

# JOHNSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*Bryan, Texas*



In the entry hall of Johnson Elementary School, natural light bounces off bright walls hung with student arts and a pair of banners, one encouraging reading, the other congratulating the school on being a Blue Ribbon School. There are comfortable benches for parents and students to sit while waiting. At the reception area counter, a laptop computer is always available for parents to check on their child's grades while waiting in the school lobby. On designated evenings, the space becomes an art gallery and parents come and view their children's art work.



*Johnson Elementary houses a vibrant "open plan" school.*

Johnson Elementary School (JES) is a neighborhood school in Bryan, Texas, although some students live as far as 18 miles away. A medium- sized suburban city nestled next to College Station, Texas, home to the Texas A&M, Bryan is two to three hours away from Dallas, Houston, and Austin. Although this creates a challenge to recruiting and keeping excellent teachers (the larger cities tend to offer higher salaries), Johnson Elementary School has a relatively low teacher mobility rate—13%—and JES students routinely meet and exceed state standards in math, reading, and science.

Johnson is on the small end of student population in the Bryan Independent School District, where schools range from 400 to 600 students. Demographically, it is similar to other elementary schools in the district. What distinguish JES from other elementary schools are its unique open concept building, its dual Spanish-English language program, and its ability to translate high expectations into accomplishments throughout the school.

## Student Demographics

Johnson Elementary School Bryan, TX  
<http://fc.bryanisd.org/johnson>  
400 students, K-5

White	51%
Hispanic	42%
Students eligible for free/reduced price meals	45%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	27%
Special Education Students	3%
Student/Teacher Ratio	18:1

## **OPEN CONCEPT**

Johnson is an open concept building; most classrooms do not have doors or permanent walls. Classrooms are often separated by mobile cabinets and shelving units. The absence of fixed walls and doors brings natural light into all classrooms.

Asked what they would share about Johnson's success with others, teachers said, "Tear down their walls!" The absence of walls means that they always feel connected to other teachers and students in the building, they said—seeing them next door, hearing students' excitement when playing an educational game, and knowing when a certain teacher got really excited about the current lesson. For Principal Carol Happ, working in an open concept building means that every hour of every day in the building is a "constant walk-through," not just for her, but for all staff and students.

Despite the porous boundaries from one classroom to the next, each class has a clear center and students are focused on the activities inside. Johnson classrooms are full of engaging, hands-on learning opportunities—from using laptops to take a virtual tour of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to using the Internet to find and listening to speeches, to creating terrariums. Each teacher has a Smart Board, laptop, speakers, and a document camera and LCD projector, to photograph and project images; teachers regularly use these tools to deliver engaging content focused instruction in both content classes and in specials. Teachers at JES have the opportunity to have weekly training by the technology specialist or assistance in developing lessons to best use technology. The specialist says her goal is "to integrate technology into everything- reading, math, language arts, etc."

The environment throughout JES is simultaneously rich and layered, yet calm and focused, always reasserting high expectations and celebrating the community itself in images and artwork. Walls are covered, often floor to ceiling, with educational materials, and even the obligatory video monitors in each classroom present a continuous, slowly fading slide show of images from the school. There is a layered soundscape: background noises from other classrooms join classical music playing quietly in several classrooms.

## **DUAL LANGUAGE PROGRAM**

Three years ago, Happ proposed changing the bilingual program to a dual Spanish-English language program. Half of the students enrolled in the dual language classroom would be native English speakers while the other half would be native Spanish speakers. Enlisting the entire staff before making this decision, the staff voted to learn more about the program by engaging in a schoolwide book study and visiting schools in and out of their district that have established dual language programs.

After their study, the JES staff decided to phase in the dual language program one cohort at a time and to use a program where 90% of the class would be conducted in Spanish, and 10% in English. Each year, students receive a larger proportion of their instruction in English. With so little initial time devoted to learning English, the

school placed the responsibility for fostering English language use on the parents—knowing that most of the time students were not in school they would be speaking English rather than Spanish.

When parents agree to enroll their students in the dual language program, they commit to the program for their student's entire time at JES. There are currently 22 students in the dual language kindergarten, which is predominately conducted in Spanish. At the end of first grade, dual language students begin writing in English. In second grade, both science and social studies are taught in Spanish. Dual-language second graders spend 30% of their time learning in English and take both the English reading (TPRI) literacy assessment and the Spanish language Tejas Lee literacy assessment.



*Materials used in dual language classes*

Music is also a big part of the beginning dual language program: after morning announcements, a teacher's aide engaged kindergarten students in singing Spanish songs on topics such as colors, shapes, days of the week, names of months, seasons of the year, and letters and numbers. The first few months of the dual language kindergarten are challenging for English-speaking students, who spend nearly the whole day receiving instruction in a language they don't understand. However, a teacher noted how thrilling it was when "after three months when you see an English speaker understand every single command and a Spanish speaker be excited about English and not be scared." The second year of the dual language program, the principal and teachers were concerned that 1st graders weren't receiving enough instruction in English, so they modified the program to 80% Spanish and 20% English instruction.

Third through 5th graders who are not proficient English speakers are enrolled in the bilingual program, which accommodates students who wish to continue mastering their studies in Spanish and serves as a transition into English-speaking classes in middle school. As the dual language program grows, the bilingual program will be phased out. Before the dual language program, JES staff wanted to ensure that the students in the bilingual program felt part of the school community. One of the ways the staff went about ensuring this larger sense of community was to create two programs for the bilingual students: a soccer program for the boys and a dancing troupe for girls and boys which highlighted important dances from other cultures.

The students in the dual language and bilingual program are important to creating the atmosphere of the entire school. Spanish is spoken throughout the school in classrooms by teachers. For the specials (art, physical

education, and music) the entire grade level breaks into three different groups so that students can spend time with peers in other classrooms.

Teachers explained that the dual language program owes its success to the practice that “both languages are given respect” “both languages are given the same priority and same value,” and that the children are “excited to see a friend speak his or her own language.” This was born out in observations of the classrooms. The students in the dual language seemed to move effortlessly between English and Spanish. They will ask clarifying questions in both English and Spanish, and peers respond in either language; dual-language students are encouraged to ask peers for help with unfamiliar words the teacher used.

While parents understand they are expected to continue speaking and nurturing their children’s native language, JES also explicitly expects parents from different cultures to acknowledge and strengthen the bonds the dual language program creates. Principal Happ feels the real value is that children will not just be bilingual but bicultural. “We told the parents we don’t want to see the English-speaking parents on one side of the gym and the Spanish-speaking parents on the other side. There are certain ways of talking without using language—a nod hello, pat on the arm.”

Through parents, students’ bicultural experience extends beyond school. Birthday parties usually involve the entire class and help students learn more about their classmates’ cultural and economic worlds. Teachers recount students’ stories of how excited English-speaking students are to go to Spanish birthday parties, with piñatas and different food; attending birthday parties of their English-speaking classmates is also a cultural experience for many Spanish students, and for some an opportunity to go to restaurants that are financially out of bounds.

Teachers credit the success of the dual language program to several things—committed parents, students, JES staff—and the open concept building. Open concept design, teachers concurred, helps integrate bilingual and dual language students into the school. Bilingual and dual language students are often included in classes with regular students in the afternoon, in the ability-grouping for science, social studies, and reading.

Happ realizes teaching students to be Spanish-speakers can slow down their English skills. But she feels that the trade-off of producing truly bilingual citizens is worth it. Indeed, demand is so great for the dual language program—there’s a waiting list. Johnson could have had two dual-language kindergarten classes, Happ said. The challenge has been finding dual certified teachers to teach these classes. Not waiting for someone else to solve problems, JES is talking with Texas A&M to look for grants to help improve the program.



*Principal Happ poses with a student.*

Carol Happ has been the principal of Johnson Elementary School since 1995. Described by her staff as supportive, she was identified by one teacher as someone who doesn't, "ask anyone to do something without support." Teachers and central office staff describe Happ as "a true instructional leader." She can often be found out in the classrooms talking with teachers, students, and parents.

## TEACHING STAFF AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Creating daily time for teachers of the same grade to connect and plan is no small feat, but this daily fifty-minute block for Johnson teachers means they are in close communication, can maintain consistency throughout the grade, make decisions about re-teaching together as a grade, and discuss adjustments necessary for all students to achieve, and email parents.

The grade-level teams also form a teacher support system. Asked how the bilingual and dual language teachers fit into the grade-level classes, the immediate response was they are all teaching the same thing, just in a different language. New teachers are not expected to create their own lesson plans; other grade level teachers share their lesson plans, and conduct the same activities. The day after a lesson they will often debrief with new teachers and help prepare for the next lessons. After their first year, new teachers are invited to join in developing lesson plans. In addition, staff members conduct home visits prior to the beginning of school for kindergarten students and for students enrolled in the bilingual program (grades 3-5). One teacher commented that she appreciated knowing where her students did their homework and having that experience helped her connect with her students throughout the year.



*Students run the camera for morning announcements.*

This culture of support also allows Happ to move teachers to teach in grade levels of need. For example, the current fifth grade bilingual teacher has not taught fifth grade prior to this school year. Principal Happ talked to her at the end of the last year about how the now fifth graders would really benefit from her teaching them; Happ also knew that the other fifth grade teachers would support her in every possible way. The bilingual teacher explained that the other fifth grade teachers would help her prepare everything and introduce her to all of the activities; she jokingly stated that the other teachers even make her play the games so she knows what her students will experience. This fifth grade teacher stated that their knowledge and willingness to share and support her is why she has had such a successful year teaching in the fifth grade.

Happ believes it is important to find the best grade level fit for a teacher. In another example, while interviewing for another position, Happ identified a teacher who would fit into the JES culture seamlessly, however

her grade level was not the grade level with an opening. In order to place the new teacher in the grade level where she had the most expertise and comfort, another teacher volunteered to move to a different grade.

In order to fund many of the activities the teachers want to incorporate or try, all teachers are encouraged to write proposals. Teachers stated, “Everyone writes grants for materials; some are done by grade, some by content.”

## **PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

Whenever possible, JES faculty and staff invite parents to the school. From art gallery evenings to student teacher conferences, parents are routinely welcomed into the fabric of the school day. Parents noted, “We are welcome to come anytime.” In order to reach as many parents as possible, class performances occur twice—one during the school day and one in the evening.

Regardless of whether a student is in their classroom, teachers at Johnson feel responsible for all students. One teacher explained since cooperative groupings happen within the grade levels, not just within the classroom, teachers often teach students in other classes. Additionally, another teacher stated it was hard to not feel responsible for all the students in the open concept building.

On Fridays, students take home their “weekly folder” which includes graded work, a contact form which teachers describe student behavior for the week as well as student accomplishments of the week, and a newsletter with class and community updates. These forms are provided and completed in English or Spanish as needed. JES staff understands the importance of the additional parent touch, and have staff present during drop off and pick up times. The principal takes advantage of after-school pick up’s to share students’ successes during the day with the adult picking up the child.

The parental involvement throughout all of JES community is very strong. During our visit someone shared a story of when the district decided the bilingual program would no longer continue at JES, but would be moving to another elementary school within the district. Unknown to Happ, the parents decided one of the unique factors of the bilingual program was being part of the



*Johnson Elementary students collaborate during*

Johnson community. The parents from the program decided to demonstrate their frustration about the proposed move by picketing the district central offices with signs demanding the program remain at JES. Happ shyly acknowledges this experience and immediately credits her staff, denying any accolades for herself.

## **HIGH EXPECTATIONS & CELEBRATIONS**

While most schools discuss state test performance in numbers of students who pass the test, staff at Johnson expect students to aim for “commended performance,” not just passing scores. Teachers use the goal of commended performance as a way to begin talking about how every student can graduate high school and be accepted into college.

Even before children start school, teachers communicate high expectations. Teacher visits to the homes of new kindergartners before the school year begins provides the first opportunity for telling parents what is expected of their children. Many teachers commented on their use of “thinking out loud” to model high expectations for students.

Students are very much involved in their own education as active participants rather than being passive recipients of knowledge. High expectations at JES focus not only on academics, but also address behavior. “We expect them to be gentlemen and young women and to act responsibly and hold them accountable,” a teacher said. Students receive a great deal of practice in behaviors the school wishes to instill, such as forming orderly lines.

“We don’t have the ability to give out a lot of extrinsic rewards,” a teacher noted. Instead, staff provide immediate feedback, build students’ ownership of their achievements, “brag to the parents,” and find other opportunities to celebrate success. A portion of the morning announcements is dedicated to a variety of student-achievements, from naming students who received perfect scores on practice tests, to awarding “good choices” awards and Happy Visits. JES awards Happy Visits daily to students for both behavioral improvement and academic achievement. Children receive a ribbon from the principal’s office that they proudly take home.

One of Johnson’s biggest celebrations occurs when a student becomes an independent reader. When students have read three books independently and pass the Accelerated Reader tests, they receive a certificate which every teacher signs, then get to “Pop Their Top” during the morning announcements. Parents and grandparents are invited to this ceremony, after which newly independent readers are given cans of lemonade they are allowed to drink in class. In terms of effort, this celebration consists of a few cans of lemonade, time during the morning announcements, and a t-shirt. Johnson is the only school in the district to have such a ceremony, parent said, noting while it was “not expensive, it is a big deal” for the children, an example of the school’s ability to turn “ordinary resources” into “extraordinary results.”

## **SETTING GOALS**

Johnson students learn early to internalize high expectations and set their own goals. Parents noted that “teachers do a lot of goal-setting.” One parent observed that not only does her daughter “talk about it constantly,” but once, when she met her goal early, asked her teacher for higher goals. In the early years, when the focus is on behavior, teachers also help students self-manage behavioral issues.





The central office strives to support teachers and staff not only through professional development opportunities but also by making sense of monitoring reports, creating folders containing all relevant monitoring forms and reports on a specific subject. The district follows the folders up with training so staff can complete the forms properly and supports an online system of lesson plans linked to the state’s framework that teachers can access. The lesson plans are from teachers in the district and allow others to add ideas. To share expertise across the district, the district has also started hosting horizontal grade-level meetings with representatives from each school.

Many Johnson teachers, especially bilingual and dual language teachers, have moved on to district leadership positions. Happ makes the best of this loss, arguing that as long as the talent stays in the district, she’s okay with losing some talented instructors. In general, though, the teacher turnover rate for the past few years is around 13%.

## CONCLUSION

Johnson Elementary School mirrors many other schools throughout the country in terms of student demographics, population and budget, yet it is unique in the level of success students aim for and reach. Strong parental involvement, translating high expectations into action, celebrating successes and the dual language program at JES all contribute to the school’s success. The Superintendent noted that when it comes to resources “it’s never enough,” but attributes the success of Johnson to the people – to good teachers, a good principal, and a willingness to take chances. As one fifth grade teacher commented, “Success isn’t a program or an individual teacher—it’s a complex system.” The successful system of Johnson works due to the all of the individuals that comprise the school—students, parents, teachers, central office and the principal.

<b>Johnson Elementary School Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills % proficient and above: 5th grade Reading</b>				
	2004	2005	2006	2007
All	88	94	100	98
Hispanic	84	86	100	
Reduced or Free Lunch	79	88	100	
State Scores				82
<b>% proficient and above: 5th grade Math</b>				
	2004	2005	2006	2007
All	95	98	98	100
Hispanic	94	95	96	
Limited English Proficient	94	96	96	
State Scores				85