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## 1. History

Chugach Optional Elementary School opened its doors in September of 1973. A

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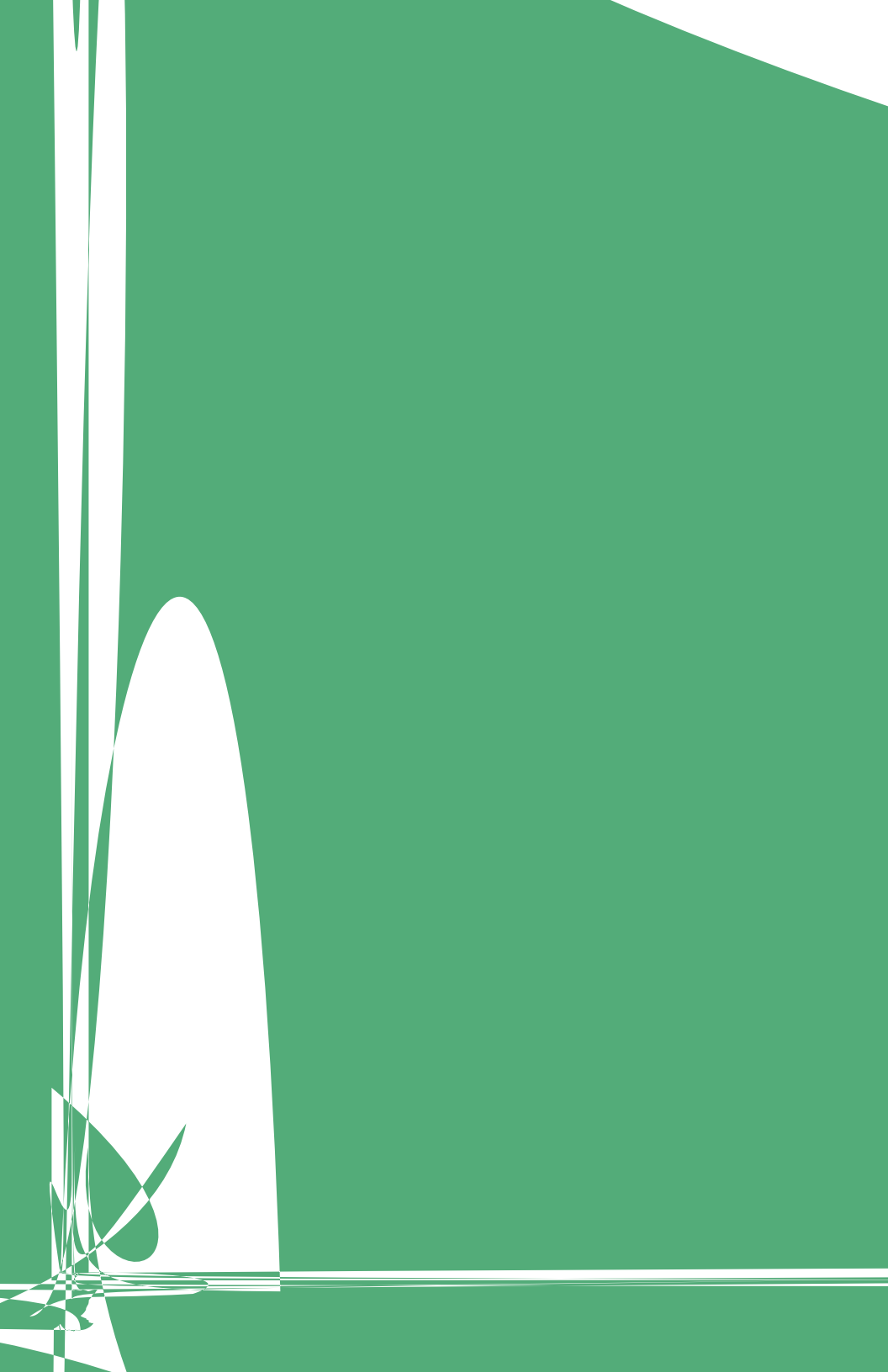
In short, our learning environment is dependent on a strong community of involved families.

We encourage family members to seek out ways to get involved In Chugach Optional and to discover volunteer opportunities which match their skills, interests and schedule.

### *Participating at Chugach Optional*

- **Working in the Classroom**—From kindergarten on, there are opportunities to work directly in the classroom with students. Some examples include providing a listening ear to budding readers, helping as a spelling coach, helping students practice math concepts, assisting in the computer lab, leading student book clubs, acting as the classroom photographer and coaching students in Writer's Workshop. Other in-class ways to help include chaperoning field trips, planning class celebrations, helping with student publications and distributing mail. Some family members might help briefly in the classroom several times a week while other families might dedicate longer blocks of time but less frequently.
- **Helping Teachers in the Workroom**—Volunteering "behind the scenes" in the parent-teacher workroom provides vital support to teachers. Some tasks include sharpening pencils, cutting shapes, photocopying materials, helping decorate classrooms for **theme studies**, displaying student work on classroom and hallway walls and laminating art projects. Each completed task, small or large, supports the flow of daily learning activities.
- **Completing At-Home Tasks**—Some families find it easier to help out with tasks that can be completed at home. Some examples of this include gathering materials for classroom projects, correcting math activity books, preparing materials for classroom activities, helping with sewing projects, washing napkins, compiling Scholastic book orders, building carpentry projects and editing the school Memory Book.
- **Help with Schoolwide Events and Activities**—There are a number of ways to get involved in efforts that benefit the entire school. Some examples include the following:
  - Organize or participate in schoolwide events such as **Art Night**, **Spring Festival**, the **Halloween Carnival**, school dances and **Science Share**.
  - Help with **Supplies**, **Workshops**, **Mini-courses** and **Big 11 0 0 Simple**.
  - Teach a class, coach a team, coordinate the









- **Music and Dance**—learn and perform traditional Medieval songs and folk dances.

Thematic units are implemented by every grade level teaching team based on topics of interest to many students of that age. While thematic unit topics may change through the years, the core idea of using thematic teaching as an approach for in-depth learning remains at Chugach Optional.

### *Practicing Inquiry Learning*

**Inquiry learning** encourages students to ask questions and explore interests rather than a teacher telling the student facts. Learning through discovery encourages creativity and is more relevant and meaningful to students. We provide experiences requiring students to pose questions, analyze the questions, research the answer and arrive at their own well-considered solutions. Chugach teachers, staff and family members help instill inquiry learning in our students by guiding them to find their own answers through posing questions back to the student:

- Would you tell me a little more about...
- Let me see if I understand...
- So you are saying/suggesting...
- Tell me what you mean when you....
- To what extent...
- I'm curious to know more about...
- I'm intrigued by...
- It would help me understand if you gave me an example...

### *Providing Differentiated Learning Opportunities*

**Differentiated instruction** is an approach to instruction that takes into account the needs of diverse learners. Differentiation allows teachers to look at students as individuals and honor their learning needs and potential. Since each student's learning and development proceeds at different rates, teachers give consideration to student readiness, individual interests and learning profiles when shaping instruction for the whole class. A Chugach classroom may have the following evidence of differentiation:

- Students will work with teachers to establish whole-class and individual learning goals.
- Students will help other students and the teacher to solve problems.
- Teachers will empower students to promote self-reliant learners.
- Teachers will regularly assess learning so that instruction responds to learner needs.

## *Creating Meaningful Learning Opportunities*

Chugach teachers and staff want to create meaningful learning opportunities for students so that students become lifelong learners. Good learning habits are developed when students are given opportunities to discuss, share and appreciate each other's ideas about meaningful, real-world subjects. To that end, we provide opportunities such as field trips, classroom speakers and events such as **Outdoor School**. These rich experiences excite the students about the world outside the school. Community service is also an integral part of the Chugach Optional learning experience, providing an authentic learning opportunity. We aim to build learners that have empathy and care about others.

## *Educational Technology*

The Chugach Optional community embraces the need for differentiating curriculum based on a student's skills, readiness and interests. We work to meet this challenge for all learners. While we believe in the importance of hands-on and real-life learning, educational technology may be used sparingly as a tool to help us meet the diverse needs of each student. The applications of educational technology vary from age group to age group and are based on appropriate developmental readiness. Generally speaking, younger students experience less exposure to technology. Our younger students need concrete, hands-on



**Emails and Newsletters**—Teachers will share learning goals and topics with parents through ongoing written communications with parents.

**Face-to-Face Dialogue**—Teachers are readily available to discuss student progress. This is done through ongoing informal and formal conversations between parents and teachers.

Additionally, if you choose to send your child to Chugach Optional, it is important to understand how the relationship between teachers, students and families supports assessment and student growth.

#### Teachers:

- Observe each child's strengths and needs
- Encourage students to engage in goal-setting and self-evaluation
- Encourage students to reflect on their learning
- Coach students to learn from their own experiences
- Utilize formal assessment tools when necessary to support unit instruction

#### Students:

- Communicate their knowledge back to teachers and in doing so discover possible adjustments for their work
- Share ideas within **family groups** and receive constructive feedback from peers
- Self-evaluate and reflect on their own progress
- Learn to evaluate their own progress by comparing past work to current work
- Communicate what they've learned at home daily with their families and in twice-a-year student-led portfolio shares

#### Families:

- Spend time in the classroom
- Observe learning in action
- Check-in with teachers at the beginning or end of the day
- Communicate via email with teachers and staff
- Engage with children daily about their individual learning experience
- Foster **in-charge** learning
- Encourage teamwork
- Encourage setting and meeting individual goals
- Celebrate their child's educational growth from a starting point, throughout the year

A family's commitment to the Chugach assessment process allows students to be confident with their educational experience. The education and assessment process at Chugach Optional may differ from assessment experiences found at other ASD schools. Although Chugach Optional honors the Anchorage School District requirements, Chugach Optional does not use formal assessment tools alone to define our students' whole intelligence and capabilities.

## 6. Specialist and Support Services at Chugach Optional

### *Specialists*

Students enjoy classes taught by specialists throughout the week in the form of art, music, physical education/health and library. The specialists' curriculum honors our philosophy at Chugach Optional.

In **Physical Education** we incorporate lifelong fitness goals and skills into games, team challenges and individual activities. The Physical Education classes always emphasize cooperation and the students are encouraged to problem solve, whether that is through strategies, team initiatives, or other activities. We work a lot on social skills such as teamwork, getting along with others and how to be inclusive in everything we do.

In **Music** we explore many different areas such as music history, dancing, singing, instruments and music composition, often connecting our lessons with the student's classroom theme-studies. In addition, students enjoy numerous performance opportunities. Students often perform musicals with their **family groups** and students can join performance groups, which meet after school. Band and Orchestra are offered to all sixth grade students in addition to classroom music.

In **Art** the unique artistic potential of every child at Chugach is encouraged and rewarded allowing for individuality, sequential motivation, imaginative creation and self evaluation. The art teacher collaborates with the classroom teacher ensuring integration of classroom **theme studies** as well as providing the regular ASD Arts Curriculum. The love of the arts in our community is fostered by constant support and respect of ideas.

The **Library** is the heart of our school and an extension of the classroom. As well as scheduled librarian-led classes, students are welcome to read and work independently in the library throughout the day. Our **in-charge** learners engage in activities such as classwork, research, book clubs, or just enjoy a good book.

In keeping with Chugach Optional's integrated thematic approach, specialists often collaborate with classroom teachers to incorporate grade-level themes into their content. For example, when grades 3-4 work on Alaska Studies, the physical education teacher may teach Alaska Native games, the art teacher may



teach Alaska Native mask making, the music teacher may teach Alaska Native drumming, while the librarian supports researching information about Alaska Natives.

### *Support Services*

Chugach Optional provides support services that are normally available at schools in the Anchorage School District, including services for gifted education, speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, bilingual, visual and auditory disabilities and special education resources. Special education services are available to all students attending alternative, optional and charter schools of the district; however, not all resources and services available in neighborhood schools are necessarily available within each alternative or charter school. For more information on lottery schools and special services, please refer to the Anchorage School District (ASD) website.

Since Chugach Optional is an alternative school and students are admitted by lottery only, ASD does not provide busing service. Families that attend Chugach come from all over the ASD, mostly driving their children each way, or participating in self-organized car pools.

### *Extra Curricular Activities*

Parents and teachers provide activities after school throughout the school year. The activities often rely on parent involvement, even if a teacher orchestrates the activity. The activities are often parent-driven, guided by their interests and expertise. Parents can look for and post announcements of upcoming activities in *The Scoop* (our school newsletter), or on flyers posted throughout the school.

## 7. Expectations for Community Interactions

### *We have two important concepts that guide our community*

Respect—students, staff and families have a mutual respect for each other's ideas, work, feelings, bodies and property.

Cooperation—students, staff and families cooperate with and help each other as much as possible.

### *Respect*

Respect comes in many forms. At Chugach Optional, students and adults work together, listening to each other and demonstrating that they value what is said. Learning together involves both students and adults demonstrating honesty, trust, acceptance, responsibility and self-discipline.

One way we show respect at Chugach Optional is having staff, students and families address each other with first-names. Besides creating a friendly atmosphere, this practice has a deeper purpose: we believe that a child learns

respect from adults who treat him or her with respect. When students are respected, they tend to value themselves and their abilities and therefore are more inclined to take on responsibility for their own learning and behavior. In treating both students and adults with a similar respect, we express our expectation to them that they will behave as responsible, autonomous and purposeful members of our community. Additionally, we don't believe that an adult gains a child's respect by utilizing a formal title; rather, a child learns to respect an adult for the attitudes, capabilities and knowledge that adult demonstrates.

### *Cooperation*

Cooperation is a hallmark of learning and life at Chugach Optional. Like respect, cooperation is exhibited in many ways at our school. A tangible expression of the spirit of cooperation is the open physical design of the school, a design which fosters a sense of interdependence and connectedness and thus encourages a sense of social responsibility.

#### When Conflicts Arise

At Chugach Optional we emphasize helping students take responsibility for their behavior. Teachers and staff facilitate and support students to solve problems individually or in groups whenever possible. While this may challenge the student, we believe it is ultimately more beneficial for the student to realize he or she is capable of working out his or her own solutions to problems rather than always depending on a teacher or another adult.

**Family groups** may come together to problem solve classroom or schoolwide issues. When problems arise that involve the entire school, we prefer to solve the problems cooperatively, as a community. Venues for cooperative problem solving include **Community Assembly** meetings, Parent Coordinator meetings, the Chugach Education Corporation Board meetings and through student input. The principal is also a resource and should be involved to help guide the process.

### *Building and Supporting Emotional Intelligence*

At Chugach Optional we work toward building the fundamentals of emotional intelligence—the capacity to be aware of, control and express one's emotions and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically. Along with concepts, knowledge and skills, teaching emotional intelligence is part of educating the whole child. This also leads students to persist in the face of setbacks, learn from criticism and find inspiration in the success of others.

Students at Chugach Optional practice life-related skills that promote strategic reasoning, insightfulness, perseverance, creativity, problem-solving and craftsmanship. These skills are necessary to effectively operate in society. In the



context of social behavior, this includes managing impulsivity (thinking before acting) and listening with understanding and empathy.

At Chugach Optional we teach students to practice the 4 B's:

Be Respectful

Be Kind

Be Safe

Be Productive

## 8. Governance

### *The Community Assembly*

Chugach Optional's version of a "PTA" is called **The Community Assembly**. The group is a gathering of families, teachers, staff and students. Everyone in our community is invited to the monthly meetings. At the meetings we discuss typical school topics such as school activities, fundraising and community needs. In addition to these topics, the Community Assembly is one of our best venues for the ongoing and important work of cultivating the school philosophy. It is a place to listen to others and have your own ideas heard. At its best, the meeting is a democratic and collaborative experience. Joining the Community Assembly discussions helps keep Chugach Optional the very special school that it is.

### *The Chugach Educational Corporation*

Each year the Community Assembly elects individuals to serve on the board for the **Chugach Educational Corporation (CEC)**. The CEC is a 501c3 nonprofit corporation, a status which allows for fundraising. The elected board works closely with the school principal and the Community Assembly to oversee the money we raise throughout the year as well as addressing any other important school topics. The CEC upholds the approved bylaws and follows best practices for a nonprofit corporation.

## 9. Glossary of Terms

### **Art Night**

Art Night is a schoolwide event in support of the Mauni Primary School in Malawi. Chugach Optional students, families, school groups, classrooms and community members donate pieces of art. The donated artwork is sold on Art Night at a fixed price or by silent auction. Past art pieces have included paintings, jewelry, wall art, pottery, quilts, knitted garments, stained glass, garden art and furniture. Some of the artwork is created by established artists; other artwork is created by amateurs, students or determined rookies. Additionally, craft tables at the event allow kids to try their hand at a new skill. All funds raised go directly to the Mauni Primary School in Malawi, Africa.

### **Big Simple**

The Big Simple is a **once-a-year fundraiser** for Chugach Optional. Contributions from families are divided equally among Chugach teachers/classrooms to pay



for field trips, performances, special projects and classroom subscriptions such as Scholastic News. The Big Simple is solely used to pay for classroom needs. By contributing once, at the beginning of the year, families are spared having to 'pony up' for each activity during the year and teachers and staff are able to budget for their highest needs. Chugach Optional does have other fundraising events that pay for schoolwide needs.

### **Child-centered**

Child-centered learning is based on the child in a developmentally appropriate setting. Teachers aim to develop learner autonomy and independence while considering the child's voice and perceived abilities at a given time in their education. The role of the teacher is to facilitate discovery and utilize less adult directed instruction than in a traditional education setting.

### **Chugach Educational Corporation (CEC) and Board of Directors**

The CEC is a non-profit organization that manages the Assembly finances with community input. The Community Assembly votes for new CEC board members each spring. The CEC Board of Directors works closely with the school principal on schoolwide issues. The Board of Directors upholds the approved bylaws and follows best practices for a nonprofit corporation.

### **Community Assembly**



Kindy–Chugach Optional's term for kindergartner

Primary—the combination of the three multi-age classes consisting of first and second graders

Middle—the combination of the three multi-age classes consisting of third and fourth graders

Upper—the combination of the three multi-age classes consisting of fifth and sixth graders

### **In-Charge Learners**

The in-charge learner is a student showing responsibility in the educational environment. An in-charge learner shows initiative, completes tasks in a timely manner, asks questions when he or she needs help and contributes to the community of learners.

### **Inquiry Learning**

Inquiry learning engages learners by using open-ended questions, research, dialogue and problem solving. Teachers pose questions back to the student. Rather than simply presenting established facts or portraying a smooth path to knowledge, teachers facilitate a process to develop students' thinking skills.

### **Learning Partners**

Learning partners connect students of various ages. Throughout the year, fifth and sixth graders pair with first and second graders while third and fourth graders pair with Kindergartners. Learning partners play games, read to each other and share Chugach experiences to establish a sense of community.

### **Memory Book**

The Memory Book is Chugach Optional's yearbook.

### **Outdoor School**

Outdoor School is a learning opportunity for Upper Group students to learn through being outdoors. Currently, this includes a two-year rotation of learning. In one year, students learn outdoor winter survival skills over the course of several days outdoors without the overnight experience. In the alternating year, students learn art, science and outdoor skills during a two night overnight camp.

### **Science Share**

Science Share is a schoolwide event in which students design an experiment at home, replicate it and present their findings (usually on a poster) to share during Science Share week. There is also an evening event during Science Share week where the student presents their project to a "Science Share Mentor."



