

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL OF CHOICE
PROPOSAL

POUDRE R-1 SCHOOL DISTRICT
April 1, 1993

Submitted by the

Elementary School of Choice
Advisory Board
And Associated Concerned Citizens

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This is a proposal for an elementary school of choice to be established in the Poudre R-1 School District that intends, specifically, to address the goals of improved education define by both national, state, and district goals as outlined in the America 2000, Colorado 2000, and Poudre R-1 Strategy Plan. It has been undertaken by members of the Fort Collins community who are serious in their concern about education and their desire to make a positive contribution toward its improvement at a time in our history when all agree that our public school system is not educating children as well as it might, nor in ways that it must in anticipation of the future.

While the design has been undertaken locally, its elements are the reflection of many experienced and wise individuals from across the country who have, through their writings, illuminated both whence we have come historically and the nature of the principal difficulties that beset our public education, and who offer well thought out solutions to improve the training and education of our young people, our nation's greatest and most important resource. Major references will be noted; others are included in the appendix.

The mission of the Poudre R-1 School District is to create the highest quality learning community of children, youth, and adults, provide competency to live productive and fulfilling lives in a dynamic, technologically diverse, and

democratic society. The following proposal takes into account the strategic goals of the District to achieve that mission.

There are four major aspects in the design of our school: It will be a school of choice, it will raise specific academic standards, it will provide more equality and fairness to those with differing family, economic, or racial backgrounds, and it will teach the values of a democratic society. Each of these points will be considered in succession below. Next, related issues will be covered, including a statement of guiding principles, a description of the site based management schema, and the plans for implementation. After a summary, an appendix is attached with an annotated bibliography, select excerpts from books and news sources, and other pertinent data.

CHOICE

Much has been written over the last five years about the need for reform of public education and how that is to be accomplished. There is general consensus that the expectations and content of learning need to be raised, but that the decision making should be decentralized.

The President, the Secretary of Education, Governor Romer, and the Governor's Council of Education, our state legislature and our District Superintendent agree that to improve schools and reform education, we must restructure the way school are run and introduce choice into the public school system. For there to be choice, there must be options and there must be parental (p-ublic) input in all aspects of administering education (which will also assure community support and involvement).

This represents the first step toward choice by providing an option with open enrollment to all students in the district of an elementary school with higher standards in learning, equality, and values.

There is nothing more basic to education and its ability to bring our children into the 21st Century than choice. Given a choice in public education, we believe parents will play a stronger role in our schools. Innovative programs will sprint to life. Parents and the whole community will become more deeply involved in helping all children learn. Teachers will be more challenged than ever. And, most importantly, our students will see immediate results.

The National Governor's Association, *Time for Results: The Governor's 1991 Report on Education.*

More about the benefits of choice in education – how they facilitate the raising of standards and success – can be read in *Winning the Brain Race* and other works listed in the bibliography.

We have chosen to focus our efforts at the beginning, namely, elementary education. As will be noted, our approach takes into account the diversity of backgrounds from which children come and is specific in its plan for leveling the field and bringing all children to a common starting point from which they can readily learn together. We believe that all children are very capable of learning and that they hunger after meaning. We believe that given a club learning atmosphere and teachers who have a clear understanding of what they are to teach and are unhampered by bureaucratic dictums, this school can raise the standards of excellence and fairness in education for all children.

Our purpose is to:

1. Raise academic standards and success;
2. Provide more equality to those with differing backgrounds;
3. To teach the values of a democratic society.

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLE

1. All children are educable. Therefore, they all deserve the same quality of schooling, not just the same quantity.
2. The best education for the best is the best education for all.
3. Children yearn for meaning and require a basis of organized common knowledge for the development of literacy, for growth in a diverse society, and upon which to build further knowledge.
4. The skills of learning – reading, writing, listening, speaking, calculating, problem solving, observing, critical judgment – must be learned from the knowledge of content of the curriculum to be meaningful, and are acquired through coaching and sensible practice.

5. Equality in education is best achieved by all students learning together in a club atmosphere. Given a content rich curriculum, individual differences may be addressed through greater breadth and depth of knowledge, rather than by specialized acceleration. In such an environment, skill development occurs more naturally and can readily be accelerated or remediated as appropriate.
6. The values of a democratic society – devotion to human dignity and freedom, equal rights for all, social and economic justice, the rule of law, civility and truth, tolerance of diversity, and self-respect – must be taught by inference and example through what and in how we teach.

HIGHER ACADEMIC STANDARD AND SUCCESS: COMMON KNOWLEDGE

The first and most important aspect of our proposal are changes in the curriculum. Several important national educators have looked closely at the trends in education in our nation over the last century and have hallmarked several specific weaknesses in the approach currently taken toward education across the country.

Perhaps the most important is our failure to currently provide a solid basis of common knowledge that is necessary both for the development of literacy, as well as for the bringing together of individuals from many diverse cultural backgrounds to that all can communicate effectively in our society and have the knowledge and skills necessary for full participation and cooperation. Historically in the United States such a core of common knowledge was taught by unwritten agreement. Currently, such a core of common knowledge is taught in all of the most successful educational systems in the world, particularly those rating high in nations of the world excepting the United States and Australia, both of which are at the bottom of the ranking with respect to academic knowledge and skills and with respect to fairness and equality in education. Three national commissions over the past several years have acknowledged the need for a basis of common knowledge that all American children share, while agreeing that a national curriculum as such would not be appropriate.

For our school, we have chosen the Core Knowledge Foundation's Curriculum Sequence for the 1st through 6th grades. This curriculum represents about half of the content of the curriculum of the school. The Core Knowledge Sequence is a planned progression of specific knowledge in history, geography, mathematics, science, language arts, and fine arts. It represents a first and ongoing

attempt to state specifically the core of knowledge that children should earn in the 1st through 6th grades in American schools. It is distinguished by its specificity.

Why should it be taught?

1. All of the most successful education systems in the world teach a core of knowledge in the early grades.
2. Kids learn new knowledge by building on what they already know. It's important to begin building foundations of knowledge in the early grades, because that's when children are most receptive (they are by instinct driven to construct an organized view of the world and what there is to learn about it) to gaining an organized body of knowledge, and because academic deficiencies in the first six grades can permanently impair the quality of later schooling.
3. Only by specifying the knowledge that all children should share can we guarantee equal access to that knowledge. In our current system, disadvantaged children, especially, suffer from low expectations that translate into watered-down curricula. In schools using the Core Knowledge Sequence, however, disadvantaged children, like all children, are exposed to a coherent core of challenging, interesting, interwoven knowledge. This knowledge not only provides a foundation for later learning, but also defines a common heritage and makes up the common ground for communication and cooperation in a diverse society.

We encourage all who wish to examine this proposal to look carefully at the Core Knowledge Sequence. This was developed by the Core Knowledge Foundation, which set in motion a process to build a consensus on a core of knowledge that should be taught in American elementary schools. The Sequence represents a consensus of diverse groups and interests, including parents, teachers, scientists, professional curriculum organizations, and experts on America's multicultural traditions.

The Sequence takes into account the recommendations of professional curricular organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. It also reflects research into the knowledge and skills expected of children in successful educational systems of other countries, including France, Japan, Sweden, and West Germany. (Though the word "core" is included in the title, it is not related to Global REACH, World Core Curriculum, Project 2000, or to New Age-One World philosophies.)

We encourage all to study the Sequence carefully, to read its introduction (included in the appendix), and to notice its richness and variety, and also to notice how well cross-correlated it is. Science and mathematics, for example, are complimentary throughout the progression, as are American and world civilizations with the fine arts, music, and the language arts sections. This allows teachers a wonderful opportunity to take many different approaches to the curriculum based on their own talents and the needs of their students, recognizing the wonderful opportunity for project, active, and collaborative learning when a curriculum is so integrated. We commend the District on its efforts to increase these types of hands-on learning. Such a school as we propose will take these efforts another step forward.

In addition to the Core Knowledge Foundation Curriculum Sequence (which can be ordered from the Core Knowledge Foundation by calling 1-800-238-3233), we also encourage parents to read the introduction to the books, “What Every First Grader Should Know,” “What Every Second Grader Should Know,” etc., which are parent/teacher/student supplements available at local bookstores. The research basis of this curriculum, namely; the effect of schemata on the learning of both skills and knowledge, the influence of background knowledge on literacy and language, and the learning, are discussed more fully in the book, *Cultural Literacy*, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. as noted in the bibliography attached in the appendix.

The Core Knowledge Sequence discussed above may well be called the extensive curriculum – cultural literate knowledge, the network of associations that should be known by every child. The other half may be referred to as the intensive curriculum, which, though different, is equally essential. It will be made up of those parts of the District curriculum not included in the Core Knowledge Foundation Sequence, such as Colorado history. Also, physical education, the teaching of a second language, and more detailed focus in any subject will make up the intensive study. It coincides with Dewey’s recommendation that children should be deeply engaged with a small number of typical concrete instances. This allows for flexibility of context and for a variety of teaching approaches and a ready accommodation to skills instruction, which we intend always to be based on the content of what is taught in the school. The intensive curriculum is the pluralistic element of this proposal, ensuring that individual students and teacher can work intensively with materials that are appropriate for their diverse temperaments, past preparations, and aims. The conception of a two-part curriculum

avoids the idea that all children should study identical materials. The teachers, the school district, parents (through the school based management council) and even students will help shape and define the intensive curriculum.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND SUCCESS: THE SKILLS OF LEARNING

The skills of learning, namely, reading, writing, speaking, listening, calculating, problem solving, observing, measuring, estimating, and exercising critical judgment, are best taught through the content of the body of organized knowledge that the children are learning. We believe it has been well shown that teaching these skills through separate and often meaningless or unassociated content is ill advised and unsuccessful. For example, issues of grammar and logic can be both interesting and relevant to children when learned from high quality works of literature that they enjoy. Mathematical problem solving is more engaging when students seek to solve a pulley problem from their science studies.

In addition, skills are not taught didactically, but rather by involvement with a good coach. Coaching and supervised, meaningful practice are the ways in which students best attain the skills of learning. The design of our school provides for assistant coaches from experienced community volunteers.

The development of literacy will be one of the primary aims and focuses of effort in our school. This will include a great deal of reading from a variety of both fiction and non-fiction, primary literature. Particularly in the early grades, our school will emphasize in every appropriate way reading and more reading. In grades 1 and 2, there will be 10 to 15 minutes daily spent on decoding skills (blended phonics). Approximately three to four times this amount of time will be spent in reading or being read to.

We also intend to focus a great deal of the volunteer efforts available to us on reading with children and assuring that all children are mentored or coached adequately in the development of their reading proficiency. We consider reading the principal and primary skill or learning and of all subsequent education. The Core Knowledge Foundation Sequence provides an excellent beginning for the breadth of reading experience all children need. As this represents only a beginning, there is ample room for use and recommendation of other high quality works of literature to engage our children and provide them with a broad and rich reading experience.

The approach to learning a body of organized knowledge and the development of skills as outlined above will benefit all students. The greatest benefit, however, will be to children considered at risk. Rather than being downtracked, they will be given the background knowledge necessary for them to learn on a level playing field with their peers from more advantaged homes. Thus, greater equality and fairness for all children is achieved. Personalization of schooling and common standards go hand in glove; one without the other won't make it.

Although the common knowledge does not represent the knowledge that any one of us may have chosen, it does represent a broad based initial effort to identify a framework of what all American school children should know. Before a parent lets him/herself be distracted by any item or set of items, the entire view and the way it is sequenced and interwoven across subject areas should be studied. If a parent takes exception to too much of what is to be taught, they probably should not choose this school. A side by side comparison of the Core Knowledge half of the curriculum has been made to the current defined PR-1 curriculum for elementary grades. It is available through Ruth Ann Everett for evaluation.

HIGHER STANDARDS AND SUCCESS: VALUES

The purpose of public education in a democracy is to prepare people for the demands of work; the duties of citizenship; and the obligation of each individual to make as much of herself of himself as possible. AS much is stated in the mission of PR-1. For this to be accomplished, our youth must be taught the values inherent in a democratic society, such as devotion to human dignity and freedom, equal rights for all, social and economic justice, the rule of law, civility and honesty, tolerance of diversity, and self-respect.

Academic standards and standards for behavior and demeanor are a part of education values. In this school, children will learn sportsmanship, fair play, sharing and taking turns. They will be given the opportunity to lead and to follow and to respect the rights of the minority. These values will be taught from the content of the curriculum, by inference and example, through what and in how we teach.

Situational ethics, values clarification, group affective training, etc. taught to children in public schools are inappropriate, rarely have any durable benefit, but

do carry considerable potential for misuse or harm to individuals and risk unwarranted intrusion into the family.

A warm supportive personal attitude from a caring teacher who focuses his or her time on providing a child with a coherent body of knowledge of the world around him or her and the intellectual skill so succeed in it (which are instinctual high priority needs for young children) will go further toward calming and filling unmet emotional needs than group approaches to “learning” affective or interactional skills. Not only does a long-standing, ever growing body of knowledge support this view, but an increasing number of reports from successful inner city schools provide the field testing confirmation of this principle. High risk children need individual concern, not group therapy. Self-esteem comes from confidence in growing abilities, not from unmerited praise. While others may want this social engineering for their children, by decision and design it will not be included in this school. This fact, along with other principles guiding this school are the basis by which parents will choose or not choose this school for their children.

The above approach to our school helps define, in many respects, the outcomes on which we anticipate assessing the school. The District will necessarily be defining benchmarks by which all children shall be measured in Grades 1 through 6. All children will be expected to have a sound understanding of the core knowledge portion of the curriculum and must demonstrate this in both oral and written exams prior to being advanced to the next grade.

Experience with the core knowledge curriculum shows that because much of the knowledge taught is specified, it can be more directly remediated and, indeed, this is a secondary source of the increased fairness in education. In the United States, there has been a steady and progressive divergence in the skills of knowledge and skills of the main group of elementary students. In other countries where a core knowledge curriculum is in place, the opposite occurs. For example, in France, Turkish migrant workers’ children come to a school where the deficiencies in knowledge and skill they have which would prevent them from catching up and continuing to grow literate in that society are identified and , hence, can be taught in remediation.

As will be noted later, assuring that all children have the necessary support to gain this basis of knowledge will be an ongoing part of the volunteer efforts, particularly in the before and after school hours. In addition to the standardized

tests, we recommend other tests for the evaluation of reading skills. Our school's principal teacher and the other teachers, as well as the advisory board, will cooperate fully as the District seeks to establish the benchmark standards by which all outcomes will be judged.

SCHOOL BASED MANAGEMENT

The design for this elementary school includes recommendations for School Based Management (SBM) as outlined below. This plan, like the other aspects of the design, is based on the experience of others across the country. We recognize Poudre R-1's current work on this strategic goal and wish to contribute to it with actual local field experience. Therefore, we recognize that this management schema may be modified by the Site Based Management procedures eventually ratified by the Board of Education.

There are three components for a successful SBM program:

1. Schools have the authority to make major decisions;
2. All important decisions are made by teams;
3. The Districts administration works with the teams.

By definition, SBM places maximum educational planning responsibility in the hands of individual schools councils. The responsibility should include all aspect of running the school.

Through cooperation between a governing council of a Teachers Board and a Parents Board of seven members each, al decisions shall be made.

An Advisory Board of semen members will be initially identified, whose purpose is to provide philosophical and curricular leadership to the school. They will undertake the responsibility for establishing the school in all its particulars, including the haring of the principal teacher, in agreement with the superintendent, and subsequently assisting the principal teacher in interviewing and hiring its teachers. The Advisory Board will oversee the elections of the seven members of the Parents Board, who will then replace them.

Members of the initial Parent Board shall be nominated from committed citizens by those who designed the school. They would be subject to PR-1 School Board confirmation. After the school is fully established, elections shall be held to replace the initial Parent Board that shall provide leadership for the start-up of the school with a Parent Board.

The Parent Board shall consist of five parents and up to two other community members (total of seven) and shall be voted on by the parent council (a school-wide group open to all parents).

The Teachers Board shall consist of the principal teacher, five teachers, and one staff member, and shall be chosen under direction of the principal teacher. These two Boards and an optional non-voting member of the PR-1 central administration form the SBM council. It is responsible for making all operating-policy decisions and instituting all long-range planning for the school. The chairs of the SBM council should be chosen from among all members, but should not be the principal teacher. As such, decisions regarding the “intensive curriculum” (the other half, not specified by the Common Knowledge), appropriations of resources, personnel decisions appropriate to current teacher union contracts, etc., and other undefined philosophical or instructional issues will be made by the SBM council.

To function properly, a SBM council needs appropriate management training and orientation to the workings, policies, and procedures of the PR-1 administration. The central administrations must provide ongoing service support for all SBM councils, in addition to comprehensive training in practical management, advocacy skills, and group decision-making. The readiness to supply this support is now in place.

In addition to the SBM Council, a Board of Curriculum Consultants will be named from qualified volunteers. These men and women with experience or expertise in each of the areas of content – Language Arts, Fine Arts, Mathematics, Science, History, and Geography – will provide support to teachers in lesson plan development on their own continuing education as requested by the teacher. There will be up to seven members in each consultant team.

ORGANIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHOOL

We have requested two classes each of Grades K through 4 – 25 students in each class – to begin with the regular school year in the fall of 1993. The school

will then grow each year into fifth and then sixth grades. Both space and budgetary constraints make this initial size and growth necessary.

The staff will include a principal teacher, 15 teachers, and a special education/volunteer coordinator. Curriculum and library development will be provided by the volunteer consultant staff in conjunction with the teachers. It will also require a complete school support staff with a budget commensurate with district-wide elementary students.

Outside resources will be sought in the form of a computer workstation network for the teachers and staff and additional funds for library (learning resources) development.

Initially, enrollment will be on a first come, first serve basis. Enrollment will be offered publicly with an effort to invite all to review this proposal and enroll if the parents' desires can thus be met. A minimum number of Hispanic and other non-white positions equal to the demographic proportions of the student body will be held open for individuals until the closing date for enrollment. More or less than the minimum number of students from each group may be represented as expressed by the choice of the parents of individual students. If demand exceeds opportunity, as it may, then a lottery or drawing may be necessary to achieve fairness. Preference would be given to siblings of students enrolled in the school.

WHAT THIS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IS NOT:

It is not a laboratory school. The curriculum and approach have been tested and proven both here and abroad. Its focus is academics.

Our program is also not just an appeal for an improvement in the quality of education for some students. It is an appeal for the improvement in quality for all, without any exception whatsoever. And, since it is for all, it is not elitist. Indeed, although all students will benefit, children at risk will benefit the most. People who call such a plan elitist because it is dedicated to a high quality of education misuse the word elitist.

WHAT THIS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WILL RELY ON:

Teacher networking – The Core Knowledge curriculum provides a well integrated, appropriately sequence plan. Because teachers share the curriculum, each teachers’ experience, expertise and lesson planning can be shared with others. Teachers in schools now using Core Knowledge find it useful and exciting to work cooperatively with other teachers and with parents in coordinating lessons and greater depth and complexity. The Core Knowledge Foundation has published several resource books and maintains an exchange of lesson plans for teachers.

Parental involvement – Teachers will have a well orchestrated plan for each month of the school year with a Core Knowledge curriculum. Within this framework, parents will be invited to teach or assist with lesson plans or learning project in all subjects, depending on their interests and expertise. Parents also will be encouraged to spend an established amount of time reading aloud to children at school. Whether inside or outside the classroom, parents will need to volunteer at least five hours a month. (As coaching in skill development will require one on one interaction, much volunteerism will hoped for.)

Library – Original literature will replace textbooks as the major resource for students and teachers. The school library must contain a good selection of the best literature, including fiction and non-fiction.

Foreign Language – Children learn foreign languages best when they are young, at the same time they are rapidly learning their own language. The school will coordinate volunteer expertise in hopes of providing several choices of foreign language instruction.

Voluntarily Limiting Television Viewing – Because television is a passive activity and discourages creative play, this school would suggest a voluntary limit of television watching by each student to no more than ten hours a week. Television viewing is diametrically opposed to reading, stifles cognitive development and visual imagination in our children, trivialized information, undermines values, distorts cause and effect, and is unable to portray thought.

The content of the Core Knowledge sequence includes music, art, and architecture. In addition to the knowledge imparted, the school will have music, art, and P.E. teachers for active participation and development of skill. Several issues have intentionally been left unaddressed by the proposers. Some of these are the actual form of report cards, discipline policies with the PR- 1 guidelines,

those parts of the curriculum beyond the Core Knowledge Sequence, etc. These and other issues not set forth in the proposal need to be decided by the parents and teachers jointly through the site-based management.

Thank you for evaluating this proposal. We hope you are pleased and will want to sign up your children.