

# History of

## Norton Elementary School

Ground was broken for R. L. Norton Elementary School during the summer of 1985. The school was located at 3050 Carson Road at the corner of Lenora Church Road, just south of the city of Snellville in the community historically known as 'Lenora.' You should note that on January 21, 2005, the Gwinnett County Commissioners and the Department of Transportation renamed the road in front of R. L. Norton Elementary School Xavier Ray Court in honor of Xavier Ray, a Norton student who lost his life while trying to save the life of his five-year-old foster brother during a family outing at Tallulah Gorge State Park.

R. L. Norton Elementary School was created to help alleviate the overcrowding of students at Centerville and Annistown elementary schools. From its beginning, the school has been dedicated to the community it serves. By naming the building R. L. Norton Elementary School, the Gwinnett County Board of Education at its regular meeting on July 16, 1985, established that this school was to be a credit to its namesake, a man who devoted his life to service to his community and the schools therein.

Robert Lee Norton was a member of the Gwinnett County Board of Education from 1948 until 1958. He also served as trustee of Centerville School from the late 1920s until 1947. A lifelong resident of the Centerville area, Norton was known for his service to the community, church, and school. He headed many fundraising activities for the construction of school gymnasiums, playgrounds, community, and church facilities.

### FAST FACTS

**Address:** 3050 Xavier Ray Court  
Snellville, GA 30039

The following have served as principals of R.L. Norton Elementary School:

|                   |                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1986–1991         | Dr. Wanda Warner      |
| 1991–1996         | Nancy Samples         |
| 1996–2009         | Dr. Robert Peterson   |
| 2009–2011         | Dr. Daundria Phillips |
| 2011–June 2017    | Dr. Terry Watlington  |
| July 2017–Present | Melanie Lee           |

**School Colors:** Navy blue, silver  
**School Mascot:** Comets

As construction of the building proceeded with Bowen and Watson Construction Company, and Tony Smith as contractor, the Board named Wanda M. Warner as principal of the new school on February 11, 1986. Dr. Warner immediately established a parent-teacher association. This group held its first meeting on May 7, 1986, at Annistown Elementary School. Similarly, a local school advisory committee was established and held its first meeting on May 27, 1986. Dr. Warner asked for student suggestions for a school mascot and school colors. A vote was taken to decide that the mascot would be a bear and the colors would be red and blue. (Years later, the colors and mascot were changed to the navy blue and silver comets associated with the



South Gwinnett Cluster.) The groundwork for community involvement had been laid as the structure continued to take shape.

On July 1, 1986, formal occupancy of the building was given to the staff of Norton Elementary. Together, the principal, faculty, and parents organized the framework for the school with the exemplary teamwork that would be the trademark of its first year. A monumental task was accomplished by dedicated, goal-oriented and cooperative people.

On August 25, 1986, the doors were opened for students at Norton. A total staff of 71 teachers, paraprofessionals, and support personnel welcomed the 837 students to their new home. The majority of these students had previously attended Centerville Elementary and Annistown Elementary.

At the dedication for the building on September 21, 1986, the philosophy of the school was read. This philosophy was developed by teachers and parents and stated in part: "We believe R. L. Norton is a community within itself as well as a part of the larger communities of city, state, nation, and world. We will strive to foster within each student a sense of responsibility, self-discipline, cooperation, and self-worth to grow as contributing members of a community today and into the future. We recognize that each member is unique and valuable to the community as a whole." A significant effort has been made to establish policy and procedures founded on this philosophy. The two sons and relatives of Robert Lee Norton, along with friends, parents, and children, attended this inspirational event. A portrait of Norton was donated by his family and is displayed in the school lobby. Students and guests are reminded of his dedication to service to children and the community in which he resided.

During the 1988–89 school year, an addition to the existing building was constructed and occupied during December. This addition provided 13 classrooms and a special education suite to help house the student population that now exceeded 1,100 with 105 teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff.

Also during the 1988–89 school year, Norton was named a Georgia School of Excellence in Language Arts by the Georgia Council of Teachers of English. In addition, first-grade teacher Rita VanFleit was named the Georgia Elementary Science Teacher of the Year.

In 1991, Norton became a Charter member of the League of Professional Schools. As a member of the League, the school took significant steps in implementing

shared-decision making, teacher empowerment, and site-based management. The League encourages continual improvement in curriculum and instruction through action research, shared governance, and a covenant for teaching and learning. Through the shared governance process, the faculty and staff took responsibility for all major decisions regarding curriculum and instruction, technology, discipline, and local school staff development, all of which were based on Norton's schoolwide goals determined through the Local School Plan for Improvement initiative-setting process. Norton's high level of commitment to shared decision-making led to the creation of a local school interviewing and hiring committee, which further enhanced the teaching environment. In recognition of such practices, the school was designated by the Lehigh University Study Team as a national model for the implementation of shared governance. As a result, the school became a targeted school for other League schools to visit as a result of its commitment to the League.

R.L. Norton Elementary is very fortunate to have a tremendous amount of technology available for teacher and student use. Through the first Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) programs, Norton was able to supply IBM computers to the school at a ratio of one computer for every 20 students. All certified teachers have a laptop provided to them for professional use. In addition to the classroom computers, Norton has a productivity lab for all of the students.

Norton was the first school in Gwinnett County to acquire the Josten's Computer Learning Lab, which enables Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade students, as well as limited English speaking and remedial education students, to work at their own instructional level emphasizing vocabulary, word analysis, comprehension, study skills, and writing. Due to Norton's success with Josten's, it was asked to be a national demonstration site.

Norton Elementary also served as the Lighthouse School for the ArtsConnect Consortium. ArtsConnect is an interdisciplinary model for integrating theatre, dance, visual art, and music into content areas using a common thinking skill as a focus for curriculum and instruction. Norton's visual art teacher at the time was the ArtsConnect founder and Project Director. Funding was secured from legislative appropriations through the Georgia Challenge Grant and from private foundations, with matching funds supplied by participating school systems and local schools. As the Lighthouse School, the Norton Elementary faculty hosted educators who came

to train in arts integrated instruction, brain-compatible teaching and learning, and working with the children of poverty.

Since 1996, there has been tremendous growth in the student population. Enrollment now stands at approximately 1,100 students. During this time, the percentage of minority students has risen from 7% to 77%. To accommodate the growth in population, a two-story addition went under construction in the summer of 2004 and was completed in December of 2005. The addition included 32 regular education classrooms, 2 art rooms, 2 music rooms, 2 computer labs, and several rooms for special education and other support services. Renovations to the rest of the building were completed during the summer of 2006. In spite of the new construction, Norton opened the 2006–07 school year with 25 trailers. A new elementary school—Rosebud Elementary School—opened in 2008 to relieve overcrowding in the South Cluster.

Throughout the years, Norton Elementary has remained steadfast in its high expectations it holds for student achievement. As a result, its students and teachers have met the challenge!

Norton's teachers have earned much acclaim from the professional community. Our teachers have earned awards including: the Atlanta Journal & Constitution's Honor Teacher Award (3 teachers have earned this designation); Gwinnett County Teacher of the Year Finalist; District Science Teacher of the Year (2 teachers have earned this designation); County Gifted Program Teacher of the Year; Veterans of Foreign Wars Teacher of the Year; Brigham Young University Teacher of the Year; Turner Broadcasting Corporation's Elementary Teacher of the Year for Georgia; State Science Teacher of the Year; and much more.

In recent years, the school's commitment to its students and school community has resulted in a number of honors including the school's recognition from the Georgia Department of Education as a 2015–16 Reward School in the "High Progress" category. The award honors schools among the top 10% of Title I schools in the state making the most progress in improving performance of the "all students" group over three years on statewide assessments. Norton also was selected by the Georgia Department of Education as a 2016 winner of the Georgia Family-Friendly Partnership School Award. This award recognizes the partnership between schools, families, and communities

that leads to increased student achievement. The state also recognized Norton as a "Beating the Odds School" in 2016-2017 (an honor it has earned for a number of consecutive years).

The school continually looks for ways to challenge students. Norton collaborated with the Gwinnett Environmental and Heritage Center (GEHC) to promote STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) teaching and learning. Every year, more than 150 Norton students visit the center for a field trip. Due to our continuous collaboration, GEHC has recognized our school as a STEM partner school two years in a row. In the area of creating a positive school environment, the school is an active PBIS school. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) encourages positive behaviors with recognition for those students who exhibited appropriate school conduct. And as part of the school's participation in the College and Career Readiness Initiative, all students participated in Norton's annual Careers on Wheels and Career Day. Family members, merchants, and experts in their fields assembled to teach students about their chosen professions. The school also offers a wide variety of extracurricular clubs for students including Art Club, Cheerleaders, Chorus, Drum Club, Math Club, Science Club, Readers Rally Team, and Dazzlers Dance Club.

As you can see, Norton Elementary is still doing its part to develop contributing members of a community today and into the future.

