

# History of

## Berkeley Lake Elementary School

Shirley Davis-Chapman, principal, greeted the students on August 29, 1983, as Berkeley Lake Elementary School formally opened its doors for students. The staff worked all weekend to prepare the school for opening. Located inside the city limits of Berkeley Lake at 4300 Berkeley Lake Road, Duluth, the school derived most of its 884 students as a result of rezoning from Peachtree Elementary and B. B. Harris Elementary schools. The students had registered at Peachtree since their new school was not finished prior to opening date.

Joining Mrs. Davis-Chapman in the front office as Instructional Lead Teacher (ILT) was her former co-worker at Knight Elementary, Yvonne Fincher. Most of the 40 teachers were from the two feeder schools. The community of Berkeley Lake welcomed its new residents with a reception at the lakeside chapel on August 26.

During that first year, the enrollment continued to grow and concluded with a total of 1,089 students. The 'Berkeley Bear' became the official mascot of the school, with the students wearing T-shirts featuring bears, the school's newspaper being named The Berkeley Beehive and the faculty communique being entitled The Bear Essentials. Berkeley Lake colors were set as royal blue and cream.

Having each student plant a flower bulb on the school grounds helped the school earn the Clean School Award presented by Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful. The PTA, under the direction of its first presidents, Mr. and Mrs. Harold Cremer, had earned the 950 bulbs as a bonus to its fundraiser for the school.

### FAST FACTS

**Address:** 4300 S. Berkeley Lake Road  
Duluth, GA 30096

The following have served as principals of Berkeley Lake Elementary School:

1983–1993	Shirley (Davis) Beard
1993–1994	Jan Hall
1994–2003	JoAnn Brown
2003–2008	Leigh Westcott
2008–2012	Dr. F.A. McLeod
2012–2017	Dr. Susan Bearse
2017–Present	Dr. Lesley Pendleton

**School Colors:** Purple

**School Mascot:** Berkeley Bear

In November of the following year, Governor Joe Frank Harris was filmed with students in the library for television public service spots to promote American Education Week. Miss Fincher became assistant principal and, with the enrollment growing, Judi Rogers became part-time ILT during the year. The faculty had increased to 56. The school-wide assertive discipline program and a teacher's duty-free lunchroom plan were implemented at the beginning of the year.



Berkeley Lake students won at the state level in Future Problem Solving and Odyssey of the Mind. Students were also winners in county writing contests. The fifth-grade FOCUS classes built a school nature trail on the grounds to help the school again earn the Clean School Award from Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful.

The 'Read-In' in the spring brought many dignitaries from throughout the area into classrooms to read to students during National Library Week. The Bear Prints became the official title of the school newspaper.

The 1985-86 year began with 1,238 students, 68 staff members and nine portable classrooms. Work on a new addition to the building was begun in March. Miss Fincher returned to the ILT position.

The Art Club assembled a colorful felt flag designed to represent the school at an exhibit at the Twin Towers Building during Youth Art Month. In February, the poems of Berkeley Lake students were featured in the local newspaper to express the feelings of the fifth-graders about the Challenger space shuttle tragedy.

Barbara Lunsford joined the other 111 total staff members as assistant principal for the 1986-87 school year. There were 12 new classrooms in an added wing, one portable classroom and 1,343 students. The fourth-grade classes took a three-day science study trip to Rock Eagle in the spring. The fifth-grade classes extended their knowledge of energy and space with a trip to Huntsville, Alabama. With a new addition completed at Peachtree Elementary, 259 students from Berkeley Lake were rezoned to Peachtree effective the next year.

The 1987-88 school year opened with 'wellness' being a school goal. J. R. Proud was the new assistant principal and Debra Holmes was the new ILT. There were 60 faculty members and approximately 1,130 students. In celebration of the Constitution's Bicentennial, the student body buried a time capsule by the flagpole in front of the building. The box, containing artifacts of 1987 along with every child's name, is to be opened in 100 years.

A new driveway for buses was cut through the front woods, so the PTA created a new nature trail and outdoor classroom in the remaining woods. The Video Cubs Club's production of 'Your Future's So Bright' received recognition at the International Media Festival. Berkeley Lake had the most students recognized with achievement awards in writing of all schools participating in the Georgia Council of Teachers of English awards program. The school won the Clean School Award again.

Four portable classrooms were part of the scene as the 1988-89 school year began with about 1,220 students and a faculty of 66. Jean Schultz was a new ILT. On November 1, 1988, the school cemented its Perfect Partnership with Joan Glancy Hospital with a ceremony to dedicate the new walking trail at the rear of the building. Rezoning occurred in the spring to fill the new Chattahoochee Elementary School to

open in the fall of 1989.

"Take A Byte Out of the Future" was the theme for the 1989-90 school year. With the opening of Chattahoochee Elementary, many students were rezoned. Berkeley Lake had 40 K-5 classes and four self-contained classes. We participated in the Kroger "Earning for Learning" program, where grocery receipts were collected and turned into Kroger. Every \$200,000 earned us an Apple computer. For every 10 computers earned, the school received a free computer. Berkeley Lake was one of the first schools in the county to receive a free computer.

In 1989, Berkeley Lake and Peachtree Elementary were the first GCPS schools to host a Kindergarten Roundup. The Kindergarten Roundup was held the week after the county-wide kindergarten registration. Parents and rising kindergartners came to the school, where the students visited in a kindergarten classroom for about one hour, while the parents got an overview of the kindergarten curriculum.

1989-90 saw PTA membership at 100%, various Hurricane Hugo relief projects, and the PTA scrapbook won 3rd place. The kindergarten grade level collected cans for recycling, in order to "adopt" a toucan at the zoo. With our emphasis on technology, the first school-wide Apple computer lab was opened. Berkeley Lake, along with Rockbridge Elementary, got the first and only Jostens Integrated Learning Labs as models for Gwinnett. Berkeley Lake was recognized as being "technologically savvy".

What a great year, 1990-1991, was for Berkeley Lake. Our theme, "Health and Harmony - It's a Family Affair", focused our attention on wellness activities, both physical and mental. The "100 Mile Club" was formed, with assemblies and awards for those who met various milestones. In the fall, the counseling department organized a pumpkin carving contest, and a pumpkin relay race. The students enjoyed watching faculty and administrators participate in the relay race. All new playground equipment was purchased by the PTA.

Berkeley Lake voted DeAnn Crawford as the 1990-91 Teacher of the Year. Mrs. Crawford went on to be selected as the Gwinnett County Elementary Teacher of the Year.

1990 saw the drug awareness program, D.A.R.E. - Drug Abuse Resistance Education, at Berkeley Lake. A police officer, trained as a DARE instructor, came and worked with our 5th graders over 17 weeks.

In the spring, "Operation Cooperation", a play written and produced by the Berkeley Lake faculty, was performed by our special education classes. We continued participating in the "Earning for Learning" program, earning more computers for our classes and labs.

During 1990-91, students wrote letters, made banners and sent Valentines to support our troops involved in the Persian Gulf. The slogan on the banners was, "Friendship starts within our hearts and reaches around the world."

1991-92 Marion Sebastian was selected as the BLES TOTY.

1992–93 brought about the realization that there were going to be big changes happening at “the Lake”. Simpson Elementary, the new Berkeley Lake relief school, was under construction and would open in the fall of 1993. The principal of Berkeley Lake, Shirley Beard, was named the new principal of Simpson Elementary. All students south of the Peachtree Parkway dividing line were rezoned to Simpson.

Students participated during this school year, in a mock presidential election. Our Odyssey of the Mind team placed 3rd in their competition. Shirley Beard was the Counseling Administrator Advocate of the year for Counselors in 1993.

1992–93 was also the 10th year that Berkeley Lake had been opened. There were various celebrations throughout the year. One of the celebrations saw each class bringing in a sheet cake. All sheet cakes were then put together to form a giant “patchwork sheet cake.” The picture of this patchwork cake was published in the paper. We also had a breakfast open house, where anyone who had been associated with Berkeley Lake could come back and visit. Students collected pennies and purchased a life-size carved “Berkeley Bear” for the front hall.

PTA goals were met and were celebrated with hot air balloon rides for the administration and the teachers of the classes with the highest participation.

Jan Hall was named the new principal for Berkeley Lake, for the 1993–94 school year. She was only the second principal in school history. The school again went through a “downsizing”, due to the opening of Simpson. There were 38 K–5 classes and seven self-contained classes. We continued with our motto of, “Friendship begins within the heart and reaches around the world.” Marion Sebastian was named the Gifted Program Teacher of the Year by the National Association for Gifted Educators. Berkeley Lake also had its first yearbook published.

In 1994–95, Berkeley Lake again got a new principal. JoAnn Brown, a Simpson Elementary assistant principal. Other administrative changes were a new assistant principal, Maria Chininis, who came to us from Hopkins Elementary.

This year, we adopted, “Working Together to Cross the Finish Line” as the PTA slogan. Many traditions continued at Berkeley Lake – Project Self-Esteem, DARE, Student Council, and field trips. PTA sponsored wonderful cultural arts events. Students participated in planting projects around the school.

“Our Team Generates Steam” took us into the 1995–96 school year. The administration added another assistant principal, Sharon Reddick, who job-shared with Mrs. Chininis. Debbie Jackson, a gifted education teacher, was named our Teacher of the Year. PTA sponsored skate nights at both ice and roller rinks. The chorus performed at the Justice Center, and Joan Glancy Hospital.

August, 1996, brought us “Reaching for the Stars.” Our administrative team saw no changes for the first time since the 1993–94 school year. One of our 5th grade teachers, Mary Brooks Sewell, was named Teacher of the Year. The Berkeley

Lake cafeteria was named the “Bear Cub Cafe”. Students again participated in a mock presidential election, which helped them to identify with the national election. Our first annual Sock Hop was initiated this year, and was a huge success. ESOL teachers, along with the rest of the faculty, hosted the “ESOL Family Night”. Families of our non-English speaking population brought in native foods and some dressed in their country’s native costumes. All staff, students and their families were invited to celebrate the diversity of Berkeley Lake.

A lot was happening at Berkeley Lake during 1997–98. As we “worked together to build a brighter future”, a new gym was built, kindergarten camp— an opportunity for upcoming kindergarten students— was first held, a water pond was built in front of the building, and one of our first graders won at the county level in the Reflections contest.

Grade levels went on many exciting field trips, including Tybee Island, the Tennessee Aquarium, Zoo Atlanta, and Fernbank. Berkeley Lake was awarded a tutoring grant that enabled us to have Duluth High School students come and work with some of our 3rd graders.

Berkeley Lake was getting a major renovation during the 1998–99 school year. We definitely were a “hard hat” area. A new addition was added on where the old gym had been. Throughout the year and summer of 1999, the media center was expanded, the cafeteria was enlarged, we gained a conference room, 15 classrooms, two computer labs, and an office area reconfiguration. The summer of 1999 had the summer office staff housed at Mason Elementary.

During the 98–99 school year, it was business as usual though. Kathy Bentley represented Berkeley Lake as our Teacher of the Year, as well as being named the Bell South Teacher of the Year. She received her award from Bell South at a Braves Game. One student was a national Reflections contest winner and our Future Problem Solving team went to Athens, Georgia for the competition, and came in 3rd. Reading was a major theme, as always, with RAD— Read All Day, and high school Bear Buddies. We collected for UNICEF in the fall and filled stockings for those in need during the wintertime.

Camp Invention came to Berkeley Lake the summer of 1999. For one week, campers took electronics and other machinery apart to see how they were constructed, created their own inventions, and enjoyed being part of such a creatively stimulating camp experience. At the end of the week, parents were invited in to see their children’s inventions.

But, most of all, we eagerly anticipated our new addition!

And we’re in! Everyone was so excited about all of our new “elbow room”. The music and art rooms are so spacious and give plenty of space to budding artists and musicians. In the media center, there is room for lots more books and other media that is used by all, as well as a room to house all of the broadcasting equipment— 5th grade students, who did the morning and afternoon broadcasts, are enjoying having a “newsroom”.

There were other happenings in the school besides just excitement over our new addition. Jenny Rindt was our Teacher of the year, and one of our students won at the International Media Festival!

Onto a new millennium, where we were “Planting Seeds for Success” With an enrollment of 1,142, for the 2000–01 school year, our Berkeley Lake community strove to address new challenges and opportunities.

Berkeley Lake fielded its first Relay For Life team. All during the year, this team spearheaded efforts to raise money for breast cancer research. One event was the Teacher Talent Show, which was a huge success.

PTA was very active, as always. They sponsored Donuts for Dad, a Writer in Residence, received a grant to create a butterfly garden, and logged 3200 volunteer hours in our school.

Richard Cohn was named as our Teacher of the Year – the first male TOTY from Berkeley Lake! The school received a grant for additions to the outdoor classroom, was honored as a Lighthouse School for the Arts through the Arts Connect program, and 50 staff members were trained in InTech. Students participated in a mock election, had artwork displayed at ChickFilA and Promina Children’s Clinic, and 2nd grade participated in an Olympic games celebration, to honor the Sydney Australia 2000 games.

2001–02, our enrollment was 1,167. Jean Schultz had retired the year before, and Lorraine Sparks was our new assistant principal. Lorraine came to Gwinnett County from DeKalb County. Julie Harstead represented Berkeley Lake as the Teacher of the Year. The Relay for Life team adopted “Fighting the Battle Against Cancer in the USA” as their theme.

The arts were a big part of life at “The Lake”, as always. Berkeley Lake had eight teachers, in grades K–5, who piloted the Arts Connect program. Artists came into the classrooms and gave an AKS-based lesson, delivered through some form of the arts, dance, song, etc. Berkeley Lake also hosted “The Artists of Berkeley Lake” art show. Local artists displayed their works in the gym. The whole community was invited.

PTA sponsored ice and roller skate nights, Giving trees, wonderful cultural arts programs, and logged 5,000 volunteer hours. PTA also worked on beautifying the grounds and were instrumental in a “safe walk to school” project.

The Berkeley Lake faculty participated in the state Pay for Performance program. The faculty established goals, according to the state guidelines, and documented successful completion of the goals. Although not awarded the monetary prize for this year, Berkeley Lake was successful in the following year. Teachers also participated in the Teacher Support Specialist pilot, through Mercer University.

Our enrollment was on the rise again in 2002–03, reaching 1,173, and our school had 11 trailers.

BLAST, the Berkeley Lake After School Tutoring program was formed this year. PTA gave funds towards the purchase of

Leapfrog Literacy Centers and formed the Dad’s Club. These fathers became very active in the school helping with various projects.

We chose Kathy Oldham as our Teacher of the Year. Kathy was a reading specialist. The Relay for Life team had a “Commitment to a Cure” and raised \$10,828 for cancer research.

The Berkeley Lake Chess Team placed 3rd in the tournament at Norcross Elementary.

2003–04 was starting out to be another bustling year. Our enrollment rose to 1,210. With the retirement of Joann Brown, Leigh Westcott was appointed as our new principal. Leigh had been an assistant principal at Mountain Park Elementary and Bethesda Elementary.

Students were very active at Berkeley Lake this year. The Destination Imagination team placed first at their competition. 118 students submitted 148 entries in the Reflections Contest – we even had two county winners. 325 students participated in the Sunshine Math program. This program gives participating students a math worksheet every week. Parent volunteers grade the sheets and return them the next week. Periodically, participating students are treated to an ice cream party.

Our Relay for life team earned their highest dollar amount this year - \$17,334! One fundraiser was a spaghetti dinner, which earned \$2,000. Janie Doroff, a gifted education teacher and a member of the Relay for life team, was the 2003–04 Teacher of the Year.

In 2004–05, we decided to “Dive Into Learning.” Chesney Elementary opened as a relief school for the Duluth cluster. Our enrollment dropped to 1,110 due to this rezoning.

2004–05 saw a lot of firsts at Berkeley Lake – first Bingo Night, first Lego Club, and our Berkeley Lake Running Club ran in the Peachtree Junior Road Race.

Berkeley Lake was represented by our Teacher of the Year, Angie Smith, at the annual banquet. Relay for life donated over \$6,600 to cancer research.

In 2005–06, Berkeley Lake saw some administrative changes. Maria Chininis and Sharon Reddick transferred to other schools in the county. Rania Sukkari came to Berkeley Lake as an assistant principal, from a Houston, Texas, high school. Lorraine Sparks was appointed as principal at Annistown Elementary, and Lisa Share, a gifted education teacher from Jackson Elementary, was appointed to take Lorraine’s place.

Berkeley Lake was so proud of its accomplishments this year. One of our students earned an “Excellence in Media Production” award from the 2006 International Student Media Festival, our Lego Robotics team competed at the state level, and we had two county winners in the Reflections contest, one of which was entered in the state competition. “Terrific Thursdays”, an after-school opportunity for students to take classes in cooking, language, dance, etc., took off with a bang. We had about 200 students each session. We improved

relationships with and increased the number of our business partners. Alice Baines, a 4th grade teacher, was voted on by the staff as our Teacher of the Year. The Relay for Life team was very active, “Lassoing A Cure”. Over \$7,800 was donated through their efforts.

As we rolled into 2006–07, our enrollment leveled off at about 1,105, with 13 trailers. There were 59 homerooms this year.

One of the projects addressed this year was a “mini-makeover” of the office. Walls were painted and decorated in the clinic, bathrooms, workroom, main office, and office hallway.

The art department sponsored “First Artworks.” Student artwork was put on display, for parents to view and purchase. All artwork was framed in black frames. Many pieces were used to decorate the office, and they look fabulous. It is amazing how talented our students are. The yearbook cover for this year, was designed by one of our 5th graders. All 5th graders had a chance to submit entries. The theme was, “The Future’s So Bright for Berkeley Lake Bears”.

In the fall, the PE department sponsored its 3rd annual Family Fun Run/Walk, where families run or walk a mile or two mile route. After returning to the school, a pancake breakfast was served. Again, all donations went towards Relay for Life. Our Berkeley Lake Running Bears participated again in the Peachtree Jr.. Road Race. We had the second highest participate rate!

As always, Berkeley Lake students and families were very generous in their giving. Each grade had a specific month that they concentrated on donating items, as well as the whole school collected for UNICEF, Giving Trees, and stuffing stockings.

Another great accomplishment for the 2006–2007 school year, was that one of our counselors, Laura Marantz, was named the Gwinnett County Elementary Counselor of the Year!

In 2008, our school saw another leadership change as Principal Leigh Westcott transferred to become principal of R.D. Head Elementary. The new principal at Berkeley Lake was Dr. FA McLeod. Dr. McLeod served as the leader of Berkeley Lake until her retirement in 2012. At that time, the Gwinnett County Board of Education tapped Dr. Susan Bearse to lead BLES. Dr. Bearse served as the school’s principal until her retirement in 2017 when Dr. Lesley Pendleton was named to lead the school.

Our school represents the global population of our district as it serves a very diverse group of students and families. Berkeley Lake became a Title I school, earning funding for additional teachers and instructional materials. A Parent Center was expanded to engage parents in volunteering and to offer reading and math materials for parents to check out for home support. Parent and community support are evident in many of the school’s initiatives and the school’s PTA has won numerous

awards. This support was in full force as Berkeley Lake celebrated its 30th anniversary during the 2012–13 school year. The celebration included students creating a Community Canvas that they all touched, with a local artist, and a special event to dedicate the art to the school. That support continues today as parents and community members participate in activities such as the school’s Half-Hour Heroes Program and CAREing Paws. In addition, mentors from the community and homework clubs also support student achievement. And the school’s Parent Center looks for ways to involve parents, including offering books and mathematics materials to check out for home support.

At this same time, Berkeley Lake Elementary School participated as a pilot school for the district’s eCLASS initiative with a 2nd grade class launching BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) to support instruction.

BLES provides a number of extracurricular and leadership opportunities for students including Student Council, Safety Patrol, Peer Mediators, Broadcast Team, School Store, Green Team, Math Conundrums, Math Exemplars, PTA Reflections, Kindergarten Camp, Camp Invention, Club Invention, Art Club, Chess Club, Chorus, Strings Club, and the Duluth Kiwanis-sponsored K-Kids Service Club. Competitive student teams included Witzzle Pro Math, Readers Rally, Running Bears, and WordMasters. Some of the most popular activities for students include the Peer Mediators group, the IT (Information and Technology) Girls Club, the Green Team, and the chorus.

Berkeley Lake Elementary is a proud member of the Duluth Cluster. While the school sports the purple and white associated with the Duluth schools, BLES has held on to its mascot— Berkeley the Bear. This allows the school to hold on to its proud history while also showing its cluster spirit.

