

DPS schools: time to choose

■ by **Basha Cohen**

As a new decade dawns, it seems a worthy resolution to stop all of the flap and furor that Northwest Denver's middle school crisis incites. Through all the politics and posturing, the most important element of the story is missed: the education of our children. It is time to leverage the strength of our diverse community, and the common goal that is shared amongst all families in the Lake and Skinner boundaries, a desire for a quality education in our neighborhood.

This month marks a critical time for all families to make a choice if they live within the Lake Boundary, in particular as the redesigned Lake Middle School facility becomes a shared campus, housing the Lake International (IB) School and West Denver Prep. These two schools will operate independently from one another, with separate principals, faculties and classroom space.

In a typical neighborhood school program, all students that reside within the school's boundaries are guaranteed a spot. Due to the co-location plan at Lake, students must now declare their intention for participation in either Lake International School's IB program or West Denver Prep. The two programs share one goal, to

prepare students for a college preparatory high school education, with a curriculum that meets all Colorado State requirements. That said, the approach to education is extremely different with both models and deserves research in order to select the program that best suits each family. In a true spirit of cooperation, and a genuine belief that "we need to heal the neighborhood," Amy Highsmith, Lake's newly appointed principal, and Chris Gibbons, Director of West Denver Prep, will be holding joint "Lake Information Sessions" throughout the month of January to help parents and students make more informed choices.

Like all of the Denver Public Schools, Lake-boundary students may choose to attend any school in the district through the School of Choice process occurring this month, but the paperwork requirements are different and will be distributed in classes during the first week of January. All fifth graders in the Lake boundaries, which include elementary students from Brown, Colfax, Cowell, Cheletenham, Eagleton, Fairview and Newlon will receive a "Lake Area 6th Grade Student Intent Form 2010/2011 School Year". These forms must be filled out by January 29, 2010 in order to secure a slot in either the IB or WDP program. If a family does not fill out this

required application, students will be randomly assigned to either Lake IB or West Denver Prep, based on remaining space available.

The first in a series, "Time to Choose" focuses on the reinvention of Lake International School, the International Baccalaureate (IB) model and their new principal, Amy Highsmith. Because there are so many aspects of learning to consider, it is critical to understand the basic premise of the International Baccalaureate Organization. The official mission statement proclaims, "The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understand and respect. To this end the organization works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment. These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right." Northwest Denver's diverse population mirrors this philosophy, and makes Lake International

Highsmith brings IB experience

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School a perfect choice for many children's social, emotional and intellectual education.

It is not "Kumbaya." Lake International School specifically supports all Colorado State standard requirements for middle school education. The Lake IB curriculum offers inter-disciplinary instruction in eight subject areas: English, Humanities (Geography and History), Technology, Mathematics, Arts, Sciences, Physical Education and Spanish. This well-rounded approach ensures that students integrate learning and build skills in multiple disciplines. IB places emphasis on problem solving and experiencing as opposed to rote memorization of facts and figures. It places a premium on understanding how to succeed in our increasingly global world. It helps students forge connections between classroom experiences and real-world applications.

Amy Highsmith is young, ambitious and smart. She comes to the helm at Lake with a credible curriculum vitae for a school that has floundered despite its IB status. When Highsmith chose a profession in education, she specifically wanted the challenge of working in a diversified community. She both lives in and has taught in the DPS school system in our neighborhood. She also has the advantage of international experience teaching the IB program at the American School Foundation in Mexico. There she served in a leadership role in curriculum development, and taught American studies of a bilingual program to linguistically diverse students.

This unique experience paved the way toward her position at Brown International Academy's IB program. Suzanne Loughran, principal, hired Highsmith as a fifth grade teacher, and ultimately promoted her to "International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme Coordinator," a role that is greatly credited with part of Brown's success. Under the leadership of Loughran, Brown has gained a virtual cult status in and beyond the neighborhood boundaries. In a recent Highland Mommies posting weighing the pros and cons of local elementary schools, Brown's IB program continued to get high neighborhood marks with comments like, "We liked the international perspective and how it is intertwined throughout each unit of inquiry. For example, in kindergarten, when they were learning about routines, they learned about different family routines around the world. I like the real-life approach to learning and problem solving – start with the goal or end in mind and work backwards to determine the steps to get there."

Highsmith understands and authors these types of curriculums. International IB experience and local hands-on knowledge, provide Ms. Highsmith with an advantage to navigate the choppy waters "Sometimes I think it's an undertow," Highsmith gently quips, in Northwest Denver's Middle School storm. Highsmith is pragmatic and understands the challenges ahead. She also knows what it takes to redesign a school and its programs, and that it is not just one thing that makes a school great. Upon reflection of Brown's success, she states, "Being part of a successful redesign is looking at the overall package. The school needs to be like a home, welcoming and safe. Parents need to be informed and involved about how their child is learning, and teachers need to be responsive to student's needs. Showing consistent growth is the key. IB philosophy is all about the journey. At Brown we are on that journey, but you never really get there. You need to take each success to the next level, to be reflective about what is working and what is not, and continue to evolve the curriculum based on these learnings."

When asked about her lack of experience as a principal, Highsmith accepts that some in the community may remain skeptical, but believes, "The true benefit that I bring to this role is a complete passion and understanding of the IB philosophy, and what it means to educate and support kids in this manner. Lessons founded in the IB philosophy must have transparency showing how a lesson relates to other world subjects, with an explicit explanation of why it is important. Stating end goals up front allows students to buy-in to the learning process."

One of the leading questions is what changes are being implemented in the IB Programme at Lake for the 2010/11 school year? Lake's redesign will focus on strategically implementing the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP.) Highsmith will establish more rigorous course outlines that support Colorado curriculum standards and the IB models. To help her implement these crucial changes, she will hire a full time IB coordinator. This leader will monitor and modify course content, support teachers and assist in developing student-learning interventions. Professional development is a key tenet of Ms. Highsmith's strategic plan. Teacher training will be provided on an ongoing basis and ensure proper implementation of IB requirements. Beginning next year, students will be monitored regularly to ensure they are on track academically. Ongoing assessment and progress monitoring under the federally mandated Response to Intervention (RtI) model will ensure that all students are meeting state standards. Should a student require additional help in a core discipline such as Reading or Math, they will be teamed with appropriate student groupings to ensure that they are getting focused attention. These groupings are fluid and flexible, allowing student movement to the next level as their learning meets requirement standards.

Part of Highsmith's current role at Brown is to spearhead the assessment process. Teams meet on a regular basis to review data testing and implement strategies to improve each student's performance. Students are grouped together based on skill levels to promote learning at the pace of the student. Supporting this theory another Highland Mommy wrote, "I was interested in the G&T program at Edison until I discovered that Brown does something I think is better - for reading and math the kids are shifted into different groups according to their ability. So a first grader may be in a group with second and third graders, every day. And other kids from the same first grade class may be in a group with first graders from the other first grade classes. What I like about this vs. G&T is that the kids are constantly being assessed & shifted between groups, there is no 'labeling' of kids as gifted or remedial or whatever."

Her experience at Brown leading assessment teams will have practical application at Lake. Highsmith says, "Of course I support and advocate for students to accelerate to their highest potential. We have to evaluate where students are as they enter Lake in order to create a course structure that meets their needs. I see 8th grade Algebra as a must to offer students that are ready for that level of math. We have to meet student needs in 6th grade on both ends of the spectrum. I am equally committed to struggling students achieving below proficiency as I am to those who require advanced classes to reach their potential."

Highsmith acknowledges that just like Brown, this is a major overhaul. "Much work has to be done to achieve success for our diverse student population. We fully intend on showing statistical strength and

Information sessions for Lake IB and West Denver Prep

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improvement next year. Over the next three years, we will focus on creating a structure that supports the needs of ALL students. This new structure will begin with sixth grade progress monitoring and grouping students appropriately in core academic classes, and will rapidly evolve as I engage with parents, students and teachers to create the final academic platforms.” She is lucky enough to already have a very active team of parents from Brown who are helping to build strategies for Lake’s success. They are looking for partnerships with the current Lake parent community, and any other volunteers who wish to join the effort to “Make Lake Great.” If you are interested contact Hi Howard at highhow@mindspring.com.

Ms. Highsmith will be working side-by-side with the long time Vice Principal, Elza Guajardo, who leads the 7th and 8th grade IB program. They will capitalize on funding that the Federal turnaround strategy dollars will provide, and all grades will benefit from the new role of an IB coordinator. “I have a tremendous amount of respect for Elza Guajardo and we are already working closely together to ensure success

at all grade levels. She is the ‘home away from home’ for many of our families. She ensures that the community’s voice is retained during our reinvention process.”

Highsmith has her work cut out for her, but her refreshing candor, and lack of political agenda, gives hope that the New Year at Lake International School will truly have a fresh start under her watchful and resolute eye.

For more information about Lake International School and West Denver Prep attend one of the following community information meetings:

***Lake Campus
1820 Lowell Boulevard
6:00-7:30 p.m.
Tuesday, January 12, 2010
Wednesday, January 20, 2010
Tuesday, January 26, 2010***

For more information on either school, or the Student Intent Form process, please contact Choice Liaison Oliva Amarao at oliva_amaro@dpsk12.org or call (720) 423-3080.