Welcome to the first edition of the District 49 Dispatch. This newspaper is an important part of our plan to increase communication efforts to the 60 percent of residents in District 49 that don’t have a current, direct connection to our schools.

As a resident, you invest in our students, staff, programs and facilities. We have a job to report to you how we are doing, and how you can communicate with us. Each quarter we’ll do just that on these pages of the District 49 Dispatch. We’ll report on the impacts our educational programs are making on the lives of young people as we prepare to launch them to success after high school. We’ll report on how we are using your financial investment effectively and efficiently. We’ll report on some of the tools we have available to make two-way communication with our community as easy as possible.

Communication takes resources. You’ll notice that a number of local businesses have chosen to support our communication efforts by advertising on these pages. May I suggest, in turn, that you consider supporting them. The Colorado Springs Military Newspaper Group and the Colorado Springs Business Journal believe that education is important. They have chosen to partner with us in bringing the Dispatch to you each quarter. I thank them for their efforts in helping to bring you a quality report on your local schools.

It takes all of us to effectively educate the next generation, and it takes all of us to have a healthy and productive dialogue about the successes our schools are having and the challenges we face.

I hope you enjoy learning a little bit more about the important work happening inside your local schools. Thanks for reading the District 49 Dispatch.

**Students Kiss Summer Break**

**Goodbye As School Begins at RVES**

By Brett Ridgway

Chief Business Officer

In the United States, public education is carried out in all 50 states. This de-facto requirement is further confirmed by the U.S. Constitution. The 14th Amendment requires that all children between the ages of five and twenty-one years, rising in that district without the payment of tuition, be educated gratuitously.

In Article IX of Colorado’s state constitution is titled “Education”, covering both “K-12” and the higher education of a college or university. Article IX establishes the State Board of Education to be the oversight authority, but it also specifically gives control of instruction to local school boards. Article IX also charges the state legislature to “. . . provide for the establishment and maintenance of a thorough and uniform system of free public schools throughout the state, wherein all residents of the state, between the ages of six and twenty-one years, may be educated gratuitously.”

Key in that phrase is, “a system of free public schools”. That system does not relate to buildings as much as it relates to a coordinated set of educational programs to be delivered to students; the physical structures are the responsibility of the local districts throughout the state. This is why local districts come to constituents to provide the funding to construct the physical facilities, state formula funding is to be used for the operation and delivery of the educational program.

That de-facto requirement is further established in the next layer of influence over education below the state constitution, the Colorado Revised Statutes. “Education,” CRS Title 22, details how local districts and schools are established and funded. A primary ideal at the front of Title 22 (CRS 22-1-102(1)) establishes that, “Every public school shall be open for the admission of all children between the ages of five and twenty-one years, residing in that district without the payment of tuition.”

This combination of our state constitution statutes require local school districts to be able to educate residents of their district. That requirement only concerns the program from a technical perspective.

As a practical matter, it must also include the physical structures – having adequate physical buildings and space to educate the resident students of the district. Prior to 2008, school districts were required to allocate a portion of their per-pupil funding (i.e. PPR) for a capital reserve fund. However, when the great recession hit and education funding in Colorado was cut by about 16 percent, more than $1 billion per year, the legislature removed this requirement so that schools could keep educational programs going during
the funding cuts. Unfortunately, those funding cuts continue today through the ‘negative factor’ - the work-around developed by the state legislature to cut about $1 billion each year from constitutionally required education spending.

District 49’s share of the ‘negative factor’ was $20.4 million for the 2015-2016 school year. District 49’s share of the ‘negative factor’ since implementation by the state legislature totals more than $100 million dollars of lost revenue for the education of our local students. As a result of ‘negative factor’ losses, many local schools district’s capital planning has shifted to merely minor maintenance of their physical facilities. This is the new reality. The more than 16 percent of funding that was removed with the ‘negative factor’ is not likely to return unless a statewide tax increase is passed. That strategy was tried with the proposal of Amendment 66 in 2013. The District 49 Bard od Education wisely opposed the $1 billion tax increase; the distribution mechanism behind Amendment 66, also known as SB 13-213, would have increased the funding disparity that already plagues District 49. Residents in District 49 would have ended up paying more in the new income tax than District 49 would have received in the distribution formula.

District 49 leaders continue to believe that taxes each of us pay to support the public good should have appropriate benefit to the school district you live in. The current funding formula, much less than the proposed formula of SB 13-213, have factors designed to penalize District 49 because we do not have the high-visibility demographic factors that the formula’s authors are intending to benefit. The formula also ignores equally deserving demographic factors that District 49 does experience.

District 49 Demographics

Our community has grown quickly since the turn of the century, and today some 17,500 students live in District 49. While some school building space has been added since 2000, the district unfortunately does not have sufficient space to accommodate all of these students. As previously established, the district itself cannot cure that deficiency - only the community members of the district can remedy that by authorizing the assessment and collection of tax streams by the school district, for the purpose of constructing and physically maintaining school facilities adequate enough to actually educate all resident students.

Another important concept impacting District 49 is what Colorado calls ‘choice enrollment’. Choice enrollment exists due to a provision in state statute (CKS 22-36-101) that indicates, “... Every school district . . . shall allow: (b) Commencing with the 1994-95 school year and thereafter, nonresident pupils from other school districts . . . without requiring the nonresident pupils to pay tuition.” Choice enrollment brings approximately 1,400 students into District 49 because of the excellent educational programs we offer. Students attending a District 49 school through choice enrollment do increase the district’s funded student count and annual funding allocation from the state provided for operations.

In total, District 49 needs to accommodate nearly 19,000 students in our schools – this does NOT include the more than 4,000 students enrolled in the various online programs District 49 operates. The current portfolio of buildings that District 49 operates will effectively educate 11,500 students in permanent structures – that is a shortfall of space for 7,500 students! The district does have four, soon to be five, authorized charter schools operating within district boundaries that provide approximately 3,000 seats, bringing the total permanent facility capacity to 14,500 students – still leaving a 4,500 shortfall in capacity.

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EIES Students Gear Up For First Day

By Dustin Senger
Digital Communications Specialist

Roughly 700 students began the school year Aug. 2 at Evans International Elementary School in District 49. As families approached the school during a warm summer morning, teachers and admin-

istrators offered greetings and explained class-

room assignments. Several students swapped summer break stories outside, while others rushed into the building.

As students from preschool to fifth grade filled into classrooms for orientation activities, school administrators and support staff pre-

pared a kick-off assembly in the gymnasium. Kindergarten teacher Rita Morris reads “First Day Jitters” by Julie Danneberg, a story about starting classes at a new school, and making new friends. The story’s surprise ending shows how anyone might catch the jitters about en-

tering a new situation, even teachers.

Immediately after coloring and cutting out “first day of school” crowns and before touring the build-

ing, Morris opened a green two-liter bottle labeled “jitter juice,” a mixture of Hawaiian Punch, 7UP and pineapple juice, and poured a cup for every student. As students finished the juice, one boy rose his hand and said, “Mrs. Morris, it helped take all the butterflies away.” Morris, who has taught kindergarten though third grade, says her focus is on ensuring familiarity with the school grounds and procedures, and then phonetics and word structure. “My goal is to get them all reading, so they’re ready for first grade.”

Continued from page 2

of those issues, and present decision points (i.e. elec-

tion questions) to the constituents for consideration. The community, in turn, has the responsibility to stay abreast of issues in the school district in order to make appropriate, informed decisions on the election ques-
tions presented to them. If the school district’s election plan is prudent, appropriate, and necessary, then it is incumbent upon the community to support the needed funding that will enable programs or facilities to occur for the benefit of students.

Many residents are unaware that many companies developing residential neighborhoods in District 49 go above and beyond what is required to support education in our district. A public benefit, non-profit entity called Falcon Community Builders for Classrooms, has contributed over $5 million to District 49 for assurance in various capital needs. The developers make voluntary contri-
butions to what is essentially a trust fund, managed by the FCBC Board of Directors. The board, with equal representation between District 49 and residential developers, with a final member drawn from among one of the publicly elected individuals from county or city offices in the school district, vote on distributions made to the district.

The voluntary contributions made by developers are typically $1,500 per single family home and $1,000 for a multi-family housing unit. Operating in this way since its inception in 2005, FCBC and its contributors have shown they truly care about District 49 students, residents, and taxpayers. The continue to demonstrate that with their continued efforts today.

Local Support From Property Taxes

How do school district tax assessments of District 49 compare to neighboring school districts? While there can be a basic comparison of total levy rates, the underlying questions (e.g., Is the tax rate appropriate? Do the students have what they need? Are our students equitably funded with neighboring districts?) are much more complicated and not as easy as they may occasion-

ally be portrayed. To truly understand the issue, one must consider:

A mill is one-thousandth of a currency unit. In the United States, one mill is equivalent to one-tenth of a cent, or $0.01. The mill rate is the amount of tax payable per dollar of the assessed value of a property.

A district’s funded student count, 2. A district’s distribution of property types existing within its boundaries, and

3. A district’s abatement rate (i.e. abatement levies, bond levies, override levies)

A majority of the total tax levy assigned by the school district is written in state statute. For example, in District 49, for the 2015 assessment year, the general fund portion of the total levy was 24.459 mills and the abatement portion was 0.217 mills. The general fund amount has been frozen since the School Finance Act of 1994. The abatement levy is formulaic, simply representing the total taxes abated (refunded or reduced) in the prior tax year, applied to all assessed property in the new tax year. Combined, these two components can’t be changed represent ‘unactionable’ mills.

District 49’s general abatement levy is 24.676 mills. D20’s is 27.308 mills and D11’s is 23.694: one higher and one lower than District 49’s. The next question is more appropriate – How much local support is gener-
eted for each student. Applying the mill rates to the total assessed value and student count of each district, shows District 49 students receive $850, D20 students receive $1,989 and D11 students receive $1,402.

While District 49 leaders appreciate being held to a higher standard of efficiency and effectiveness than our competitors, it is fair to recognize that even significant performance variances may make up for 189 percent (D20) and 104 percent (D11) advantages in actionable local support from residents.

Conflicting Tax Policies

There is a lot of complexity and policy conflict present in three of Colorado’s major tax-related dogmas known as:

• Gallagher Amendment
• Taxpayer Bill of Rights [TABOR]
• Amendment 23

These policies are well intentioned, but the conflation of the three (as they are currently written) is a virtual terminal diagnosis for the future financial health of the state of Colorado. Why?

While District 49 leaders appreciate being held to a higher standard of efficiency and effectiveness than our competitors, it is fair to recognize that even significant performance variances may make up for 189 percent (D20) and 104 percent (D11) advantages in actionable local support from residents. Gallagher restricts residential property tax rates – not a bad thing for individual property owners, but a bad thing for education when you consider that the School Finance Act was written with an assumed ratio of 60% state support and 40% local support – and that ratio is now sitting at 70/30 – a 10% swing on a $7 billion dollar state budget.

TABOR is multi-faceted, but one component is trou-

bling regarding state revenue limitations. When state revenues go down, as they did during the great recession, it resets a new maximum revenue total going forward. Unlike we do in our own homes, the state can’t ‘live lean’ during hard times and go back to normal after the crisis has passed. Instead, the ‘living lean’ becomes the new normal. Conceptually that could seem OK, but in reality, that limit isn’t able to be maintained long term.

While this was the full intention of those who wrote TABOR, voters may not have fully understood the repercussions of this portion of the policy. Amendment 23 requires that K-12 education funding in Colorado keeps pace with inflation – a sensible

Continued on page 4

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As a generality, District 49 is a subur-
ban component of the Colorado Springs
metropolitan area. Being outside the in-
dustrial and commercial core of the city
makes our district a wonderful place to
call home. However, that quality-of-life
benefit comes at a cost to our school dis-
trict. The Gallagher Amendment, passed
in 1982, had the intention of keeping the
ratio of residential property values vs.
commercial property values consistent.

This has provided great benefit and re-
lief to residential property owners over
the years, to the point that residential
property is now assessed at less than 1/3
the rate of commercial property. For the
2015 tax year, residential property was
assessed at 8% of retail value, while all
other taxable property types were assessed
at 29% of retail value.

Those assessment rates, when applied to
total taxable property values of a school
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<th>Actionable Mills</th>
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<tr>
<td>District 49</td>
<td>District 20</td>
<td>District 11</td>
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<td>Assessed Mills</td>
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<td>$ Generated Per Student</td>
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<td>Total Local Funding Per Student</td>
<td>$1,537</td>
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end-of-year review of our DIBELS results, said that District 49 was leading Colorado in the rate of improvement for our young learners. They said our improvement efforts were unprecedented and a role model.

- The Colorado State Board of Education recognized District 49 as leading culture change in the state through our implementation of individual career and academic plans for secondary students, a key component of Colorado’s new graduation guidelines.

These specific recognitions, along with numerous requests to present components of our success at state, national, and international conferences on education, all speak to the accomplishments of District 49’s efficiency and effectiveness. We also regularly host visitors from far and wide who want to see our success in innovating and creatively changing public education to better serve our students, families, and residents, in person.

In our American culture, we have the famous idiom of ‘squeezing blood from a turnip’. In the business sector, we know that optimizing efficiency and effectiveness creates growth. Once that optimum level is achieved, only additional investment will drive growth. District 49’s elected and administrative leaders desire to continue to grow and improve. We have spent the last eight years turning the efficiency and effectiveness dials to reach the optimal balance we have today. The next step is investment. In order to improve the educational experience for our students, to improve and increase the school district’s impact on the local economy and property values, to give the students in District 49 every opportunity that neighboring districts give their students – please support the good plans we have for the future.

- • Increased investment by District 49 taxpayers
- • High-level financial efficiency and financial performance by District 49 leaders
- • Excellent learning effectiveness by District 49 educators
- • The challenge of the latter two necessitates is that District 49 recognizes, embraces, and enthusiastically pursues every single day - and the evidence of having successes in efficiency and effectiveness exist and are becoming more and more visible. For example: District 49 was recognized as one of the top three districts in Colorado for financial efficiency by the Center for American Progress. District 49 was recognized by Education Week as one of 25 districts worth visiting in America. District 49 was recognized by Getting Smart as one of 30 districts in the country worth visiting. District 49 was the recipient of the Foot Hills Award from Rocky Mountain Performance Excellence, the regional affiliate of the Malcolm Baldridge National Quality Award program. The literacy experts at the Colorado Department of Education, during their...
Evan Mahon, 17, scheduled to start 12th-grade at Vista Ridge High School, speaks July 27 to hundreds of school administrators and teachers during a District 49 back-to-school event at the Pikes Peak Center in Colorado Springs. "You are the most influential group of workers in this nation, building the future leaders and citizens of the world," Evan said. "How powerful would our world be if we had kids who weren't afraid to take risks, meet new people, think like innovators, know they can change the world, who weren't afraid to think and who all had a champion in their lives?"

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Approximately 1,600 employees from across District 49 attended a back-to-school event July 27 at Pikes Peak Center in Colorado Springs. Some of the most highly praised remarks were delivered by a high school student.

Evan Mahon is preparing to start 12th-grade at Vista Ridge High School. When he took the stage in the auditorium, it was packed with school administrators and teachers, a crowd that extended from the first row facing the stage to the balcony overlooking it.

Under a base camp theme, the event underlined a need to strengthen teams with clear goals and responsive support systems. In between presentations and activities, video clips highlighted the roughly 49 staff members who climbed Pikes Peak on July 18. The climbers described their next phase in life.

"I am honored to have been asked and I am blessed to be able to speak in front of such esteemed and honorable teachers and staff in District 49," said Mahon, holding a microphone and several note cards.

"Hopefully, I can deliver a crescendo for the morning and give you all some inspiration for the upcoming school year," he said.

"District 49 has given me so much and helped me grow and develop and become the leader and student I am today," Mahon said.

"What makes you unique as a district employee? As a teacher? As a principal? As a counselor? We preach to kids all the time about finding their niche and being their own person and not being followers. Are you listening to your own advice? What makes you stand out?"

"Let students leave your class not only with an education but also with life skills they will remember. Put the effort into your class that you want from your students. Go out of your way to talk to that educator that you don't always socialize with."

"Make you and your class be the class everyone looks forward to."}

"Let me tell you one thing: Kids don't learn from teachers they don't like. Go out of your way to help students understand material and make the personal connection. ... You must go out of your way to help students be lifted to the point where they feel confident in themselves to be who they want to be."
District 49 Leads Regional Learning Efforts During Summer Break

By Matt Meister
Director of Communications

“We’re learning new ways that we can engage students in the classroom with updated activities that use technology to get students excited about learning,” said Patty Gioscia, Skyview Middle School assistant principal, at the Colorado Springs GAFE Summit July 20.

Gioscia and educators from across District 49, Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming attended the Ed Tech Team event at Vista Ridge High School. District 49 beat out neighboring Academy School District 20 to host one of three GAFE summits in Colorado each year. More than 55,000 educators attended Ed Tech Team summits in 2015.

Teachers and administrators discover practical strategies for enhancing learning in the classroom through effective technology integration, specifically through the use of Google Apps for Education at the summit.

“Administrators need to model for our teachers what we want them to do with technology in the classroom with our kids,” said Gioscia, who along with a cohort of other educators, attempted to solve a series of clues using a suite of Google apps in a game of breakout.

The scavenger hunt required a team of two-dozen educators to use Google skills to successfully solve a series of clues, while beating the one-hour clock timer. Under a superhero theme, the game required a series of locks to be opened. Clues were presented and solved using multiple Google applications, including drive, calendar, Google Plus and VR.

“There are a number of skills we learned in this game to share with your teachers,” said Crystal Miller, principal of Summit Cove Elementary School in Summit County. “When I do this game with my new teachers, they learn the skills and expectations I have as they come into my building. It’s more effective than watching a YouTube video about making a contact list.”

“You guys did it in less than 45 minutes!” said Sarah Stuhr, fifth-grade teacher at Summit Cove Elementary School.

“It took a lot of us,” said Debbie Cassidy from neighboring Widefield School District 3, “not everybody knows everything, but by working together, we got the clues. We’ve got to share our technology knowledge that way in the classroom.”

“District 49 is leading by being chosen to host the GAFE summits,” said John Litchenberg, District 49 instructional technology specialist. “It says a lot about who we are and where we are going to have been selected to host this important learning opportunity each year.”

On their website, Ed Tech says GAFE summits address important issues teachers face today, including problem-based learning, student motivation and engagement, design thinking and skills students need in today’s workforce. Speakers from as far away as southeast Asia spoke at the summit.

“It isn’t just about the technology,” said Josh Siczewski, Falcon High School assistant principal, “it’s also about real world skills. As problems were solved, everyone got more invested in the game.”

Siczewski and a handful of educators, including Laurie Lane, a fifth grade teacher from Cheyenne, Wyoming in solving the last clue to finally unlock the breakout chest.

“At first we were individuals working on clues and at the end we were working as a team together, said Siczewski.

“I was very impressed with the District 49 website. I applied from out-of-state, and so found the website helpful in preparing myself with the background knowledge about the school community, current projects, and the students. I found the website helpful to find information about Horizon Middle School, where I was eventually hired to work as a seventh grade math teacher.”

— Alex Hurdel, new teacher from South Dakota.

Learn more about the district’s award-winning digital communications initiatives at D49.org/communications.

A black light illuminates a clue during a game of ‘Breakout’ during the Colorado Springs GAFE Summit July 20. Educators from across District 49, Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming attended the Ed Tech Team Google Apps for Education event at Vista Ridge High School. District 49 beat out neighboring Academy School District 20 to host one of three GAFE summits in Colorado each year. More than 55,000 educators attended Ed Tech Team summits in 2015.

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Falcon Zone Students Offer Friendships During Transitions

By Dustin Senger
Digital Communications Specialist

With more than 600 Falcon Zone students transitioning to secondary schools Aug. 2 in District 49, peer support groups gathered the day before to help ease the experiences. New students gathered for orientation activities Aug. 1 in middle and high school gymnasiums. At Falcon High School, two upperclassmen were assigned to one of 30 groups of ninth-graders. The peer leaders took groups of less than a dozen students into the school’s hallways. The upperclassmen had volunteered for Link Crew, a high school transition program developed by The Boomerang Project. The program, relying on school-level coordinators, equips students to help their transitioning peers feel comfortable, so they may feel a need to help others, too.

Link Crew leaders work to discover what might help each transitioning student succeed.

After building tours, various commissions, 12th-graders who had also participated in Link Crew as 11th-graders, led team-building activities. After that, the new students would begin an abridged school day, spending 5 minutes in classrooms and testing 2-minute passing periods.

“I felt like the Link Crew leader I had was helpful for me, so I wanted to give back,” said 12th-grader David Palmer, 17, tossing a miniature football in a classroom. As incoming ninth-graders caught it, he asked them to share something interesting about themselves.

“When they first come into the school, they’re shy — by the end of the day, they feel welcomed,” said David, wearing a Falcon High School football jersey. Several Link leaders wore a parody of the “Jurassic Park” movie logo applying the school’s green and gold colors. They acted as guides to “Falcon Park.”

“It’s helpful to have an older student show us around, and tell us not to be sacred about anything,” said ninth-grader Natalie Stoufflet, 14, explaining how her anxiety was lifted. “For me, I don’t like to be alone — I like to be in a group with other people.”

Twelfth-grader Jessie Yost, 17, led Natalie and several other ninth-graders for a building tour. They navigated the athletics and arts hallways, and explored the band room and counselor center, and then the wings for science, history, math, English and world languages.

“I had an awesome freshman experience, so I just want to start these guys out right,” said Jessie.

Jessie took Natalie and ninth-grader Cassidy Steele, 14, into a room lined with computers and reference manuals.

“Teacher Thomas Russell welcomed the young technology enthusiasts, and encouraged them to join his cybersecurity club’s first huddle of the school year.

Russell, a retired Army sergeant first class, enrolled in a Department of Defense Troops-to-Teachers program to study network security and information systems management, and then complete a master’s degree in education for applied technology.

He started a cybersecurity club so Falcon High School students could compete in the Air Force Association’s CyberPatriot program, the largest cybersecurity competition in the United States. The Hedging club quickly became one of the top CyberPatriot teams in Colorado.

“There are a lot of people here who are friendly to new people,” said Cassidy, after leaving Russell’s classroom. She was looking forward to learning about computer applications and networking, as well as technology literacy.

“This is my favorite class — this is where I feel most at home,” said Jessie, opening a door to a classroom bordered by hospital beds, and A-O-H-S stenciled on the window.

Connie Michaels-Lipp, instructor and program coordinator, explained how to join or support the school’s Academy of Health Sciences.

Michaels-Lipp is also a Pikes Peak Community College nursing adjunct instructor and a CNA coordinator for the college’s Falcon Nurse Aide Program.

“Taking her class is what made me want to pursue a medical career,” said Jessie, routinely praising the career opportunities and passions the academy promotes.

“This has helped me feel more comfortable with the school,” said Cassidy, after a Link Crew commissioner explained culminating activities.

“It feels a lot less intimidating now, less than it did over the summer,” said Cassidy.

Where Everybody Belongs

For eighth-grader Ashleigh Putney, 13, leading a small group had a unique item.

Eighth-grader Ashleigh Putney, 13, explains activities to a group of sixth-graders during orientation activities Aug. 1 at Falcon Middle School in District 49. She was part of the school’s WEB team, a sixth-grade transition program known by an acronym that stands for “Where Everybody Belongs.” Ashleigh wanted to be a WEB leader who focuses on developing meaningful relationships, those that’d last long after the orientation activities ended.

Eight-grader Ashleigh Putney, 13, leads a building tour for a group of ninth-graders during orientation activities Aug. 1 at Falcon High School in District 49. Two upperclassmen were assigned to small groups of incoming ninth-graders. They had volunteered for Link Crew, a high school transition program developed by The Boomerang Project. The program, relying on school-level coordinators, equips students to help their transitioning peers feel comfortable, so they may feel a need to help others, too.

“I had an awesome freshman experience, so I just want to start these guys out right,” said Jessie.

As hands again reached toward the ceiling, she said, “I’m going to help you with that.”

Along with eighth-grader Elias Rogers, she escorted the group on a tour through various academic wings. They strolled with backpacks, water bottles and name tags, along with brightly colored and oversized sunglasses — each group had a unique item.

They entered a classroom, took a seat and discussed passing periods, lockers and attendance policies.

“They’ll cut you some slack because it’s all new to you,” said Elias, 13. “But after a week or two, you need to be able to find your classrooms.”

“A big word for middle school is ‘responsibility,’” said Ashleigh. “In elementary school, you had a teacher lining you up everywhere. Here, you need to take responsibility. If you show responsibility and respect, then even the older kids will look up to you.”

“Be the example that others want to follow,” she said.

“You guys sounds like you’re getting this down good,” said Ashleigh. “I think you’re going to do great at your new school.”
Defining Our Journey In District 49

By Peter Hilts
Chief Education Officer

Faint grey and pale yellow colors the eastern sky as 49 climbers from across the district gathered on July 18. Before dawn exploded color on the horizon, teams boarded buses, arrived at the trailhead and set off on a 13-mile hike up Pikes Peak. By the time the sun was fully up, the leading teams were pushing in to Barr Camp and preparing for the march to tree line. Some teams arrived by noon, while others adjusted their pace and kept climbing until late afternoon. Each team kept a different schedule and every climber had a personal strategy, but 49 climbers stepped onto the trail in the morning and 49 climbers stepped onto the summit by the end of the day.

The teachers, administrators, support staff, maintenance leads and operations experts who tackled Pikes Peak were there to represent the commitment and effort we are making in District 49. After several years of excellent board leadership and improving results across the board, our district is positioned to make a climb to excellence. Our innovation efforts are maturing; our schools and zones are expanding programs, and our staff members are increasingly delivering the effective and efficient services our community expects. Our vision is for District 49 to be the best choice, and our mission is to learn, work, and lead relentlessly until our vision becomes reality. We firmly believe that delivering excellent results in our community will result in fulfilling our vision and mission.

But inspiration will not be enough. We are redoubling our efforts to live by our cultural compass, treating each other with respect, care, accountability and transparency while we treat our work with creativity, innovation, learning and strategic purpose. These eight characteristics are the culture that defines us and has consistently attracted high-performing veterans and high-promise newcomers to our district. Having just completed one of the most successful hiring seasons in our history, we have fresh energy and new teammates to serve our growing community.

The work we will do together is as difficult as climbing Pikes Peak, but a lot more rewarding. By focusing on our five strategic priorities, we will make sure our efforts to improve are aligned to each other and serve our community. 1) By demonstrating transparency and honesty, we aim to maintain the trust we’re earning from our community. 2) By inviting leaders and citizens into our schools and onto our advisory teams, we fulfill our strategic purpose. These eight characteristics are the culture that defines us and has consistently attracted high-performing veterans and high-promise newcomers to our district. Having just completed one of the most successful hiring seasons in our history, we have fresh energy and new teammates to serve our growing community.

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4) By continuing our efforts to improve primary literacy, we are building the firm foundations that our students need and their parents expect. Although we have room to keep improving, our elementary educators received the highest praise from our state department of education when they observed that D49’s system is delivering improvements well above the average. They even told our board that the pace of improvement in District 49 is an example for the rest of Colorado. And finally, 5) by expanding our system of individual success plans for all secondary students, we fulfill our commitment to launch every student to success. Whether they keep learning in college, begin serving in our military, answer a call to ministry, start and lead a family, or begin contributing in the workforce, we want the graduates of District 49 to have the same level of success our climbers had on Pikes Peak.

It is incredibly gratifying to be part of a district where excellence is more than a buzzword. It’s a commitment. We know our students and staff have the capacity to climb together and become a role model district. Our commitment is to equip and encourage the entire family of District 49 so that we can all step onto the summit of top tier performance. Just as 49 climbers did in the middle of July, we will keep the peak in view, focus on our goal and get to the summit for our students. It’s a big mountain we want to climb, but we have a great vision and growing capacity to reach the peak. We invite you to step on the trail and start ascending as we take our students to the peak of performance.