?	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I come to class prepared.	1.96%	0.00%	7.84%	29.41%	60.78%
I treat my classmates with respect.	0.00%	1.96%	13.73%	19.61%	64.71%
I complete my work on time.	3.92%	0.00%	17.65%	39.22%	39.22%
I treat my teachers with respect.	0.00%	3.92%	3.92%	7.84%	84.31%
I follow the rules at school.	0.00%	3.92%	7.84%	13.73%	74.51%
Totals:	1.18%	1.96%	10.20%	21.96%	64.71%
Cognitive Engagement					
Section Two: How often are the following statements true for you?	Never/ Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always/Almost Always
I feel excited by the work in school.	9.80%	11.76%	35.29%	17.65%	25.49%
I am interested in the work I get to do in my classes.	3.92%	11.76%	21.57%	31.37%	31.37%
I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning.	25.49%	19.61%	15.69%	15.69%	23.53%
I check my schoolwork for mistakes.	1.96%	9.80%	23.53%	21.57%	43.14%
I learn a lot from my classes.	5.88%	3.92%	5.88%	7.84%	76.47%
Totals:	9.41%	11.37%	20.39%	18.82%	40.00%
Emotional Engagement					
Section Three: How often are the following statements true for you?	Never/ Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always/Almost Always
I enjoy the work I do in class.	3.92%	13.73%	29.41%	25.49%	27.45%
I feel I can go to my teachers with the things that I need to talk about.	7.84%	3.92%	15.69%	25.49%	47.06%
My classroom is a fun place to be.	5.88%	23.53%	17.65%	11.76%	41.18%
Most of my teachers praise me when I work hard.	0.00%	9.80%	27.45%	15.69%	47.06%
Most of my teachers understand me.	9.80%	0.00%	5.88%	25.49%	58.82%
Totals:	5.49%	10.20%	19.22%	20.78%	44.31%

When examining the data, there are several items that stand out. The first is that the highest level of engagement found was on the question about treating their teachers with respect; 84.3% of the students *strongly agree* that they treat their teachers with

respect. When combined, 92.2% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that this was the case. Another high response was that 90.2% *agree* or *strongly agree* that they come to class prepared. In addition, 88.24% indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree* that they follow the rules at school. On the other end, several questions reflect a much lower level of engagement. For instance, 43.14% responded that they are *often* or *always/almost always* excited by the work in school; and 52.94% responded that they *always/almost always* talk with people outside of school about what they are learning, and that their classroom is fun. It is interesting to note that the top three responses have to do with respect and following the rules while the lowest three responses are about finding the learning exciting, talking about learning outside of school, and finding the learning fun. These results are in alignment with my observations, I found that Ms. Patsa's classroom had a stronger emphasis on being prepared and following the rules than it did on making learning exciting and fun.

When one looks at the engagement survey data by type of engagement, it becomes clear that the students in Ms. Patsa's class have the highest level of behavioral engagement. The behavior section indicated that 86.7% of the students marked either *agree* or *strongly agree* that they are behaviorally engaged. Only 3.1% indicated that they *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*. The lowest response in the behavioral section was for the question about turning work in on time, 78.44% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that this was true. The range of responses for *agree* or *strongly agree* was 78.44% to 92.15%.

For the cognitive section, 58.8% stated that they are *often* or *always/almost always* cognitively engaged. The highest response for this section was for the question

about learning a lot from their classes, 84.31% felt that this was *often* or *always/almost always* true. The range of responses was much larger for this section, only 39.22% felt that they *often* or *always/almost always* talk with people outside of school about what they are learning.

The last section, the emotional; resulted in 65.1% indicating that they are *often* or *always/almost always* emotionally engaged and 15.7% answering that they are *rarely* or *never/almost never* emotionally engaged. The remaining students indicated a neutral answer in all three areas. 84.31% felt that their teachers understood them *often* or *always/almost always* while 52.94% indicated this was true for enjoying the work they do in class and for their classroom being a fun place to be.

In order to examine the data in another format, I calculated frequency and relative frequencies below.

Table 4

*Ms. Patsa: Frequency and Relative Frequency of Overall Engagement*

Type	Strongly Disagree or Never/Almost Never	Disagree or Rarely	Neutral or Sometimes	Agree or Often	Strongly Agree or Always/Almost Always
Frequencies	41	60	127	157	380
Relative Frequencies	.054	.078	.166	.205	.497
Percentages	5.36%	7.84%	16.6%	20.52%	49.7%

The previous chart demonstrates the results when the three sections of engagement are combined. As reflected above; 70.22% of the class indicated that they *agree/often* or *strongly agree/always almost always* that they are engaged. This indicates that the majority of the students in Ms. Patsa's class were engaged.

The engagement survey data reflects what was seen in the classroom, the goals that Ms. Patsa worked toward, and the goals of the Core Knowledge model. I noticed high expectations for the students, and saw that the students were prepared and ready for each new activity. From my time in the classroom, I also observed that the students were usually engaged and actively participating in the activities. They had a respectful relationship with each other and their teacher. The regimented approach to learning that Ms. Patsa created is reflected in the engagement data.

### *Interest and Propensities*

When I asked Ms. Patsa whether she enjoyed the third grade curriculum, she replied, "Yes, very much. This is a good grade and fit for me." When I followed up and asked her if she intentionally tried to match activities to student propensities, she answered,

I try to. I guess, generally the more active they are, the more engaged they are. Being active and creativity equals engagement. I feel limited a little by timeframe and the amount we need to cover each day. Sometimes it's hard, but I try to do it as much as possible.

The parent and student responses reflected agreement with this statement. When asked if the school meets the learning style of her daughter, a parent commented, "Yes,

the structured learning environment and core curriculum keeps her on track and disciplined.”

I asked students in Ms. Patsa’s class what they liked to do in their spare time. The majority of them reflected that they liked to read. For example, one student commented,

“I like to read a book or play a game in my notebook.”

Another student, when asked what he liked best about the school, replied,

“What I like best, well I would keep the demerits so that people follow the rules.”

This was a surprising response from a third grade student and demonstrated that the student fit well with the intentions and structure of the school.

In order to assess how well the responses matched the school model, I asked all of the students how they best preferred to learn. The majority of students in Ms. Patsa’s class responded with similar comments to the following students,

“I like it when it is quiet and I get to work by myself.” Or,

“With new stuff, I like to hear about it first. Then once I know it, I like to do it on my own.”

These preferences fit well with the classroom instruction and routine I observed. Ms. Patsa was often the one to introduce material, and students were offered a quiet classroom in which they could work independently.

## **Final Thoughts**

Just as in life, circumstances beyond one's control impact the classroom. When I asked Ms. Patsa if there was anything else that I should know, she replied:

This year has been a very different year for me for a lot of reasons. It's been the most difficult group of students, and the new principal has made a lot of changes. In addition, I have been distracted because of personal stuff. It's honestly been the hardest year in my five years here. I mean, the students, behavior wise they are difficult. There have been three or four major issues this year. That changes the atmosphere; it's made me be a stricter teacher this year. I've definitely been stricter than I like to be.

Despite these comments, I was impressed with how well Ms. Patsa covered material and helped support the students' ability to move through the activities. The students stayed focused and attentive and really admired their leader. As one student commented, "The thing that I like the best about our school is our teacher. She's nice." Similar to strong military leaders, although seemingly tough with her cadets, there was a deep love and respect that permeated the environment.

## **Response from Ms. Patsa**

Kristen-

Having you in my room during the 07-08 school year was an interesting experience. I was a bit nervous at first about having someone observing my instruction and students on a consistent basis, but you did a good job of being as inconspicuous as possible so as not to disturb the regular activities in the room.

I found it helped me to think about my methods and teaching approach in a little different light knowing that you were watching to see how my classroom fit into the model of a traditional charter school. The data that the student interviews produced was quite revealing for me as well and helped me to evaluate the effectiveness of my instruction in a very different way. The whole experience was enlightening for me.

Sincerely-

Ms. Patsa

## **Ms. Swasher<sup>4</sup>**

### **6<sup>th</sup> Grade, Core Knowledge**

#### **Introduction**

Ms. Swasher is a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Apple Stream Academy. She has been teaching there for the past six years, and taught for ten years before starting at Apple Stream. Ms. Swasher began her career at a private Christian school and then worked at other traditional elementary schools. She is white with blonde hair and has a smile that lights up her face. Aged somewhere in her fifties, she has pictures of her two high-school-age daughters around her desk. I observed her from December until May, primarily during her honors literacy class.

Her room has a slight smell of the animals that she has adopted over the years as classroom pets. The pets, all four of them, were named after the characters from *Peanuts*. Interestingly enough, Ms. Swasher is rather similar to Snoopy; being well loved by those around her. According to the Peanuts website, Snoopy "...manages to convey everything necessary in facial expressions and thought balloons. A one-man show with superior intelligence and vivid imagination." Ms. Swasher also exhibits these traits; her students are more often than not redirected with a certain look, and her imagination fills her curriculum with passion and excitement. When you walk into her room it is immediately obvious that she puts her heart and soul into her classroom. From the hand-made displays to the attention to each child's own space, her care for the students is found in the details. Although she maintains the order and structure of the Core Knowledge system, it is evident that sarcastic humor permeates her teaching style and classroom.

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<sup>4</sup> Names of all teachers have been changed.

### *The student experience*

There is a structure and routine in Ms. Swasher's classroom that helps create the atmosphere found in her room. The large white board at the front of the room is the center of all vital information. For instance, goals for the day are always clearly stated on the board. In addition, Ms. Swasher writes the names of students with late work, a section for the work that she is collecting that day, a "wuzzle" (a wuzzle is a puzzle that is made up of words in an interesting display. The goal is to solve the well-known saying, person, place, or thing that it is meant to represent), the daily journal topic; the saying of the day; the virtue of the day (for example humility/gentleness); and models of a proper paper heading. All of the sections are neatly labeled in her own dotted handwriting style.

Ms. Swasher's classroom is also located in the rectangular shaped addition. Square-shaped, the classroom has a wall of windows that look to the south and provide a great deal of sunshine. Ms. Swasher has set up her desk along this wall. It is a large L-shaped desk that takes up a great deal of space. On the desk is her Apple Powerbook<sup>®</sup>, a lamp, pictures of her daughters, several plants, and an assortment of stuffed animals. Also along the wall is the only student computer in the room—an iMac<sup>®</sup>. Next to the computer is an extra desk—it serves as a quiet place for students to work, as well as the space where I spent most of my time. Along the back wall, student lockers have been set up. Each student has a locker, and additional lockers are labeled for "lost and found" and "returned work." Different handmade displays are located around the room: "Hats off to my helpers," "Sixth Grader's Word Collection Jar," "They say it's your birthday," "Get thyself...organized," and "Say What—Nothing will come of nothing." Five straight lines

of four to five desks per row dominate the room. The majority of them are plastic blue seats with light wooden desks attached; two desks with orange and one with a black seat are in the back row. A large flat-screen TV towers above the front corner of the room. All of the classrooms at ASA use the overhead lights, but Ms. Swasher has added a small lamp that offers a softer light. The classroom environment that she had created feels less rigid than the other room at ASA. An orderly and structured sense still exists, but with a little more friendliness and warmth added.

Each afternoon, the sixth graders file in from recess and gather their belongings from their homeroom classes, in order to head to their literacy classes. Sixth grade conversations ensue as they gossip around their lockers about different things that took place at recess. Twenty-six students, dressed in their uniform code: red, navy blue and green collared shirts with khaki shorts, skirts, or pants, eventually take their seats in one of the five carefully arranged rows. There were eight minority students in the class, and 14 of the 26 students were girls.

### *Pedagogy*

Ms. Swasher gushes about how much she enjoys teaching language arts. According to her, she begins her lesson planning with a lot of ideas from her Masters in Education degree. “Then, I focus on comprehension and try to bring creativity into the writing, literature circles, etc.” She presents information quickly, but makes sure that the students understand her as she goes. The information is organized and very linear, and ideas flow back to previous lessons; overall, lessons appear connected in a purposeful manner. Teacher-directed instruction dominates the instructional time and matches with the Core Knowledge preferred pedagogy.

This teacher-directed style is seen in the following lesson. On a typical afternoon, the students came into the room and immediately got working on Daily Oral Language (DOL) and a grammar exercise she calls “grammar soup.” Grammar soup is a set of questions that cover a range of grammatical topics; for example, semicolons and parts of speech. After about thirty minutes, the students were stopped to trade papers with a partner. Together teacher and students grade the DOLs and grammar soups. As they discussed answers, Ms. Swasher reminds them of the rules of grammar. For instance, “When you are looking at commas, in order to remember why there is one after the date, think state or date.” Ms. Swasher continues for the next answer about pronouns:

Today’s the day you’re going to learn this because we’ve talked about this before. In order to test what pronoun you use, you take all the other pronouns out of a sentence, and ask yourself if you would say her or she? For example, to decide if it is, ‘She and I went to the movies,’ or ‘Her and I went to the movies.’ You would take out the ‘and I’ part and see what makes more sense alone. She went to the movies is correct. It doesn’t matter how many people are involved, it is always ‘she.’ They are going to try to trick you on the IOWAs and CSAPs. Don’t let them trick you on that.

When grading was done and the papers were put away, Ms. Swasher guided the conversation to the bibliography assignment. She began the lesson with a reminder of the previous oral directions, as well as the packet she had given them, on how to correctly write a bibliography. She pointed out where the information was in the packet and how to use the information that was given. Ms. Swasher emphasized the importance of bibliographies by telling them that she would not accept a paper without a bibliography.

“If you turn in a paper without one, that means that you are stealing people’s ideas,” Ms. Swasher warned them. She mentioned how important knowing how to create bibliographies is throughout life and especially in college. In order to assess the class

status, Ms. Swasher had the students raise their hands if they did not have a bibliography done. Four hands went up. She let them know that they had until the following day to turn it in or they would not be able to turn in their research papers. With the hands still raised, Ms. Swasher recorded the names of the students who did not have one completed. As she was writing these names down, other students admitted that theirs were “messed up too” and she wrote down their names; giving them the same warning about the due date. A couple of students asked specific questions about their bibliographies, and she told them that they could bring their papers to her so they could go over them one-on-one.

In addition to the teacher-directed instruction, Ms. Swasher depended a lot on the one-on-one conferences that she held each day with students. These conferences enabled Ms. Swasher to check in with each student and to get a better sense of student understanding. Throughout my observations there was a consistency in the basic structure of the room. As previously mentioned, each afternoon students began with the grammar soup and DOLs, the class would then move on to a teacher-led lesson, often including student sharing, and then Ms. Swasher would meet with individual students while the rest of the class worked on the next assignment. The students appeared to enjoy this routine, and it allowed the class to run smoothly and efficiently.

Within this structure and routine, Ms. Swasher classroom was filled with a sense of fun. She demonstrated a love for each student and expressed her feelings openly. In order to recognize students, each birthday was celebrated. Ms. Swasher had a Snoopy stuffed animal that was set to sing at a random time in the day when a student had a birthday. The stuffed animal sang, “I just want to party all the time, party all the time.”

When it sang the class would react with birthday greetings and wishes. The time I observed the song, the process only took a few minutes, and when students were all done, Ms. Swasher instructed them to get back to work. Students immediately settled back down. The small distraction in the day allowed the student with a birthday to feel recognized and appreciated. Small efforts similar to this were frequent and helped build the strong relationships within the class.

Ms. Swasher had routines in place for all elements of the day. When students did what was expected of them they were often rewarded with candy. The end of the day usually ran smoothly because of these routines. For example, during the end of class, Ms. Swasher often wiped down the white board while the students independently cleaned up. One student would conduct “magic trash;” this was a routine in which Ms. Swasher would determine a number. That day, six pieces of trash was the magic number. All the students in the class had to pick up at least six pieces of trash and bring them up to the student in charge. Once the class all had picked up six pieces, the student in charge asked a question, and the person who got it right got a piece of candy. Again, it was a playful way to get the students excited about small chores, but it appeared to work.

The structure and loving atmosphere also impacted classroom management. Because expectations were clear, there were few examples of off-task behavior. With that being said, there were a couple of strong personalities in Ms. Swasher’s class. For the most part the students were all very organized and academic, but it was clear that a few were scattered. While Ms. Swasher checked in with students the expectation was for the others to be silently working. For the most part, the majority of the class was on task.

Normally a few students chattered, but my observations saw silent and focused work most of the time.

One student often had a difficult time staying focused on working and frequently distracted the others. Often, rather than singling him out, Ms. Swasher would make several comments to redirect the class at large. One afternoon, while she was conducting one-on-one conferences, his behavior was particularly disruptive. The comments would quiet the student for a short time, but he would soon fall back into distracting those around him. Time went by, and Ms. Swasher would look up and give a few “shhs” in between the mini-conferences. These reminders were normally all that were needed to remind the boy that his behavior was not appropriate. However, this time he needed a more directed approach. So after a conference finished, Ms. Swasher commented, “Garrett, why do you think I said ‘shh’?”

“Probably because I am distracting people,” Garrett replied. “I get it, I’ll get back to work.”

Since Ms. Swasher did not normally single students out, this was enough of a clue that he needed to get back on track. He respected his teacher’s wishes and was able to work quietly for the remainder of the conferences.

### *Curriculum*

When asked, Ms. Swasher answered that she follows the Core Knowledge curriculum perfectly. She answered that she aligns her lessons with their guidelines and maintains a structured approach to her instruction. She elaborated, “Our curriculum decisions are based on the Core Knowledge sequence, but I feel like I have a lot of

latitude within that structure to add to the lessons.” When I asked her if she had ever had any Core Knowledge professional development, she replied that she had never had any training. “The first year was tough; I was handed books and expected to go.” In order to improve her own teaching, she decided to get her Masters in Education from Lesley University with an emphasis on Literacy. “I now integrate many ideas from that program into the Core Knowledge curriculum.”

The two main projects that I observed the students working on did indeed fit into the curriculum: a study of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and a research paper on a historical figure. These units were selected to fit into the recommended curriculum for sixth graders. According to the Core Knowledge Foundation, the recommended sixth grade sequence is:

#### Sixth Grade: Language Arts

##### **Fiction and Drama**

The Iliad and The Odyssey  
The Prince and the Pauper  
Julius Caesar

##### **Writing and Research**

Write a research essay, with attention to:

asking open-ended questions  
gathering relevant data through library and field research  
summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting accurately when taking notes  
defining a thesis  
organizing with an outline  
integrating quotations from sources  
acknowledging sources and avoiding plagiarism  
preparing a bibliography (<http://coreknowledge.org/CK/about/index.htm>)

Ms. Swasher and her teammate share students so that she is able to teach the same literacy curriculum twice a day while her teammate covers science content. Ms. Swasher's confidence with the curriculum is clearly demonstrated, and her instruction flows seamlessly from one activity to the next. The following lesson demonstrates how her classes progressed from one activity to the next, allowing her to cover a lot of curriculum in a short time. The normal after-lunch chaos ensued; the homeroom students shuffled in and then out again, and the afternoon literacy students streamed in. As previously mentioned, being a post-lunch class, it had the potential to be a difficult transition with students coming from different areas and with playground scuttlebutt on all of their minds. Students ended up arriving at different times, making immediate instruction nearly impossible. In order to solve this dilemma, Ms. Swasher consistently started with grammar soup and DOLs. This time gave the students a chance to settle in and immediately get to work without necessary instructions. The students appeared to really appreciate the routine, and the chaos quickly settled into quiet work time. As the students entered the room, Ms. Swasher gave directions and warned the class about one of the problems that many of the students had missed earlier in the day. While the students worked, Ms. Swasher had them turn in spelling homework and outlines. All of the students had their spelling ready to turn in; prompting Ms. Swasher to comment, "Oh, you are my favorite class!"

"We know," replied several students in unison.

“That’s because I’m in your class,” replied one of the more vocal girls in the room.

“Of course it is,” affirmed Ms. Swasher.

“Thanks,” the girl said, acknowledging the response.

While the students were still working, Ms. Swasher looked over the homework and immediately put grades in the grade book. As she marked the papers she organized them into neat piles. This ability to take advantage of every moment of time was typical of Ms. Swasher and allowed her to stay on top of all the different aspects of teaching.

When she finished the grading, Ms. Swasher reminded the students that they had note cards due today. While still working on the DOL and grammar soup activities, Ms. Swasher called students up one at a time to go over the note cards with her. It was clear from these interactions that there were high expectations, and as students brought note cards up they had a lot of information and appeared to be well organized in the research process. When I asked her about how she organizes the research project, she answered, “I have been doing it now for several years and feel like I have the system down. We spend time on each section, and the students complete them in a structured manner.” Checking the note cards was an example of how Ms. Swasher broke down the research process so that she could set attainable goals for each step and make sure that each step was completed satisfactorily.

When Ms. Swasher finished checking the note cards, she stood and made a comment to the class. “Is anyone still having a problem with historical influence?” A number of students raised their hands. The research papers that the students were working

on were biographies of famous people. The papers all followed a predetermined order; one section of the paper was on the historical influence of the chosen person.

“I thought so, and I was lying in bed last night thinking about this and the word “legacy” came to me. What you leave behind is your legacy. This is your historical influence. So I tried it today on a Google search and typed in Stalin’s legacy and a bunch of information came up. In the future I am going to use this term instead.”

“Jeez, that would have been nice to know,” joked one boy.

“I actually found that word in my own searches,” commented a student.

A third checked to see if the things that he had for his person were good examples of legacy.

When students finished DOLs and grammar soup, they were often given a journal prompt. That day, the prompt was: “List as many emotions as you can think of...all over the page!” The journal prompt offered additional independent work time and was intended to allow Ms. Swasher to meet with all of the class about their note cards.

After about forty minutes of work time, several students noted that they had finished all three activities. Since Ms. Swasher was still conferencing with students, she had other students offer suggestions for what they could work on if they were done with everything. The students suggested a few things; for example, “read silently,” and “finish homework.” Ms. Swasher restated these “approved” activities and then let them know that she was getting frustrated having to constantly stop to monitor talking and wandering.

Eventually, Ms. Swasher finished the conferences, and when she did, she asked the students how many students needed time to finish the activities they were working on.

A few raised their hands and she asked them to indicate with their fingers how many more minutes they needed. She gave them three more minutes and used the time to hand back book club questions. Ms. Swasher gave verbal feedback to each student as she handed them back. In addition to the oral comments, the papers had a percentage grade at the top and written comments. The comments gave the students directions of how to make the papers stronger. After the three minutes were up and the book club questions were returned, Ms. Swasher transitioned the students into the actual book club time.

To begin the book club time, Ms. Swasher got up in front of the class and started a discussion about comprehension. Book club was what the reading time was called. This particular afternoon, she focused on the difference between literal and discussion comprehension. She began by asking the students to define the differences.

“Literal comprehension, that’s if you can open the book and point to an answer. It is right or wrong. Discussion comprehension is your own opinion,” answered one student.

Ms. Swasher agreed and followed with examples and non-examples of both types of comprehension. Ms. Swasher then directed the students’ attention to a list of discussion questions on the board:

1. What is your opinion of...?
2. Who do you think...?
3. If you could...?
4. Which one of....do you think...?
5. What would you...?
6. Who would you...?
7. If you were...?
8. How would you feel...?
9. What would you ask the author about...?

Ms. Swasher read through these questions and instructed the students to make their own book club questions. She demanded that the questions be “fun and not obvious.” To check and make sure that the students understood the directions, Ms. Swasher had students offer examples from the *Iliad*, which they had all just finished reading. “Those are all good, but don’t forget to think about predict, compare, and create.” She went on to talk about how as older students they needed to get away from literal comprehension. “As young students you are expected to be able to answer literal things—for example, what color is the wagon? But now, for example, working with my daughters in high school, they need to synthesize and analyze, so my job is to teach you how to get there.”

After directions were finished, students began on the assignment, which was to write an example of each type of question. The students immediately got to work writing questions. Students had about fifteen minutes to work. When the students were done, Ms. Swasher had them turn to a partner and ask each other one of their questions. The listening partner was supposed to answer whether it was a literal or discussion question. The students partnered up and began working. Ms. Swasher added, “Thumbs up when both questions are asked.”

When students had finished the book club questions, the class moved on to grading the DOLs and grammar soup papers and talking about the different grammar rules encountered. Ms. Swasher included many examples of high-level grammar terms and rules. For example, one time the class discussed gerund and infinitive verbs. She commented they would see rules like these on CSAPs and Iowas. As they went, the students that answered correctly were rewarded with a pack of *Smarties*. At one point, Ms. Swasher asked for a synonym of airliner and a boy answered,

“Canadian bacon.” He was confused, and after he realized his mistake, he said, “Oops, I thought that you meant an example of when you wouldn’t capitalize the second word.”

Ms. Swasher joked with him, “I would be so embarrassed if I were you right now.”

“Yes, I am so embarrassed,” he joked back to her.

“Okay, but how about a synonym?” She questioned him.

“A jet,” he immediately answered.

“Good, now I am not as worried about you,” affirmed Ms. Swasher in her typical humorous way.

Things definitely moved fast in Ms. Swasher class, but the students kept up and appeared to enjoy the frequent changes. One way in which she kept the students interested and engaged was to infuse the curriculum with a creative touch. For example, Ms. Swasher was able to make learning grammar rules more interesting than pure rote memorization, and the students reacted with pleasure and excitement. The following lesson on semicolons demonstrates a more imaginative way in which to learn the rules of semicolons. Ms. Swasher instructed the students to take out lined pieces of paper because they were going to do something with their “fun pictures.” The students got excited when they heard what they were doing and yelled out, “Yeah!” It was evident that they had used the pictures before for other lessons. As pictures were handed out, students needed to pick a picture and hand the stack back to the next person in their row. Once a picture was chosen, students were instructed to number the first line with “semicolon.” When everyone had done these two steps, the class reviewed elements of a semicolon.

“Both sides have to be...?” Ms. Swasher questioned.

“An independent clause,” one student answered.

Another followed, “have a capital first but not after a semicolon.”

She agreed with the responses and had the students write a sentence with a semicolon. “When you finish, please hold up your picture so I know when everyone is finished.” The pictures were magazine cut-outs on colored paper and laminated. They varied from pictures of animals to students whispering to each other. There was no significance to the pictures; they were simply random images to inspire the students. When all pictures were held in the air, they switched with their partners to “trade and grade” and decide whether their partners had written a perfect semicolon sentence. After this process, students swapped pictures and wrote another sentence. Two more times students were instructed to repeat the process. Going through the process four times enabled each student the opportunity to write a perfect sentence. The activity allowed all members of the class practice with the proper way to use a semicolon, and by the end it was evident that all students better understood when semicolons were needed.

Class ended after the semicolon lesson, and before the students left, Ms. Swasher repeated the homework assignment for book club; certain students were to bring food or drinks from home, and everyone had to bring eight questions along with their literature group books. Students were dismissed back to their homerooms while her homeroom students filtered in.

### *Evaluation*

Ms. Swasher constantly checks in with her students and makes sure that they know how they are doing. She is extremely organized and keeps careful anecdotal notes on all of her students. The school has adopted the district wide practice of posting grades

online so that parents can check in daily. Because of this, all of the teachers at ASA have had to rethink elements of their grading practices. When I asked Ms. Swasher about assessment, she answered that she tries to do all forms of assessment, “I use every type; written, verbal, projects, game boards, ABC books, etc.” My observations affirmed that she does indeed integrate different forms of assessment into her classroom.

However, all seven students that I interviewed in Ms. Swasher’s class commented that they were usually tested with written exams. I interviewed seven students from Ms. Swasher’s room to give them the chance to talk about their experiences. Ms. Swasher also helped me select a range of gender, time at school, and personality. I spoke with each student in the hallway outside of her classroom. I began by reintroducing myself, talking about the study, and getting their signatures to audio-tape the interviews. The interviews followed the interview guide (see Appendix B) and lasted around 10 to 20 minutes. In the end, I spoke with five girls and two boys. They mentioned that the tests were usually short-answer, fill-in-the-blank, and multiple-choice. All seven agreed that they liked this format, and one went on to add, “We usually get a study guide two days before; we do that on the first day and have an in-class review day, like a game, on the second. Then the next day is the test.” The students did not express a high level of stress about the tests, and not one of them mentioned the CSAP or Iowa tests when I asked how they were assessed. One student mentioned that they liked the assessment format: “We usually get a mix of multiple choice and short answers. I like that format; it is easier.”

On a day-to-day basis, Ms. Swasher uses a variety of methods to assess students. For example, students were frequently given stickers to reward correct answers when doing whole group instruction. The students were honestly excited to get their stickers

and appeared to really enjoy this seemingly juvenile symbol of a correct answer. As previously mentioned; Ms. Swasher keeps a list of students missing work on the corner of the white board. This visual reminder keeps the students' aware of where they stand. When asked, Ms. Swasher commented that this helped keep her students aware and up-to-date. Assignments also demonstrated the variation in assessment. I observed Ms. Swasher using written papers, visual timelines, group presentations and one-on-one conferences to help her assess the students in her class.

### ***Behind-the-scenes***

#### *Intentions*

As previously mentioned, the intentions of the Core Knowledge schools are to introduce all students to an established set of information; the goal being the creation of an equitable school system. Expectations include following a formatted schedule and curriculum. There is a strong focus on both academic and moral growth.

When I asked Ms. Swasher what her goals for her students were, she answered, "I want every student to have one year of growth." The notion of each individual child demonstrating growth was her first thought, but she went on to add, "And I want my students to feel fostered emotionally and socially." Her intentions follow closely with the school's goals of academic and personal growth and commitment. Additionally, her personal educational philosophy is closely aligned with the previously stated school's mission. When asked what her educational philosophy was, she responded, "I believe in students growing in a well-rounded way—educational in all levels. The schools supports,

if not teaches, values and morals. Also, I believe in high discipline.” The Core Knowledge curriculum includes teaching a moral each day. As previously mentioned, these values included virtue and humility. When I asked Ms. Swasher if she intentionally matched student propensities with her lessons, she replied, “No. It’s more that I am constantly offering all modes. I teach diversely at a whole class level.” My observations supported her responses, and while there was not a lot of choice, there were a variety of activities offered over the course of the year.

To confirm my own reflections on what set the school apart, I asked her to describe what she thought made the school different. She responded:

Students are here to learn. They are not just playing the game of getting an ‘A.’ The students like to learn for the sake of learning. They are life-long learners; especially the students that have been here since kindergarten. There is a vast difference between the students who have been here since kindergarten and the students who start later. The curriculum rotates so they come to my class with a great set of prior knowledge. I love that the specials support the Core Knowledge curriculum; the students are surrounded by Hirsch’s integrated ideas. It’s complete immersion.

An academic focus was seen in the school and I observed high expectations throughout the school. In fact academics, not the extracurricular activities brought families to the school. In choosing to attend ASA, families were clearly choosing a school that expected students to maintain a high level of academic achievement.

### *School Structure*

Reflecting the focus on academics, the school was designed with longer school years and days. The school has 182 school days. The structure of the day is built around a

combination of core subjects and specials. All four teachers whom I interviewed responded that the structure of the school has changed this year with the introduction of a new administrator. When I asked Ms. Swasher how much control she had over her schedule, she laughed and then answered,

None. When I was hired, I had to pick two subjects to teach. My teammate had some say originally in setting the schedule, but now it is set. This year our principal extended core subjects to one hour and twenty minutes, which meant that I lost an entire planning period. Now I am forced to do more grading in class. I have 63 students instead of the normal 48-50.

The school structure is in alignment with the Core Knowledge system. Preference was given to core subjects, and students were taught in a structured and linear way. In this manner, the material in Ms. Swasher's classroom was presented in alignment with the 4 S's of the Core Knowledge theory. The differentiation of subjects and focus on assessment are also linked with the selected model. Despite the fact that subjects are not connected, students and teachers appear to be able to transition within the segmented time from one subject to another.

### *Engagement*

When asked, Ms. Swasher stated that engagement is extremely important in the learning process. She commented that she knows a child is engaged when the "products" reflect effort and when they contribute in the classroom. "Sometimes chatting is good—it shows that they're processing information." When I asked her to describe what engagement looks like, she commented,

It looks like a room full of excited faces. The students are attentive to what they are doing. For instance, they are raising their hands, asking questions, offering prior knowledge, adding to the discussion, offering humor and enthusiasm. Other times it's quiet, focused, and working.

Again, the data from the engagement surveys (see Appendix E) reflects that the majority of the students were engaged in all three engagement areas: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. The following chart represents the data from the engagement survey. The survey asked students to indicate whether they agreed with 15 different statements regarding engagement. The choices for the statements were: *Never/Almost Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always/Almost Always, or Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.*

I combined the classroom data from the two times the survey was given and averaged the responses in order to present overall findings. Twenty-one students completed the survey the first time, and twenty-one completed the second time. The points were totaled, and an average percentage score for each question is reflected in Table 5.

Table 5

*Summary of Ms. Swasher Engagement Results*

Behavioral Engagement					
Section One: How much do you agree with each of the following statements?	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I come to class prepared.	2.38%	2.38%	9.52%	33.33%	52.38%
I treat my classmates with respect.	2.38%	0.00%	14.29%	38.10%	45.24%
I complete my work on time.	2.38%	2.38%	7.14%	28.57%	59.52%
I treat my teachers with respect.	2.38%	0.00%	0.00%	14.29%	83.33%
I follow the rules at school.	2.38%	2.38%	9.52%	50.00%	35.71%
Totals:	2.86%	1.43%	8.10%	32.86%	55.24%
Cognitive Engagement					
Section Two: How often are the following statements true for you?	Never/ Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always/Almost Always
I feel excited by the work in school.	11.90%	4.76%	42.86%	30.95%	9.52%
I am interested in the work I get to do in my classes.	4.76%	9.52%	35.71%	33.33%	16.67%
I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning.	7.14%	26.19%	23.81%	14.29%	28.57%
I check my schoolwork for mistakes.	4.76%	19.05%	21.43%	30.95%	23.81%
I learn a lot from my classes.	0.00%	0.00%	11.90%	23.81%	64.29%
Totals:	5.71%	11.90%	27.14%	26.67%	28.57%
Emotional Engagement					
Section Three: How often are the following statements true for you?	Never/ Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always/Almost Always
I enjoy the work I do in class.	9.52%	7.14%	23.81%	35.71%	23.81%
I feel I can go to my teachers with the things that I need to talk about.	0.00%	14.29%	21.43%	33.33%	30.95%
My classroom is a fun place to be.	0.00%	2.38%	21.43%	38.10%	38.10%
Most of my teachers praise me when I work hard.	2.38%	21.43%	26.19%	26.19%	23.81%
Most of my teachers understand me.	0.00%	9.52%	21.43%	33.33%	35.71%
Totals:	2.38%	10.95%	22.86%	33.33%	30.48%

Upon close examination, there are several items that stand out. The first is that there is a big difference in the results for the three types of engagement (88.1%, 55.24%, and 63.81%, respectively). Of the four classrooms, Ms. Swasher's class had the highest level of behavioral engagement and the lowest cognitive and emotional engagement.

There was also a range found within the categories. For example, although 83.3% of the students *strongly agree* that they treat their teachers with respect, only 35.71% indicated that they *strongly agree* with the fact that they follow the rules at school. In addition, 88.1% indicated that they *often* or *always/almost always* learn a lot from their classes, while only 40.47% said the same about feeling excited by the work in school.

The behavior section indicated that 88.1% of the students marked either *agree* or *strongly agree* that they are behaviorally engaged, while only 4.29% indicated that they *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*. Interestingly, the range of responses for *agree* or *strongly agree* was 83.34% for treating classmates with respect and 97.62% for treating teachers with respect.

Results are lower for the cognitive engagement section; 55.2% stated that they are *often* or *always/almost always* cognitively engaged. As mentioned, the only response in this section that had a high number of *often* or *always/almost always* was the question about learning a lot from classes (88.1%). Only 40.47% indicated that this was true for being excited by the work.

The last section, the emotional; showed that 63.8% indicated that they are *often* or *always/almost always* emotionally engaged, and 13.3% answered that they are *rarely* or *never/almost never* emotionally engaged. The remaining students indicated a neutral answer in all three areas. The responses in this section ranged from 50% being the lowest (most of my teachers praise me when I work hard) to 76.2% being the highest (my classroom is a fun place to be).

Similar to Ms. Patsa’s classroom, the highest level of engagement is found in the behavioral engagement. Again, this fit with my observations and indicated to me that the structure and routine in the class helped the students become more engaged. In the following table, I calculated frequency and relative frequencies.

Table 6

*Ms. Swasher: Frequency and Relative Frequency of Overall Engagement*

Type	Strongly Disagree or Never/Almost Never	Disagree or Rarely	Neutral or Sometimes	Agree or Often	Strongly Agree or Always/Almost Always
Frequencies	22	51	122	195	240
Relative Frequencies	.035	.081	.194	.310	.381
Percentages	3.49%	8.10%	19.37%	30.95%	38.10%

The previous chart demonstrates the results when the three sections of engagement are combined. As reflected above; 69.05% of the class indicated that they *agree/often* or *strongly agree/always, almost always* that they are engaged. This indicates that over half of the students in Ms. Swasher’s class indicated that they were engaged in all three categories.

Again, the engagement survey data reflect what was seen in the classroom, Ms. Swasher’s goals for her students, and the intentions of the Core Knowledge model.

During my time in the classroom, the students in Ms. Swasher’s class demonstrated the

elements that she described as being engaged. They paid attention to what they were working on, were able to answer questions, and exhibited humor and enthusiasm. For example, when Ms. Swasher had the students write “I Am” poems from the perspective of a character in the *Iliad*, these characters came alive to the class. Students exhibited a real desire to share what they had written, and the other classmates eagerly guessed which character their classmates had chosen. It was clear that students were held to high standards and were learning a lot.

### *Interest and Propensities*

Again, in order to better understand what the students’ thoughts were, I interviewed seven students. Interestingly enough, when I asked the students what they like to do in their free time, the majority of the seven students interviewed answered with an academic answer. For instance, four of the seven students, listed “reading.” As previously mentioned, this was similar to the third graders at ASA. Answers included:

“I like to study for a test, if no test is coming up, I like to read,” replied one student.

“Play lacrosse and read,” answered another.

For the majority of my observations, the students were focused and academically invested. They enjoyed the routine and appeared to thrive in a structured and fast-paced environment. When students were asked about their favorite project from the year, a variety of assignments were listed. For instance, one student answered,

I really liked the timelines. We wrote a biography first and then made a timeline for our person. I liked how I got to be creative and how I could chose a personal background for that person. My person was Clara Barton.

Another student answered, “My favorite was the Greek Festival. Everyone memorized a play for the Greek myths, and we performed them in front of the whole grade.” It was evident from their responses that they enjoyed the different projects and lessons that Ms. Swasher provided for them.

Ms. Swasher remarked that she thoroughly enjoyed the curriculum that she was teaching. “I love the curriculum at this grade level. It’s very challenging and after six years, I just now feel like I’m hitting my stride.” Her passion for the curriculum was seen in the attention to detail that her lessons offered and in her own enjoyment in the literature. When discussing the different books they were reading, she would frequently comment about how much she loved the book. This obvious love of learning in her own life encouraged a similar love in her students.

### **Final Thoughts**

My time in Ms. Swasher’s class was enjoyable. She made everyone feel welcome and appreciated. She worked hard to make personal connections with her students, and because of that they looked up to her and respected her as a teacher and confidant. When I asked one of her students what she liked best about the school, she answered, “All the teachers really are here for you and they have a lot of good intentions. So if you need help, they’ll come to help you right away.” Again, as Snoopy might, Ms. Swasher offered

the perfect amount of humor and knowledge to infuse her students with a passion to learn and enjoy.

## Response from Ms. Swasher

Kristen-

It was an honor to be a part of your graduate work, and to have you observe in my classroom for the months you were here. The students were intrigued by your presence, and wondered why you were there. It was a great chance for me to tell them about the advanced degree you were earning, and that not only could each of them do something like that when they are older, but how they got to be a part of the project you were doing.

At first, we were all aware of you being in our room, and we were doing our best to be impressive, but then we became used to you being there each week, and I feel like you got to observe "normalcy" in my room. The students were excited to volunteer to meet individually with you to answer your interview questions, and you made me think about things I was doing as an educator; and the reasons for teaching at my school with their curriculum. Your questions were thought-provoking and allowed me to be intentional about the way I work with my classes. All in all, it was a very positive experience for all of us, and we all wish you the very best with your research!

Sincerely,

Ms. Swasher

## **The Grassy Hills School of Expeditionary Learning<sup>5</sup>, Expeditionary Learning**

### **Introduction**

The Grassy Hills School of Expeditionary Learning (GHSEL) is located in Denver, Colorado and is a public school of choice that was created as a partnership between five of the Denver metro school districts. The school is a K-12 school that was created in 1993. In addition to the Expeditionary Learning (EL) model, the school adopted the following mission statement:

As a K-12 community, the mission of [the school] is to empower students and staff to be learners, thinkers, citizens, and explorers engaged in and inspired by the real world. "We are crew not passengers.

According to the State Accountability report, the school enrolled 343 students, in 2007-2008. None of the students were eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch during the 2007-2008 school year. The K-5 section of the school is ranked *High* by the Colorado Department of Education. According to the school website:

GHSEL was founded on the ideals of Outward Bound and organizes its curriculum around multidisciplinary learning expeditions. Academic achievement and character development are placed together at the core of the curriculum. Our standards-based K-12 portfolio assessment system makes explicit the criteria by which success can be measured and documents the accomplishment of high academic and character standards.

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<sup>5</sup> Again, school names have been changed.

In order to apply, students must live within one of these five counties and must return an application. All applicants are then put into a lottery. Siblings are given preference, and Kindergarten is a full-time class.

The Expeditionary Learning (EL) model is a comprehensive design that aimed to create a more active curriculum. The initial design was created in part by the Harvard School of Education. It is now being used in more than 150 schools. The school website describes it in more fully in this manner:

The Expeditionary Learning system is based on ten design principles. Those principles grew in large part out of the experience of Outward Bound. The design principles are abstract and aspirational. Nonetheless, they are worth reading, because so much of the Expeditionary Learning system is derived from them. The preface to the design principles sums up the Expeditionary Learning approach to learning: Learning is an expedition into the unknown. Expeditions draw together personal experience and intellectual growth to promote self-discovery and the construction of knowledge. We believe that adults should guide students along this journey with care, compassion, and respect for their diverse learning styles, backgrounds, and needs. Addressing individual differences profoundly increases the potential for learning and creativity of each student.

This school was one of the original ten demonstration schools. Classrooms are multi-aged at the elementary level. So the classrooms that I observed in were a 2nd/3rd and 4th/5th grade classroom. The classrooms are referred to as “crews,” and teachers are called by their first names. In keeping with that, I refer to the teachers by their first names.

**Ms. Kelly<sup>6</sup>**

**2nd/3rd Grade, Expeditionary Learning**

**Introduction**

Kelly has been at Grassy Hills School of Expeditionary Learning for six years. This was her first teaching job. She began teaching at GHSEL after completing her educational degree with an emphasis in expeditionary learning. She was introduced to the school as an intern while working on her degree. Kelly almost always wears jeans and casual tops. She keeps her brown hair cut a little shorter than shoulder length and usually wears it down. I observed her classroom from December through May of the 2007-2008 school year. I was able to see a range of subjects being taught but was most commonly there for the Writers Workshop and Expedition time.

Kelly is one of those teachers who exudes enthusiasm about her career choice. In her late twenties, she is passionate about teaching and gives her all to her job. She has a laid-back attitude and a smile that is seen more often than not. Kelly reminded me of a master chef, providing all of the ingredients to create a masterpiece. She supplies the right amount of each ingredient and the necessary love and then lets the creativity of the moment fashion the final product. Her classroom is a well-prepared kitchen, with just enough support to make sure that all products are prepared perfectly. Some may follow the recipe exactly, but there is always enough room for experimentation and a little extra of this or that, here or there.

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<sup>6</sup> Teachers names have been changed.

### *The student experience*

Painted along the top of the classroom walls was the Shel Silverstein quote, “If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar, a hope-er, a bean buyer... If you’re a pretender, come sit by my fire, For we have some flax-golden tales to spin. Come in! Come in!” This quote sets a tone for the classroom and encouraged a sense of imagination and wonder. The classroom radiates a positive and caring attitude; for instance, there are student-made posters on the window:

“I show courage by trying new things.”

“I care for my crew and the world around me.”

“I listen and speak in conversations.”

“I push myself to work hard.”

The room was colorful; with blue and turquoise as the predominant colors. Student work and classroom-created posters filled the wall space. There was a reading corner on the northwest corner of the room, complete with a futon, coffee table, and rug. Tons of books spilled out of the labeled buckets around the reading area. That entire northern wall of the classroom was windows, which allowed light to stream in on sunny afternoons. A large tree branch had paper “leaves” of words attached to it, turning it into a tree of “Words we Love.”

Students sat at either the two trapezoid tables pushed together to form six-sided figures or the four circular tables. There was an indistinguishable odor permeating the room, something along the lines of wet clothes and post-recess bodies. The rug was a standard school rug with gray as the primary color and turquoise, blue, and an orangey-brown mixed in.

A large bookshelf on the southern wall was dedicated to the students' portfolios, the alternative assessments that the school used to demonstrate student growth. There were 24 students in the room: 12 girls and 12 boys. A great deal of diversity was present in the room; both in academic levels and in ethnicity. The clothing was colorful and eclectic; for instance on several occasions, many of the students wore snow hats and slippers.

A huge uncovered pipe ran across the majority of the classroom ceiling. Kelly had hung a rope across part of the pipe, and using clothespins she displayed student work. For instance, at one point in the year, the drawings students did of the digestive system were hung. Students each made one, labeling the different parts of the system. There were books everywhere, and a love of reading was reflected in the classroom atmosphere. The classroom displays changed frequently and exhibited a fun and creative atmosphere. One day there was even a colorful construction paper banner hanging on the doorway. The classroom has pictures of the students and white butcher paper displays everywhere in the room. Evidence of *Best Practices* was evident throughout the room; for example, the vocabulary (schema), student-created work, and posted learning targets were all found. One poster from an earlier lesson read: "Thoughtful readers leave tracks of their thinking to make their conversations more powerful!" And it went on to list: "questions, connections, predictions, feelings, and mental images." By each of the listed items there was a sticky note with an example of these things.

A designated area of the room was set aside for circle time. This area had a rug and was where they held class meetings and a lot of whole group instruction. Above the space, hung a ceiling that was created by hanging yellow fabric with stars on it, draped

over wooden dowels. There were a lot of hand-made items in the room; both teacher- and student-made. The mugs that the students drank out of were clearly made by the students; each one a little awkward and unique. The walls were almost all covered with student work and teacher- made “lesson artifacts.”

Despite its obvious creative nature, the classroom was definitely organized; a series of rituals kept everyone on task. Songs signaled transitions, and students were trained to be where they needed to be by the time the song was over. The class ended each day with chores and cleaning and then a gathering in a circle to sing a song. In circle time, the class sang, discussed the day, and shared a success for the day.

Traditions also began each day; the students were greeted with a personal letter from Kelly as well as the daily schedule. For example:

December 12, 2007  
12/12/07

8:00 meeting  
8:15 fitness  
9:15 technology  
10:15 recess/snack  
10:45 math workshop  
12:15 lunch/recess  
1:00 read-aloud  
1:30 writers workshop:  
    culinary memoirs  
2:30 Carolyn’s birthday celebration  
    closing circle  
3:00 home/aftercare

Dear crew,  
Good morning! I hope you  
have a great morning with JH and  
Elizabeth. Please remember the crew  
goals we chatted about in closing circle  
yesterday. I know you’ll do great!

Love,  
Kelly

Happy Birthday  
Carolyn!

morning activity...  
please write a  
culinary word  
from the list →

Kelly had a teaching assistant for the year. The assistant had been leading wilderness trips for the past couple of years and wanted to get into teaching. She volunteered at GHSEL, helping out in the classroom and providing additional support to those students who needed it.

### *Pedagogy*

The EL model encourages a discovery-oriented pedagogy. It expects all members of the “crew” to work together to learn. When I asked Kelly about her teaching philosophy, she responded:

I believe that students learn best by doing. I want the students to do the work—to not be the spoon feeder. The children figure it out, and I learn along with them. I believe that students learn the best through conversation and practice. In addition, it has to be something meaningful to them; they have to be able to make connections.

This philosophy was exhibited in the classroom; most of the activities that I observed were student-directed. For example, when I walked into the classroom for the first time, the students were gathered in a circle on the rug discussing the writer’s workshop task for the day. Kelly had the students carefully listening and responding to a sentence about a culinary experience. Previously the students had brainstormed words and explored cookbooks to determine culinary terms. The words were posted on the closet doors, for example: “blend,” “produce,” “teaspoon.” Kelly had typed up a sentence for each student that used words that “exploded” the moment, demonstrating how details make the memory more vivid. The students discussed the words in the sentence and how they made it more memorable. Then Kelly said, “Okay, now for a boring sentence: ‘I poured the flour into the bowl.’” Students were asked to explode it, and several examples were offered, for example:

“I dumped the flour into the bowl and watched the puff of smoke rise,” stated one little boy.

As the students started to get excited about sharing their sentences, Kelly reminded them “Remember, I want a noise level of 1 or 2, and thumbs up for sharing.” She allowed several students to share their “exploded” sentences and then moved on to the directions for the continuing activity. After the explanation was completed, students were chosen to hand out the writing folders. The children were called for their folders, and after grabbing them, they went back to their tables to work on exploding their own culinary memories. As they worked, Kelly constantly got down to the same level as the children. Whether it was sitting with them on the rug or kneeling at their tables, she was right there with them.

Part way through the writing time, Kelly asked students to share some of their favorite sentences.

“In a blink of an eye, I was gone,” shared one excited girl.

“I stirred the lumpy pumpkin chocolate dough,” offered a boy.

After several students shared, Kelly complimented them and encouraged everyone to stretch themselves to add more details. Throughout the lesson, Kelly walked around to the different tables offering support and helping students work through the lesson. She complimented positive behavior and offered books to the students for references to support their ideas.

About half way through the writing time, Kelly turned on soft music (Enya) to support the writing and quiet time. Several minutes later she turned the lights off for a time check. She let the students know that they would all share as a “crew” in 15 minutes.

As the writing time came to an end, Kelly used a call and response, “Ah go.”

“Ah may,” the class repeated in unison.

“Okay, I want you to star the sentence that you think best demonstrates an exploded sentence. Bring your papers to circle and put them on the ground in front of you.” The students quickly transitioned to the floor and all were ready to share. Kelly had them go around in a circle sharing their sentences.

“Oh, how I love chocolate fridge pie; a cold delicacy in summer,” responded the first child.

“The glittery ice crystals floating outside,” shared the second.

After several shared, Kelly came to a student who wasn’t ready to share. She offered wait time for the student to pass and didn’t force him to share. He decided he wasn’t ready to share, and so Kelly moved on to the next student. Eventually, she went back to the boy that had passed and he decided to share his sentence.

At the end of the circle, Kelly asked, “When I look at the clock, what time do I see? Thumb’s up, if you can tell me.” Several offered some random guesses, demonstrating that they were still learning to read a clock. Finally, one girl offered the correct time. Kelly had her explain how she knew. It was a perfect example of how Kelly allowed the students to teach one another.

After the explanation, Kelly let her students know that it was time to clean up for the birthday celebration. The clean up was a little hectic; several students showed great dance moves as they worked through their end-of-the-day clean up and jobs. After a few minutes of cleaning, Kelly began a song with movements to begin circle time. Students

were able to do the song without words; it involved a series of claps on different body parts. The song was called *Carwash*, it went like this:

“Lemonade,”

“Clap, clap, clap,”

“Crunchy ice,”

“Clap, clap, clap,

“Sip it once,”

“Clap, clap, clap,”

“Sip it twice,”

“Lemonade, crunchy ice, sip it once, sip it twice, turn around, touch the ground, and freeze.”

As the song came to an end, Kelly said, “When bodies and voices are still we will start the celebration. Everyone needs to turn their energy volumes down. Carolyn, how do you plan to celebrate your birthday?”

As this lesson demonstrates, there is a high level of energy and excitement about learning in Kelly’s class. The students were genuinely excited to work on their sentences to make them better. Knowing that they would be able to share their improved sentences motivated them to write really detailed sentences. Kelly’s own enthusiasm in response to their sentences spread throughout the room. This enthusiasm was present for most of the time I was in the room.

Another element of the classroom that stood out during my observations was the smooth transitions that took place. Kelly gave clear directions and allowed the students to

move freely about the classroom. The classroom is large and has plenty of space for different activities and learning needs.

Because the expedition journeys continued for several months, the students were able to explore many aspects of a topic, in this case, digestion. It also allowed Kelly to make connections between content areas. For example, she used what the students had learned in science to help teach a lesson on nonfiction reading techniques. The following example demonstrates this ability to make cross-content connections.

The class was all gathered in a circle on the rug. Kelly was reading *Little House in the Big Woods*. They were in the middle of sharing connections to the story when I entered. The students raised their thumbs when they wanted to share. Kelly finished reading the chapter and told the students that she would read the first sentence of the next chapter while they all gathered close up to her for the science experiment directions. Students began by sharing what they had written the day before on what part of digestion takes place in the mouth. When they finished sharing, Kelly said: “Okay scientists, now I am going to give you a text and you are going to have to code the text. Often, nonfiction books can be difficult to understand. One way to read them is to code them.” She had photocopied large pages of the text that the students were going to be working with and went through the first page with them to teach them how to code the most important parts.

She began with the heading, “Why does my mouth water?” she circled the word mouth and made a drawing to represent it above the word and then underlined the word water and drew an image of water over it. The next sentence was, “The smell and taste of food often makes your mouth water with saliva.” The students chose the words that they

thought were important: smell, taste, food, mouth, water, and saliva were the words that they chose. As they called them out, Kelly recorded them on white butcher paper. When they finished, she commented,

“You should know an automatic clue as a reader: if a word is in bold, it is an important word.”

She pointed out how saliva was written in a bold font and asked what being in a bold font often meant in nonfiction texts.

“That the word is in the glossary,” answered one student.

“Yes,” Kelly responded. “Now I want you to read the rest of this with a partner and underline the important words like we just did. You scientists should then write three to five things that you learned on the back of your page.” When she was done with the directions, she had a student repeat back what the directions were. When he accurately repeated the directions, Kelly moved on to the expectations for the activity: “If you were working well with your partner what does that look like?”

“It means that you’re not talking to your partner about something else,” replied one girl.

“Yes, if Carolyn and I were partners and we were chatting about something not at all related to the digestive system, then that wouldn’t be very productive. What else?” asked Kelly.

Throughout the process, Kelly offered plenty of wait time and patience with the students, and eventually they came up with the following ways to demonstrate productive behavior:

“Listening to our partner,” responded a girl.

“Staying in our seats,” continued a boy sitting next to her.

“And sticking together,” a student from the middle called out.

“Great, that’s my crew challenge for you today, to demonstrate that you’re being a good partner.” Kelly partnered everyone up and had the aide work in the reading corner of the room with a small group of students who needed extra support. The students all settled into their spots and got to work. Kelly walked around checking in with the groups and asked them why they were selecting certain words. “Are you noticing the kind of words that you’re not circling? I wonder if a lot of the words you are not coding are on our list of common words.”

The students had about 15-20 minutes to do this task. The class had moments of chatter, but for the most part worked well together and got the task done. When the students finished their work they came back to meet in ‘mush’ (a grouping where everyone sat next to each other on the floor) to discuss their work. They brought their papers and shared some of the things that they had learned. Students talked about the different facts that they were learning, and Kelly recorded the thoughts on a piece of paper. This piece of paper would become one of the learning artifacts found hung around the room. She then gave them directions for the science experiment. Again, after the directions, the students were given a chance to ask questions and get further clarification.

In order to complete the experiment, the students all got paper towels, crackers and some water. They had to dry off their tongues with the paper towels and then eat one cracker. After this, they took a sip of water and then got to eat the second cracker. They were then supposed to write their conclusions down. While the students were doing this, they were talkative, but got the task done. Kelly walked around the room and modeled

the use of scientific words, for example: “conclusion, discover, observations, conflicting research, what did you discover?” When she noticed that students were done, she had them clean up and grab their “just right” books. Directions were clear, and students had a good sense of what they were supposed to be doing. Group by group, the students quietly cleaned up and handed their papers to Kelly. They all selected their books and got ready for individual reading time.

Once the students were seated with their books, Kelly said, “See if you can build your reading stamina to 20 minutes today. That’s our goal.” A couple of the students read together. There is clearly a wide range of readers in the class—reading everything from C.S. Lewis and Harry Potter to beginner reader series. Kelly worked with one student to find a book that would work for him. Having the aide in the room is helpful and enabled the students needing more help to have direct instruction.

The 20 minutes went by quickly, and for the most part, the students stayed reading and quiet the whole time. At the end of the time, the students were praised for reading for the 20 minutes and given directions for listening to the new job chart. Students appeared excited about the jobs and busily cleaned and got the classroom organized. Tables were cleaned with wipes, and things were put away and organized for the next day. After about five minutes, Kelly began singing and the students joined in; by the end all were gathered in their closing circle. Kelly asked them to share their observations from the science experiment. When everyone had shared, she encouraged them to try the experiment at home with stronger tasting food to see what happened.

Again, considering all of the transitions, the students did a nice job of moving from one task to the next. And although activities changed a lot, there was an underlining

structure and support that kept them focused. Kelly used the lights, music, voice changes, and songs to keep students aware of what was expected.

One of the main themes that I noticed in both classrooms at GHSEL was the questioning techniques that the teachers used. Both teachers were constantly walking around asking questions and guiding students to their own answer rather than always giving the answer. This technique got the students interested and thinking through ideas rather than being handed information. It also set up a classroom that supported students learning from each other.

Kelly was aware of the individual needs of her students and guided them all to a level of personal success. For example, the following description of independent reading time demonstrates the individual attention all students received.

As the students began to read, they found places around the room to read. Some sat on the stools, some on the other “comfortable” furniture, including Crazy Creeks (camping chairs) and a hand-painted blue bench. Kelly turned on music for them, again, quiet Enya music. As students settled in, Kelly discussed the ability to read for longer as building stamina. “Today we are training to be able to read for 22 minutes.” The students appeared excited to meet this goal.

A girl with obvious learning needs sat down with Kelly to work on her “just right” book. It was Sleeping Ugly. Kelly worked with her on decoding words and reading strategies. She was a beginner reader and was struggling to read the beginner book. Kelly asked questions and praised her throughout the process. She encouraged the girl to make connections and to process the text as she read. For example, when the student came to a word that she did not know, Kelly said, “Two vowels go walking, who’s going to talk?”

The girl was then able to sound out the word. As Kelly worked with this student, another student tried to interrupt to tell Kelly that there was a piece of paper that was left on the heater. Kelly gave her a “thumbs-up,” basically letting her know that she was busy and should be left alone. This strategy allowed her to acknowledge the student without interrupting the student she was working with. After reading with the girl for about ten minutes, Kelly told her, “I’m going to read one more sentence with you and then let you read on your own.” The students were very independent in their reading, thus allowing Kelly to work with this girl. It was necessary time, and as soon as Kelly left, the student stood up and stopped reading. The one-on-one time was essential to get her reading at all. At the end of the 22 minutes, Kelly checked in with the students, asking them to share how much they had accomplished.

“I read 32 pages – wow!” one student commented.

“Wow, 32 pages! Readers, show me fists of five on how you built your stamina,” Kelly replies. The students all raised their hands and the majority of them were fives.

“Wow, almost all of us were fives!” remarked another student.

“Yes, I agree, lots of fives,” Kelly responded, “great job!”

They put away their books and gathered in the circle. Kelly reminded the students that they needed to make good choices about whom they sit next to and that it takes a whole “crew” to make good choices. She then had the students answer the questions from the quiz that they had taken earlier that day and commented on the great information that she was getting. While Kelly asked the questions, the students were very excited to share, and almost everyone has his or her thumbs up to share. The class finished with a song, and the day was over.

As mentioned, the expedition work was tied in across the different content areas, and Kelly made sure to make projects real and important to the students. For example, one project that they worked on was making books about the digestive system. When they finished writing their books, the plan was to read them to other students at the Museum of Nature and Science. These books were worked on over a period of time. Kelly guided them through each step, offering support and clear goals. For example, one day, she had them mentally prepare themselves for writers' workshop, reminding them of things that they should be looking for in their own papers. Each student was asked to come up with a daily goal for their writing. Kelly encouraged them to come up with really specific "laser point" goals. Students shared their goals before beginning:

"I am going to get half-way through my large intestine paragraph," responded the first student.

"I am going to use really scientific language and finish," another commented.

As the students reported their goals, they were handed their plastic writing folders and sent back to their seats to begin working. The students made their way back to their tables, and at their own pace they got to work on the writing assignment. The assignment had several "targets" that they were trying to meet that were posted on the board:

"Use similes and metaphors;"

"Use scientific language;"

"Teach the reader about the digestive system."

After writing for a period of time, one of the boys thought he was done. He talked to his tablemates about the expectations and what he should do next. He asked them if they thought 301 words were enough. Kelly realized that he needed some direction on the

next steps, so she came up and helped him get back on track. She offered a review of the learning targets and suggestions to make his piece as complete as possible before turning in the rough draft. After she left, he went back to work, adding more details.

Kelly continued to walk around checking in with individuals and tables. For example, one table was talking, so Kelly walked over and said, “My goal for this table today is productive work. I know that you guys like to share ideas and that’s great, but let’s work on how to get those ideas on paper too.” At one point during the working time, Kelly wanted everyone’s attention. In order to signal that she needed their attention, she turned off the lights and reminded them of some of the other details she wanted them to consider. She finished the writing time continuing to walk around from child to child offering challenges to individuals and tables. At some point in the lesson, all students were given individual attention and suggestions.

Classroom management was handled in a loving and nurturing way, but without room for excuses. For example, one student who had been difficult several of the times that I had been in the room crawled over to a spot behind a table while the class was in circle time. I wondered if Kelly had seen him. Eventually, she calmly asked him if he was ready to come back and join the group. He remained behind the table and didn’t answer so Kelly continued on with the lesson. Eventually he decided to join the class again. Rather than making a big deal of the situation and disrupting the lesson for all of the “crew,” Kelly acknowledged the behavior and put the impetus on him to make the right decision. He took the necessary time to collect himself and was eventually able to rejoin the group. Kelly knew that student well enough to know that if she demanded that he

return it would be detrimental to the outcome. She demonstrated this knowledge of individuals on most occasions, and situations were handled with a loving concern.

### *Curriculum*

As previously mentioned, EL schools base their curriculum around learning expeditions. These expeditions are units of study that guide instruction by delving in depth into a topic. At GHSEL, the teachers choose two or three expeditions for the year. As previously mentioned, this year, one of Kelly's expeditions was nutrition and digestion.

When I asked Kelly about curriculum, she responded,

Well, let me use the nutrition expedition as an example. I sat down with my teammate and the coach. Together, we looked at the standards and thought about what it is about food and nutrition that the students would be interested in and what is important to know. EL schools have an electronic program called LEO. It's a template; it asks for the compelling topic and the guiding questions. For many of the sections you can fill-out 'No,' 'Yes,' or, 'No Answer.' It asks you, 'How might this help me know and grow.' You fill in questions, contents, standards, projects, and other things like that, and it helps put together your unit. I like to think about planning backwards—what do we want them to know at the end?

Kelly was explicit with her goals and objectives. This program helped her consciously think through the curriculum-planning process. To get an idea of some of the expedition work and how it is integrated into the different content areas, I have provided several classroom examples of the nutrition expedition.

Evidence of what they had learned about the digestive system was found all over the room, and books and references were scattered all around. Hanging on the front board was a poster that they made together; it was titled: "An Accomplished Nonfiction Paragraph:" Next to it was another poster with a blown-up copy of one of the student's

paragraphs. On the paragraph, the class together had found multiple examples of scientific words, marked them, then circled onomatopoeias and examples of where the paragraph “talked to the reader.” These were used to prep students for the day’s writers’ workshop.

When the review time finished, students were given 35 minutes to write. One of the students could not remember how to spell one of the vocabulary words, “rugae,” which means the folds that capture food in the stomach. Kelly told him that she wasn’t sure about the spelling either, so together they researched it online. They found a website with a bunch of “gross” information and pictures that entertained them. In order to share their enjoyment with what they found, Kelly took the computer around to all of the students to show them the website. This act demonstrated Kelly’s own passion and humor and helped get all of the students interested in the lesson.

After everyone had gotten a chance to see the pictures, the students continued writing their pieces. At one point, the students at one table started talking about soccer practice and had forgotten about their writing task. Kelly noticed, walked over, and asked them how things were going. She got them back on track and then walked away to help another group

At times, the students chatted while they worked, but for the most part, it was a discussion about the assignment, and they helped one another through the various stages of the writing process. For example, tablemates helped each other with spelling and what they should work on next. One student got frustrated with his lack of ability in spelling some of the scientific words. Kelly’s response was to tell him that most adults struggle with spelling these words. He seemed to feel better after their interaction and went back

to work. After the one student looked up rugae, many of the other students wanted to write about it. When they needed to spell it, Kelly had students spell it for them so that they could be the ones to pass on the information. Music played quietly throughout this time. Students were spread around the room; in addition to the tables, some were writing on the couch and some were sitting at tables by themselves. This flexibility allowed them to all find work spaces that worked the best for them.

The students appeared to be easily able to write about a difficult topic and were naturally putting figurative language into the text. For example, one student while writing about the waste leaving the anus, described it this way:

“Whoosh! Plop! Splash! It’s a hurricane to the sewer.”

When there were six minutes left for writers workshop, Kelly warned them that they were wrapping things up and so they should think of the ways in which they could be most productive for the last six minutes. She then went around and checked-in with the students to see if they had met their goals. She encouraged them when they said that they were “stuck” and reminded them of resources that they could use to help them get through that stage.

The curriculum was designed so that the students would be given the opportunity to teach each other and to learn together. The students appeared to appreciate this and often walked around the room asking each other for support, for example,

“What do amino acids do?” one student asked a friend.

“How do you spell spinach?” another student asked a tablemate.

Kelly encouraged this behavior and often allowed students to answer questions that were directed at her.

Kelly intentionally talked quietly when giving directions and changed her voice level based on the needs of the classroom. For example, this day, when writers' workshop was over, she quietly got the class's attention and gave directions for the next activity. She instructed students to put all of their supplies back in the plastic envelopes and to stack them on the table so that she could collect them.

As students finished their work, she gave them tasks to do around the room, for example, cleaning the white boards. Kelly continued to remind them of time restrictions and how much time they had left to complete the activity. Then when the time was up, Kelly told the students to do "twenty nice things for the room." She let them know that if they couldn't come up with things, she would give them suggestions. When they finished the 20 things they were supposed to come up to the circle area and complete a *Mad Lib*. The students finished, did their tasks, and then joined the group in the front.

"Thanks Max, maybe that clipboard could find its home too." Kelly commented when the room was almost ready for dismissal. When all of the students had finished their 20 things, Kelly joined them on the floor. The students shared their *Mad Libs* and then did a quick version of their lemonade song in order to be dismissed for the day.

Another example of the nutrition information being seen across the curriculum was in an assignment that was a scientific drawing of the upper digestive system. I walked in one day and the students were gathered at their tables with pencils and journals out drawing the different body parts. Kelly was walking around asking questions. She found a student that was working hard and stopped the class to point out her "good strategy" of drawing the outline first. Part way through the activity, Kelly turned music

on and then went back to walking around asking students questions and making comments about their work:

“Oh, it’s kind of fun drawing the intestines, huh?”

“I like what you’re doing here.”

“What is your strategy here?”

For the most part, the students were focused during the work time. Kelly gave them a time check; “You’ve got ten more minutes. When you’re done, I’d like you do a whole body silhouette on the back.” By telling them what she would like them to do when they finished, she avoided them coming to tell her they are done and asking what they should do next. Praise was frequent, and as she walked around, Kelly told students what exactly she liked about their drawings. “You know what I like about this? I like the way the small intestine wraps around and looks like one thing. That’s hard to do like that.”

The students were not quiet, but their level of engagement appeared high and the conversations were appropriate to the activity; they compared drawings and looked at each other’s work. One of the students came to Kelly to ask her what to do next. Kelly reminded them that she has already suggested what they can do and then stopped the class and said, “It sounds as if several people have forgotten what they were supposed to do when they finish. Can anyone tell them what it is that they should work on?” She called on a student and had him repeat what she wanted the class to do. The student said, “You should look at your drawings and find something that you could do better, and after that you should draw the whole body to see what you remembered.” Again, by having a student respond, Kelly created an opportunity for the students to learn from one another.

Having the curriculum tied together around a theme appeared to work well for the “crew.” I observed them making connections across the curriculum, and the students really seemed to understand the material. In addition, there was a high level of involvement and excitement toward the content introduced in the class. The coverage was deep, and students examined issues from several perspectives. Having the subjects tied together around a theme made transitions move smoothly and therefore not seem as disconnected. Finally, the ability for long-term group projects was possible due to the structure of a thematic curriculum.

### *Evaluation*

Evaluation was prevalent in the classroom but included a plethora of assessment devices. When I asked Kelly about assessments, she responded,

I use a variety of assessments. Quizzes are rare; they are usually only for spelling. There are some short-answer quizzes for content. Then we use the DRA and QRIs, and the MAPS computer assessment. We do a lot of performance and informal assessment, a lot of rubrics for writing. We also do a final written test in math at the end of each unit.

I was fortunate enough to watch Kelly’s “crew” take a short test on the digestive system. The following is a description of one testing experience. Students were cleaning up and getting ready for the assessment when I came in. Each table was supposed to clean everything up and get ready for the assessment. One table was ready and Kelly said, “Nice job.” Both students smiled and one did a little fist pump, obviously happy that their efforts had been acknowledged.

“This assessment is a chance for me and for you to know just what you know. Today’s assessment is one that you need to do all alone.” Kelly read over the test questions before handing the tests out. She explained any funny wording and talked about

what she was looking for from each question. There were six questions about the digestive system. The questions were all short answers with blank lines after the question. “Do your best with spelling. Sound it out as best you can.” As Kelly started handing out the tests, she added, “The more scientific words you can use, the better.”

The students were silent during the test and Kelly walked around quietly helping with questions and checking in on the students. One of the little girls was not taking the assessment. She was the same beginner reader that Kelly had worked with previously. She missed class time for pull-out support and was therefore not taking the test.

The students finished the test relatively quickly and were instructed to turn their tests in and to get out their “just right” books. As Kelly picked up the quizzes she commented on the good job that they had done and told the class not to worry about not knowing all of the answers.

CSAPs are the end of February for this class. Kelly was not very reactive when I asked her about the dates. She was calm about the upcoming tests and didn’t seem fazed by them.

I interviewed five students from Kelly’s room to get an understanding of their experience. Similar to the other classrooms, Kelly helped me select a range of gender, time at school, and personality. I spoke with each student in the hallway outside of the classroom. I began by reintroducing myself, talking about the study, and getting their signatures to audio-tape the interviews. The interviews followed the interview guide (see Appendix B) and lasted around 10 to 20 minutes. In the end, I spoke with two girls and three boys. I also had two parents respond to the survey. The student and parent

responses echoed that there was not a lot of pressure put on testing. As one student commented when I asked how they are assessed:

“Kelly looks through our stuff, like our writing and stuff. Then she writes little sticky notes or pulls them aside. For tests, the only one is CSAP.”

Another student commented, “She sometimes tests us. Like our culinary memoir; right now is our chance to write down everything we’ve learned. Kelly looks through it and figures out what we have learned.”

And a parent commented,

The students do not seem to be stressed by the assessments, and we like the specific information we get from them. Interestingly the CSAPs don’t seem to be very stressful for the crews either, and I expect that is related to how the teachers approach it. The students also do assessments after each unit—I hear about the math tests but assume there are others as well.

My observations matched these comments. Assessment was present, there were a lot of different ways for the students and the teacher to know how everyone was doing, but the focus was on individual growth and not on a pressure to test well. One of the hallmarks of the assessment program at GHSEL is the use of portfolios. Teachers in all grades create portfolios for each student. These portfolios serve to showcase student work and allow individual growth to be expressed. In addition, the portfolios enable different forms of learning to be shown rather than just relying on test scores. According to the school’s webpage, the portfolios are also used as a way to determine whether a student is ready to progress to the next level:

Students, at the end of 3rd, 5th, 8th and 12th grade, present their portfolios for evaluation by a panel of people who represent the GHSEL<sup>7</sup> community, and then discuss their work in terms of effective communication, deep knowledge and

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<sup>7</sup> School name has been changed.

higher order thinking. This demonstration of understanding is meant to further uncover student skill and knowledge. Students whose work is not judged by the passage panel and crew leaders as meeting passage requirements are not promoted until they demonstrate that they have completed the required work and attained the necessary knowledge and skills.

The EL model encourages a range of assessments and the use of authentic assessment. Kelly remained true to this ideal and offered many different ways for her students to demonstrate their growth.

### ***Behind-the-scenes***

#### *Intentions*

One of the main goals of the EL model is to use real-world content to interest students to become life long learners. There is an obvious focus on students working together to discover new information. In addition, there is an emphasis placed on academic and personal best. When I asked Kelly about her goals for students, she responded,

I want my students to be critical thinkers, to develop their curiosity, to be conscious citizens, to know that it is not just about learning. I want them to have character development, to work hard, and do things that they didn't think that they could. They should all have the opportunity to be an expert in something.

The students in her class demonstrated a wide range of ability. Some students could barely read in order to follow the directions and others were able to read and comprehend at a level much higher than grade level. Kelly was conscious of meeting the needs of all the learners and setting appropriate goals so that they could all be experts.

When I asked Kelly how well she thought her classroom matched the Expeditionary Learning Benchmarks (see Appendix G), she told me, "On the whole, we

have a benchmark book with all areas, for example, instruction and assessment. I do my best to meet these.” We continued talking about whether it was harder to meet these benchmarks because of the CSAPs. She responded, “Not really; the classroom is not guided by CSAPs. We don’t do a lot of testing, so we need to teach test taking, but we don’t stress it. My job doesn’t rely on it, and my students are critical thinkers, and that should relate to the test.” The EL benchmarks include learning expeditions, active pedagogy, culture and character, leadership and school improvement and structures (Appendix G). It was evident that Kelly was cognizant of these benchmarks and strived to use them in her classroom.

### *School Structure*

When one imagines what a school based on Outward Bound principles would be like, it is easy to imagine a building with few walls and classes held outside. Surprisingly enough, GHSEL’s school structure was much more traditional than that. The school was housed in a building that used to be a neighborhood elementary school. Classrooms were rectangular in shape, and students stayed with their teachers for the majority of the day. In addition, the school year matched the district schedule in which the school was located. When I asked Kelly what the typical daily, weekly, and yearly schedule was, she answered,

Well, specials are scattered throughout the week. For the daily schedule, we normally have a morning meeting, then we do lit work, the students have a mid-morning break, specials, and math is after lunch. This year we changed to have single grade math, so that is the same every day. We have lunch, read aloud, and then do our expedition. The year is structured into three expeditions that all fit into one theme.

In order to understand who made the decisions regarding the class schedules, I asked Kelly how much say she had in the determination of the schedule. She responded,

Well as far as the weekly schedule, well let me start with daily, I have a lot of say on a daily basis. But I am also on the school leadership team, so I have a lot of say on weekly design and specials schedule. Each grade has a lead team member who reports back to their teams. I am that lead person. So my voice is heard.

Because of the nature of the school, with content tied around a learning expedition, the transitions between subjects were not as obvious as in a traditional school. And with all of the clues that Kelly used to signal transitions, things flowed from one activity to another. So while the school day was more structured than one might find in a true Outward Bound environment, the structure appeared to support the intentions of the school.

### *Engagement*

In order to determine whether Kelly actively considered engagement in her classroom, I asked her a series of questions. When I asked about the importance of engagement, Kelly answered, “Engagement is essential. If students aren’t engaged and excited then the classroom will be stagnant and they won’t learn. I mean, learning is impossible without engagement.” I continued by asking her how engagement looked. She responded,

It is students talking with each other, grappling with things, asking lots of questions. It’s the feeling that in an hour’s workshop, the time disappears because everyone is immersed in it. It is students wanting to find out more, they’re grabbing a book, or something else like that to get more information. Engagement is not quiet all the time, sometimes sure, but perfect engagement is not them being quiet and independent.

I continued the conversation, asking her how she knew if a student was engaged. She responded:

I watch them asking questions, and talking about what they are learning with their peers. They go home and e-mail me about what they found out when researching something further at home. I know when parents e-mail and give feedback about what they are saying and learning outside of the classroom. I am struggling with some of the students who show it differently; I'm trying to figure it out so that I can meet their needs too.

I observed Kelly constantly trying to find ways to interest students in the activity that they were working on and watched her try to keep learning meaningful. One way in which she helped them remain engaged was creating final products that demonstrated the significance of what they were learning. For example, when I asked Kelly if there was anything else that she wanted to add, she concluded,

One of the ways that the students show engagement is through the performance expeditions. For example, on May 7th we have a parents' night. The students will read books they wrote and have food. Experiences like that make and show the level of the students' engagement and expertise. It offers them a social awareness and reflection of their engagement as they design things that they are excited about. It's all about opportunities to be experts. And their performance is indicative of how engaged they are.

As in the previous two cases, the data from the engagement surveys (see Appendix E) reflect that the majority of Kelly's students were engaged in all three engagement areas: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. The following chart represents the data from the engagement survey. The survey asked students to indicate whether they agreed with 15 statements regarding engagement. The choices for the statements were: *Never/Almost Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always/Almost Always, or Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree*. I combined the classroom data from the two times the survey was given and averaged the responses in order to present overall findings.

Twenty-four students completed the survey the first time, and twenty-three completed the

second time. The points were totaled and an average percentage score for each question is reflected in Table 7.

Table 7

*Summary of Kelly's Engagement Results*

Behavioral Engagement					
Section One: How much do you agree with each of the following statements?	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I come to class prepared.	0.00%	0.00%	23.40%	36.17%	40.43%
I treat my classmates with respect.	0.00%	0.00%	25.53%	23.40%	51.06%
I complete my work on time.	2.13%	6.38%	19.15%	34.04%	38.30%
I treat my teachers with respect.	0.00%	0.00%	6.38%	19.15%	74.47%
I follow the rules at school.	0.00%	4.26%	17.02%	25.53%	53.19%
Totals:	0.43%	2.13%	18.30%	27.66%	51.49%

  

Cognitive Engagement					
Section Two: How often are the following statements true for you?	Never/ Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always/Almost Always
I feel excited by the work in school.	0.00%	4.26%	36.17%	19.15%	40.43%
I am interested in the work I get to do in my classes.	2.13%	4.26%	12.77%	38.30%	42.55%
I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning.	4.26%	17.02%	23.40%	12.77%	42.55%
I check my schoolwork for mistakes.	10.64%	8.51%	14.89%	27.66%	38.30%
I learn a lot from my classes.	0.00%	0.00%	17.02%	12.77%	70.21%
Totals:	3.40%	6.81%	20.85%	22.13%	46.81%

  

Emotional Engagement					
Section Three: How often are the following statements true for you?	Never/ Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always/Almost Always
I enjoy the work I do in class.	2.13%	2.13%	19.15%	21.28%	55.32%
I feel I can go to my teachers with the things that I need to talk about.	2.13%	8.51%	10.64%	29.79%	48.94%
My classroom is a fun place to be.	0.00%	10.64%	8.51%	21.28%	59.57%
Most of my teachers praise me when I work hard.	2.13%	2.13%	27.66%	12.77%	55.32%
Most of my teachers understand me.	2.13%	0.00%	10.64%	27.66%	59.57%
Totals:	1.70%	4.68%	15.32%	22.55%	55.74%

When examining the data, there are several items that stand out. The first is that engagement levels are more evenly distributed in this classroom than in the previous two.

Teacher respect is again high with 93.6% of the students indicating that they either *strongly agree* or *agree* that they treat their teachers with respect. When data from the emotional section are examined, it becomes clear that Kelly's classroom had the highest level of emotional engagement. For example, 87.1% reflected that their teacher understands them either *often* or *always/almost always*.

Overall, the data show that none of the students marked that they *disagree* or *strongly disagree* with treating their classmates with respect, treating the teacher with respect, or that they are not learning a lot from their classes.

The behavior section indicated that 79.1% of the students marked either *agree* or *strongly agree* that they are behaviorally engaged, while only 2.6% indicated that they *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*. Treating teachers with respect was the highest response of *agree* and *strongly agree* (93.62%) and completing work on time was the lowest (72.34%).

The cognitive section indicated that 68.9% of the students marked either *agree* or *strongly agree* that they are cognitively engaged, while only 10.2% indicated that they *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*. The lowest responses of *often* or *always/almost always* in this section was for the question about talking to people outside of school about what they are learning, it was 55.32%. The greatest amount of students felt that they *often* or *always/almost always* learn a lot from their classes.

The emotional engagement section indicated that 78.3% of the students marked either *often* or *always/almost always* that they are emotionally engaged. Only 6.4%

indicated that they were *never/almost never* or *rarely* emotionally engaged. In addition to a 87.1% remarking that their teachers understand them *often* or *always/almost always*, 80.9% indicated that their classroom is *often* or *always/almost always* fun.

In order to examine the data in another format, I calculated frequency and relative frequencies, results are listed in Table 8.

Table 8

*Kelly: Frequency and Relative Frequency of Overall Engagement*

Type	Strongly Disagree or Never/Almost Never	Disagree or Rarely	Neutral or Sometimes	Agree or Often	Strongly Agree or Always/Almost Always
Frequencies	13	32	128	170	362
Relative Frequencies	.018	.045	.182	.241	.513
Percentages	1.84%	4.54%	18.16%	24.11%	51.35%

The previous chart demonstrates the results when the three sections of engagement are combined. As reflected above; 75.46% of the class indicated that they *agree/often* or *strongly agree/always almost always* that they are engaged. This indicates that the majority of the students in Kelly’s class were engaged.

Interestingly, the results from the survey are in alignment with my observations and the interview data. I observed a caring community that exhibited high curiosity and

learning. Students appeared to be engaged in all three areas. Likewise, the EL model encourages a balance between the different types of engagement. From my time in the classroom, I observed that the students were usually engaged and actively participating in the activities. They had a respectful relationship with each other and their teacher. Again, out of the four classrooms I observed, Kelly's class had the highest level of emotional engagement.

An element of emotional engagement is peer-to-peer relationships. The students in Kelly's class worked well together and independently solved issues. For example, one time when students were settling in to read, two students argued over a spot. Both adults were doing other things so the students had to resolve it on their own. The situation began when one boy was sitting somewhere and got up to get a book. When he came back, a girl had taken his spot. They argued for a minute, but during the settling of it, one of the other students mentioned that they should think about "solitude." The boy thought about it for a minute and then ended up finding another spot to read. The students solved the problem without it becoming too much of an issue. The idea of solitude comes directly from the Outward Bound model; time alone to figure things out. It is an effective way to give students quiet reflection time. This time, the boy needed to think about his own actions and to make a positive decision. This type of supportive environment was common in the classroom and combined with Kelly's emphasis on creating an engaging classroom most likely helped keep engagement levels high.

### *Interests/Propensities*

When I asked Kelly about matching the lessons to the propensities of her students, she stated, “I think about my class as a whole; it’s a diverse group of students. I try to think of experiences that will tap into their passions. Some are not as strong readers, so I think about how I can differentiate for all of them. I ask myself how will this work today; how will they respond?” The EL model encourages teachers to get to know their students. By nature, this knowledge allows teachers to plan lessons that better meet student interests.

Parents selected the school because they believed that the school would better meet the propensities of their children. One parent elaborated, “What sets the school apart is the approach to education. Also everyone seems to be having fun. I think that is a good sign.”

Students also agreed that they enjoyed how the school was interesting to them, for example, one student commented, “We go to an expeditionary school, so we get to go on expeditions and we travel a lot more and it’s a lot cooler because we get to explore the outdoors. And we focus on one specific expedition to study.”

Another student agreed with this idea, “Yes, we get to learn a lot, and it’s not a bunch of different things, it’s based on one thing.”

Again, my observations matched the interview data and I noticed that the students all seemed to be really excited about learning. The digestive system information interested them and had a good balance of “gross” information as well as factual scientific information.

## **Final Thoughts**

When I asked Kelly what she thought set the school apart from others, she answered,

A lot. We ask students to do real world things—they become real scientists, artists, historians, etc. We push them to work hard to create high-quality projects and present their work in interesting ways. In addition, we focus on character development. We go on trips—camping and weekly outside trips.

I witnessed first hand her students becoming real scientists, authors, historians and artists. Kelly's love for the students and for the art of teaching was obvious. The chefs in her classroom experimented together and learned to make culinary masterpieces.

## **Response from Kelly**

Hi Kristen,

I enjoyed reading your intro. It's always so enlightening to have extra eyes on my classroom, students, me and our learning experiences. I would say you captured my classroom well and represented the EL philosophy and students' experiences accurately.

As far as my experience having you, it wasn't in any way an inconvenience or distracting for me or the students. We are used to having frequent visitors so I think we have all developed the ability do what we do on a daily basis no matter who is around. I think it's so helpful to see and hear what others observe, as it's easy to get wrapped up in my own little teaching world and miss the big picture. I'm thankful to have had someone look closely at my classroom.

Please let me know if you need any further info.

Take care,

Kelly

**Ms. Amy<sup>8</sup>**

## **4th/5th Grade, Expeditionary Learning**

### **Introduction**

Amy has been teaching at GHSEL for the past two years, but taught in other EL schools for seven years before joining their staff. She is a tall, white woman in her early thirties. She appears to fit the Outward Bound archetype well; demonstrating a love for the outdoors and all that it entails. In addition, she was seemingly a perfect fit for the outdoor lifestyle that EL schools promote. Amy was often seen drinking all natural ginger ale from Whole Foods, and was usually wearing jeans and a button-down shirt, with her Dansko clogs. She kept her hair cut short— a boy cut—and wore wide-rimmed funky glasses. When I asked Amy what brought her to the school, she answered,

The idea of Expeditionary Learning, the week long interactions with students. I found an Expeditionary Learning preparation program at the University of Denver. It included a year-long placement at one of the two EL schools in Denver. When I finished, there was space at the other one, so I applied for a job there and taught 5th/6th grade for five years. The design principles are great! I felt like they took the EL learning goals and grounded them with rigorous learning. I feel lucky to be here because this is an ideal place. Through all my experience, mentoring, etc., I realize that I am where I want to be...I chose GHSEL because of the professional development offered here.

Amy has a natural ease with the students and a good mix of structure and love. She reminded me of an expert gardener; giving the nourishment and support for her “plants” to grow strong and independent. She created an environment for them to develop and flourish on their own. Her students appeared to cherish her support and guidance.

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<sup>8</sup> Teacher names have been changed.

After spending time in her room, it became clear that all of the “plants” were growing in their own unique ways.

### *The student experience*

Walking into Amy’s room, one of the first things that stood out was all of the personalized decorations. For instance, Amy had created quotes out of “collaged” letters; they were made as a mosaic that looked similar to Eric Carle’s work; for example, two were:

“We are crew, not passengers,” and

“I am a passionate life-long reader.”

A plethora of pictures of the students, both black-and-white and color, hung around the room. A focus on different types of literacy was evident in the room; for example, the math vocabulary was usually listed from that day’s math lesson. Additionally, there were handmade (teacher and student) posters of the things that make a strong reader and writer. Everything was presented on large white Post-its. There were lots of connections around the room, helping to tie the learning across the curriculum. For example, pictures of trips to places in stories, pictures drawn and taken of related topics, and other images were hung to enable students to make visual connections.

Each child had his or her own magazine rack to keep work and supplies organized. These racks were stacked on the window sill. The back cupboards, above the sink, were painted black with blackboard paint. On them, Amy had chalked in a calendar so that students were aware of upcoming events. Next to the painted chalkboard, the classroom jobs were posted. Amy used pictures of the students to mark the jobs they had.

It was a clever way to do classroom jobs and matched the other displays which were full of pictures of the students. The classroom reflected the personality of the community members, with personal touches all around the room. There was a sense that the students had helped transform the room into a place that they wanted to be.

Amy's room was located right next to Kelly's, and she also had an entire wall of windows. The natural light that streamed in often overpowered the fluorescent lights. Outside the windows there were red temporary buildings, which housed the high school students. Scattered around the room were bean-bags, rugs, Crazy Creeks (camping chairs), and other comfortable spaces for students to explore. In general, the room was comfortable and inviting, and the students exhibited a sense of contentment and ease in the room. The students, similar to the room, had a style of their own and were also frequently found wearing snow hats. One day there were several pairs of shoes by the sink, and students were walking around in socks; definitely testimony to the comfortable atmosphere.

In the same mosaic lettering, Amy also had the EL goals listed above the chalkboard:

“the having of wonderful ideas;”

“solitude and reflection;”

“the natural world”

“empathy and caring;”

“success/failure;”

“service and compassion;”

“the primacy of self-discovery;” and

“diversity and inclusion.”

Amy’s learning targets were clearly evident; the students were aware of the goals and therefore able to work toward them. For example, learning targets for the week of math were clearly written on the white board. The statements were written as, “I can…” statements. By writing in this manner, Amy placed the responsibility for learning in the hands of her students.

Each morning, Amy would write a letter to her “crew.” It included a quick note and the daily schedule. For example:

Dear Crew, Happy Monday! We’ve got a lot to do this week, but I think you’ll be excited about the projects we will start. Let’s not forget to support our spellers. They have a big day tomorrow! Also, I’ll explain homework in closing circle. Make sure you pick up a packet before you leave. – Amy

Schedule:

8:00 – Morning Activity  
8:20 Morning Meeting  
8:30 Math Lab  
9:50 I.R./ Snack oops!  
10:15 Recess  
10:30 Art Studio  
11:30 Readers Workshop – bookmarks  
12:15 Lunch/Recess  
1:00 Read Aloud  
1:20 Expedition Workshop  
2:20 Solitude  
2:40 Closing Circle/Homework/Debrief  
3:00 Home/After care

Although the room was incredibly inviting and cozy, there was also an underlying structure to it. Amy had flowerpots full of markers and colored pencils. They were arranged by color and served as an aesthetic way to display the materials. Next to the flower pots Amy had placed a wide mouth Ball jar to catch pencil sharpenings. Plants and other natural materials were sprinkled around the room—for example, shells, birdhouses, and pinecones. Many of the buckets for the books were a very natural looking wicker material. Blue and green were the predominant colors; they struck me as the colors of earth, and I could not help but wonder if Amy intentionally chose those colors. The thoughtfulness toward the little things was evident throughout the room.

### *Pedagogy*

EL schools promote a workshop atmosphere in which students and teachers work together to discover new information. The teacher is not placed at the center as the keeper of all knowledge. This role requires that the teachers view themselves as learners along with the students. There is also a strong focus on academic and personal growth. In order to get a better understanding of Amy's pedagogical style, I asked her about views on teaching and learning. She replied:

I try to focus on compelling topics that drive learning for a long time—going deep—this is exemplified here. And it is demonstrated in the products that come out of that. Students know that they need to work hard and become experts in the area. I push them to dive deep and want them to feel in the classroom like they've done something important. We do workshops and focus on learning together; learning alongside one another. This allows them to do something greater than they ever thought they could. I definitely teach the character pieces—focus on relationships, supporting each other, high expectations. I try to drive who they are together as a crew.

The ability to work and learn together in her classroom was obvious. There was a balance of meeting individual needs with students working together to reach goals. The following example reflects this balance. I walked in with snow beginning to fall outside. The overhead machine was on reflecting a rubric for accomplished work on the front board. Amy was teaching the students how to use the rubric and discussing the assignment's learning targets. She finished discussing the goals and moved onto brainstorming with the students about what to do in order to be successful on the upcoming task. The students listed:

“Get the piece of work out;”

“Re-read; stop; and thinking time;”

“Look for evidence; look closely;”

“Be kind, specific, and helpful;”

“Talk through it;”

and “Read the rubric.”

The class finished brainstorming, and Amy gave the students options for the next steps. “You have two options; you can rework your writing pieces or find a partner and do peer-editing.” This choice allowed students to pick an activity that was the most productive for them and was either a group project or a chance to work independently.

Amy finished the directions, and the students broke apart to begin working. Several found partners to work with; others took out their own pieces and began self-editing. A couple of the students went to Amy for assistance partnering up; she helped them find a partner and then guided them on specific next steps.

Students were scattered around the room; some sitting on the floor and others gathered at the tables. One group even went to work quietly in the hall. The students worked well with their partners, offering suggestions and ideas from their own writing process. I overheard one student ask another, “What are some details you had?” The student responded with several ideas.

The students appeared interested and engaged in the editing. When Amy let them know that they only had ten more minutes for editing, they groaned, indicating that they wanted more time. As the students worked for the last ten minutes, Amy walked around and checked in with them. She asked questions and helped guide the students rather than telling them what to do.

Questioning is definitely Amy’s teaching style. She guided children to the answer and helped them answer their own questions. It was clear that she strived to pull out ideas and answers from each student as she wandered around the room.

In addition, Amy constantly checked-in with the students and made sure that her directions were clear. This allowed her to ensure that the students understood what they were supposed to be doing. Often when giving directions Amy would lower her voice level so that the students had to be quiet to hear her; their silence served as a sign that they were paying attention.

The snow was really coming down outside as the activity came to an end. Amy checked in with the whole group, giving a time warning and posed the last steps to think about while editing. When the time for editing came to an end, Amy signaled for their attention.

“Ah go,” Amy called.

“Ah may,” responded the children. This was all that the students needed to signal that it was time to listen. They stopped what they were doing, and Amy gave the next steps. As requested, the students put away their supplies and gathered on the rug in a circle. Amy sat down on the ground with them and started the discussion with commenting on how difficult the writing process can be. She went on to add, “I want you to share something that you feel like you have improved on. Tell us, as a writer, what one of your strengths is.” She started the sharing by passing a magic wand around as the symbol to talk.

The first student responded, “My words are better; I’m better at being able to talk from another perspective.”

The next stated, “I am now using bigger words.”

Amy took a turn in the sharing circle, modeling what she thought she’s done well. A couple of students were obviously not paying attention, and Amy got them back on track by reminding them of how separate conversations were not a part of being a supportive community. As the wand made its way around the circle, students were allowed to say “come back” and hand the wand onto the next person.

The “crew” finished the debrief circle; in the end, even those who had initially passed, shared. Amy summarized the comments that she had heard and went on to talk about what she hoped to see for the remainder of the class time. She then asked who was ready for “solitude” (solitude is a time for students to work independently). Students showed her their readiness with a thumb up. They had thirty seconds to find a spot and had ten or fifteen minutes to do something on their own. Amy turned on quiet music, and the students worked to find an appropriate activity. The majority found books to read,

others drew, and a few struggled to find something to work on. A couple of the students walked around without their shoes. One student started juggling by himself during the time. Eventually, the juggler caused a few other students to come over to watch. Amy saw the distraction and said,

“On your own please. Remember read, write, or draw...or think.” She talked to the group watching the juggling for a few more seconds, helping them get redirected into another activity.

During solitude, Amy worked on a few teacher activities and then modeled what she wanted them to be doing by silently reading a book of her own.

The “crew” stayed quiet with everyone respecting the chance for solitude. It was a peaceful time in an otherwise hectic world. At the end of the 15 minutes, Amy had to interrupt them from their solitude time to do the wrap-up jobs for the day. The students got to work and began doing what they were supposed to be doing. When they finished their jobs, they all gathered on the floor in a circle. Amy began the closing circle by having the students guess what author she was thinking of. The students had to ask different questions in order to figure out who the author was. In doing so, they had to review different types of genres and problem-solving strategies. Once they had guessed the author, the students went around the circle and shared a highlight from the day. If they didn’t have one, Amy would give them a highlight that she had noticed. She finished closing circle by going over their upcoming homework with them.

The students worked well together and often asked each other for help. Classroom behavior was usually not a concern. Expectations were clear, and students, for the most part, were well-behaved and courteous. Amy used questioning and modeling to steer the

students in the direction that she wanted. For example, one time when a student was talking, Amy asked, “Sadie, what is your job right now?” and as Sadie answered, Amy commented, “Thank you for doing it.”

Interestingly enough, this was not the case when a substitute was in the room. While students are often more difficult for substitutes, this particular time was a remarkable difference and the students’ behavior was a lot different with him than they were for Amy. The substitute did his best to keep them on track; he even resorted to requesting five minutes of silence. The students did not complete nearly as much work with him as they normally did because they did not work efficiently. This change in behavior was testament to the respect that the students had for Amy and her ability to keep them focused and working hard.

### *Curriculum*

Curriculum at EL schools is centered about learning expeditions. Teachers are expected to choose compelling topics that will allow students to really delve into a subject. Different content areas are woven into the expedition, and students are exposed to a greater breadth and depth of information. When I asked Amy how curriculum decisions were made at her school, she replied:

We use the EL goals as an umbrella; teachers are expected and given the freedom to develop their own expeditions. We all use a text called *Benchmarks*; it’s an outline that shows what a good expedition looks like. I also keep state standards in mind. For this year, I met with our coach over the summer for three days and did all the long-term planning. The planning and freedom of it is one of the reasons why I am here, but even though I love it, it’s really time-consuming. The school is trying to develop a curriculum map that is repeated and revised every other year. We get input from coaches and parents and teachers. The

administration trusts us, but things are a lot tighter now than when I first started. The school is now more thoughtful to standards and what else the students will learn in the rest of their educational career. We also have the online LEO—an online EL template. I hated it at first, but have grown to find it useful. It goes from a compelling start to guiding questions, etc. Other teachers, around the country, can add input, etc. What isn't the best in my own practice is going back and reflecting on what we've done and what actually happened.

As we continued talking about how she generates ideas for curriculum. Amy had this to say:

I use a skeleton that is detailed in learning outcomes; it includes backwards planning, standards, etc. This helps plan through the day-to-day. I tend to be super detail-oriented. This helps me differentiate and help students get it. I find that sometimes I have too many steps. My teammate and I have been really successful this year; we meet every Sunday for a couple of hours. I am the type of person who needs to write things down. Last year was hard, coming in and not knowing the students and walking into the sailing expedition. It's more difficult to do things well when you know little about the students and the curriculum. From years with this age group, I know the bigger categories that are important for them. EL has a lot to do with service learning and helping others. I am always looking for information on local issues and different ways to present that learning. That was part of the inspiration for the expedition on the pine beetle.

Amy successfully tied local issues into her expeditions, and the expeditions took advantage of the different content areas. The following description demonstrates the use of different content areas in one expedition activity. I walked into the classroom and found the class gathered in a circle on the rug with clipboards and pencils. Amy was kneeling in front of a white piece of paper with a web and "*Whose Land is This?*" written across the top. She was leading the students through a brainstorming session.

"Animals, homesteaders, and people who bought it," were already listed. As one student suggested some answers, another student responded: "Gosh, you are smart today."

“You guys are smart together right now,” Amy responded back to the student as she continued probing for ideas. The class added more people to the chart before Amy handed out copies of the paper to everyone so they could work on their own answers. As Amy handed out the papers, she suggested more ideas and asked additional questions to encourage her students to think of multiple perspectives. Her final directions let students know they had five minutes to complete the work. The students went right to work, listing the people they thought should also be included on the chart. As the students worked, Amy walked around and tried to help students complete their lists.

When the five minutes were over the students gathered back together to share what they had come up with on their own. They added:

“The Boom Town President;”

“Thomas Jefferson and other presidents;”

“People who were there originally—traders, tribes, etc.;;”

and “Miners.”

Amy complimented their ideas and then let them know that they were going to transition to another space and activity. She explained her expectations and excused the students to their spots. All of the students easily transferred to their desks while Amy walked to the other side of the room and took out an overhead of a “mystery text.” It was a sketch of two “men” looking out into a landscape with a bunch of skulls and bones on the ground (in addition to the overhead, each student was given a copy of the image). While they were examining the image, Amy raised the question of what the picture might have to do with the *Whose Land is This?* activity they had just been working on. She instructed the class to work with their tablemates to determine what this picture might be

telling us and to discuss the relationship with the previous activity. Together the students discussed the picture; trying to determine what it was and why it was related to the last activity. After about five minutes of discussion, Amy asked for people to share their thoughts.

“I think that they are standing on a canyon because they are looking at the clouds,” replied one child.

“Okay, good, so you’re trying to place it,” commented Amy. She continued allowing each table to share what they thought was taking place and what the story might be.

“I like that you are listening and learning from each other,” Amy responded when all groups had shared.

“I am now going to give you another clue. I want you to spend the first minute thinking on your own. Think about what it is telling us and how it relates to the guiding question.”

“Text #2” was handed out to each student. It had four pictures on it; all four were of the state of Colorado. They showed how the population has changed over time, and in particular how the Indian territory had changed. The maps were titled the 1700’s, 1800-1850’s; 1861-1879, and 1880-present.

After handing the images out, Amy asked the students, “How do you decode a text like this?” She gave the students thinking time on their own and then asked them what the “clue” was telling them. Once again, students were given the opportunity to share what they thought it showed. The dialogue between the members of the “crew” allowed them to learn from each other and to hear multiple perspectives. After sharing,

the table groups were given a chance to work together. Almost all of the students were actively working on the assignment. One student was struggling, and Amy walked over to him and asked him if he thought that the task was difficult or easy. This gave him the opportunity to get more engaged. He answered her questions but still had a difficult time working on the assignment once she left. When Amy wanted the groups to stop working so that they could share, she called out:

“Ah go,”

“Ah may,” responded the students.

Again, all of the table groups were given the opportunity to share. Interestingly, the student that had appeared to be off-task during the assignment was able to give a really thoughtful answer of what he thought the pictures might be telling. Apparently, even though he was talking, he was still processing information. The class was able to determine a lot of clues and had interesting ideas as to what the texts were telling them. They built off of each other’s ideas until one student commented, “I think that the image is showing destruction that the white men caused and maybe it is related to the maps because the number of Native Americans went down in each map.” Amy complimented their problem-solving skills and then directed their attention back to the original web that they had been recording information on. She used another color marker to add the new information and instructed the students to add a color to their notes. Next to the web, she made a key to show what the different colors meant. One color was for “our original answers,” the next color was for “after Text 1,” and for the newest color she wrote: “white settlers and forts; Arapahoe; Kiowa/Commanche; Southern Cheyenne; Shoshone; and Pawnee Grassland.” After directions were made clear, students were given time to

complete their own keys. As they worked Amy meandered around checking their work. When she realized that they were all done, she had them leave the charts at the table in order to meet in the circle to get the next set of directions.

The “crew” gathered back together and discussed what they knew and still needed to learn. Amy explained:

You are now going to get more clues. I want you to add any new information in a different color. You’ll be getting three new texts: a different kind of map; an article with a copy of an advertisement; and a map with text. I want you to investigate these and ask yourself, “What story is this going to tell me?” Your goal is to read these and sift through the information and try to get really smart about these texts. Are there any questions about your tasks? I only made 12 copies of things because I didn’t want to waste too much paper, so you’ll have to share.

The students asked a few clarifying questions and then immediately went to work trying to solve the mystery that had been put in front of them. While working on the decoding, some chose to break into partners and found a space to work together, and others worked independently. One student appeared to be struggling getting started. Amy intervened and started talking to him, “This is a hard one to read. Have you selected your third color yet?” The interaction served to redirect him without punishment; and he continued working after she left.

During the entire work time, Amy floated around from group to group and person to person, checking in, asking questions, and keeping students focused. For the most part, everyone stayed attentive, adding information to their charts from the provided texts. The students were definitely not quiet, but the chatter was for the most part directed toward what they were working on and tied back to the *Whose Land is This?* activity. Amy was able to maintain the focus by constantly asking questions and modeling what she was

expecting. The hour went quickly, and the students followed her lead through each stage. Amy would frequently add elements to the chart, while asking them to do the same. There was a lot of scaffolding and modeling on her part; in addition, the use of maps and images as texts allowed Amy to introduce the idea that text can be more than written information.

After the allotted time came to an end, students were directed to gather again on the rug, this time with their charts and texts.

“Okay, historians, I want to hear what you found.” Students gave Amy more ideas to fill in on the class chart. She added these to her web. When all students had finished sharing, Amy complimented them and dismissed them to do their end-of-day jobs.

There was a strong focus on character development as well as academic growth in Amy’s class. In addition to the emphasis placed on moral values in the classroom displays and the modeling of appropriate behavior, students were encouraged and expected to resolve their own issues. When I asked one of Amy’s students if there was anything more that I should know about her experience at the school she replied,

We get more experience with all the students and stuff. The teachers help you hang out with your whole class. They help us follow the character values—discipline, responsibility, courage, integrity...there are more, we have them listed in the classroom. We decorated the inside of the letters of the different character values and now we look at them on the walls; they are helpful.

The curriculum genuinely appeared to engage the students, and they actively sought more information. The majority of the students I interviewed commented that they enjoyed the amount of group time they got. One such student responded, “I usually like the projects we do here because at other schools they just pretty much do work instead of

interacting and comparing what they got. I like that we work in groups.” As witnessed from the previous descriptions, the ability to choose curriculum that Amy knew would interest the students and to present it in a way that stimulated their own learning needs created a classroom atmosphere that encouraged active learning.

### *Evaluation*

During my time in the classroom, I witnessed more informal than formal assessment taking place. When I asked Amy about assessment, her answer was,

We use MAPS, an assessment that is online. It’s from Northwest Regional Educational Labs. I’m struggling with it now because I wanted another piece of student information, along with CSAP scores, and other informal assessment. I wanted the data from MAPS, but I’m not getting what I wanted. I do CSAPs, the portfolio process, and we have *Passage* in fifth grade. Fifth graders have to go through the *Passage* and I have to prepare them for this. I want to know what they know. I use lots of rubrics so that they know what they know too. We’ve been using them along the way; there is a lot of criteria and assessment along the way. I struggle with QRIs; I feel that it is a lot of information that I already knew. But it does give me a number, etc. Math has Friday Check-in, where we look at learning targets for the week and the students show what they know. They are quick assessments for us both to know where they are.

These various forms of assessment were evident in the classroom, and the students were often seen working with self and peer evaluations. I interviewed six students from Amy’s room. As in the previous three classrooms, Amy helped me select a range of gender, time at school, and personality. I spoke with each student in the hallway outside of the classroom. I began by reintroducing myself, talking about the study, and getting their signatures to audio-tape the interviews. The interviews followed the interview guide (see Appendix B) and lasted around 10 to 20 minutes. In the end, I spoke

with three girls and three boys. In order to get the students opinions about assessment, I asked them, “How does your teacher normally test you?” A few of the responses follow:

“Most tests are independent; but she’ll ask if you can prove something or what something means? We do assessments where we’ll have packets and then we do as much as we can.”

Another student commented, “She’ll check in with us and ask for explanations. She will work through answers with us; she won’t just say that they are wrong. She will help us get to the answer. She also does this in conferences.”

And a third stated,

She talks about it and if you don’t understand it, you can go to her and she’ll help you or have other students help. She’ll also show you examples. She shows written examples; sometimes a packet of stuff to make sure that we remember things. Sometimes she gives us a score and sometimes we’ll score it ourselves and then she’ll help us with what we don’t know that well.

It was my understanding that the students all had a clear idea of how they were doing. Amy kept careful track of each student’s progress and continued to push them to reach further. In addition, the importance of the fifth grade *Passages* kept all students reaching to meet their personal best. The EL model encourages students to strive to reach their personal best. As mentioned in Kelly’s description, the use of portfolios helps students constantly monitor their own growth and gives them an avenue to exhibit their growth to others.

## *Behind-the-scenes*

### *Intentions*

The intentions of the EL model are based around their ten design principles. As mentioned, Amy has these clearly posted in her room. When I asked her what her goals for the students were, she responded:

At this grade level, I want to instill a confidence in themselves as learners. They have a lot of skills, and these need to continue to be pushed. But they also need confidence in their skills. I also work on reading stamina; they know how to read, but I can help them read longer and better. I want to push them to be as curious as possible. Students feel excited about their accomplishments; they need to be recognized and feel good about these. They also need to learn self-advocacy for what they are not doing as well. It is the transition years to middle school. I focus on maintenance of skills and how this can be transferred to the more independent learning styles of middle school. In order to do this, they need to feel solid in the communication of what they know; to achieve a level of self-reflection. They need to learn to be honest and careful about what they know and how this is important.

We continued the interview with a discussion about her personal educational philosophy. When I asked Amy what her philosophy was, she responded:

Learning is a process—a quest to create something. We use a workshop model—it's us all together and a lot of messing about. But it is also a craft; and how we make something is important. Attention to detail matters, one should never be satisfied; you need to keep pushing yourself and others. My role is to ask really good questions, to know my students well, and to help them get to a further place.

I continued by asking her if the school's intentions matched her own beliefs. She responded:

Yes, the EL model fits really well because students have so many successes throughout the year; most that I could never predict. They come through what I have set up and also through the students' own process. We have a lot of freedom, but also a lot of structure. It's an organized chaos. I set things in motion, but they keep it going. We have high expectations, but also give them the chance to know their own strengths and weaknesses. We work on letting them know when to sit back and when to step up and lead and show their strengths.

Later, I asked her if there is anything else I should know. She commented:

One of the things that I love is the classroom library; literacy is everywhere. In our class, students are dying to read together. They get to ring the bell when they finish a book; it's how they announce it to others that they've finished a book. I love infusing them with books, teaching them about choice, about learning to be smart about choosing. All of this ties into the sense of creating and providing a culture of quality.

There was a real passion in Amy's room, and the students and Amy exhibited excitement about the topics they were learning. Research was based around a real desire to learn more. A clear connection between the school's intentions and Amy's own belief system about learning was evident.

### *School Structure*

In line with the EL model, the class time was based around the learning expeditions. However, the school also functioned as a state-sanctioned school and therefore had structural requirements that they needed to meet. The school year was a traditional year, with a long summer break and the daily schedule broken into different content areas. The students have one homeroom teacher and other teachers for specials.

When I asked Amy about the determination of the schedule, she responded:

We don't have much say in specials schedule; when they go to art, tech, etc., but this year they gave a lot of feedback to the leadership team. For example, we

wanted the same hour for everyone for math and planning time. Math is taught by single grade now; this has helped me and helped the schedule stay on task. I have a ton of say in weekly and daily events. I came up with a weekly schedule with my coach and figured out how the time should look each week.

The structure of the school appeared to still allow for activities that are specific to the EL model. For example, camping trips happen at least twice a year, and teachers attempt to get the students “out in the field” as often as possible. The flexible structure appeared to support Amy’s learning goals for her students, and often Amy would let a lesson flow naturally rather than worrying about sticking to a strict schedule. And similar to Kelly’s classroom, being able to tie all content into one idea allowed the students to flow from one activity to the next in a seamless manner.

### *Engagement*

When I asked Amy to describe for me what she thought engagement looked or felt like in the classroom, she responded,

I’ll give you an example of a time where I felt it recently. It was during readers workshop. We had done a mini-lesson on descriptive writing before; using Ray Bradbury as the model; we looked at how his descriptive writing sets the scene and then they went off to do their own scene setting. Dictionaries and thesauruses, etc., were all out; they knew exactly what they wanted and needed and did that. That was engagement. It’s also learning with one another; challenging each other. Students knowing what they need; finding their own space, etc. It’s the ability to answer their own questions and be independent so that I can conference with others. It’s also thinking hard, deeply, pushing themselves, and setting high expectations. It is them seeing themselves as writers, etc. How can I encourage that? I try to use the language to make them feel successful. A lot of it is tone.

When asked about the importance of engagement in the learning process, Amy responded,

It's obviously huge here and key for me with my daily planning. I think about how are they going to be engaged. They will be if it is important; if it matters to them, if there are high expectations. There are varying levels, but my goal is to get them there, to see the importance of the project or learning activity.

I continued the conversation asking her how she knew when a student was engaged.

She replied:

There is so much student talk here; it is easy to tell in group work. If they're not participating, then they are not in it. Sometimes evidence is body language; some is what they have produced. I ask myself if it is my issue or their issue; I can usually tell if it is my fault or theirs. At this point in the year, we call each other out on it. Students compare their work; one design principal is responsibility of learning. I think that this helps their engagement levels; it's a responsibility for themselves.

Similar to the three classrooms already discussed, data from the engagement surveys (see Appendix E) reflect that the majority of the students were engaged in all three areas: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. The following chart represents the data from the engagement survey. The survey asked students to indicate whether they agreed with 15 statements regarding engagement. The choices for the statements were: *Never/Almost Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always/Almost Always, or Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.*

I combined the classroom data from the two times the survey was given and averaged the responses in order to present overall findings. Twenty-two students completed the survey the first time, and nineteen completed it the second time. The points were totaled, and an average percentage score for each question is listed in Table 9.

Table 9

*Summary of Amy's Engagement Results*

Behavioral Engagement					
Section One: How much do you agree with each of the following statements?	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I come to class prepared.	0.00%	0.00%	12.20%	70.73%	17.07%
I treat my classmates with respect.	0.00%	0.00%	9.76%	60.98%	29.27%
I complete my work on time.	2.44%	2.44%	29.27%	39.02%	26.83%
I treat my teachers with respect.	0.00%	0.00%	2.44%	24.39%	73.17%
I follow the rules at school.	0.00%	0.00%	9.76%	56.10%	34.15%
Totals:	0.49%	0.49%	12.68%	50.24%	36.10%

  

Cognitive Engagement					
Section Two: How often are the following statements true for you?	Never/ Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always/Almost Always
I feel excited by the work in school.	0.00%	2.44%	24.39%	41.46%	31.71%
I am interested in the work I get to do in my classes.	0.00%	4.88%	19.51%	46.34%	29.27%
I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning.	2.44%	7.32%	34.15%	24.39%	31.71%
I check my schoolwork for mistakes.	0.00%	9.76%	19.51%	46.34%	24.39%
I learn a lot from my classes.	0.00%	2.44%	12.20%	29.27%	56.10%
Totals:	0.49%	5.37%	21.95%	37.56%	34.63%

  

Emotional Engagement					
Section Three: How often are the following statements true for you?	Never/ Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always/Almost Always
I enjoy the work I do in class.	0.00%	4.88%	19.51%	58.54%	17.07%
I feel I can go to my teachers with the things that I need to talk about.	2.44%	9.76%	19.51%	39.02%	29.27%
My classroom is a fun place to be.	0.00%	0.00%	24.39%	41.46%	34.15%
Most of my teachers praise me when I work hard.	2.44%	7.32%	17.07%	39.02%	34.15%
Most of my teachers understand me.	0.00%	0.00%	17.07%	63.41%	19.51%
Totals:	0.98%	4.39%	19.51%	48.29%	26.83%

When examining the data, there are several items that stand out. The first is that, similar to Kelly's classroom, the three engagement areas are closely aligned (86.34%, 72.19%, and 75.12%, respectively). Also, in keeping with the other three classrooms, respect for the teachers is high; 97.6% of the students *agree* or *strongly agree* that they treat their teachers with respect.

The behavior section indicated that 86.3% of the students marked *agree* or *strongly agree* that they are behaviorally engaged. Remarkably, only .98% indicated that they *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with these statements. High response levels were also found for *agreeing* or *strongly agreeing* that they come to class prepared (87.8%) and follow the rules at school (87.3%). The high responses in this section are interesting when compared to the observational data. While Amy's students were on-task and prepared, there was not a strong focus on discipline apparent in the room. However, as mentioned in Chapter Four, the students were difficult for a substitute and were not on-task when he was in the room.

For the cognitive section, 72.2% stated that they are *often* or *always/almost always* cognitively engaged. On the other side, 5.9% stated that they are *rarely* or *never/almost never* cognitively engaged. The highest response in this section was that 85.4% *often* or *always/almost always* feel that they learn a lot from their classes. On the other hand, only 56.1% marked that they *often* or *always/almost always* talk to people outside of school about what they are learning.

The last section, the emotional; resulted in 75.1% indicating that they are *often* or *always/almost always* emotionally engaged and 5.4% answering that they are *rarely* or *never/almost never* emotionally engaged. The remaining students indicated a neutral answer in all three areas. 82.9% of the students indicated that their teachers understand them *often* or *always/almost always*. The lowest response in the emotional section was 73.2% indicating that their teachers praise them when they do a good job *often* or *always/almost always*.

In order to examine the data in another format, I calculated frequency and relative frequencies. These results are listed in Table 10.

Table 10:

*Amy: Frequency and Relative Frequency of Overall Engagement*

	Strongly Disagree or Never/Almost Never	Disagree or Rarely	Neutral or Sometimes	Agree or Often	Strongly Agree or Always/Almost Always
Frequencies	4	21	111	279	200
Relative Frequencies	.007	.034	.180	.454	.325
Percentages	.70%	3.40%	18.00%	45.40%	32.5%

The chart above reflects the results when the three sections of engagement are combined. As indicated, 77.9% of the class responded that they *agree/often* or *strongly*

*agree/always almost always* that they are engaged. This indicates that the majority of the students in Amy's class were engaged; her combined engagement level was the highest of the four classrooms.

As seen above, the data from the engagement survey matches what was seen in the classroom, the educational goals that Amy worked toward, and the intentions of the Expeditionary Learning model. It was evident from my time in the classroom that Amy worked hard to create an engaging classroom with curriculum that was pertinent in the lives of her students. She pushed her students to discover their own answers and encouraged a questioning atmosphere.

Emotional engagement and a positive classroom environment also stood out in my observations. This was reflected in a student interview with one of the boys in Amy's class. When I asked a student what he liked best, he responded:

What I like best is that everybody cares for one another; it's kinda a community. You know a lot of the people in the school, and you don't often argue with a person, and if you do argue, you say are you sure about that? And you wouldn't go into any physical activity; there is no violence.

The EL model is structured in a way that encourages students working together and learning to work as a team. In addition, according to the EL model, curriculum is supposed to be student-centered and engaging. It was, therefore, not surprising to find high levels of engagement in this classroom.

*Interest/Propensities*

My observations showed that the Expeditionary Learning model appeared to fit well with the propensities of the students and the teacher. The way in which the expeditions allowed each student to follow his or her own interests within the theme allowed all students to find and nurture a personal strength. When I asked Amy if she intentionally tried to match activities to student propensities, she answered,

Yes, I think about who is in the crew; I know so much about these students and learn more each day. I know that certain things aren't going to work for certain students, so I try to differentiate; it is the hardest part of planning. I really like walking through ideas and finding resources. But it is harder to make it work for everyone. The longer I've taught the more natural and embedded the differentiation is in what I do. I figure out more by conferring with students; interaction is the most important part. I also set questions ahead of time for the conference. I start to think of these before I meet with them and can tailor these to the individual students.

The students were able to articulate well how their school was different and why it worked for them. When I asked a student who was new to the school why she was here, she answered:

I used to go to a different school; a lot of people from there came here. I'm really athletic; this school helps me be more athletic because it's adventuresome. My sisters and I have been on the wait-list. My sister came first, then me, and then the other sister. I really like it here.

Both the students and Amy expressed passion and excitement when talking about what they were learning. When I asked Amy if she enjoys the curriculum at this grade level, she commented,

Yes, I love it. I miss the 6th graders, because they are so quirky and fun. But I love thinking about my students and how they'll go through *Passages*, and then the nervousness of the 4th graders, and the progress and change that they go through. It's great to watch them become the leaders and drive the culture. This age is great because I love the transition from learning to read to reading to learn.

When I asked students what their favorite activity of the year had been, their answers expressed their excitement about the different learning activities that Amy provided:

Definitely measuring the volume of the classroom in math; we measured it in cubic yards, centimeters, meters and feet. I worked with three other people. We had done some work with how to measure 3-D figures and then were set free.

Another said that the sailing trip was the best, “It taught what it could be like to be on a boat with a crew, what they would have to do at sea, how they work together, and what they need to do to work together.”

When I asked one boy what he liked best about the school, he replied: “It’s really adventurous and active. You can share your opinion; have debates about things and if you disagree you can say your opinion.”

Amy’s students were very eloquent and were able to express their learning needs well. When I asked students how they liked to learn the best, here are some of the responses I heard:

“I like to work in groups because I might not understand something, and I can ask what things mean or ask for help. So working in a group means I can be a better learner; I’m not just sitting there doing nothing.” Another student responded,

“If I had to choose a way to learn, it would be practicing. I like to dive right in with anybody. It’s a good tool to have a partner; two different answers, who can decide who is right or if you are both wrong you can fix it.” And yet another responded:

“I usually just jump in and do it. I like to work by myself, but I like to have friends near me, so they can goof around some, but still get her work done. I like when it is not as serious.”

Another student agreed with this sentiment, “The hands-on kind of stuff; all the expeditions, how the school sort of comes together. It fits good with a lot of the students. You can tell that the students actually like it. It’s a fun school to go to.”

A student, new this year, commented,

I learned more than I thought I would. I thought it would be like a normal school, but I’ve learned a lot more. Like with CSAPS, or when you think that you now know something, you do at GHSEL. It’s the right pace of learning, it’s really good.

In keeping with this quote, all of the parents and teachers I interviewed from Amy’s class expressed affection for the EL model and the opportunities that the school provided.

### **Final Thoughts**

What I asked Amy what sets the school apart, she responded,

The things that set it apart are the two-year relationship with students (both for students and teachers); and the pushing of students to reach the high expectations to be successful. Also, our portfolio and assessment schedule. The whole *Passage* process plays a huge role in culture and the students’ expectations for themselves. Being a K-12 school is also unique. It is attractive for some parents and not for others. Lots of parents do their homework and find the school for the younger grades.

I also asked her, if you could choose a metaphor to describe your school, what would it be? Amy responded,

It would be a train; everyone is hoping to be along the same track, but they are all in their different situations in each car, doing their own thing, but together they make greatness. Children are valued for their individuality, and we are responsible for nurturing the different pieces; when they come together, it's to make them into something great.

This reference to nurturing reminded me of the garden analogy and Amy's dedication to caring for each individual in her classroom.

When I asked one of Amy's students if there was anything else that I should know about his experience at school, he answered,

Yes, what makes this school different is that there are no desks, you interact with the other students, or share what you do. If you found out an answer to the question, you would think that this is the only answer, but when you share with others, they might have an answer that is also correct. The school understands that there are different perspectives to an answer and that students can work together.

I don't think that I can capture the room any better than that.

## **Response from Amy**

Hi Kristen,

I read through the section you sent and I think it's great. I think that you did a particularly good job of capturing the culture of my classroom and the interactions that go on each day. And we all know that relationships are a huge component of successful teaching.

Thanks for forwarding me the section so I could see how all of your hard work panned out.

It's great! Congratulations.

Sincerely-

Amy

## Summary

The previous four descriptions were meant to capture the daily student experience in four school-of-choice classrooms. The descriptions were separated into three sections. The first, *the student experience*, used Eisner's five dimensions of the classroom to help describe what was taking place. Specifically, I examined the pedagogy, curriculum, and evaluation that defined the classrooms (Eisner, 1998; & Uhrmacher, 1991). Vignettes from the classrooms assisted in painting the picture of the student experience. The second section, *behind-the-scenes*, used the remaining two elements of the school dimensions: intentions and school structure (Eisner, 1998; & Uhrmacher, 1991). This section was primarily concerned with whether the intentions of the model held true in the classroom and how the school structure impacted the classroom. The final section was the *engagement* section; which focused on the engagement levels and the alignment of student and teacher interests and propensities.

In Chapter Five I will discuss the themes that emerged in these descriptions and will connect them back to my four research questions and the existing educational literature. The goal is to answer Eisner's (1994) final stage of an educational criticism, what ideas can be used to help explain the major features that took place.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Thematics, Evaluations, and Implications**

#### **Overview of the Study**

Student learning and effective school reform continue to be major concerns in our modern world. As mentioned in the first two chapters, researchers, politicians, educators, and the general public are all interested in how to create effective schools. From the beginnings of the American public school system, people have argued over what the outcomes of the educational endeavor should be and how to best meet these aims. Despite the efforts and the billions of dollars invested in school reform, we are still not meeting the needs of many of our students. What is needed is an understanding of what is taking place so that we can improve the student experience and, therefore, improve learning. Policy makers and educational experts need to use this understanding and work together to improve the state of our educational system.

Decisions based on what is best for students need to be at the heart of educational reform. For the past hundred plus years we have tried to find a way to create a one-stop shop for public education. This goal has failed over and over again. By creating a range

of schools that meet different learning needs and community values, we can offer more students the opportunity to learn in a manner that fits their natural propensities. In addition, offering a choice of schools to families creates a more equitable system that meets the needs of more learners. The equity would be based on the goal of a high level of engagement and achievement for all students rather than on an identical education.

One of the missing elements of past studies on school reform is a true understanding of the student experience. A part of this is student voice, which is vital in the understanding of the day-to-day experience of students. In order to improve their interest, learning, and future success, students need to be given the chance to express how they learn and what elements of the classroom are effective. In the investigation of children's voices in research, Malewski (2004) concludes that using student's thoughts and feelings enables "...the ability to connect generalizations and particularities in ways that provide investigators with a far more textured understanding of the voices of children and youth" (Malewski, 2004, p. 220).

Federal and state policies have a considerable impact on what takes place in educational reform. Studies have shown that we need more flexibility (e.g., Elmore et al., 1988; Fullan, 2007); and that choice leads to positive impacts on student learning (e.g., Mead & Rotherham, 2007).

Using engagement as an indicator of learning allows for a richer measure than simply comparing test scores. Recent studies demonstrate that one way we can improve student learning and experience is by increasing engagement levels. Engagement has

been tied to positive outcomes, and researchers are investigating the ways in which levels of engagement can be increased in the classroom. Fredricks, et al. (2004) reviewed the current engagement data and summarize that engagement should be a three-part measure, including behavioral, cognitive, and emotional elements. This meta-concept covers all areas of engagement and helps better determine student engagement levels. However, while we have seen that engagement is a vital key in educational outcomes, we are still finding low levels of engagement in schools. As Marks (2000) summarizes:

Students who are engaged with school are more likely to learn, to find the experience rewarding, to graduate, and to pursue higher education. Despite its importance, research studies over the past two decades have documented low levels of student engagement in U.S. schools. (p. 154)

The level of engagement or disengagement for the school career often starts early in the school years. When students believe that they aren't successful with academic and social activities, they will often disengage (Finn, 1989). It is, therefore, vital to ensure that young students are engaged in their learning. In order to keep students from ever disengaging from learning, the reform efforts need to begin before high school. Students need to develop a love of learning and engagement with school early in their school career.

Furthermore, interest, motivation, and engagement are all closely related (e.g., Libbey, 2004). Therefore, it makes sense that a school model that is in alignment with a student's propensities would have a better chance of connecting the student with the school and the people in it. The opportunity to find curriculum that engages the students is also increased when these elements are in alignment.

From the review of the literature, I created my four research questions: 1. *What happens in the classrooms of elementary schools that have gone through a school-of-choice reform?*; 2. *How does the policy play out at the classroom level?*; 3. *What levels of engagement are found in classrooms of schools that have gone through a school-of-choice reform?*; and 4. *What lessons can policy makers and educational professionals learn from these reform examples?*

As previously mentioned, a mixed methodology study was selected. Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism (educational criticism), an observationally strong methodology designed by Elliot Eisner; in addition to student, teacher, administrator, and parent interviews and an engagement survey were used. The interview questions, like the observations, were based on five dimensions that affect classroom life: the *intentional, curricular, pedagogical; structural, and evaluative* (Eisner, 1998; & Uhrmacher, 1991).

The educational criticism method has four components: description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics (Eisner, 1994). The goal of this research method is that an accurate and rich portrayal of a situation is created. The descriptions and evaluations allow one to create themes that can help guide future research and be used to guide positive change. In this case, the goal is that the data will help us understand what is currently taking place and how we can use this information to improve the student experience across the country.

The engagement measure that I used was a fifteen-question survey. The survey was designed by the National Center for School Engagement. It was created in response

to the idea that engagement should consider all three elements—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive—of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

In the last phases of an educational criticism, Eisner suggests answering the following question: “What ideas, concepts, or theories can be used to explain its major features?” (Eisner, 1994, p. 229). Eisner (1994) believed that researchers can begin their research having predetermined things to attend to or can allow themes to emerge (Eisner, 1994, p. 176). I began my research with an emergent focus. In Chapter Four, I shared four educational criticisms and in doing so, described the classrooms that I observed. In this chapter, I will discuss the themes that emerged, in the hopes of explaining the major features of the four classrooms. These themes ultimately can be used to examine school reform efforts at large.

During my observations, I observed four elementary teachers. Two were primary teachers and two intermediate. All four were teachers at public school of choice schools. Both schools were created in the Denver area more than ten years ago, and both are currently receiving either a high or excellent rating from the Colorado Department of Education.

### **Discussion of Themes and Responses to Research Questions**

I based the observations and interviews on Eisner’s five dimensions of schools (pedagogy, curriculum, intentions, school structure and evaluation) but allowed for enough freedom so that other themes could emerge. The first theme that emerged is that the intentions of the schools appeared to be in alignment with learning propensities and

philosophies of the students and teachers. A strong community was formed in both schools partly because of this alignment. The second theme is that interest is closely related to student learning and engagement. The third theme is that having clear mission statements and intentions helps create a strong learning environment. Next, according to research, engagement is an important indicator of school success, and I found that engagement was high in both schools. The fifth theme that emerged was that students have different learning needs. Strong charter school laws allow for more variability, thus allowing for a wider range of learning needs to be met. These themes will be further discussed in the research question responses below.

*1. What happens in the classrooms of elementary schools that have gone through a school-of-choice reform?*

In Chapter Four, I created descriptions of each classroom to help portray what was taking place. The goal was to see how the students in these schools were impacted by the reform effort, in this case, school of choice reform. A theme that was evident in both schools was that teachers and students “fit” well with the model of the school. The research conducted for this study points to the fact that when one is able to match propensities and educational philosophies it creates a school culture with high interest and engagement. Gardner (1993) agrees with this idea: “A ‘matching system’ should help ensure that a student can rapidly and smoothly master what needs to be mastered, and thus be freed to proceed further along both optional and optimal paths of development”(Gardner, 1993, p. 389).

In fitting with the intentions of the model, a unique school culture was created in both schools. There was an immediate difference felt upon entering both schools. From the uniforms worn, to the method for volunteer check-in, the Core Knowledge school exuded an organized and structured setting. On the other hand, with colorful student artwork and a range of attire, the EL school appeared more eclectic and free.

This alignment was also found at the classroom level, as the teachers were able to pick a school that had educational philosophies that were in line with their own. As stated in Chapter Four, all of the teachers I interviewed agreed that the school they had chosen matched their own philosophy on teaching and learning and that this allowed them to feel supported and confident in their teaching methods. As one teacher at the EL school stated:

I believe that learning results from what learners do far more than from what teachers do. Everybody who is human has the capacity and, under the right circumstances, the desire to learn. For me, love is the most important of those conditions. Or in other words, an awareness, or feeling of that love, that you are supported. Responsibility teaches people, and we learn by doing. So far the model fits my own beliefs. We are given latitude; I'm given the ability to make decisions about my own learning. I am treated as a learner who is in charge of his own learning; this reflects the integrity of the institution.

Research suggests that teachers want to teach in schools with mission statements and educational philosophies that match their own. In fact, in a study on charter schools, Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2003) found that teachers seek out charter schools that fit with their own educational philosophies. And Malloy et al. (2003) found that despite the fact that teachers in charter schools frequently make less money, have less opportunity

for tenure, and work more hours each week, they still responded that they were satisfied at their charter schools.

As stated in Chapter Two, one of the original reasons that charter schools were created was for improved professional development and increased possibility for innovative teaching. As Malloy et al. (2003) state:

They fashioned two main purposes for charter schools that are related specifically to the work of teachers: (a) to facilitate innovative teaching and (b) to create professional development opportunities for teachers. Of the 37 states and the District of Columbia with charter school laws as of January 2002, 29 laws have the intent to ‘facilitate innovative teaching,’ and 24 states include statements that charter schools were designed to ‘create professional development opportunities for teachers.’ The emphasis on innovative teaching suggests that charter schools were intended to be places in which teachers would have the freedom to use nontraditional instructional methods and curriculum. (p. 220)

Because of this goal, one would expect to find that teachers in schools of choice are able to use innovative teaching and have strong professional development. The data from my study found that the curriculum was interesting to the teachers and satisfied their own learning needs. This comfort and interest was seen in the classrooms and in the interview responses. As a teacher at the EL school stated:

I’ll always have room for growth in these areas, but I push for that quality. A lot of people don’t define themselves by their jobs, but I think that it’s a major part of who I am and that is because of what I am allowed to do here.

Teachers were encouraged to teach units that interested them. As one of the EL school founders stated, “Curriculum is still determined by what teachers want to teach. The learning is current and not what has always been taught. Teachers teach their passions, which is good.”

Similar responses were found at ASA. One of the teachers I interviewed talked about how the intentions of the school match her educational philosophy:

I want to educate students to be successful learners. They should come out of my classroom with good character. I try to teach them to be morally and socially responsible. To be good citizens. This is in alignment with the Core Knowledge model because they stress character education. We are encouraged to teach care and community with the students through the core values.

All of the teachers that I interviewed at ASA indicated that the curriculum at their grade level was interesting to them and all believed that the model of the school matched their own beliefs. This helped them feel more supported and better able to plan with their grade level partners.

The positive effects of congruence are also experienced in reverse, Joffres and Haughey (2001) researched the effects of incongruence and found:

Value incongruence increased the informants' feelings of isolation as it limited opportunities to develop warm relationships with the community members (and thus feelings of community) but it also undermined collaboration, a valuable source of efficacy for most teachers, since informants refused to work with colleagues who held different values. Informants also noted that value incongruence decreased their job autonomy because they were reluctant to continue behaving or teaching in ways that were frowned upon in their work communities for fear of reprisals (e.g., a poor performance evaluation or further isolation), a process which angered them and induced feelings of self-betrayal (informants felt that they betrayed the teachers they wanted to be or ought to be). (p. 3)

There was obvious teacher collaboration in both schools, and all four teachers commented that they collaborated with their peers. As Ms. Patsa mentioned when discussing curriculum decision-making, “My partner and I made some additions to the third grade reading program because it was weak.” Her planning time was often spent

with her third grade teaching partner as they worked together to align their lessons with the Core Knowledge program. In addition, Ms. Swasher and her sixth grade teaching partner worked together so that she could teach all of the sixth graders literacy while he taught the science content. Similar results were found at GHSEL where both teachers also worked closely with their grade-level partners. Amy commented that in addition to meeting over the summer with her teammate, “My teammate and I have been really successful this year; we meet every Sunday for a couple of hours to plan and discuss how things are going.” Kelly also plans with her partner and sits on the teacher leadership committee. The leadership committee was created to increase teacher voice and to help disseminate information across the school. The lead team member at each grade attends and then reports back to his or her team. In addition to the leadership committee, the coach at GHSEL worked hard to create a collaborative environment in which teachers worked together to stretch their own learning. Her influences were seen in all of the classrooms, helping build the sense of community and continuity across the classrooms.

The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004) found that when teachers feel supported the positive effects carry over to the students:

....in schools that meet teachers’ needs for resources, professional development, and collegiality, teachers are more likely to be caring and effective. Such teachers are more likely to give students a feeling of being cared about, and to promote students’ confidence in their ability to succeed and the belief that academic success is important for future goals. These positive beliefs and feelings, in turn, should lead to high levels of effort and persistence. (p. 34)

Similar results were also found by Kelm & Connell (2004) when they investigated the connection between relationships and achievement. Given that the teachers all agreed

that they were aligned with their school, one would expect positive student feedback. This is important because students also value a school that is pertinent to their own lives. The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004) found that “Students enjoy learning more, and they learn better, when topics are personally interesting and related to their lives” (p. 52). The data from my observations and interviews reflect that students had a strong connection with their schools. As stated in Chapter Four, the interview data demonstrated that students in all four classrooms had positive relationships with their teachers and responded that the curriculum is pertinent to their lives. For example, one student reflected:

Our teacher checks in with the students and asks questions. For example, she makes me talk about my book more which helps me understand it even more. I might think something and when I share it, she’ll help me and ask questions to make sure that I am really understanding the book. I enjoy the work because I can work with a partner to explore if it is really happening and how it is affecting Colorado. For example, the pine beetles are impacting us, and we need to know about them.

The student responses indicated that they enjoyed the different learning environment that the model provided. I asked the students if they liked the activities their teachers provided for them and how they best liked to learn. One student at the Core Knowledge school replied:

“Yes, I like the activities that we do. Usually they are fun, and also you learn stuff. It’s good because it is not boring.”

Of the seven students I interviewed in Ms. Patsa’s class, five commented that they prefer to work independently in a quiet environment. For example, a student in Ms.

Patsa's class responded, "I like it when it is quiet and I get to work by myself." The other two students commented that they liked to work in groups and reflected that they got to do that in her classroom. These responses are important because they demonstrate that the students believed that their learning preferences were being met. They are also significant because they are in alignment with the classroom atmosphere that Ms. Patsa created. Her teaching style most often reflected a lecture introduction and then either individual or group time to complete worksheets.

Ms. Swasher's students reflected a similar experience. Six of the seven students responded that they were able to learn in the manner that was best for them. For example, "I learn best when I take notes and see it visually. I get to do that a lot here." Another responded, "I like to see things and I like them to be structured and orderly." The other two reflected that they would like to do more interactive group work.

When I asked the students in Kelly's class how they preferred to learn, four of the five commented that the learning matched the way they liked to learn. For instance, one student commented, "I like to research a lot, and I like to do this with a partner. I get to do that a lot here." The fifth student commented that he sometimes wished it was quieter in the classroom.

Finally, all of the students in Amy's classroom responded that the learning was in alignment to the type of teaching that I observed. For instance, as shared in Chapter Four, one student commented. "I like to work in groups because I might not understand

something and I can ask what things mean or ask for help. So working in a group means I can be a better learner; I'm not just sitting there doing nothing.”

This matching between the student comments and observational data was also seen when I asked a student at the EL school what was best about their school, he replied:

Everybody cares for one another. It is kinda a community; you know a lot of the people in the school and you don't often argue with a person and if you do argue, you say are you sure about that and you wouldn't go into any physical activity; there is no violence.

This statement is important when one compares it to the mission statement of GHSEL. As stated on page 114, the mission of the school is to place academic achievement and character development together at the heart of the curriculum.

Blum and Libbey (2004) found that this alignment is also related to engagement:

...researchers trace how students who feel supported by their teachers (a measure of school connectedness) are more likely to be engaged in their schooling than peers who do not experience such support. The more engaged a student is in school, the better the academic performance and achievement. (p. 231)

This engagement will be discussed in response to the third research question. In addition to the positive effects stated earlier, another important side effect of the alignment is the creation of a positive school climate. The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004) discuss what school climate means:

School climate refers to the values, norms, beliefs, and sentiments associated with routine practices and social interactions in schools. Theorists and researchers have used a wide variety of terms to refer to aspects of school climate—including atmosphere, culture, environment, morale, school community, and school ethos. (pp. 97-98)

The report goes on to state that “Taken together, the evidence suggests that student engagement and learning are fostered by a school climate characterized by an ethos of caring and supportive relationships; respect, fairness, and trust; and teachers’ sense of shared responsibility and efficacy related to student learning.” (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 103). A similar result was found by Wohlstetter and Griffin (1997) “...there is increasing evidence and general agreement that strong learning communities enhance school performance.” (Wohlstetter and Griffin, 1997, p. 3) And still further, Smith, (2006) found that a relationship exists between perceptions of school culture and student achievement. Rhodes (2007), in her dissertation on the challenges of engagement, found supporting evidence:

... belief in school, the identification with one’s school community, is also linked to school success: students who are at risk for dropping out of school are less likely to identify with their schools or accept the values and norms that they promote. (p. 26)

This finding is noteworthy because of the strong identification of both teachers and students that was found at both of the schools in this study. It appears that schools of choice do create cultures that support student achievement. This strong learning community was reflected in many of the interviews. In particular, when I asked one of the teachers at GHSEL what set the school apart from others, he responded:

It’s the close knit community that you find here. The fact that it is a small school. And it’s the opportunity for teachers to grow and learn with our kids. This is a big part of learning for me. There are opportunities here for kids to grapple and become engaged with real world problems and things around them. This is important.

Additionally, positive educational outcomes appear more often in schools where students have opportunities to experience how their work will benefit them in the future, and where a strong tie between the school, community, and families is found (e.g., Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004). This is important because research suggests that students are more likely to exhibit engagement in schools where there is a focus on student-centered curriculum and positive student-teacher relationships (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004). The fact that families chose the school that they believed was the best fit for their family helped in this area. As an EL parent responded: “My son is a kinetic learner and our neighborhood school was not a great fit for him academically. We also just like the school better.” And a parent in Ms. Patsa’s class reflected: “I like the focus on core knowledge, curriculum and the focus on academics. The school meets the learning needs of our daughter.”

As discussed, when I began the study, I was looking for whether a variety of activities were provided that met different learning needs, and whether students were given a chance to demonstrate mastery in various ways. I found that each classroom created an environment that allowed students to demonstrate their own learning. As described in Chapter Four, each classroom had its own personality. Ms. Patsa created a military environment in which students were held to high expectations and standards. Students knew what was expected of them and rose to the occasion. Ms. Swisher blended sarcasm and humor to create an environment where students were comfortable to be themselves. A daily routine kept them focused and ready to learn. Kelly’s room reflected a gourmet kitchen with all the spices necessary to let the students create their own

masterpieces. Students experimented together and learned from each other. And Amy's students flourished in the natural greenhouse that she created. Each student was able to grow, nourished by Amy's own passion and excitement. While all different, each classroom demonstrated a community that reflected and met the needs of the learners.

It was clear from my time in all four classrooms that the members of both schools fit with the school's intentions. This alignment helped foster a positive school culture. This is important because a positive culture supports increased learning and engagement. It is, therefore, important that reform efforts work to create a match between learning and teaching propensities and school intentions.

*2. How does the policy play out at the classroom level?*

Evidence of the school-of-choice reform was found throughout the schools and classrooms that I observed in. When looking at how the policy was reflected at the classroom level I observed that a strong and clear mission helps improve learning. As Chapter Four described, it was evident in both schools that the school community supported the mission of the different models. Teachers worked to match their instruction with the school's goals. Likewise, it was immediately obvious that the two schools were quite different from each other. Having a clear mission allows schools to be cognizant of their goals. As Smith and Stolp (1995) describe:

It is the glue that holds together and unifies the aspirations, commitments, and interests of the organization's members around common themes and shared purposes. The vision is what communicates to members of the work group what is worth doing and how. Obviously, the more committed members are to the vision, the harder they will work together to attain the vision. (p. 3)

Wohstetter et al. (1997) agree, “The school mission is a touchstone for participants’ passion and commitment to the school, and when the mission is clear and specific, the school is better able to translate the mission into practice.” (Wohstetter et al., 1997, p. 9). In addition, having a clear model allows a school to hire teachers and enroll students who are interested in the philosophy. This furthers the positive effects of the matching system described here. This idea is expressed in the following response. When I asked a teacher at GHSEL what brought him to the school, he responded:

It was the EL philosophy that brought me here, really. It is a similar philosophy to my own. I especially like the curriculum and how the expeditions drive the learning. It allows kids to go deep and also to get the breadth. They get to grapple, to tinker with stuff, and to solve rich problems. There is an emphasis on learning, from teachers and kids. I feel lucky to be here, really I do.

Both of the schools that I used in my study based their mission statements on a nationally established model. This allowed them to start with an established model with clear and tested goals. As Wohstetter et al. (1997) found, “A high-quality instructional program includes both clear curricula and pedagogy, and details how teachers will get all students to achieve at high levels. It derives directly from the school mission and is the blueprint for helping schools achieve their missions (Wohstetter et al., 1997, p. 14). Both schools used curriculum guides from the national models and all of the teachers commented that they tried to match their instruction to the goals of the model. When taken into the actual classrooms the clear mission statement allowed for continuity between Eisner’s five dimensions of the classroom (Eisner, 1998 & Uhrmacher, 1991). In other words, starting with a clear mission statement allowed both schools to establish intentions and base curricular decisions, instruction, the structure of the school and

evaluation around meeting these intentions. This alignment created a strong, albeit different, learning community at both schools.

Another theme that emerged is that student interest is pertinent to learning and engagement. Traditionally, schools have not placed a high level of importance on using student interest to guide the curriculum. The importance of a student-centered education can be tied directly to John Dewey's work. As he wrote in 1916:

Translated into details, it means that the act of learning or studying is artificial and ineffective in the degree in which pupils are merely presented with a lesson to be learned. Study is effectual in the degree in which the pupil realizes the place of the numerical truth he is dealing with in carrying to fruition activities in which he is concerned. This connection of an object and a topic with the promotion of an activity having a purpose is the first and last word of a genuine theory of interest in education. (p. 134-135)

Critics of progressive education have often argued that students should not be able to create their own curriculum, as they don't know what is best for them. But as Dewey (1938) counters, student interest can be used by the teachers to encourage growth:

The way is, first, for the teacher to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of those under instruction, and secondly, to allow the suggestion made to develop into a plan and project by means of the further suggestion contributed and organized into a whole by the members of the group. The plan, in other words, is a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation. The teacher's suggestion is not a mold for a cast-iron result but is a starting point to be developed into a plan through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process. (p. 71-72)

When the students enroll in a school that provides curriculum and a pedagogical style that is matched with their natural propensities, the ability to make learning personal and interesting is a lot easier for educators. In these schools, teachers can create a classroom that encourages participatory learning. A teacher at the EL school stated:

For instance, students need real tools—if studying architecture, then architects come in, and same with any lesson. It needs to feel real. We do this to varying

degrees here, but the students know it. They know that it is not just a photocopy of a worksheet. They see their work up and around; it shows that their work and products are important.

Interest in curriculum has been tied to deep learning. In a study on learning styles in university students, Entwistle (1979) found:

...the approach to learning is affected by the perceived interest and relevance of the task (interest encourages a deep approach), by the amount of stress generated by the situation (anxiety is associated with a surface approach), and by the types of questions used in assessment (detailed factual questions induce a surface approach). (p. 10)

Therefore, when students feel connected to and interested in the curriculum they are more likely to delve deeply into the content.

In this study, the two schools introduced curriculum in two entirely different manners and yet in both schools, students believed that the learning met their needs. Similarly, all teachers believed that the schools met their needs. When taken together, the observational data, interview data and engagement surveys indicate that different models meet the needs of different learners.

*3. What levels of engagement are found in classrooms of schools that have gone through a school-of-choice reform?*

Because engagement is related to interest and learning propensities, it is important to understand the levels of engagement found in school-of-choice schools. Engagement offers a broader look than test scores and may be a better indicator of student achievement. Libbey (2004) concludes: “Whether examining academic performance or involvement with a range of health behaviors, young people who feel connected to school, that they belong, and that teachers are supportive and treat them fairly, do better” (Libbey, 2004, p. 282).

The primary engagement data are the result of a 15-question engagement survey that I administered to the four classrooms on two separate occasions (see Appendix E). The first time the survey was administered was in December 2007 and the second time was in May 2008. It was an anonymous survey, and since I did not collect names, if a student was absent, I did not have him or her make up the survey. Therefore, the data are presented at the classroom and school level. To review the three types of engagement discussed in Chapter Three: the first, behavioral, is concerned with a student's participation, involvement, and conduct in school. The second form of engagement, cognitive engagement, refers to the motivation and effort a student exhibits. The third is emotional engagement, which refers to interests and emotions. The relationships a student has with peers and adults in the school are an important indicator of emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

The following chart represents the data from the engagement survey. The survey asked students to indicate whether they agreed with 15 statements regarding engagement. I combined the classroom data from each school and assigned values to the responses in order to present overall findings. The choices for the statements and the points assigned were: *Never/Almost Never* (1), *Rarely* (2), *Sometimes* (3), *Often* (4), *Always/Almost Always* (5); or *Strongly Disagree* (1), *Disagree* (2), *Neutral* (3), *Agree* (4), *Strongly Agree* (5). The points were totaled and an average score for each question is reflected in Table 11.

Table 11

*Comparison of School-wide Engagement Levels*

	Questions	Apple Stream Academy	Grassy Hills School of Expeditionary Learning
	Section One: How much do you agree with each of the following statements?		
Behaviorial Engagement	I come to class prepared.	4.40	4.11
	I treat my classmates with respect.	4.37	4.23
	I complete my work on time.	4.24	3.93
	I treat my teachers with respect.	4.74	4.69
	I follow the rules at school.	4.55	4.40
	Totals:	4.46	4.27
	Section Two: How often are the following statements true for you?		
Cognitive Engagement	I feel excited by the work in school.	3.30	3.99
	I am interested in the work I get to do in my classes.	3.62	4.08
	I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning.	3.10	3.74
	I check my schoolwork for mistakes.	3.74	3.80
	I learn a lot from my classes.	4.48	4.50
	Totals:	3.65	4.02
	Section Three: How often are the following statements true for you?		
Emotional Engagement	I enjoy the work I do in class.	3.30	4.08
	I feel I can go to my teachers with the things that I need to talk about.	3.62	4.00
	My classroom is a fun place to be.	3.10	4.06
	Most of my teachers praise me when I work hard.	3.74	4.15
	Most of my teachers understand me.	4.48	4.27
	Totals:	3.65	4.11

The highest possible average for all categories is a 5; as evidenced, overall engagement levels were high in both schools (GHSEL, 4.13 and ASA, 3.92). A significant difference was found between all three areas (.034, .003, .011). ASA had a higher level of behavioral engagement; 4.46 and 4.27, respectively. GHSEL had a higher average for cognitive (4.02 and 3.65) and emotional (4.13 and 3.92) engagement. There were significant differences on the following seven questions: 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 11, and 13.

The largest difference (.96) in the scores was for the question 13: My classroom is a fun place to be. Other large differences were found for, question 11, I enjoy the work I do in class (.78); question 6, I feel excited by the work in school (.69); question 8 and I talk to people outside of school about what I am learning (.64). In all four cases, the scores for GHSEL were higher than those for ASA.

The highest levels of engagement were for: I treat my teachers with respect, ASA had a score of 4.74 and GHSEL had a score of 4.69. Other high levels of engagement were seen for: I follow the rules at school (ASA: 4.55); I learn a lot from my classes (GHSEL: 4.5; ASA: 4.48); and My teachers understand me (ASA: 4.48).

It is interesting to consider these scores in relationship with the missions of both schools. As listed in Chapter Four, the mission of ASA places a high value on academic rigor, and the teachers and administration all mentioned the importance of structured behavior. For example, as Ms. Patsa mentioned when discussing her educational philosophy: “The more clear the discipline and expectations are, the better they do.”

On the other hand, GHSEL places a strong emphasis on relationships and student-centered curriculum. Its mission statement reflects a focus on both academic gains and character development. The teachers also reflected a similar attitude toward classroom goals. For instance, when asked about her educational philosophy, Kelly stated:

I want my students to be critical thinkers. To develop curiosity, be conscience citizens, to know that it is not just about learning. I think about character development, work hard, and push the students to do things that they didn't think that they could. I want them all to be an expert in something.

On the basis of these differences in intentions, one would expect that ASA would have students who were behaviorally engaged and GHSEL would have similar levels of

behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement. As reflected in the engagement sections of each description in Chapter Four, this was found in the analysis of the engagement surveys. The results reflected that the overall behavioral engagement scores were the highest for two classrooms at ASA while the classrooms at GHSEL were fairly balanced across the three areas. To examine the data in another way, I averaged the scores for both times the survey was given, and combined the responses for *Agree, Strongly Agree* or *Often, Always/Almost Always*. Table 12 details the overall engagement levels for each classroom and the range between the scores.

Table 12

*Comparison of Engagement Levels and Ranges*

Apple Stream Academy		Grassy Hills School of Expeditionary Learning	
<b>Ms. Patsa</b>		<b>Kelly</b>	
Behavioral Engagement	86.7	Behavioral Engagement	79.1
Cognitive Engagement	58.8	Cognitive Engagement	68.9
Emotional Engagement	65.1	Emotional Engagement	78.3
Range:	31	Range:	11
<b>Ms. Swasher</b>		<b>Amy</b>	
Behavioral Engagement	88.1	Behavioral Engagement	86.3
Cognitive Engagement	55.2	Cognitive Engagement	72.1
Emotional Engagement	63.8	Emotional Engagement	75.1
Range:	33	Range:	14

As evident in Table 12 there is a large range between types of engagement at ASA while a much smaller range is found at GHSEL.

The next way that the engagement data were analyzed was at the individual classroom level. Detailed classroom data were presented in each of the classroom descriptions in Chapter Four. The following chart expresses the combined individual classroom results. Data were averaged from the two times that the measure was given. The total percentage of responses is indicated for each teacher and each section. The highest percentage of ‘*always/almost always*’ was for Ms. Swasher’s behavioral engagement section. Again, this is interesting because it matches well with the observations in her classroom. Table 13 lists the engagement percentages across the different classrooms.

Table 13

*Comparison of Individual Classroom Engagement Percentages*

Frequencies	Strongly Disagree or Never/Almost Never	Disagree or Rarely	Neutral or Sometimes	Agree or Often	Strongly Agree or Always/Almost Always
Ms. Patsa	5.36%	7.84%	16.60%	20.52%	49.67%
Ms. Swasher	3.49%	8.10%	19.37%	30.95%	38.10%
Kelly	1.84%	4.54%	18.16%	24.11%	51.35%
Amy	.70%	3.40%	18.00%	45.40%	32.50%

To further examine the data, I totaled the three types of engagement and separated the results by level (primary (grades 2-3) vs. intermediate (grades 4-6)). This was done to examine whether there were any patterns to be seen across the grade levels. The greatest difference between the grades was seen in the *strongly agree* or are *always/almost always* engaged response. The data reflect that younger students are more likely (50.5%) compared with the older students (35.3%) to respond that they *strongly agree* or are *always/almost always* engaged. There was not a significant difference between grades. Further results are reflected in the following table.

Table 14

*Primary versus Intermediate Engagement Levels*

	Never/Almost Never or Strongly Disagree	Rarely or Disagree	Sometimes or Neutral	Often or Agree	Almost Always/A lways or Strongly Agree
Primary Results	3.60%	4.89%	18.70%	26.80%	50.50%
Intermediate Results	2.03%	5.76%	18.71%	38.17%	35.30%
Difference	1.57	0.87	0.01	11.37	15.2

The final way that the engagement data was analyzed was to compare averages from the two times that the survey was administered (December 2007 and May 2008). In order to evaluate differences, the number of responses from each section was averaged.

There was not a significant difference between the results of the two tests. The average from the second time was then subtracted from the first average to find the difference.

These differences are reflected in Table 15.

Table 15

*Comparison of Average Responses between the Two Times the Engagement Survey was Administered*

		Differences				
Ms. Patsa	Behaviorial	0.01	0.01	0.03	-0.06	0.01
	Cognitive	-0.02	0.03	0.07	-0.04	-0.05
	Emotional	0.04	-0.04	0.02	-0.06	0.04
	Totals:	0.01	0.00	0.04	-0.05	0.00
		Differences				
Ms. Swasher	Behaviorial	0.05	-0.01	0.05	-0.07	-0.02
	Cognitive	0.02	-0.01	-0.07	0.02	0.04
	Emotional	-0.01	-0.07	-0.04	0.02	0.10
	Totals:	0.02	-0.03	-0.02	-0.01	0.04
		Differences				
Kelly	Behaviorial	0.01	0.02	0.02	-0.12	0.07
	Cognitive	0.00	-0.02	-0.03	-0.03	0.08
	Emotional	0.02	0.01	0.03	-0.12	0.07
	Totals:	0.01	0.00	0.00	-0.09	0.07
		Differences				
Amy	Behaviorial	0.01	0.03	0.00	-0.17	0.02
	Cognitive	-0.01	-0.03	-0.06	-0.06	0.04
	Emotional	0.02	0.00	0.01	-0.17	0.01
	Totals:	0.01	0.00	-0.02	-0.13	0.02

As reflected in Table 15, the differences are all small and reflect that the students responded similarly the two different times the survey was given.

Overall, the data from all four classrooms reflect that students are engaged in the classrooms. The different types of engagement are represented differently across the four

classrooms, but students indicate that they are highly engaged across all three types of engagement. Levels of engagement are important because as Klem and Connell (2004) summarize, engagement is directly linked to student achievement:

Regardless of the definition, research links higher levels of engagement in school with improved performance. Researchers have found student engagement a robust predictor of student achievement and behavior in school, regardless of socioeconomic status. Students engaged in school are more likely to earn high grades and test scores, and have lower drop-out rates. (pp. 262-263)

The engagement results are important as they support the notion that these two schools-of-choice schools are creating environments that encourage a high level of engagement. This is true despite the very different approaches to education. Both schools are doing well on state accountability measures and it is possible that the high engagement levels seen are encouraging this success.

*4. What lessons can policy makers and educational professionals learn from these reform examples?*

Several themes that emerged in this study are pertinent to the future of educational reform. As previously mentioned, the first theme is that the teachers and students at both schools matched the model of the school. This matching helped in the creation of a strong community. The second theme is that a clear mission statement improves student learning. The third theme is that interest, student learning, and engagement are all closely intertwined. The fourth theme is that high engagement was found in both schools; this is important because engagement is an indicator of school success. The first four themes have already been discussed in the responses to the first three research questions; therefore, I will refrain from discussing them again here. In this section, I will

address the remaining theme. This is that people have different learning needs, which leads to the belief that we need flexible state policies that encourage more choice.

Few people would disagree that people learn differently. However, the desire to create efficient schools based on a factory model has kept schools from meeting the needs of different learners. Schools have focused primarily on mathematical and analytical skills. Students who are naturally inclined to these skills have done well; however, many students have not done well in this system. Research now supports the notion that differences in learning go beyond the way in which someone prefers to learn; there are neurological differences that if taken advantage of, can be used to enhance learning for all students. For example, Gardner's work on multiple intelligences and in particular his belief that intelligences can be helped or hindered by the environment support this idea. As Gardner (1983) states: "In my view, it should be possible to identify an individual's intellectual profile (or proclivities) at an early age and then draw upon this knowledge to enhance that person's educational opportunities and options" (Gardner, 1983, p. 10).

Gardner (1993) continues by discussing the idea that intelligence is formed from a combination of genetic and environmental influences:

Rather than assuming that one would possess a certain "intelligence" independent of the culture in which one happens to live, many scientists now see intelligence as an interaction between on the one hand, certain proclivities and potentials and, on the other the opportunities and constraints that characterize a particular cultural setting. (p. xiii)

This idea is also supported by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) who recognized that natural inclinations play into the overall learning experience of children. He discussed how children choose to focus their attention depends on an interaction of several factors. These factors include their natural tendencies, past experiences from paying attention in

other settings, and how valuable the activity will be to them in the future. Therefore, students will naturally pay more attention to things that they deem important and relevant and that they have a proclivity toward.

As expressed in Chapter Four, all four classrooms created different learning opportunities. The students appeared to flourish during this time, for example:

We are an expeditionary school, so we get to go on expeditions. And we travel a lot more than my old school. Also, it's a lot cooler because we get to explore the outdoors. Another thing that is great is that we focus on one specific expedition to study. So we learn a lot about one thing.

For this particular student, being able to delve deeply into a topic worked well with the way in which he liked to learn. All of the students I interviewed expressed that they were learning. One student in Ms. Swasher's class compared her experience to her previous one at a neighborhood school: "I used to go to another elementary school. This school is a lot more fun and interactive. The teachers are a lot nicer. I am definitely learning more here."

Having a system of choice allows for the creation of schools that meet different proclivities and interests. This system of choice better meets individual needs. Gardner (1999) discusses how creating a system where individual needs are met can fit with a variety of educational goals. The key is that educators need to know their students:

Because it is not an educational goal in the sense I have been discussing, individually configured education can fit comfortably with a variety of goals: a traditional or experimental curriculum, an education aimed at breadth or depth, an education oriented to the world of practice, vocations, or civic-mindedness. The crucial ingredient is a commitment to knowing the minds—the persons—of individual students. (p. 151)

Creating environments that are rich in opportunities and focused on individual needs is easier when we have flexible state policies that allow for schools of choice to be created.

Most researchers now agree that choice is a means to change the public school system (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990; Kolderie, 1990; Medler, 2003; Moe, 2001; Rofes, 1998). Charter schools are a large part of the system of choice and allow for a range of schools to be created that still fit within the public school system. Charter schools enable the development of a range of schools that meet multiple teaching and learning needs. Wohlstetter et al. (1997) found that “The development of innovative approaches to teaching and learning is clearly one of the perceived benefits to states permitting charter schools, with the assumption that such innovations will produce identifiable improvements in student achievements” (Wohlstetter et al., 1997, pp. 4-5). In order for this to happen, states need to have policies that encourage the variability.

The opposing views of charter school have created a system with different policies state by state. Thus, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the laws are different in all 50 states, and the strength of the law shapes the number of schools created. Medler (2007) states, “The ‘strength’ of a law is determined by charter-advocacy groups according to the ease of receiving charters and the degree of autonomy the schools receive under state law” (Medler, 2007, p. 207). And Wohlstetter et al. (1997) discuss the different types of laws, “Expansive laws, in theory, are supposed to be more lenient—charter school sponsors are expected to be more risk-taking, approving more innovative schools than in states with less expansive laws. Charter school proponents argue that expansive laws are

good public policy.” (Wohlstetter et al., 1997, p. 35) It becomes clear that the ability to create schools of choice is directly related to the state laws.

It is unlikely that as a society we are ever going to agree on one method and therefore one type of school. “Nevertheless, there will always be people who disagree philosophically with an approach. Furthermore, there are some children who would benefit more from one approach than from another.” (Medler, 2007, p. 8) With that being said, it is possible to encourage high quality schools that meet a range of learning needs. Encouraging variability allows school creators to take into consideration the needs of the community and create schools that are pertinent to the lives of those that are members. This idea is supported by Rubin and Silva (2003) research on student voice:

Taken as a collection, these studies remind us that no single reform can effectively close the achievement gap that persists in today’s large desegregated high schools. Through the candid words of students, these studies compel us to recognize the broader societal context of schooling and the need for a restructuring agenda that is attentive and connected to the social, cultural and economic realities of students’ lives. (p. 208)

Students have different learning needs and teachers have different teaching philosophies. Trying to force all people into one system is ineffective. We now have models of schools of choice that have been tested nationally. Changing state laws so that all states encourage the development of effective schools of choice is the next step. A system of choice has the potential to meet more needs, raise engagement levels, and therefore improve the overall educational experience.

### *Summary of Results*

My review of the research suggests that student engagement is tied to a more successful school career (e.g. Audas et al., 2001; Fredricks et al., 2004; Finn, 1989;

Marks, 2000; Munns et al., 2006) and that teachers can change the levels of engagement in a classroom (e.g., Daniels et al., 2005; Hudley et al., 2002). In examining the themes that emerged from this research, it becomes evident that teachers in schools of choice have the ability to create high levels of engagement in their classrooms. Creating different types of schools allows for the opportunity to better meet student learning preferences, propensities, and interest. As with change in any system, there are many issues that need to be examined and implemented to make schools of choice as successful as possible. However, the positive possibilities of a system of choice make these issues worth examining. State policies that encourage variability and flexibility while at the same time demanding high student achievement are needed (e.g., Elmore et al., 1988; Fullan, 2007; Mead et al., 2007). A system of choice offers flexibility and the ability to demand student achievement in an engaging and powerful way.

### *Discussion*

As discussed, positive results occur when a teacher finds a school that supports his or her needs, and encourages teaching in a manner that is in line with his or her educational philosophy. As this study suggests, all four teachers were able to find schools that encouraged them to teach in manners that they felt were effective. The teachers at ASA felt strongly about discipline and a rigorous and rigid curriculum. On the other hand, the teachers at GHSEL indicated that finding curriculum that was pertinent to their students and teaching as discovery were elemental goals. With that being said, all four teachers were very different from one another. This study suggests that it is important for teachers to have the freedom to create their own classroom community. The ability to do

this allowed all four teachers to engage their students and create positive learning environments.

Student experience is enhanced when the teacher feels supported and effective. In addition, students are more engaged when the learning is relevant to their lives and when they are interested in the curriculum. Having a range of schools, offers more opportunities for students to find a school that is relevant to them. This variation also affords the ability to cover different learning needs. The data in this study suggest that a system of choice is an effective answer to the school reform dilemma.

This study did not closely examine if student learning propensities were the main consideration in parents' selection of the two schools. All six of the parents that responded to the survey stated that they felt the school met their students' learning propensities, but I did not question how important this was in the decision making process.

With that being said, we are left with many questions that are beyond the scope of this study. Before a system of choice can be successfully created these questions need to be examined: What would an ideal or at least near-ideal system look like? Should there be choice at all levels? How many types of schools should exist? Where would students with learning disabilities fit into the system? How would students get to the school that best fit them? And, when and how would the best school of choice be determined and by whom?

The two schools studied were at opposite ends of the learning spectrum and yet students were engaged and were held to high standards in both schools. ASA and GHSEL based their pedagogy, curriculum, evaluation, intentions, and school structure off of a

national model. This allowed them to have a clear mission statement and to create strong learning communities in which teacher and students felt supported. The study demonstrates that engagement is measurable and matches the observations and interview data. Overall, this study supports the idea that a system of choice has the potential to better meet a range of learning needs, thus encouraging high engagement and quality learning. Therefore, it is worth answering the questions raised above in order to create an effective system of choice.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

With all studies, there are certain limitations inherent in this research. The first is that I used a convenience-based sample; limiting myself to two schools in the Denver area by nature limits the generalizability of the results.

Also, in order to use schools that had completed the initiation phase of reform, I purposely selected two schools that have been in existence for at least ten years. Most of the students whom I observed and interviewed had no other educational experience to compare with their current experiences. They were, therefore, not able to explain how the experience at their school is different from the experience of students in a traditional school. My research provides evidence that engagement levels are high at these schools, but it is important to compare these results with data from traditional schools. A future study should compare engagement levels at school-of-choice schools and traditional schools. This would enable a true comparison of how school-of-choice schools impact engagement levels.

Another interesting study would be to interview more parents at school-of-choice schools to see how many had truly tried to match their childrens' natural propensities with the mission and intentions of the school. And finally, studies need to be done to answer all of the questions that I raised on page 215. We need to study the schools and districts that have attempted systems of choice and determine what the best solutions are before a national system of choice is possible.

### **Closing Comments**

To be fair, my own personal educational philosophy and learning style is much more aligned with the Expeditionary Learning model than it is with the Core Knowledge model. With that being said, after completing a year in both schools, I can honestly say that I am more confident than ever that we need different schools for different students and teachers. While I would probably have a difficult time with teaching or learning in a Core Knowledge environment, others would struggle as much with an Expeditionary Learning model. The beauty is in the offering of choice which fosters the ability for teachers and students to find a place where they can become passionate, life-long learners.

As experts in the field and politicians making decisions about the future of education, we need to remember how deeply our decisions impact the lives of millions of students. While there are countless issues that we may not be able to impact, engagement is one that is accessible and immediate. It is time to create schools that engage, and therefore, meet the needs of a higher percentage of students. Creating state policies that

encourage the creation of schools of choice should allow the chance for students to engage in their own learning.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions ~ Teacher**

- 1. How long have you been teaching here? (demographic)**
- 2. How long have you been teaching? (demographic)**
- 3. What brought you to this particular school? (demographic/emergent)**
- 4. Did you teach in another school before here? If so, what type of school was it? (demographic)**
- 5. How involved in the reform effort were you? (demographic/intentional)**
- 6. What do you think sets your school apart from others? (intentional)**
- 7. How well do you think your classroom reflects the ELOB/Core Knowledge goals? (intentional)**
- 8. What are your goals for the students? (intentional)**
- 9. How are curriculum decisions made at your school? (curricular)**
- 10. What is your personal educational philosophy? Does this school's model fit with it? How so? (pedagogical)**
- 11. In general, how do you create lesson plans/generate ideas for curriculum? (pedagogical)**
- 12. Do you intentionally try to match activities to student propensities? (pedagogical/propensities) Can you give me an example?**
- 13. What is the typical daily/weekly/yearly schedule? (structural)**
- 14. How much say do you have in the determination of the schedule? (structural)**
- 15. What types of assessment do you use in your classroom? (evaluative)**
- 16. How many of these are mandated by someone/thing? (evaluative)**

- 17. Can you describe for me what you think engagement looks/feels like in the classroom? (engagement)**
- 18. How important do you believe engagement is in the learning process? (engagement)**
- 19. How do you know when a student is engaged? (engagement)**
- 20. Do you enjoy the curriculum at this grade level? (interest)**
- 21. If you could choose a metaphor to describe your school what would it be? (emergent)**
- 22. Is there anything else I should know? (emergent)**

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions ~ Student**

- 1. How long have you been at school here? (demographic)**
- 2. How did you choose this school? Did you play a role (help), or did your parent (s) decide for you? (propensities)**
- 3. Did you go to another school before here? If so, can you tell me how this school is different? (intentional)**
- 4. What has been your favorite lesson/activity this year? (curricular/propensities)**
- 5. What do you like best about this school? What do you like least? (interest/engagement/emergent)**
- 6. Do you like the activities that your teacher provides for you? (interest/engagement/emergent)**
- 7. Are you interested in the projects you do at school? (interest/engagement/emergent)**
- 8. How does your teacher normally test you? (evaluative)**
- 9. What do you like to do in your free time? (interest/propensities)**
- 10. Is there anything else you can tell me about your experience at school? (emergent)**

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Questions ~ Administrator**

- 1. How long have you been at this school? (demographic)**
- 2. What brought you to this particular school? (demographic/emergent)**
- 3. How involved in the reform effort were you? (demographic/intentional)**
- 4. What is your background; how did you get to this current job?  
(demographic)**
- 5. What do you think sets your school apart from others?  
(intentional/structural)**
- 6. How do the goals of the model work with Colorado state policies?  
(policy/intentional)**
- 7. What are the aims/goals of the school? (intentional)**
- 8. What is your personal educational philosophy? Does this school's model fit  
with it? How so? (pedagogical/intentional)**
- 9. Do you believe that the school does a good job of meeting the ELOB/Core  
Knowledge goals? (intentional)**
- 10. How is the school's curriculum determined? (curricular)**
- 11. How important do you believe engagement is in the learning process?  
(engagement)**
- 12. In your opinion, what are engagement levels like at this school? (engagement)**
- 13. Do you believe that the teachers here intentionally try to match lessons to  
student propensities? (pedagogical/propensities) Can you give me an  
example?**
- 14. If you could choose a metaphor to describe your school, what would it be?  
(emergent)**
- 15. Is there anything else I should know? (emergent)**

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Questions ~ Parent**

- 1. How long have you been a parent here? (demographic)**
- 2. Please describe your involvement in the school. (demographic/structural)**
- 3. How involved in the reform effort were you? (demographic/intentional)**
- 4. What brought you to this particular school? (propensities/emergent)**
- 5. Did your students attend another school before here? If so, what type of school was it? (intentional/demographic)**
- 6. What types of assessments are done at the school? Do you feel like there is a balance of different types? (evaluative)**
- 7. How do you think your student feels about the different evaluations? (evaluative)**
- 8. What do you think sets this school apart from others? (emergent)**
- 9. Do you feel the school meets the learning propensities of your student? (pedagogical/propensities)**
- 10. If you could choose a metaphor to describe this school, what would it be? (emergent)**
- 11. Is there anything else I should know? (emergent)**

## Appendix E

### Engagement Measure



**NCSE** | National Center for School Engagement

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Date completed: \_\_\_\_\_

We would like to find out a little more about you and how you feel about school. Your answers to the following questions will help us to do this. It will take you about 15 minutes to complete this survey. If you are unsure of how to answer a question, please answer it as best you can and then write a comment in the margin. All the information you provide is confidential. It will only be used to help us learn about how to keep children interested in completing school.

<b>1. How much do you agree with each of the following statements?</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
I come to class prepared.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I treat my classmates with respect.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I complete my work on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I treat my teachers with respect.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I follow the rules at school.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

<b>2. How often are the following statements true for you?</b>	<b>Never/ Almost Never</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Always /Almos t Always</b>
I feel excited by the work in school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am interested in the work I get to do in my classes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I check my schoolwork for mistakes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I learn a lot from my classes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>3. How often are the following statements true for you?</b>	<b>Never/ Almost Never</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Always /Almos t Always</b>
I enjoy the work I do in class.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel I can go to my teachers with the things that I need to talk about.	①	②	③	④	⑤
My classroom is a fun place to be.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Most of my teachers praise me when I work hard.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Most of my teachers understand me.	①	②	③	④	⑤



Thank you for completing this survey!



## **Appendix F**

### **Observation Guide**

This will serve as a guideline for my observations; it is purposely flexible enough to allow for themes to emerge.

#### **Intentional Dimension**

How close does the classroom environment match the intentions of the model?

How does the teacher express his/her intentions?

Does the teacher intentionally match activities with student needs/interest?

#### **Curricular Dimension**

How are curriculum decisions made? By who (teacher, student, admin, district, etc.)

#### **Pedagogical Dimension**

How does the teacher present information?

Does the classroom instruction relate to the school's model?

Does the teacher match student propensities with classroom lesson/ activities?

#### **Structural Dimension**

How is the school day, week, year organized?

Who determines the schedule?

How strictly do the teachers adhere to the schedule?

### **Evaluative Dimension**

How many different types of assessment are used?

What are the different forms of assessment used?

How do the results of assessment used?

How do the students react to the different types of assessment?

### **Engagement**

Behavioral – Are students actively participating in activities? Is there a great deal of time spent off-task? Does there appear to be a lot of behavioral issues? How are punishments handled?

Cognitive – Do students appear to understand new content? Do students express a desire to learn more?

Emotional – What do student-to-student and student-teacher relationships look like?

### **Propensities**

Are a variety of activities provided (visual, auditory, kinesthetic)?

Are students given a chance to demonstrate mastery in a variety of ways?

### **Interest**

Do the students appear to be interested in the lessons/activities?

Does the teacher appear interested in the lessons/activities?

## Appendix G

### EL Benchmarks

#### Expeditionary Learning Core Practice Benchmarks

I. LEARNING EXPEDITIONS	II. ACTIVE PEDAGOGY	III. CULTURE AND CHARACTER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Implementing learning expeditions across the school</li><li>• Designing compelling topics and guiding questions</li><li>• Designing products and linked projects</li><li>• Incorporating fieldwork, local expertise, and service learning</li><li>• Producing and presenting high quality student work</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Using effective instructional practices schoolwide</li><li>• Teaching reading K-12 across the disciplines</li><li>• Teaching writing K-12 across the disciplines</li><li>• Teaching inquiry-based math</li><li>• Teaching inquiry-based science and social studies</li><li>• Learning in and through the arts</li><li>• Using effective assessment practices</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Building school culture and fostering character</li><li>• Ensuring equity and high expectations</li><li>• Fostering a safe, respectful, and orderly community</li><li>• Promoting adventure and fitness</li><li>• Developing a professional community</li><li>• Engaging families in the life of the school</li></ul>
<b>IV. LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Providing leadership in curriculum, instruction, and school culture</li><li>• Sharing leadership and building partnerships</li><li>• Using multiple sources of data to improve student achievement</li><li>• Linking Expeditionary Learning and school improvement plans</li></ul>		<b>V. STRUCTURES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Designing time for student and adult learning</li><li>• Creating structures for knowing students well</li></ul>

## Appendix H

### National Charter School Data

#### NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOL DATA

2008-2009 New School Estimates

State	Operating in 2007-08	Opening in 2008-2009	Total Operating	Total Closed Since 2002	Total Enrollment
Alaska	25	1	26	5	5,198
Arizona	477	29	506	97	119,516
Arkansas	18	7	25	6	6,750
California	698	65	763	100	252,569
Colorado	140	7	147	10	53,249
Connecticut	19	2	21	5	3,932
Delaware	19	2	21	2	8,740
D.C.	75	14	89	17	25,385
Florida	347	37	384	7	108,382
Georgia	65	17	82	7	40,807
Hawaii	29	3	32	0	7,317
Idaho	30	2	32	1	10,492
Illinois	63	11	74	9	27,683
Indiana	41	9	50	2	12,631
Iowa	10	0	10	0	1,462
Kansas	33	6	39	10	3,361
Louisiana	54	12	66	10	23,634
Maryland	30	4	34	2	7,301
Massachusetts	62	2	64	6	23,905
Michigan	243	6	249	27	93,892
Minnesota	145	13	158	28	28,371
Mississippi	1	0	1	0	367
Missouri	37	2	39	5	13,125
Nevada	21	3	26	7	7,295
New Hampshire	11	0	11	2	1,212
New Jersey	58	6	64	20	17,986
New Mexico	66	4	70	3	11,426
New York	99	21	118	10	32,602
North Carolina	102	2	104**	33	30,445
Ohio	285	14	299	38	94,171
Oklahoma	15	0	15	1	4,770
Oregon	81	12	93	8	13,612
Pennsylvania	130	3	133	12	61,823
Rhode Island	11	0	11	0	2,894
South Carolina	29	7	36	10	8,705
Tennessee	12	2	14	1	2,585
Texas	320	13	333	35	108,541
Utah	60	8	68	1	23,233
Virginia	3	1	4	3	275
Wisconsin	246	8	254	22	41,799
Wyoming	3	0	3	0	244
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,213</b>	<b>355</b>	<b>4,568</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>1,341,687</b>

\*\* Although North Carolina has a state charter school cap of 100, the total number of campuses (which are allowed under the same charter) currently operating is 104.

The Center for Education Reform - October 2008

## Appendix I

### Colorado Charter Law from the Center for Education Reform

<b>Colorado (1993; last amended in 2007)</b> <b>9th strongest of the nation's 41 charter laws</b>	
<b><i>General Statistics</i></b>	
<i>Number of Schools Allowed</i>	Unlimited
<i>Number of Charters Operating</i>	144
<b><i>Approval Process</i></b>	
<i>Eligible Chartering Authorities</i>	Local school boards; state Charter School Institute in districts that have not retained exclusive authority to grant charters; state board may recommend conversion of "failing" schools
<i>Eligible Applicants</i>	Any person or organization (for profit or non-profit)
<i>Types of Charter Schools</i>	Converted public, new starts, virtual
<i>Appeals Process</i>	Applications denied by the local school board or the Charter School Institute may be appealed to the state board of education, which may remand the decision back to the local school board for reconsideration. A second denial may be appealed to the state board, which may instruct the local board to approve the charter.
<i>Schools May Be Started Without Third Party Consent</i>	No; teachers, parents, and/or students (in "adequate" numbers) must support; application procedures may be adopted by local school board.
<i>Recipient of Charter</i>	Charter school governing board
<i>Term of Initial Charter</i>	Up to 5 years
<b><i>Operations</i></b>	
<i>Automatic Waiver from Most State and District Education Laws, Regulations, and Policies</i>	Limited; exemptions from district policies must be negotiated with sponsor district and specified in charter, and waivers from state statutes must be granted by state board of education; in practice, however, waivers from state statutes are invariably granted upon request, and many districts grant charter schools wholesale waivers from district policy as well.
<i>Legal Autonomy</i>	Yes, but autonomy may depend on the district
<i>Governance</i>	Specified in charter
<i>Charter School May be Managed or Operated by a For-Profit Organization</i>	Charters can be given directly to a for-profit organization
<i>Transportation for Students</i>	Specified in charter
<i>Facilities Assistance</i>	The Charter School Facilities Financing Act requires a portion of funds to be distributed to charters to use in funding capital construction. If space is available in district facility, charter school may not be charged for that space (other costs for facilities operations and maintenance are to be negotiated). Any governmental entity may issue bonds on behalf of charter schools. Also, charter schools are allowed to participate in district bond elections.
<i>Reporting Requirements</i>	Charter school renewal application must include a report on school's progress in meeting its educational goals; state board of education must prepare a report for the legislature comparing performance of charter school students with that of comparable students in other public schools and reviewing the regulations and policies for which waivers were sought.

<b>Funding</b>	
<i>Amount</i>	A minimum of 95% of average per pupil revenue follows the students. Charter schools may seek bonds at a public rate. In districts of 500 or fewer, at least 85% of district per-pupil revenue is guaranteed. Estimated portion is about \$6,632.
<i>Path</i>	For district approved schools, funds pass through district to school. For schools sponsored by CSI, funds are dispersed directly from state.
<i>Fiscal Autonomy</i>	Relationship negotiated with sponsor district and specified in charter.
<i>Start-up Funds</i>	Federal funds available; no state funding
<b>Teachers</b>	
<i>Collective Bargaining / District Work Rules</i>	Teachers may remain covered by the district bargaining agreement, negotiate as a separate unit with charter school governing board, or work independently.
<i>Certification</i>	Required, may be waived.
<i>Leave of Absence from District</i>	Up to 3 years
<i>Retirement Benefits</i>	Charter schools must participate in state's retirement system.
<b>Students</b>	
<i>Eligible Students</i>	All students in state
<i>Preference for Enrollment</i>	District residents
<i>Enrollment Requirements</i>	Not permitted
<i>Selection Method (in case of over-enrollment)</i>	Lottery/random process
<i>At-Risk Provisions</i>	Priority in the approval process must be given to schools designed to serve low-achieving students.
<i>Accountability</i>	Charter schools must participate in statewide assessments administered under the Colorado student assessment program, and provide a timeline for achievement of the school's student performance standards, and the procedures for taking corrective action in the event that student performance at the independent charter school fails to meet such standards.