

Boulder Valley Schools Top 100

BY SARAH L. STEWART

Last year, only one town in Colorado earned a spot on the list of the 100 Best Communities for Young People, as determined by the non-profit America's Promise Alliance: That's right, Lafayette.

A big part of that honor, which recognizes community-wide efforts to improve the well-being of young people, is the strength of Lafayette's school system, the Boulder Valley School District. Encompassing nearly 500 square miles and 28,000 students, Boulder Valley Schools boasts the eighth largest enrollment in the state. From Nederland to Boulder to Lafayette, the district represents a broad cross-section of Coloradans.

"It is a challenge to make the district feel connected in all of those different communities," says Briggs Gamblin, director of communications and legislative policy for the district.

Although the district routinely ranks among the top three Front Range school districts, it isn't willing to rest on its laurels. With three five-year goals in place – to improve overall achievement, to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers, and to improve the relationships between adults and students within the schools – the district is striving to become even better.

"It's a good way to check in," Gamblin says. "We're making progress."

QUALITY FOR ALL

The biggest challenge facing Boulder Valley Schools is the achievement gap, Gamblin says. On average, lower-income students perform much worse by standardized measures than their more affluent counterparts – a problem shared by school districts throughout the state and the nation.

"You can't make excuses," Gamblin says. "You have to educate all kids."

This commitment to constant improvement for all students is part of what makes Boulder Valley Schools a



Ryan Elementary students and parents participate in the "Celebrate Lafayette" parade, October 4, 2008.



Students and parents from Lafayette Elementary participating in the "Celebrate Lafayette" parade, October 4, 2008.

standout among neighboring districts. Realtors have told Gamblin that there often is a difference of several thousand dollars in the price of identical properties within the same housing development – the only discrepancy being that the more expensive property is zoned within the Boulder Valley School District, while the less expensive lies across the line for a neighboring district.

Considering some of the opportunities available to Boulder Valley students, that's no surprise. Peak to Peak Charter School in Lafayette has made U.S. News & World Report's list of the nation's "Top 100 High Schools" for two years in a row. And throughout the district, children of all ages can focus their studies on language, math and science – and even pre-engineering at Centaurus High School in Lafayette.

A TRUE COMMUNITY

Within an already notable district, Lafayette schools have the added benefit of a community that supports education.

Dr. Holly Hultgren, principal of Lafayette Elementary School, has been a principal in the district for more than 20 years, at Nederland Elementary and Superior Elementary prior to arriving at Lafayette four years ago. Hultgren, who was named 2008 Colorado National Distinguished Principal of the Year, lauds Lafayette for the city's dedication to its children.

"There's a wonderful sense within the Lafayette community of 'We are a community,'" she says. "It's a great place for families with children."

Even residents without children have forged a connection with the Lafayette schools, from senior citizens reading to elementary-aged children to businesses supporting school fundraisers and festivals. The community has even pulled together to help improve overall test scores within Lafayette schools in recent years, Gamblin says.

"There's a real passion for that," he says. "There is that wonderful feeling that the whole community is responsible for the success of the kids."

For Hultgren, that's a testament to the quality of the district's residents.

"I think it's a highly educated, highly involved and highly committed population," she says. "I think they know how important education is. They know it is the great open door to opportunity."