

History of

Harbins Elementary School

Located approximately five miles southeast of Dacula on New Hope Road, Harbins Elementary became the third elementary school in the Dacula cluster when it opened its doors in August 1995. At that time, there were 525 students, and 57 faculty and staff members. The first year's theme was, "Taking Flight into a Future That's Bright."

The school resides on 35 acres. The main building was 98,000 square feet, with the total facility totaling approximately 107,000 square feet. Harbins Elementary had 50 classroom spaces. A number of staff workrooms and storage areas could be found throughout the facility. The school also had two fully equipped art rooms and music rooms. The school colors were navy blue, burgundy, and hunter green. The mascot was the Hawk.

The history of Harbins Elementary is found largely in the history of its community. In researching the stories of our area, we have found that it is a community rich in family, neighbors, and pride.

Dacula High School students Amber Brown, Eli Stancil, and Daphne Sims wrote one of the best descriptions of the Harbins community history in 1994 when they were proposing the name "Harbins Elementary" to the Board of Education. The following account is an adaptation of the students' work:

Life was hard in the early 1800s in the area east of the Alcovia River. The population was forced to struggle

FAST FACTS

Address: 3550 New Hope Road
Dacula, GA 30019

The following have served as principals of Harbins Elementary School:

1995–2004	Dr. Patty Heitmuller
2004–2015	Dr. Cindy Truett
2015– Present	Jennifer Chatham

School Colors: Crimson Red and Grey (Silver)

School Mascot: Tiger

with the stress of everyday life and lived in fear of Indian assault. The majority of families struggled to make their living by farming. Frequently, widows and small children were left to take care of farm chores that were previously attended to by the men in their families. In 1840, John Harbin filled the role of community provider by becoming captain of what became known as Harbin's Militia District and later, the Harbins community (the apostrophe was dropped from the original "Harbin's"). His duties included taking care of the poor, widows, and children, and defending against attack. In addition, Harbin was Justice of the Peace (1849–1853), and the 1850 census report described him as 68 years old, the



owner of a 660-acre plantation, and worth \$2,000.

There has been a tremendous amount of pride in the Harbins community for many years, indeed. In a newspaper column called "The Chamber Speaks", Jim Matthews, Manager of the Gwinnett County Chamber of Commerce, shared what he learned about the Harbins community while attending a special meeting at the Community House:

"From around every corner there seems to shout the expression 'We are proud of ourselves.' It certainly is not boasting either-- it is what has been achieved following a lot of honest to goodness hard work. To really show how organized they are in Harbins, when they have one of their famous covered dish dinners, the treasurer finds that the total cost to the club amounts to only slightly over eight dollars-- and when one considers the numbers served, the individual is filled with amazement as to how it can actually be done. Without any trouble, it would be easy to fill a book with what has been accomplished and what is now being done in the community. Hats off to a group of individuals who have proven first hand to the world around them how effective organized effort can be."

Schools have long been an important part of the community's history. There were several schools located in the Harbins area including: Lowrey's Academy (Bold Springs Road), Carter's Academy (New Hope Road), Ebenezer (at the corner of the cemetery at Ebenezer Baptist Church), and Oak Grove (Harbins Road). Each of these schools housed one or two teachers. In 1938, the four schools consolidated into the Harbins School. The four acres for the Harbins School cost the community \$100. The four room school with auditorium was built for \$5000. The former Oak Grove School, located nearby, was moved to the property to be used as a lunchroom. During 1957 and 1958, a consolidation merged the students from Harbins into the larger Dacula School. The Harbins School building exists today as the Harbins Community House, just north of the current Harbins Elementary.

In his "History of the Harbins Community for the Last 50 Years", J.W. Knight wrote, "Last year the County Board consolidated Harbins School with Dacula. The people of the community went to the Board and asked for

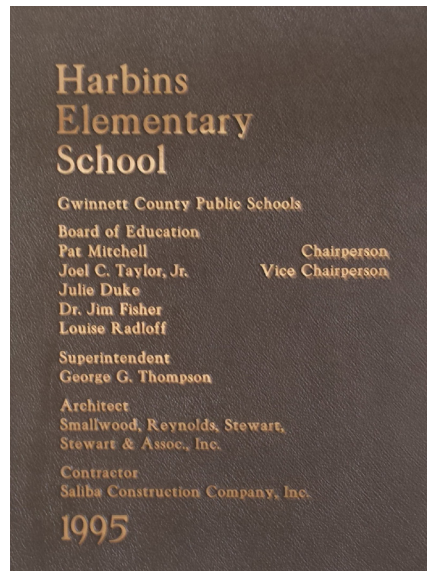
the school building to be used for a Community Center, and this request was granted. We now hold the title to the property, and if we continue to work as the people here have in the past, we believe the people here will live in peace and harmony for the next 50 years and longer. We are always proud for others to visit the Harbins Community and see the progress that is being made."

In 1995, the Harbins School returned to its community through citizen passage of the 1993 School Bond Referendum. Dacula High School students and members of the community were instrumental in convincing the Gwinnett County Board of Education that the new school could only be named Harbins Elementary. As the students wrote, "The people of the community are proud of their heritage, and Harbins Elementary School is the obvious and most popular choice for naming the new school."

Since 1995, the staff, students, and community have worked together to ensure the Harbins Legacy will live on. In the school foyer, there is a large mural depicting the rural setting that typified Harbins for many years. Included in the mural is a scene of the "old school" with teacher Sadie Hall standing in front to greet her students. Across from the mural, there is a permanent display of pictures from the old Harbins Consolidated School configured with class and staff pictures of the second wave of "Harbins Originals" who opened the school in 1995. When people who have lived in the area for several years come to vote, they love to stop and look at familiar scenes and faces in the display. Most importantly, the staff has made it a top priority to maintain a welcoming environment that is so characteristic of the community it serves.

When the facility was dedicated in the spring of 1996, dozens of people who had attended the first Harbins School as well as Lowrey's Academy, Carter's Academy, Ebenezer School, and Oak Grove School participated in the dedication festivities. Mr. J.W. Benefield, a former GCPS Superintendent, Oak Grove student, and Harbins resident, shared the keynote address.

Dr. Patty Heitmuller was the principal of Harbins when it opened. The philosophy of Harbins, according to Dr. Heitmuller, was grounded on the belief that each child has gifts and talents, and that it is the role of



educators to nurture those gifts. Harbins was founded on unconditional love, mutual respect, and an unwavering belief that each child will learn and be successful.

The school population grew by leaps and bounds from 1995-2004... from 590 to 1580 students! As a result, the school had 47 trailers and more than 150 staff members to serve its nearly 1,600 students. However, dramatic changes were on the way for Harbins. First, Alcova Elementary opened, taking in more than 650 of our students. The number of portable classrooms declined, but still the school was over-capacity. At the same time, Dr. Cindy Truett was named principal of Harbins, and shared her commitment to serve the students and community. Construction began to add 24 classrooms, a new computer lab, and administrative offices. This construction added more than 45,000 square feet to the school. In addition, work was completed on renovations in the existing building, expanding the cafeteria and media center.

In August 2009, Harbins joined the new Archer High School cluster. Harbins' students would attend McConnell Middle School and later Archer High School. The school's mascot changed to the tiger and the school colors became crimson red, grey (silver metallic), with black and white as official accent colors.

Harbins has recently become known throughout the district and the state for its innovations in technology integration, STEM, and equity for all students. Harbins has hosted several visitation days for GCPS' eCLASS and BYOD initiatives, and continues to be an example of how to integrate technology effectively to engage students and help them perform at higher levels.

In July of 2015, Harbins begins a new chapter with the retirement of Dr. Cindy Truett as its principal. Mrs. Jennifer Chatham assumed the principalship, and has continued to the work to help Harbins reach even greater heights!

Throughout its history of growth and change, Harbins has been a contributor to the local community and the wider world. Students and staff contribute annually to local food banks and organizations assisting those in need. The Harbins community has always been ready to assist families dealing with anything from debilitating illness to house fires, and loss of family members. Annual fundraising for the American Red Cross spiked as students and staff responded to the devastation of the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The school's total contribution to the American Cancer Society, after more than a decade of support, tops the \$100,000-mark! All these efforts, and more, represent the school's willingness to build leaders as well as learners.

Sources:

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