

By Way of Boulder, by Peg Smith, pegenias@gmail.com

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Public schools in Garfield County have taken some hard knocks the past couple years. It is wonderful to be able to highlight a school success, especially in our own town. Excuse me for bragging a bit on our school's behalf.

Boulder Elementary School (BES) is tiny, by all standards. The building includes three classrooms, each used for specific subject matter; plus a library and a large common room. This building currently houses nine K-6 grade students, seven preschoolers, plus one lead teacher/administrator, and three parateachers.

Boulder Elementary is also the heart of the community, and in the heart of the community, literally and figuratively, even among those of us who don't have kids in the school. In an age where quantity and MORE/BIGGER/LARGER are so touted, BES exemplifies the value and the power of being small and deeply personalized.

Elizabeth Julian, lead teacher, has arranged a unique way of leveraging the benefit of smallness. The school day starts with everyone together at the lunch table in the large room. Each child starts the year with a 180-page spiral notebook. One page, for each school day, contains a learning plan and goals, tailored for each child, but also "spiraling" back to standard curricula. The age groups are divided: 1st and 2nd graders together, 3rd and 4th graders, and 5th and 6th graders. They will work among each other on many projects and subject matter.

Some subjects are conducted as workshops. Each student receives guided instruction with the teacher at their own learning level, and students rotate to different areas for different emphases. For Math, Elizabeth will work at one table with one to four students. After their session with her, the students move off for independent work or for interactive games or other form of instruction that fits the lesson, with the other teachers offering mentoring and guidance on the lesson.

In some of the reading sessions, preschoolers are paired up with elementary students who read to them. Community members are also invited in to assist in reading activities.

The classrooms themselves are lively, colorful, and infinitely attractive. Classroom work is displayed prominently on the walls. A row of neatly-hung lab coats and eye protection adorns one wall of the science room. Computers and display equipment are often in use, and offer a dynamic enhancement to the curricula.

What stands out is how much attention each child gets. This is individualized instruction at its best. Students are gently pushed in their weaker areas through the guided instruction and mentoring. Students who are working below grade level on a given subject, at grade level, or beyond grade level are each accommodated for what they need, at that point. Special teachers provided by the school district augment attention to specific needs. Sharla Poast teaches Special Education at Escalante High, Escalante Elementary, and BES. Heather Weiler is a speech pathologist and oversees the preschool program in the district. Both of these great assets are regularly in Boulder to supplement Elizabeth's program.

Who wouldn't want to go to school here? The teachers are friendly and accessible. The building is inviting. The learning activities are challenging, but fun. Curricula are individualized. The entire outdoors surrounding them offers itself as a classroom (and is used, often, aided by community members who are subject matter experts.)

Parents who would like to enroll their students at Boulder Elementary need only complete an enrollment form, available on the school's website. Applications to work in the school are also available, on the same site. Check <http://bes.garfk12.org/> and click on "About" for a complete description of the school, and check its

Calendar of Events to make sure you don't miss out on the open community activities, which are frequent and awesome.

Last Friday, for example, BES hosted its first "Community Prompts" gathering. For each month through the end of the school year, both students, staff, and community members are invited to submit their response to a prompt. Submissions may be a written piece, artwork, performance, music, single or collaborative, presented to the audience or not. At the end of the year, Elizabeth will compile all submissions into a book for the students. October's prompt was "Two Heads." November's will be "Patterns." (These are also detailed on the website and on pegboard.)

Community members and parents are further encouraged to participate in the monthly (first Thursday of each month) Community Council meetings. These gatherings (with voting members consisting of four parents, one staff member, and Elizabeth) determine 1) how to spend designated SITLA funds, 2) a yearly school improvement plan, and 3) how to engage productively as citizens through digital technology.

Adult education at the school is also on the horizon, to bring more of Boulder's adult community into the school. The school offers a plethora of books and technology, available to the public.

Learning is ongoing, life-giving. Education is a lifelong tool, love, pursuit. The kids of Boulder, and all of us, are lucky to have such vibrant, committed, enthusiastic, and creative teachers in our community.