

WALKING THE WALK

*How a school embodies lifelong
learning in the quest to provide
all students greater opportunity
and advantages*

**Sand Creek Elementary School,
Harrison School District 2**
Colorado Springs, Colorado

ABOUT THE INNOVATIVE SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES PROJECT

Dear Educator,

Beginning in 2017, the Successful Practices Network (SPN) and AASA The School Superintendents Association have been conducting a study of innovation best practices in public K–12 systems from throughout the United States, with support from global learning company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH).

Dr. Bill Daggett has led a team of nationally recognized superintendents, researchers and data analysts to identify systems that are using innovative approaches to put students first by expanding and supporting student learning and achievement. Schools and districts were selected for further study based on a national search conducted by thought leaders and experts at HMH, SPN and AASA. HMH supported this effort by providing research and reviewers as part of its work to partner with school districts on improving student outcomes.

From that study, 25 national Innovative Successful Practices systems were identified based on their ability to demonstrate rapid improvement in student learning and preparedness through innovative organizational and instructional practices.

Each of those 25 systems collaborated with SPN and AASA to host an on-site visit, detailed data analysis and development of a case study. These case studies are intended to provide an accessible and nontechnical overview of each innovative approach that is backed up with data-driven results.

The participating systems include a wide range of geographies, demographics, student population and resource levels. In spite of those differences, each of these systems shares a common mindset that innovation can drive public education with a strong focus on serving the needs of all of their students.

We have been inspired by the lessons learned from these courageous leaders that took risks to think beyond their traditional systems and approaches. It is our hope that this work continues to inspire, inform and support public education leaders in their efforts to prepare students for success both in school and beyond school.

“The world that our children will live, work and interact in will be fundamentally different than the world we all grew up in,” said Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman, International Center for Leadership in Education. “To prepare them for success in this changing world our schools need to make fundamental changes as well. These innovative districts are paving the way and showing us how to make the necessary changes needed in our schools.”

“At a time when the new school year is beginning across the nation, there is no better time than now to speak out about the value of public education and bring to the forefront the outstanding work being done by our school districts,” said Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director, AASA.

“It’s important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade,” said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning designs in their school districts to accelerate student engagement, growth, and achievement.”

INTRODUCTION

How can we teach students the value and importance of lifelong learning if we ourselves are not exhibiting the characteristics of a lifelong learner? This was the question educators at Sand Creek Elementary School in Colorado Springs confronted as they set out to create a vision of a truly learner-centric model. Their answer? We can't. The entire team realized that whatever they preach to students they must also do. With a humble servant leader at the helm and a team of empowered, motivated teachers, Sand Creek's educators have found ways to provide for their economically disadvantaged students advantages and opportunities otherwise inaccessible to them out of an impassioned commitment to molding bright futures for all.

THE CHALLENGE

In Colorado Springs, there is a single street that serves as an actual, not allegorical, dividing line between the "haves" and "have nots." The demarcation of opportunity is well known in the community—including among students and staff of Harrison School District 2. Of the district's 11,770 students, 75% qualify for free/reduced lunch. The district is diverse and faces the challenges typically associated with economic disadvantage. Fortunately for its students, leadership is committed to doing everything it can to provide the same opportunities available to those on the other side of that street.

The ultimate goal within the district is to make all decisions focused on what is best for kids—as long as standards are being met and initiatives produce positive student achievement results. For one of the district's elementary buildings, Sand Creek Elementary School, striving to meet all student needs meant reshaping the entire school into one where lifelong learning is the ultimate goal and keeping the student at the center of all decisions is the ultimate path to that goal. These beliefs crystallized in the 2012-2013 academic year when Sand Creek gained a new principal. The preceding principal had great success in building systemic capacity for student achievement improvements. By the time the new principal arrived, the students had finally begun to meet passable state student performance thresholds.

Yet no one at Sand Creek was satisfied. Sand Creek's team saw the improvements as just the beginning. Of Sand Creek's 480 students, 80% receive free/reduced lunch. Its educators were determined to provide for their students all the opportunities they had as students and that their peers on the other side of that dividing line have. They were and remain deeply committed to creating for them as many advantages as they possibly can.

From 2012 to 2014 and under the new principal's stewardship, leadership outlined a five-year vision for school transformation. At its core, Sand Creek wanted to guide all of their students into becoming lifelong learners. They agreed that the drive and ability to continue to learn over the course of a life was pivotal to a successful career in the 21st century. Central to this goal was evolving the role of teachers to embody lifelong learning themselves. It required integrating content and using inquiry-based learning to help students make inter-content connections. And it required handing over voice and choice to students while teachers transitioned to functioning primarily as facilitators of learning.

In 2014, the district nominated Sand Creek for International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program (IB/PYP) status to capture early momentum the school had generated as they implemented broad

changes. Sand Creek's educators had been in an ongoing dialogue over the frustration of always feeling like there were not enough minutes in the day to teach all content. The district believed that the IB/PYP's transdisciplinary and inquiry-based curriculum requirements would give structure to the school's learner-centric instructional goals and desire to cover more content every day.

In the 2015-2016 school year, the school began its IB/PYP candidacy period, in which it had to operate like an International Baccalaureate school. This required adapting curriculum and using the IB program's Learner Profile—a self-reflection tool to examine and build character skills, cultivate self-awareness, and increase ownership of learning—in all instruction to meet requirements. During the candidacy period, the school experienced a steady and dramatic change in culture. Today, Sand Creek is a school where everyone personifies and owns lifelong learning.

THE INNOVATION

In 2017, Sand Creek was awarded IB/PYP status. Sand Creek's students, thus, were officially given an opportunity not yet seen in their region of Colorado Springs. This achievement, however, is just one of many the school has made in the years since its commitment to provide for students the advantages their peers in neighboring districts have. The following innovative practices have served as pillars to the school's impressive evolution.

Lifelong Learning: Walk the Walk, and Talk the Talk

As Sand Creek's educators set out to champion and prioritize lifelong learning skills on their campus, they knew without hesitation they had to model these skills. Without embodying lifelong learning, they believed they would lose trust and credibility with their students.

At Sand Creek, knowing how to find answers and gain knowledge is far more important than the knowledge itself. In the early years of implementing the new vision, the team intellectually embraced this philosophy. But it took time to adjust to it in practice. One of the earliest changes made to this end was the Wonder Wall. The school introduced the IB practice of a Wonder Wall, born from inquiry-based instruction. In each of its classrooms, the wall was a place where students could post questions or note curiosities pulling them to learn more.

Initially, this new practice made teachers uncomfortable. Not only had they been used to having all the information that would come up in a planned lesson, they had also been used to students perceiving them as gatekeepers of knowledge. To create wall space for questions to which they might not have answers was an adjustment for teachers. To help them grow comfortable with this change in expectations, leadership worked with teachers on how to let students know they didn't know something. Teachers shifted the conversation from not knowing something to how to go about learning something. Not only did teachers grow comfortable with this, they were also able to model to students there is no shame in saying, "I don't know" and that what is important is following that up with, "Let's find out."

This subtle but significant modification in mindset matched a re-thinking of professional development. To have a few professional development sessions throughout the year no longer aligned to the ethos of

lifelong learning. Instead, the school layered its formal professional development plan with ongoing, organic, and frequent learning opportunities wholly driven by educators.

As formal professional development is planned for the following school year, pairs or small groups of teachers volunteer to host sessions on topics of their expertise. Teachers who had any kind of summer training are expected to run a session. From the line-up of options, teachers choose which differentiated professional development sessions they want to attend. Once a quarter, the school has a “share fair,” another way for teachers to share-out ideas and practices they have found to be successful with their students. This can range from particular iPad applications where students can record themselves reading and reflect on their progress, to Number Talk routines and structures, to building student conceptual understanding of math.

Included in formal professional development are opportunities designed to respond to immediate learning needs. A professional development afternoon is scheduled once monthly. While these days are structured in their timing per month, they are unstructured in their content, with topics selected only in the month before. This is so sessions speak directly to the needs of teachers at that time. Every Monday, all teachers are given 75 minutes to spend with their grade-level professional learning community (PLC). Professional development is embedded in these meetings and is based on the interests and needs of the teachers at the time. To determine the topic of professional development, teachers simply inform leadership as to what they want. Leadership then supports teachers to find the resources to provide specific professional development.

Layered over these scheduled professional development sessions are highly informal and constant learning opportunities. In the district, Sand Creek has become known for its “Pineapple Chart.” The Pineapple Chart is a system that allows teachers to invite one another into their classrooms for an informal observation. It was named from a tradition of hospitality in many cultures, where the placement of a pineapple on the front porch indicates visitors are welcome.

On the Pineapple Chart, teachers post interesting things they are doing in their classrooms, such as a Socratic seminar in kindergarten, a science lab, or a Skype class with a school in another country. Teachers can also advertise what they want to learn, and teachers with those skills will invite them to visit a relevant class. Teachers can decide if they want to visit any of these instructional sessions. Then they simply show up to observe. They don’t have to take notes, stay for any specific amount of time, or follow-up with the teacher. It is a relaxed way for teachers to expand skills or learn new ideas when they need to do so and on short notice. Teachers can also film their classes to showcase certain instructional strategies. Videos become part of a video library teachers can pull from to learn new strategies or ideas whenever they want.

The intent is to make these informal professional development opportunities as casual and expectation-free as possible so that teachers will use them frequently. And they do. Leadership believes that their teachers learn more and learn more regularly thanks to this low-maintenance, friendly process. They see their entire team constantly learning from each other and engaging in dialogues to promote individual and collective growth—with students often as witnesses.

Walk into any classroom at Sand Creek and you will see students embodying the attitudes of a lifelong learner. When a teacher poses a question, students don't raise hands to attempt an answer. Instead, they've been coached to turn immediately to each other to discuss an answer or how to go about finding one. The teacher will rarely provide an answer and instead pose deeper questions to students. Similar to their teachers, students feel no shame in not knowing an answer. Instead, they place value on always honing their answer-finding and problem-solving acumen.

When Sand Creek hires, they are far more interested that a candidate demonstrate a hunger to learn. They look less for knowledge and experience and more for telltale signs that a person knows how to find information. They look to ensure a candidate will fit into a culture where everyone is expected to speak up when they don't know something, look for answers, and guide colleagues in an ongoing basis about what they do know.

Thanks to district leadership, this attitude of freely and openly exchanging knowledge exists across the district, as well. As needed, school leadership teams visit other schools or host leadership teams from other schools to share strengths and model various strategies.

Normalize Feedback

Lifelong learning is not possible without feedback. The principal and her team have made sure to normalize feedback. She and her assistant principal strive to—and do—spend 75% of every school day in classrooms observing teachers or engaging with students. They aim to get to every teacher's classroom at least once a week. After the visit, the principal and assistant principal fill out an observation form and email it to the teacher immediately. The form is tied to how teachers are evaluated on standards and follows a praise-polish-questions format. They will also informally pop into classrooms for a quick visit and follow-up with a brief, casual email suggesting new ideas or approaches and offering accolades for improvements or successes.

Thanks to the principal and assistant principals' commitment to serve as true instructional leaders and to the thoughtfulness of their feedback, Sand Creek's teachers do not fear feedback. They know it will always be delivered with care. They know it will always be frequent. And they know it is a key component of being a lifelong learner.

Practice Flat and Collective Leadership

Sand Creek's principal is known for her talent for bringing out the best and the greatest potential in every educator in her school. She does this in large part by decentralizing power and handing great control over to educators. Just as she would not advocate doing to students, she does not tell teachers what they need to do or learn. She responds to what they say they need to do or learn and then acts as a facilitator to provide the resources necessary to make it happen. When she sees a talent in educators, she plants the seed that they eventually share it with others through a formal or informal professional development opportunity. She takes care to repeatedly point out strengths so that everyone on her team gains the confidence needed to share them with others.

The principal also recognizes that, in terms of a school building, the educators are the ones who interact most with students. They are the most equipped to understand and address their needs. When the principal joined the school, she set out to break teachers of their habit of asking her permission to undertake a program or initiative to address student needs. Instead, she trained them to ask themselves if an idea is good for students and trust themselves to know the answer. When they can affirm something is a good idea, they are empowered to find the resources needed to bring it to life, be it from using allotted budget or applying for a grant. When they struggle to find sufficient resources, they are welcome to solicit the principal for support. The school refers to this as “defined autonomy.” With time, they have all grown comfortable with it. Today, Sand Creek is a teacher-led school. All activities come from teachers. All are expected to contribute and encouraged take on leadership roles to turn ideas into action.

Seek and Listen to the “End User’s” Feedback

In a smart business, it is known that every decision and action must be made with the end user—the customer—in mind. Savvy businesses know that customers hold the greatest insights about their products and services. They habitually engage customers for feedback and alter their product or service accordingly to maintain value and relevance to them.

Sand Creek has adapted this classic business approach. On their campus, leaders and teachers routinely seek student feedback. Who is better qualified to explain what it is like to be a learner in the school than students? Sand Creek recognizes that student perceptions are unparalleled in their ability to inform instructional decisions.

In the 2012-2013 school year, when the then-new principal and her team were creating a five-year vision, they asked literacy coaches to follow certain students throughout the school day. The coaches were to get a sense of what the school day looks and feels like through the eyes of students. Through this process, they discovered opportunities to optimize the school day in order to create more fluid learning time. They also were able to spot opportunities to merge discipline-isolated instruction for more rigorous and relevant learning and to fulfill the transdisciplinary IB/PYP requirement.

Thus started the practice of regularly engaging students for their perspectives. At the end of every instructional unit (of which there are six per year), all students select an item from their portfolio. Using it as a reflection tool, they express with their classmates and teachers what they learned. All students also typically fill out a written reflection. As a class, they discuss their collective take on the unit and what they found most and least valuable.

Sand Creek decided to bring this student voice to PLC meetings. Where PLCs typically consist of a variety of staff members exchanging perspectives, they include perspectives of students, as well, at Sand Creek. For kindergarten through second grade, teachers share a summary of their students’ class reflection, which is then recorded in the reflection portion of a running curriculum document. What these students deemed as their most meaningful learning experiences will often drive revisions to curriculum for the following school year. A selection of third, fourth, and fifth graders attend their respective teachers’ PLC meetings to summarize their class’s perspectives. Initially, students came prepared with a written reflection to read. As they became more comfortable participating in PLCs, they began to speak more off-

the-cuff. Teachers readily alter lesson plans based on what students say was most and least effective in advancing learning and comprehension.

Sand Creek teachers say that this process is powerful for everyone involved and they tend to get the most useful information through student feedback. Instead of making decisions for their students, teachers are now making decisions *with* them. At first, teachers were concerned this level of responsibility and the expectation to speak candidly in front of adults would intimidate and overwhelm students. The opposite has happened. The students derive great confidence from the opportunity and feel valued for imparting feedback that shapes instruction. The program has been so successful that the school is currently piloting a similar program with parents.

Use a Truly Learner-Centric Learning Model

At Sand Creek, voice and choice are seen as crucial inroads to a learner-centric education. Participating in PLCs is only one way Sand Creek students are given a voice and agency. All students lead the conference between their parents/guardians and teachers. In advance of each conference, students fill out a self-reflection form that they use to guide the conference. Sand Creek takes this a step farther by providing students with rubrics. With the guidance of the teacher, they identify where on the rubrics they feel they are in progress towards obtaining skills or meeting standards. At the conference, the teacher and student present to parents/guardians the plan they devised together to continue to move the student towards exemplar on each applicable rubric.

Students are given freedom in choosing the work they do. The school recently piloted an “un-homework” approach for third grade students. Like most teacher-initiated ideas at Sand Creek, this practice began to spread to other grades. In an effort to avoid the detrimental effects of giving too much homework to kids, teachers ask them to choose which un-homework assignments they want to complete in a week. While students are given incentives to complete assignments, they always have the choice not to complete any. See Appendix 1 for a letter sent to parents explaining un-homework.

Student choice remains intact during learning tasks in the classroom. During instructional blocks, students evaluate task options on a “Choice Board,” which details various learning options. Within the guidelines set by each teacher, students are empowered to decide in what order they will complete tasks and are expected to self-progress. See Appendix 2 for a Literacy Choice Board, which shows examples of literacy tasks from which students can choose.

Sand Creek students are truly empowered and expected to own their learning. In addition to the voice they have in shaping the instructional side of their learning, they are pervasively given choice in the action and work side of it, as well.

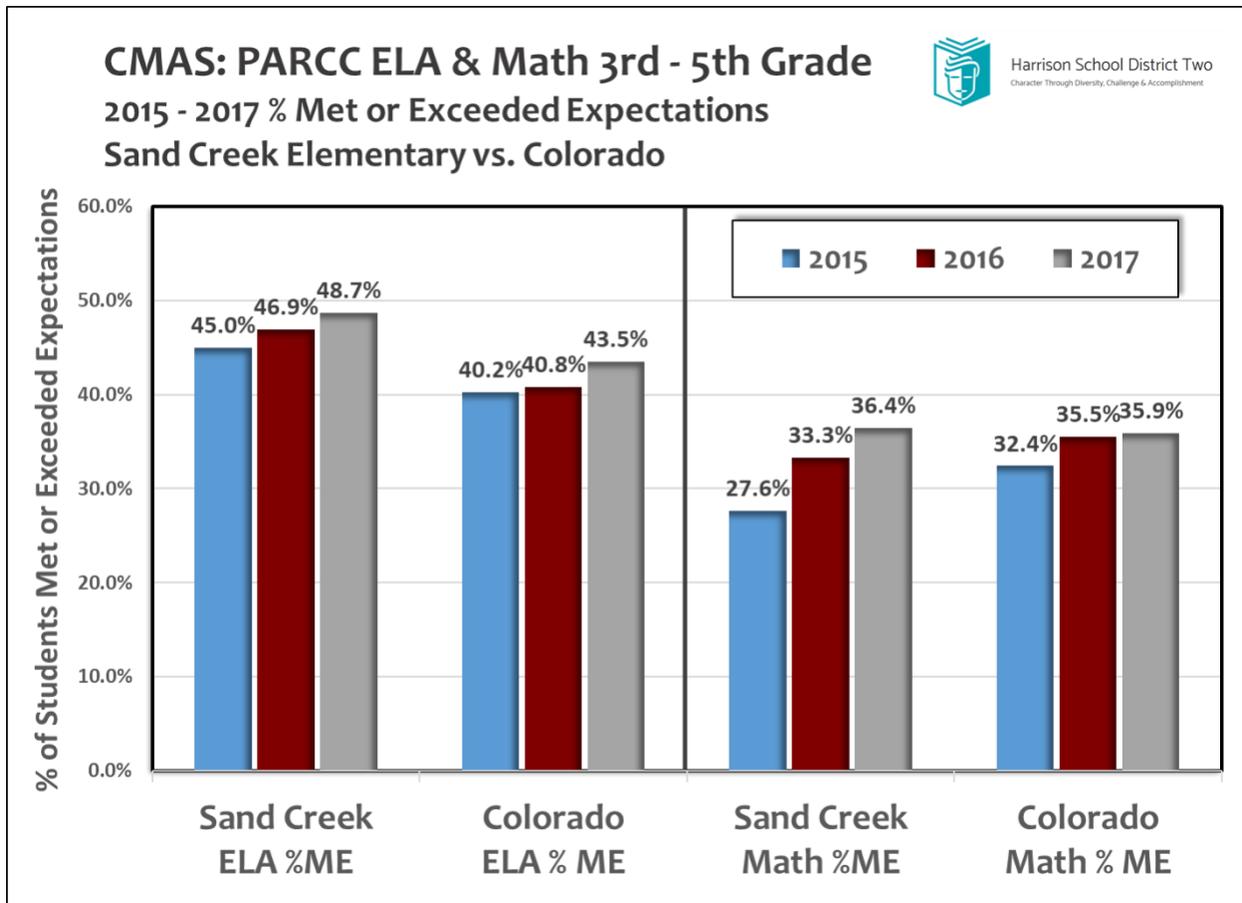
THE IMPACT

Dramatic Student Performance Improvements

The district has continued to give Sand Creek freedom to innovate and direct curriculum—because it’s working. The school has seen a school-wide uptick in student achievement results, routinely showing

growth above the state and district averages. Today, Sand Creek is one of the strongest schools in the district.

Sand Creek’s goal has never been drastic, short-term increases in scores that would likely not prove sustainable. Instead, they have strived for slow and steady progress that aligned with their long term-goals for student success. This is reflected in the following chart showing steady growth in their third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders’ CMAS/PARCC ELA & Math scores from the last three years.



For the last two years, Sand Creek has been given the Centers of Excellence award from the Colorado Department of Education. This is based on longitudinal growth that has been maintained over time for all subgroups of the population in both English Language Arts and Math, as shown in the chart on the following page.

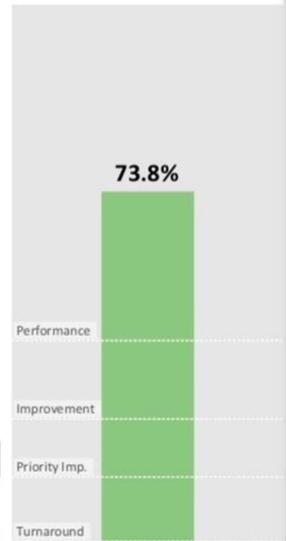
Plan Type Official plan type based on: 1-Year SPF report

Performance Plan: Meets 95% Participation

73.8 / 100

73.8%

The school's official plan type is based on either the 1-year or multi-year framework as indicated in the right hand corner of the black title bar above. Schools are assigned a plan type based on the overall percent of points earned on the official framework. The overall percent of framework points is calculated from the percentage of points earned out of points eligible. The official percent of points earned is matched to the scoring guide to determine the plan type. Failing to meet the accountability participation rate of 95% on two or more assessments will reduce the overall plan type by one level. Please see the scoring guide at the end of this report for additional information.



Indicator Rating Totals

Performance Indicators	% Pts Earned	Weighted Pts Earned/Pts Eligible	Rating
Academic Achievement	72.1%	28.8 / 40	Meets
Academic Growth	75.0%	45 / 60	Meets

The plan type presented above is based on the total percent of framework points earned out of points eligible:

Assurance

	Rating
Accountability Participation Rate	Meets 95%

Performance: at or above 53.0%

Improvement: at or above 42.0%-below 53.0%

Test Participation Rates (Ratings are based on Accountability Participation Rate)

Subject	Total Records	Valid Scores	Participation Rate	Parent Excuses	Accountability Participation Rate**	Rating
English Language Arts	249	249	100.0%	0	100.0%	Meets 95%
Math	250	250	100.0%	0	100.0%	Meets 95%
Science	76	76	100.0%	0	100.0%	Meets 95%

Priority Improvement: at or above 34.0%-below 42.0%

Turnaround: below 34.0%

Insufficient Data: No reportable data or only PWR data

Summary of Plan Types by EMH Level

EMH Level	Performance Indicators	% Pts Earned	Weighted Pts Earned/Pts Eligible	Rating	Weighted % Pts Earned	Rating by EMH Level
Elementary	Academic Achievement	72.1%	28.8 / 40	Meets	73.8%	Performance
	Academic Growth	75.0%	45 / 60	Meets		

To the great credit of everyone in the school, there was no performance dip as the school moved through the IB/PYP process. Additionally, the school has seen a double-digit drop in its mobility rate over the past three years.

Happy, Motivated, and Fulfilled Educators

Teachers love working at Sand Creek. Not only do they feel empowered, respected, heard, and valued, they also believe they are making changes in their students' lives. Teachers are so motivated by the meaning they derive from their work that they are often seen on campus over the weekend, collaborating

with colleagues and putting extra time into offering the best instructional guidance they can. The team socializes together as well. They say that they feel more like family than coworkers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What opportunities and advantages might our students not have due to demographic circumstances? Can we find a way to create these opportunities or advantages for them?
2. Are there any practices we preach to students but do not embody ourselves? Might this be a barrier to earning their full trust? What can we do to remedy this?
3. Could our teachers benefit from more informal and frequent professional development opportunities? Do we do enough to encourage our educators to readily and openly share their strengths with colleagues?
4. Are we missing opportunities to engage students in a feedback process? Do we really know what they think about being a student in our district?

APPENDIX 1: LETTER TO FAMILIES EXPLAINING UN-HOMEWORK

Dear Families,

As our school year begins, I'd like to introduce the homework system that will be in place this year. Research increasingly shows that too much homework in the early grades has negative results. The recommended amount of homework for elementary students is 10 minutes per grade level; however, K-2 students (on average) receive almost 3 times this much! In addition to too much homework, families today have increasingly less time to spend together due to busy work, school, and extracurricular schedules. The homework overload along with the time shortage has proven to result in negative feelings toward school, family and student frustration, and a poor self-image. To combat this growing problem, our classroom will participate in Un-Homework. Un-Homework is a friendly homework alternative that offers the following:

- Student Choice (Un-Homework is not graded or mandatory)
- Incentives (Students are not punished for not doing homework; in fact, they earn chances for reward by choosing to do the work)
- Saved Time (Choices offered are brief, hands-on, explorations that will eliminate frustration and encourage empowered learning!)

For details about this program, please see the following page. If you have questions regarding Un-Homework, please contact me! Thank you! Students will receive 5 choices per week.

1. Students can choose 0-5 choices to complete weekly. Each time a choice is completed, he/she will fill out a raffle ticket along with parent initials.
2. Students will bring in all raffle tickets every Monday to be entered into the Learning Lotto.
3. 4 Winners pulled will roll dice to choose a prize.

APPENDIX 2: EXAMPLE OF LITERACY CHOICE BOARD

The following choice board is from third grade. However, the school provides choice boards for students in all grade levels.

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

<h3>Literacy Choice Board</h3>		
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Buddy Reading</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Choose a partner (one person only) *Read next story in sleuth book *One buddy reads the whole story and then the other (read the same story) *Record date and name of story in workstation notebook *Answer questions in notebook in complete sentences 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Spelling</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Do activities from Spelling TicTacToe *write the week's spelling words from spelling pocket chart in notebook *Choose two activities *Date and label spelling and complete in workstation notebook 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Inquiry (Pink iPads)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Inquire more about our Central Idea *Use the QR codes to inquire about our central idea *Write the central idea in your workstation notebook. Write any thing you learned according to the central idea. *Record date, literacy station, and all information gained
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Independent Reading</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read independently your library book or a book from my library *Read anywhere in the room by yourself *You may quiz on your book on a computer *Record date, book title, and quiz results in workstation notebook *Check out from library (need a sticky note from me and both library books with one quizzed on) 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Skills Practice</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Write the date and skill page title in your notebook *Complete the skill activity from the binder *Record a reflection on how you did *Turn skills page into the inbox 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Study Island/Galileo</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Complete lessons from reading or writing section *You may do game mode *Record date, literacy station, and study island topic you worked on *Always leave one computer open (3 computers for Study Island)
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Reading Fluency</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Pick Reading Passage *Write Date and title of passage in workstation notebook *Read passage and record for a minute *Write number of words read in notebook *Read again and answer questions in notebook *Read one last time while recording for a minute and record words per minute in your notebook 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Record and Listen (Black iPads)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Choose a book and get an iPad (only 2 iPads used for this station at a time) *Record date, title of station, and book title *Record yourself reading the book and then listen back to your reading while following along in the book *Record a positive or something to improve in your fluency 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Mountain Language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Record title of station and date in your notebook. *Complete the whole Mountain Language sheet at the mountain language display area. *Choose one of the numbers and record it in your notebook. *Record in notebook something difficult about this station.

Be on task and prepared to share at anytime with teacher where you are working and what you are working on

Circle what you are doing, cross off when done, once all are completed you may repeat a station, but not until all are COMPLETED

