

# History of

## Bethesda Elementary School

Bethesda Elementary students benefit from a strong history and proud tradition. Four generations of students have passed through the doors of Bethesda expecting and achieving excellence. This strong commitment to family and school partnership has enabled our school to provide a solid education that teaches students the knowledge and skills they will need for the future.

Bethesda Elementary School, located at 525 Bethesda School Road, Lawrenceville, enjoys a history steeped in tradition and pride. For more than 110 years, the school has been a vital force in the community for which it was named, the area in proximity of Bethesda United Methodist Church (444 Bethesda Church Road, Lawrenceville).

Before 1905, the children in the Bethesda area were educated in a building near the Gloster community, an area approximately two miles to the north. When the Gloster area school burned in 1905, a school was built next door to Bethesda Methodist Church on Bethesda Church Road. A dedicated citizen of the community, J. A. Alford, donated the land, materials, and timber for the school. Men of the community cut and hauled the timber to the sawmill and then built the school which opened July 9, 1905. The new school consisted of one large room and a cloakroom with shelves, where the students placed

### FAST FACTS

**Address:** 525 Bethesda School Road  
Lawrenceville, GA 30044

The following have served as principals of Bethesda Elementary School:

1935	Rufas Brooks
1946–1947	N.W. Evans
1948–1952	Boyd Q. Baggett
1953–1955	R.C. Holstun
1955–1957	Lyle Coker
1957–1965	W.M. Pickens
1965–1969	T. L. Brady
1969–1979	Rodger Naugle
1979–1981	Jean Murphy
1981–1985	Ivan Bagby
1985–1993	Connie Greenman-Vance
1993–1999	Cheryl Wilson
1999–2003	Brenda Anderson
2003–2007	Nancy Morrison
2007–Nov 2013	Deborah Harris
Dec 2013–Present	Pam J. Williams

**School Colors:** Red and White

**School Mascot:** Cardinal



their dinner pails. Also present was a bell tower with a large bell, which was rung to signal area children the time for studies to begin.

Bethesda Elementary School modestly began as a one-teacher, one-room school. The school was heated by a potbellied stove. The wood was donated by area residents and chopped by the larger male students. These same students brought the wood inside and took turns making the fires. Several long benches were placed around the stove; and on very cold days, all the students were allowed to sit close in order to keep warm. Water was obtained from a spring, which is still present.



In its early days, Bethesda School had one teacher for grades one through seven. The children attended school four months in the winter season. The school day lasted from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. If crops did not have to be planted or gathered, parents could pay the teacher so their children could attend a private term for a few more weeks.

By 1914 or 1915, two full-time teachers were employed, and the school term was four months in the winter and two months in the spring. The school was experiencing enough growth to merit an addition. A second classroom was added, again by community residents. Also built at this time, was a brush arbor where students sat on slabs laid across logs from the sawmill. Curriculum consisted of reading (from Elson's Readers), arithmetic to square and cube roots, grammar, spelling, and geography.

In 1930, women of the Bethesda community organized a Parent Teacher Association and elected Verda Cain president. One lone male, Alvin Thompson, was active in the early PTA. Lowell Thomas, famous radio personality who was on the faculty of Emory University at the time, was one of the speakers at a PTA meeting during this time. Throughout these early years the PTA continued to thrive, and the parent involvement increased.

In about 1930, Henry Walker, principal of Monroe A & M School, showed the value of school consolidation to the Bethesda, Luxomni, Oakland, and Craig's Academy areas. Consolidation of these four schools took place in 1931.

That same year, the school was relocated to its present site at 525 Bethesda School Road, Lawrenceville. The land for the school was donated to the Gwinnett County Board of Education by the Alford family, and the school was built by volunteer parent help under the supervision of Alvin Thompson. The State Board of

Education donated \$50 per classroom for the original building, which is still in use today. The completed school consisted of four classrooms for students in grades one through nine. There were four teachers. Restrooms were outside, and coal-heated potbellied stoves were used to keep classrooms warm. Teachers were expected to keep classrooms clean, since

there were no custodians.

Six teachers were employed in the late 1930s. By 1939, that number had grown to 12 and to 16 by 1941. Additions were made to the original building in the late 1930s. By 1941, grades one through 11 were housed in seven classrooms, and there was a gymnasium/auditorium. A cafeteria was located in the basement of the gymnasium.

At this point in Bethesda's history, the curriculum consisted of English, mathematics, social studies, music and spelling. There also were courses in home economics and vocational, commercial, and agricultural education. An agricultural building was added to the campus in the late 1940s but was removed from the school property in 1981. The area children, upon completion of the graduation requirements from Bethesda School, were certainly prepared to begin life in the farming community or to go on to college.

During World War II and into the late 1940s, the school continued to serve the community's youth in grades one through 11. The school developed an outstanding reputation for its boys' and girls' basketball teams, which won county, district, and state championships.

As the Bethesda community grew in the 1950s, so did the school. Indoor restrooms were added, and a new cafeteria was built to meet the needs of an expanding school population. The year 1957 marked the last time a high school class graduated from Bethesda. A



# BETHESDA ELEMENTARY

*A learning environment that is safe, positive and challenging!*



consolidation process for high schools took place, and Bethesda students were rezoned to Central Gwinnett High School, while Bethesda continued to serve grades one through seven. In 1966, when Berkmar High School opened, much of the Bethesda high school attendance area was rezoned to Berkmar.

In the 1960s, a new building was added to house early childhood grades. In the middle 1960s and into the 1970s, the area surrounding the school experienced phenomenal growth. A new building containing classrooms and a library was added to the campus. In 1969, when the middle school concept was adopted by the Gwinnett County Board of Education, the sixth and seventh grades were moved from Bethesda to Lilburn Middle School. Two additions were completed during the 1970s.

During the 1980s and 90s, Gwinnett County and the area surrounding Bethesda Elementary School continued its growth spurt. A two-story addition was added to the back of one of the buildings, and the remaining buildings were completely renovated beginning in 1995 and ending in 2000.

Throughout the history of the school, the Cardinal has been the official school mascot. Red and white have been the school's colors.

Through the years there has been a concurrent increase in the student population and ethnic diversity. In the 1980s and 1990s, a new wave of citizens came to call the Lawrenceville area home, including new suburbanites from Atlanta and other U.S. cities and new immigrants from Asia, Africa, South America, Central America, and Central Europe. Today there are more than 30 countries represented and more than 28 different languages spoken.

The present facility occupies 17 acres of land, providing ecological and recreational learning. It encompasses more than 168,000 square feet and includes 60 classrooms, a cafeteria, a media center, three technology labs, an art room, a chorus room, a health education room, a math lab, a gymnasium, a Parent Center, and an outdoor classroom. There are four buildings, housing approximately 1,200 students and 140 staff members. Through the years, Bethesda School has continually progressed and expanded to meet the changing educational needs of the community's youth.

November 13, 2005, marked a momentous occasion as Bethesda Elementary staff, students, parents, and community members celebrated 100 years of educating children in the historic Bethesda community. The theme of the rededication was "Flying High for 100 Years." More than 600 people filled the Bethesda gym, which had been home to many state basketball championship teams, to share stories and honor those individuals who contributed to the success of our students. A particular highlight that day was the recognition of Bethesda's oldest living teacher, 89-year-old Mrs. Agnes Lovin Wells, who taught at Bethesda for 29 years, and Mr. Ralph Thompson, Bethesda's oldest living student, who attended Bethesda when it was a one-room schoolhouse in the early 1920s. A reception was held following the rededication.

The school continues its focus on how it can best serve students, preparing them for a bright future. In 2012, Bethesda Elementary School was recognized by the Georgia Department of Education as a Reward School for "Highest Progress" (top 10% of Title I schools). In 2013, the school initiated Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), an evidence-based, data-driven framework proven to reduce disciplinary incidents, increase a school's sense of safety, and support improved academic outcomes. In 2014 and 2015, the Georgia Department of Education recognized Bethesda with the "Operational" status designation. In 2014–15, the school was one of three elementary schools selected to pilot a dual language immersion program. Bethesda students in the inaugural kindergarten classes spent half of the day learning and speaking in Spanish. In the program, students are taught Language Arts and Social Studies in English while Science and Mathematics are taught in Spanish. The initial year was successful and plans are to add a grade level a year as these kindergartners continue their education.

At Bethesda Elementary School, we look forward to another century of teaching and learning in which we will continue to serve the community with pride in our historic heritage.