

# QUESTIONS (but difficult to ask) and ANSWERS ABOUT COLUMBINE ELEMENTARY

## With so many second language learners, will my child get adequate attention from the teachers?

We recognize that meeting the needs of all Columbine's children presents unique challenges. Due to the number of children on free/reduced lunch and who are second language learners, Columbine receives additional staffing resources. Rather than create a multitude of fragmented pull-out programs, resources have been organized to reduce class/group size. This helps us achieve our class size target of 18. Children are regrouped for literacy in groups of 12 or less for extended periods of time. Thus, with small class/groups and a reduced range of needs, teachers are able to customize instruction for all children. In fact, our teachers are masters at challenging all children. In addition, research demonstrates that low class size has a positive impact on the achievement of all children, particularly children of poverty.

## Will my child be challenged?

Columbine prides itself on providing a quality education for **all** our children. In 2001, the school embarked on a significant restructuring effort. The goal of the restructuring was to ensure that the needs of all children attending Columbine were met. Up to that time, the needs of Columbine's second language learners were not being met. The intent of the restructuring was not to shift emphasis to second language learners at the exclusion of native English speakers. But, instead, to create a learning system in which all children could flourish.

Our instructional program reflects the following guiding principles:

- All children are thinkers and learners. Instruction is differentiated to ensure each child has access to the curriculum and academic challenge.

*Differentiation means that instruction is tailored for individuals or groups of children. For example, while all students are learning about even and odd numbers, some students are also learning about prime numbers.*

- Children are involved in constructing their own knowledge.

*Children remember and learn more when they discover, experience and apply rather than being told.*

- Content is integrated across disciplines.

*For example when studying the Civil War, children read Civil War novels and biographies, research the causes of other civil wars and create mathematical representations of the number of people who died and were injured.*

- Students are grouped and regrouped according to their needs.

*Students work together in groups based on language, concept or curricular needs. These groups are dynamic rather than static and meet for short periods. This allows focused instruction along with critical sharing of thinking strategies.*

## Will my child be safe?

Yes, your child will be safe. The Columbine staff is committed to maintaining a safe and secure environment. As in all schools, some of our children enter school without an understanding of how to solve problems with words. Our curriculum consistently teaches and reinforces safe problem solving techniques. Columbine adopted PBS (Positive Behavior Support) as our climate model. Our PBS program positively emphasizes three school rules: be safe, be respectful and be responsible. Students want and are expected to follow these rules. They also understand clear consequences exist for falling short. We have talented counselors and interventionists on staff who work hard to ensure the safety and emotional health of our community.

## What language is spoken on the playground?

Children speak both English and Spanish on the playground. If native English speaking children are involved in a group, the language of play is English. Bilingual children speak English to include their only -English speaking classmates. This comes from an intrinsic understanding of their friends' language and a desire to play together. If a play group is comprised only of bilingual children, the language is often Spanish. But, that language quickly switches to English if a native English speaking child joins the group.

## What about fund raising?

It is true that our school community's ability to fund raise is limited because many families do not have discretionary money. Our PTA operates in a manner that honors that and only sponsors fund raising activities in which all families can participate. However, we receive funds from *Impact on Education* to compensate for a portion of that shortfall. Our

children still attend field trips, enjoy special assemblies and listen to guest speakers. We work hard to make certain our kids have many of the experiences children at other schools receive.

### **Why are so many children bussed to Columbine? Is it a satellite school for English language learners?**

It is a fairly common misperception that English language learners from other attendance areas are bussed to Columbine. However, the English language learners who attend Columbine live in the Columbine attendance area. Columbine is their neighborhood school. Per District policy any children who live at a distance greater than 1.5 miles from their designated neighborhood school are eligible to ride the bus.

### **Are Columbine's Latino parents involved?**

Yes, they are. Parent involvement has many aspects. Due to cultural differences and work and childcare situations, our Latino parents do not serve as classroom volunteers to the extent that exists in other Boulder schools. However, 20 to 30 Latino parents frequently attend our PTA meetings. Our Parent/Teacher conference attendance rate is high and indicates parent's desire to maintain a relationship with their child's teacher. Many of our Latino parents have made great sacrifices to ensure that their children receive a quality education. They care deeply about their children's education. It is just manifested in different ways.

### **What about social connections?**

Columbine children mix and play well together. Teachers work diligently to create caring, cohesive communities. They consciously form integrated work groups in the classroom. Teachers also recognize students with common interests and make an effort to connect them in various activities.

With translation help from our staff, English speaking parents can extend invitations so that Latino children and their families are welcome and included in out-of-school activities. While the children establish social connections with ease, adults tend to find it more difficult. Family Resource Schools, a collaborative program between the City of Boulder and the school district hosts several family nights during the year that allow opportunities to visit. In addition, we have TODOS (Together Our Differences Offer Solutions), a parent involvement group focused on integrating our community. We're always thinking of ways to grow and develop in this area and are open to your ideas.

### **Why are CSAP test scores lower than surrounding schools?**

At first glance, our CSAP scores appear low and cause worries about underachievement, but that is far from the case. Our native English speakers are achieving at the BVSD level and exceeding the state level. When our native Spanish speakers take the Spanish version of the CSAP, their achievement is just as high. However, when our English language learners take the CSAP in their second

language, their lower scores are directly related to their second language development. Research shows that it takes from five to ten years for English language learners to reach the same academic English proficiency as their native English speaking peers. Considering this, even on the English CSAP our English language learners are making some of the greatest CSAP gains in BVSD.

### **Are classes taught in Spanish or English?**

When English speaking and Spanish speaking children are in groups together, the instructional language is English. Spanish is the language of instruction when Spanish speaking children are in Spanish literacy or math.

### **Why don't you just teach in English?**

There is a large body of undisputed research that shows that if a child's academic foundation is developed in their first language, their academic performance in their second language will **ultimately** be much stronger. Consequently, their English will ultimately be stronger. It is also important to note that English is taught to English language learners kindergarten through fifth grade.

### **Will my child be bilingual?**

All of our native English speaking families have the option of enrolling their children in SSL (Spanish as a Second Language). In addition, your child will be exposed to Spanish through peer interaction and limited classroom activities. At the end of fifth grade your child will have basic oral fluency in Spanish. While we are proud of this offering and feel it is a strong component in our curriculum, it is important to remember that our SSL program is not as extensive as a dual immersion bilingual program such as at Uni-Hill or Pioneer.

### **What is your overriding teaching Philosophy?**

Prospective parents often ask are we more experiential or traditional? Hands-on or directive? The short answer is neither. We employ a mix of both techniques that results in comprehensive learning. We believe in teaching comprehension strategies that broaden independent thinking, encourage questioning, and develop research-based inquiry. Kids leave here not only knowing the answers but with a deeper understanding of what lead them to that answer.

### **What are the planned Bond issue changes for Columbine?**

The Columbine facility was originally slated for \$8 million in improvements and upgrades. After architects took a first look at the facility, they recommended a complete replacement. The District agreed with their assessment and recently approved the additional funds needed to build a new school. Visioning for the new school is underway and will be followed by a 9 month design process. Students will remain in the existing building until construction on the new facility is complete, thus minimizing disruption to learning.

We are excited about our new school and look forward to its scheduled opening in the fall of 2011.