

Elementary School Curricular Philosophy

At Community School of Davidson, our goal is to create an innovative, inspiring school to serve families in our community. We are concerned with the total development of each student and believe that it is our responsibility to address the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of all our students throughout each school day. This holistic approach to educating our students is designed to help them develop into healthy and well-rounded individuals who enjoy life and learning.

The elementary school curriculum reflects our mission belief that every child can and will succeed in ways that reflect his or her own aptitudes and interests. This is how we do it:

Integrated Thematic Units

At CSD, our students become well informed, lifelong learners. Each grade level passes through several integrated thematic units of study which are all part of a meaningful, global, year-long theme. These themes are based on the Core Commonalities from Dr. Ernest L. Boyer's educational program "[The Basic School](#)."

Reading

At Community School of Davidson, literacy is the first and most essential goal. All students are expected to become proficient in the written and spoken word. Language at CSD is defined broadly to include words, numbers, and the arts. We consider all of these to be critical areas of development for students to be truly communicative, and we expect our students to have a deep understanding of all three areas. Language is the means by which all other subjects are pursued.

Reading instruction in elementary school is one of the biggest concerns for both parents and educators. Success in reading is directly related to later success and achievement in life. At Community School of Davidson, we adhere to a balanced literacy approach which focuses on reading for meaning. We incorporate the five major areas of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, explicit phonics instruction, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension) into our balanced literacy program. We teach students strategies to decode unfamiliar words, such as using phonemic and phonetic awareness – how does the letter sound by itself or in combination with other letters, or semantic and syntax awareness – what does the word mean and does it make sense in the sentence. Our reading instruction is heavily influenced by the work done by Marie Clay in relation to the [Reading Recovery](#) instructional program.

Emergent and beginning readers spend time in guided groups where they receive direct reading instruction while using texts that are appropriate for their level. They

also spend time working on phonics skills with the [Making Words](#) model developed by Pat Cunningham. This model focuses on word chunks (-ick, -ock, -ain), word patterns, and the blending of sounds. Students spend time on systematized phonics rules in short mini-lessons and then transfer and apply these newly learned skills to their reading and writing.

We use a set of approximately 70 phonograms, based on the phonetic work of [Romalda Spalding](#), to address spelling and the complex system of letter/sound rules in the English language. By studying the way these phonograms are used, students gain a deeper understanding of common patterns that will assist them in determining the spelling of unfamiliar words. Although all students work on similar spelling/word/phonogram activities, we also use an individualized spelling program that provides students with words specifically chosen for them each week. We incorporate word walls into all of our classrooms, beginning in kindergarten, to quickly imprint the correct spellings of high frequency words for our students.

Reading instruction is not just limited to a short block of time, but is also incorporated throughout the day across the curriculum. As a result, students become exposed to a variety of genres of literature, such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry and songs.

Writing

At Community School of Davidson, writing is viewed as the counterpart to reading and is woven through the entire curriculum. "...writing is an act of both discipline *and* discovery, one that allows children to be wondrously self-expressive while teaching clear thinking, too....Every day, children are expected to write, write, write." (Boyer)¹ There is an emphasis on the writing process throughout our elementary program which includes brainstorming, drafting, editing, revising and publishing. Students experience extensive mini craft lessons to stimulate growth in the very complex act of writing.

¹Ernest L. Boyer, *The Basic School – A Community for Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1995), 71.

Mathematics

Community School of Davidson utilizes the CAMMP mathematics program developed by leading elementary education experts from the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. CAMMP is an acronym for "Comprehensively Applied Manipulative Mathematics Program" and provides a framework for CSD to present math in a fun and meaningful manner. CAMMP emphasizes learning through hands-on manipulatives and problem solving. The CAMMP approach integrates five essential learning processes: (1) problem solving, (2) reasoning and proof, (3) connections, (4)

communication, and (5) representation. Our approach to math instruction is based on a *diagnose and prescribe* technique: we actively study what developmental level a student operates from for a given math objective and then prescribe the correct math instruction and manipulatives to assist the student in his/her learning for that math objective.

Other essential components of the CAMMP approach center on teacher behaviors and include the following:

- Math objectives taken from North Carolina's Standard Course of Study
- Small, developmentally appropriate instructional groups
- Developmentally appropriate math manipulatives (concrete, representational, transitional, symbolic)
- Math software introduced first at the representational level and continued upward through manipulative levels
- Putting problem solving in context for teaching and learning mathematics
- Calculators and computer software incorporated into math instruction (at the representational level)
- Estimation (reasonableness) and checking solution for accuracy
- Student assessment checklist to track growth and adjust instruction
- Pacing guides for sequencing and timing mathematics instruction throughout the academic year

Handwriting

Community School of Davidson uses the widely acclaimed writing program [Handwriting Without Tears®](#) (HWT). This program was founded and created by Jan Z. Olsen, an occupational therapist, and is perfectly developed for young learners. The curriculum in the program places emphasis on teaching the readiness skills necessary to ensure handwriting success. The HWT teaching method was also developed to have as few opportunities for letter reversals (the most common early writer mistake) as possible for the students, and as a result, makes handwriting easier and less frustrating for you children to learn. We use HWT curriculum for both printing and cursive instruction.

The Arts

At Community School of Davidson, we feel strongly about incorporating the arts into everyday activities. The following quote is a cornerstone of our philosophy, “Art, too, is a universal language – perhaps the most evocative form of human expression. Through singing and painting and dancing, it is possible for people of different backgrounds to communicate powerfully their feelings and ideas...For young children, art in *not* a frill; it is an essential language that makes it possible to communicate feelings and ideas words cannot express.” (Boyer)²

We weave the arts, both visual and performing, throughout our entire curriculum at

CSD, giving the students the opportunity to explore and respond to content through aesthetic experiences. We focus on art history, art appreciation, and art making. In addition, students in every grade level create and participate in various classroom performances, incorporating dialog, song and movement. These extensive age appropriate experiences with dramatic presentations help build a strong respect for the art and certainly enrich our students' lives.

²Ernest L. Boyer, *The Basic School – A Community for Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1995), 76-77.

Foreign Language

Community School of Davidson understands the importance and benefits of foreign language instruction at early ages. Therefore, we have incorporated Spanish instruction into our curriculum, beginning in kindergarten. Each class, kindergarten through fifth grade, receives one formal session of Spanish instruction per week for an entire semester. Sign Language, a beautiful visual language in itself, is taught once per week during the other semester.

Technology

Community School of Davidson is aware that this is the age of technology and that many students come to school as kindergarteners already very computer savvy! Each classroom has one dedicated Internet-connected computer with printer, and teachers can also utilize mobile laptop centers, which can turn any classroom into a computer lab. As students grow and develop, they will be taught fundamental computer skills, such as keyboarding and word processing, and students in upper grades will learn to use the Internet as a research tool. We are also committed to teaching students the responsibilities that go along with using the various technological resources available to them and expect the students to show their understanding by their actions.

Even though we put great value into providing technology for our students, we still feel that the most essential resource for learning is the *teacher*. “Television can take students to the moon and videotapes transport them to the bottom of the sea. Calculators can solve problems faster than the human brain. Computers can instantly retrieve millions of information bits and connect teachers and students to classrooms all around the world. Word processors can help children write and edit. But there are times when the switches should be turned off. Technology cannot make value judgments. It cannot make students wise or able to distinguish the beautiful from the vulgar. For this we need *teachers*, not computers.” (Boyer)³

³Ernest L. Boyer, *The Basic School – A Community for Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1995), 148.

A Commitment to Character

At Community School of Davidson, we are just as concerned with the ethical and moral dimensions of a student's life as we are with the academic dimension. One of the building blocks of our philosophy, A Commitment to Character, considers how the school experience shapes the ethical and moral lives of children: "The goal [of the school] is to assure that all students, on leaving our school, will have developed a keen sense of personal and civic responsibility. Seven core virtues (respect, compassion, honesty, responsibility, kindness, self-discipline, giving and perseverance) are emphasized as we promote excellence in living, as well as learning. These core virtues are taught both by word and deed. Through curriculum, through the school climate, and through service, students are encouraged to apply the lessons of the classroom to the world around them.....they will have discovered that what they learn in school really does make a difference in their lives, that it will touch their deeper selves and help them become more knowledgeable, responsible human beings." (Boyer)⁴

Virtues take on meaning when they are lived. CSD is also committed to developing relationships across the generations. For too long, our society has separated the generations and created a horizontal culture. We strive to bring senior citizens into our school on a regular basis and we also reach out to the seniors in the community. As part of our service learning, each class will visit a nursing home/retirement facility once a month. Students will participate in a variety of art, music and learning activities with the senior community. We want our students to not only learn from these wonderful people who bring so much from the past, but to also experience the joy of giving back to the community and its older generation.

⁴ Ernest L. Boyer, *The Basic School – A Community for Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1995), 11, 185.

Individualized Instruction and Differentiation

Individualized instruction means meeting the needs of individual learners as they move along their learning journey. This does not mean a 'one-to-one' teacher/student ratio, but rather a way of viewing each student as a unique human being with distinct and specific learning needs. Research indicates that people differ as learners, and in order to address the varied needs of each individual learner at CSD, teachers use the method of differentiation as a means of teaching essential content. Differentiation is a student-centered instructional approach where teachers study and assess their students' learning needs and adapt instruction accordingly.

Through differentiation, teachers are able to attend to individual students' differences in readiness, interest, and their overall learning profile, which results in the ability to connect more effectively with each student. Teachers achieve this by implementing a wide variety of instructional techniques to enhance the overall learning environment.

Key principles of differentiation in the classroom are rooted in the teachers' responsibility to: create a classroom community, utilize high-quality curriculum, offer relevant and meaningful tasks for all students, and use on-going assessments to formulate instruction plans. Through these differentiation methods, students are allowed and encouraged to take greater responsibility for ownership of their learning and as multiple pathways to learning are established, the possibility that all students will experience success and reach their full potential as learners is maximized.

Hands-On Learning

At Community School of Davidson, we believe that students learn best when they gain knowledge through exploration and active learning. We do not rely on text books and lectures to teach content. We do engage students in meaningful, hands-on, real-life experiences that challenge them to think and explain their reasoning instead of memorizing and reciting facts. After these hands-on activities, students use the data they've collected to construct their own personalized "text book" to use as a resource and study guide for the remainder of the school year.

Hands-on learning allows students to make connections among and between the different disciplines, thereby enabling them to formulate deep, conceptual understandings of over-arching themes and concepts within our world. As a result of this type of learning, passions are ignited and student motivation soars. Students fulfill their brain's innate desire to make meaning of information, while also learning how to think critically about the learning process, as well as the experiences.

Assessment and Testing

At Community School of Davidson, on-going assessment constantly drives instruction, enabling teachers to individualize instruction and promote student learning at the highest level. All assessments are authentic in nature, meaning that students do not "prepare" for a test only to forget the material immediately after. Rather, assessment is used as a tool to inform and guide teachers as they make instructional decisions.

CSD teachers utilize a variety of assessment techniques in order to cover the various domains of learning. Therefore, assessments take on many forms, including performance-based tasks, teacher anecdotal notes based on oral discussions and/or written responses, cooperative group work, portfolios, and also, the more traditional paper-and-pencil "tests."

Along with administering high-quality assessments that target the "whys" and "hows" not just the "whats", teachers promote student ownership of their learning by continuously providing specific feedback to students. By working together as partners in the teaching and learning process, teachers stay informed of their students' learning, and students feel empowered and motivated to reach their full potential as learners.

As a public charter school in North Carolina, CSD follow the [NC Standard Course of Study](#) (SCOS). Our students take End-of-Grade (EOG) tests beginning in Grade 3. While we acknowledge standardized test-taking as a component of our balanced assessment program, we do not teach to the test. Rather, we engage the students in meaningful hands-on experiences linked directly to the curriculum all year long, and then six weeks before the EOG tests, we teach our students test-taking strategies and skills in order to promote their best performance on this particular mode of assessment. All in all, our assessment program is about balance; parents and students can expect to see a variety of assessment techniques utilized with specific feedback given to maximize the learning potential of each individual student.

Report Cards and Conferences

At Community School of Davidson, we do not give traditional letter grades in elementary and middle school. We do, however, use the results of the variety of on-going assessments to determine where students are on the journey to mastery of content for their grade level. Our report cards include meaningful and authentic information, detailing a student's academic growth and development. Report cards are issued three times a year, October, February, and May.

Parent/Teacher conferences are wonderful opportunities for sharing and receiving information about your student. The Parent/Teacher Covenant Conference takes place in August and is a chance for parents to share information about their child to the teacher, and the teacher can share goals and expectations. This mutual sharing allows both parties to understand, from the very beginning, that a partnership is being formed in the education of the student. Parent/Teacher conferences are held in October, February, and May.