

Report on Berkeley Lake Elementary School
As a matter of interest to the citizens of Berkeley Lake
By Lois Salter, Mayor
January, 2006

I have heard from several of our citizens recently that they are concerned about our City property values possibly going down in the future due to changes at Berkeley Lake Elementary School. When I first heard about this a while back it was from one citizen who agreed to chair one of my mayorally appointed citizen committees to investigate that concern. However, no other citizen could be found at the time who was interested in serving on such a committee. Hearing this concern again recently from others, I have done some exploration myself on this. Below are my findings.

I spoke at length to the principal, Leigh Westcott, whom I found to be very forthcoming and willing to discuss any concerns frankly and helpfully. She readily acknowledged that the diversity level at her school has changed in recent years. The student population is now about 30 % white with increasing numbers of ESOL (English as a Second Language) students. It, of course, presents difficulties for such students to score well on standardized tests in a language that is not their own. However, she is quite proud of their test scores in spite of these obstacles, and pointed out that on the recent CRCT (Criterion Referenced Competency Tests), 91% of BLES students met or exceeded standards and 100% passed the Language Arts portion, which is most fundamental to ESOL students' success in all areas. Leigh says that in the face of change she still gets great parent support, which I personally believe to be one of the strongest predisposing factors to student success. The school has never failed to meet the AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) standard which some Gwinnett County Schools have failed, and last year's reports were "some of the best ever!" I asked about the overcrowding factor and the lines that were drawn recently when Chesney Elementary was created to lower numbers of students at BLES. She says that Chesney is even more overcrowded now than BLES, which has @1100 students now and is expecting @1200 next year. I have included at the end of this report some other information in writing that Leigh sent me after our conversation.

After talking with her (and getting obviously subjective information) I did some looking on my own at data available from both the county and state that compares BLES to other schools. What stood out to me in studying this data was that although they do have a growing percentage of ESOL students, the test scores do indeed continue to look very good. The very large majority of BLES students meet or exceed standards. Their population as compared to other Gwinnett Co. schools has less black students than the county average and more Asian and Hispanic ones. The large majority of retained students were Hispanic. I recommend that anyone who is much interested in the school study the websites that I used, as there is a wealth of objective data out there. For county school system information go to www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us and for state information go to <http://reportcard.gaosa.org/> which is the Governor's Office of Student Achievement.

Finally to get some additional background on changing demographics in our area, I talked about our concerns directly and individually with 2 state senators and 1 county commissioner. The reason I met with Sen. Curt Thompson who is not our senator is that we are very close to the border with his district which is just south of us, and which is the area from which the demographic changes that worry people are moving toward us. For that reason I believe what happens in his district will ultimately have an effect on us. Both Sen. Thompson and our Sen. David Shafer are very aware of the demographic changes and the challenges they represent. Thompson sponsored and Shafer cosponsored a bill last year that supports revitalization efforts in communities that have gone into declining property values. Thompson is working on a CID (Community Improvement District) in the Jimmy Carter area of Norcross. Bert Nasuti, our County Commissioner, pointed out that the Federal laws will not let the school system draw district lines that have the effect of creating economic, class, or ethnic grouping in one district more than another insofar as may be practicable. Pinckneyville Middle, he says, is now less than 50% Caucasian and “doing great” in its test scores. Bert is, in my opinion, quite knowledgeable regarding future expectations for our district, and he doesn’t foresee that we’ll experience any mass exodus in our area as a result of changes in local public schools. He pointed out that some of the challenges in the schools are the result of a skewed ratio of multi-family to single family homes which can create a transient school population. He noted that the county has not approved multifamily residential developments in this area for quite some time. The ones in our area all went in before his time, mostly in the early 80’s. Bert and I have also been talking about other developments very near us that will have, I believe, a very salutary effect on our property values. The year-round indoor and outdoor aquatic and other sports center will break ground in March just across PIB from us and will be a wonderful amenity for our area. The addition of a dog socialization area to Pinckneyville Park that I have been asking him for has just been approved also, and that park, of course, already offered a great many valuable family recreational opportunities. Additionally a new police precinct is to be created in Peachtree Corners, much closer to us than our current one which is over on the other side of Gwinnett Place Mall. He asked me not to announce the exact location until the lease is signed, but I can tell you that it is much closer to our City. I believe it is significant that all three of these gentlemen are now, as a result of my conversations with them, very aware of our concerns and even more interested in whatever positive contributions they might make.

In summation, my feeling after all my conversations and research of data is that the demographic changes that concern some of us are coming fast, not just to our immediate area but to **all** of our county and to contiguous counties, and that they do not have to precipitate decline in our property values. It’s my understanding that Gwinnett’s *modus operandi* is to target areas that may have problems and then focus great efforts there to ameliorate them. I’m speaking here of both the county government itself as well as of the school system’s management planning which is largely separate. I appreciate that approach, and I would urge anyone in our community to adopt the same attitude. If you are concerned about Berkeley Lake Elementary, I encourage you to contact the school and arrange to volunteer there in ways that will support and improve it. When I asked Leigh Westcott if they would be open to our citizens, even nonparents, visiting and becoming involved with the school, she was immediately receptive to that idea. She gave me the

name of a contact person who could be called to make such arrangements. Dr. Lisa Rudowitz is an Asst. Principal there and her direct phone number is (770) 446-0947. Our citizens of all ages could visit BLES regularly to read to students, to share their talents or experiences in specific careers, to mentor struggling students as individuals, or to do any number of volunteer tasks that would make significant contributions to the strength and success of the school itself. In doing so, our concerned citizens would be able to keep an eye on the progress of the school and develop their own personal perceptions of its overall character from the inside, as it were. That would certainly be a mutually beneficial relationship for both the school and our City. If I can facilitate such activities, or in any way contribute further, please feel free to call on me.

Lois Salter
Mayor, City of Berkeley Lake

Addendum:

Please see below the written information sent to me by Leigh Westcott subsequent to our conversation.

Looking at the CRCT for the 2004-2005 school year, Berkeley Lake did an excellent job of continuing progress with 91% of the students meeting or exceeding the standard in both language arts and math. This information includes all students here at Berkeley Lake in third through fifth grade.

On the fourth grade Gateway, we had 100% of the students pass the language arts portion of the test with no retakes. We had all students except two who passed the math portion of the test.

In writing, all fifth graders that were required to pass the state writing test succeeded during the first administration with 67% of the students scoring in the excellent/effective range (an increase of 12% over last year).

Even though we see improvements in the data for our students, we continue to look for more ways to improve. As data was made available to us, the staff began analyzing the information in order to plan staff development, as well as interventions to support students who were less successful in school.

Some of the strategies we have incorporated into our school include planning together as a staff and making sure all employees who work with the individual grade levels are aware of what is being studied. Our schedule also works to help with individual support, by providing opportunities during the school day where the classroom teacher has fewer numbers and can increase the one-on-one attention for students.

We have staff members that support our ESOL population, as well as others who work with our gifted population. We continue to have an after-school program for students who need additional support with their school work, and we offer scholarships to ensure everyone an opportunity to participate. This fall we began an enrichment after-school program offering several classes and will begin a full-fledged group of classes this winter. Staff are looking at their own areas of interest and giving children an opportunity to explore and be challenged through their skills.

We are excited about our diverse population here at Berkeley Lake and feel that having an international group of children gives each child an opportunity to learn about different ethnic groups and countries throughout the world. Our International Night will further showcase all the groups of people represented here. Though some children come with language barriers, once immersed in our classes, they very quickly learn the language and on a whole become very good students. In turn, many of our students have picked up phrases and simple words from other languages. This immersion process is exactly what our colleges and universities do with students wanting to learn a foreign language.

We continue to have an ongoing staff development program here at BLES and Gwinnett County, to address issues that the staff feels they need to improve upon. Many staff members are presently enrolled in a Spanish class and many others have their ESOL endorsement classes completed. We have four staff members that work daily with our second language students and they are in constant communication with the classroom teachers.

My staff is one of the best I have had the privilege of working with in my twenty-five years in education. We do have staff members each year that leave BLES but change is a constant that we all deal with. Last year we had folks that wanted specialty positions that were already filled here at Berkeley Lake and also staff that moved out of state due to marriages or spouse transfers. Some also moved to get closer to home and are now able to spend less time on the roadways. For each one of these teachers, I applauded their choice and helped themsomething I hope any good leader would be willing to do.

At this time, there are no plans for redistricting our school. As a public school, we accept all students who enter our doors and welcome the challenges and the excitement of serving our children in the best way we can because children come first at Berkeley Lake.

Sincerely,

Leigh A. Westcott