

Developing Community



One School's Fruitful Journey

This community works together
to create a school where
people come first.



“The white one;

that’s Mr. Stendera’s.” My tour guide is Alin, a sixth grade student at Brookside Elementary. “Do you see that one at the end? That’s Mrs. LeFort’s Volvo.” As we stand in the parking lot on a crisp fall morning, Alin is proving to me that he has memorized the make, model, and color of every staff member’s car. “That green Nissan– it’s been around here a lot lately. Is it yours?” I had been serving as the Vice-Principal of this suburban school for just a few weeks, and already he had registered the change in the population of cars. He looks at me with a big grin and a sparkle in his dark brown eyes. “I like that car. I think I’ll get one of those, someday.”

A year ago, Alin left his Romanian orphanage when he was adopted by an American couple. His transition has been understandably difficult, and he finds school very challenging. “Is it because you are still learning English,” I ask? “Yes, but I like this school very much. Every morning I get off the bus, I am excited because I see all the people I know. And I think about the exciting things we will do!” Alin’s enthusiasm for school may seem unusual. But Brookside is not your typical public school.

Built in 1959, the school is located in the City of Lake Forest Park, an affluent suburb directly north of Seattle, Washington. Brookside gets its name from adjacent Lyon’s Creek, a small

stream that meanders through a natural ravine and feeds into the north end of Lake Washington, just a few blocks away from the school. 100 foot Douglas Fir trees stand guard around the attractive school, remodeled just six years ago. Native northwest plants are nestled around the school's soft pink, green, and blue pastels. Walking in the front double-doors, one can't help but notice the care with which this school is kept. The office door, right at the entrance, has a sign that simply says "Welcome."

"Welcome to Brookside," I said as I shook the mother's hand. She had just moved to the neighborhood and wanted to explore the idea of registering her son, Ben. He had been involved in home education, but since they had moved, she thought it was worth at least checking the school out. "We haven't made up our minds yet. We are still leaning toward the idea of home schooling for a few more years. He's only seven."

I introduced myself as the new Vice-Principal of the school and explained that I had only been at the school a few weeks, but I would be glad to give them a tour of the school. As we walked the hallways, she commented on the

attractive student artwork and the impressive computer lab with all new iMacs. As we roamed the school, smiling students regularly went out of their way to say "Hi" not only to me, but to the new visitor as well. As we approached the doors to the gym, I noticed a student standing outside the doors, looking in the windows to see her classmates playing basketball. My visitor and I glanced at each other and smiled. We both knew that this young girl had been asked to step into the hallway for discipline reasons. It was at this moment I decided to take a risk.

"Hi, Amber. I'd like you to meet someone. She is visiting our school and considering whether to send her son here. What do you think of Brookside?"

She paused for a moment and I saw a glimmer in her eye. I immediately began to worry. What had I done? Asking a student in trouble to review the school is like asking an evicted tenant to write a recommendation of their landlord. Amber began "Sometimes the teachers can be really strict." Those first seven words made me regret my decision and I was beginning to imagine little Ben being home schooled through the twelfth grade.



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“But, most of the time, they are really nice. The teachers work us hard but it is also lots of fun. My mom said that I could choose which school I wanted to come to. When I visited Brookside I knew I wanted to come here. Mostly I decided because the school is so clean and well-cared for.” The mom and I smiled at each other, thanked Amber for her comments, and finished the rest of our tour. A few days later, Ben was registered for first grade.

The laughter increases in volume as I open the door to the staff lunch lounge. There is little talk about slow learners and misbehaving students, as is common in many schools. Instead, friends joke about weekend activities, UW Husky football games, and the recent presidential debates. This social atmosphere is epitomized by the creation of the “Lunch Bunch.” Five staff members have formed a lunch club where each member prepares gourmet meals one day per week. One staff member teases the ‘elite culinary quintet’ in a light-hearted way. The school librarian facetiously defends by citing a recent article about lunch clubs in Martha Stewart’s *Living* magazine. More laughter. “Kids here see laughter and joking,” says school psychologist Bob Wright. “They see their teachers as real people.”

The Lunch Bunch could be considered a symbol of the supportive community this school has developed. Kindergarten teacher Liz Travis explains: “My favorite aspect of Brookside is the staff. It is a dynamic mix of people, we all get along professionally, but also personally. Barely a week goes by where a group of

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us don’t get together socially. But most importantly, we support each other. If someone is in a crisis, the rest of the staff supports them. If another staff member had an in-grown toenail, we would bring them hot soup and drive them to school.”

First grade teacher Janet Giger tells the story of when her son D.J. broke his neck. “The staff was so supportive I couldn’t believe it. Not only with all the help they gave, like making meals, but just being there for us.” As tears begin to well up in her eyes, her appreciation for the staff is made clear. “In my fourteen years at this school, it has always been a close and supportive staff.”

“Friday Morning is for Trust Building.”

Scary visions came to mind when I first heard this. I imagined the staff in a circle, arm in arm, singing Kumbaya. 6th grade teacher Ken Goree explains, “It’s called Trust Building because we all trust that someone will bring the food.” I discover, to my relief, that it is simply an end-of-the-week social ritual. Fresh coffee is brewed, hot sticky buns are served, and the staff gathers for thirty

minutes of banter to end the week on an up-note. The custodian, librarian, and kindergarten teacher are laughing together. Secretaries, student teachers, and music specialist are all enjoying each other's company. As new teacher Mary Telstad summarizes: "There are no camps at this school. Everyone gets along. That is why I wanted to come to Brookside. I'm glad to be here."

This environment has not formed by accident.

Behind the Trust Building is the leadership of Rick Stendera, Brookside's Principal. A career educator, Rick deeply understands the link between school culture and quality of education. "You can't get to working on the instructional needs until relationships, caring and trust are given attention.

They are necessary for professional collaboration and innovation." Before becoming a Principal, he worked in staff development for fifteen years. His hard worked in fostering a social environment has formed a foundation for school-wide professional growth.

This year, the staff is involved in whole-faculty study groups. This staff development model is based on the assumptions that teachers should guide their own professional growth and collaboratively explore ways to improve learning for students. I am visiting with the technology study group. Two tables are pulled together in the library to seat the eight educators that chose to form this team. The music specialist, physical education specialist, librarian and classroom teachers are all exploring ways to use technology to help strengthen student learning.



Early mornings before school, students choose to work side-by-side with parent volunteers who run Brookside's Math Olympics program.

This is not easy work. Learning together in this self-guided manner requires that teachers share what is working and what isn't. They must become open about what they know and need to learn more about. They must be openly vulnerable with one another. Only in its first year of implementation, the staff is quickly forming groups that have worked through disagreements, developed norms for behavior, and are getting down to the difficult work of school improvement.

It is this commitment to education that has earned this staff its respected reputation throughout the Shoreline School District.

At the Shoreline Center, the district's headquarters, Math Teacher Specialist Terry Rose gives accolades to the staff. "What a great group of people. They are so fun, and such good teachers!"

It is not surprising that she is fond of the school. Last year, the staff asked her to help them design a math center that uses number games to improve student understanding. The project has been so successful that a group of Brookside teachers were asked to present their work at an upcoming statewide math conference.

The math center has drawn attention from the parents as well.

Each year, parents organize a "Pass the Hat" event to raise money for Brookside, highlighting a specific school initiative. This year's event was a \$250 per person wine and hors d'oeuvres party at a family's home. The house, built in the early 1900's, had a large circular driveway. Candle luminaries warmed the entrance. Guests were greeted by high-school aged Brookside graduates. A young pianist played jazz on an upright in the living room.

Conversation and laughter filled the downstairs of the expansive house. Delicious appetizers were passed and I was handed a glass of red wine.

I said hello to Ed Coleman, a parent I had met before the school year began. After commenting on how impressed I was with the gathering, he explained to me how this is indicative of the Brookside parents. "This community cares about their kids, so they care about their school. They want to do what they can to support their own kids, other people's

kids, and the school as a whole." In a later conversation, Ed explained how he became so involved in the school. "I started off as a volunteer in my daughter Hillary's kindergarten class; cleaning desks and filling paste containers. Four years later, as my son Tyler entered kindergarten, I found myself being asked to serve on Site

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Council. This year, I'm running the Math Olympics on Tuesday mornings. My last daughter, Linnea, is just two years old. The way I figure it, each of my children will spend seven years at Brookside; half of their public education career. I wanted to focus on having an impact that will help my kids. I'm looking at a fourteen-year volunteer career at this school. For me, I see it as 'the more I put in, the more I get out.'

Ed's commitment to the school is not unusual. Throughout the evening, parents explain to me that they see the school as a key component of this tight-knit community. "Tonight, my kid's are being baby-sat by Bob's kids," one parent explains. "Next party, maybe his kids will be over at my house. You see; this community is close. We see each other at soccer games, back to school night, Indian Princesses, you name it. This community values family!"

Judging by the participation in the PTA, this appears to be true. When I asked the school secretary for a list of the PTA Board of Directors, I was handed a four-page list! The document described sixty different positions filled by eighty-eight parent names, including phone numbers. Parent Mary Lee Snorteland helped me understand the motivation. "I volunteer because this is a great group of kids. The teachers appreciate the help and I also want to give back to my community." The PTA runs after school programs that include bus transportation, sponsors cultural assemblies for all students, sells school supplies at the beginning of the year and gives each teacher \$200 to purchase

materials. In addition, they make field trip scholarships available to lower income students.

Brookside has a divided population.

This has the potential to be a source of conflict. Although the majority of students live in the wealthy City of Lake Forest Park, a small part of the student population lives in a lower income area of the neighboring City of Shoreline. Students from this area live in modest homes, inexpensive apartments, or a federally subsidized housing project: Ballinger Homes.

"In some cases, people had to learn that poverty isn't a crime!"

This mixing of populations occurred when the school attendance areas were redesigned over eight years ago. The school has worked hard to help these different populations get along. Sixth grade teacher Kaydee McGillivray tells

the story of why all sixth grade students go on a three-day trip to Camp Orkila in the San Juan Islands. "We had tremendous tensions between students of different socio-economic backgrounds. We experienced similar tensions between parents. In some cases, people had to learn poverty isn't a crime!"

This thoughtful and caring response is present in many actions taken by the

staff. The school's "Family Center" is prominently located at the entrance of the building. Decorated in home-style furnishings, it serves as a location for parents to engage with the school in a comfortable manner. From volunteer "Cut and Chat" sessions to meetings with parents about troubled students, this room's area rugs and comfortable furniture help maintain Brookside's reputation of warmth and caring.

Brookside has a complex understanding of community.

In their work with students, teachers hold regular "classroom meetings" and use a behavior program called "Love and Logic" to develop strong classroom communities. In their work with each other, the sharing of compliments at the beginning of each staff meeting are indicative of the deep level of respect that binds this professional community. In addition, parents are clearly an integral part of the school community. It is sometimes difficult to walk through the office workroom because of the sheer number of volunteers photocopying worksheets, cutting butcher paper, and laminating student artwork. The concept of community is even stretching beyond the 'nuclear family' of student, parents, and staff.

Ron Seguin is the School Resource Officer for Brookside. He has been with the Lake Forest Park Police Department for eighteen years. He teaches the Drug Addiction Resistance Education

(D.A.R.E.) program to sixth grade students. He explains how the school is a part of the larger community. "This school is a catalyst for the functioning of the community in Lake Forest Park. The City Government, the Police Department, the school; we all come together to work for the students. The kids really appreciate the work I do. When I go to the middle school, they still remember me. Sometimes, I even get a hug!" He tells me that he is in the process of working with local businesses to donate money so he can buy t-shirts, workbooks, pencils and prizes to support his work with students.

Community participation can be seen in small ways, from the donation of Great Harvest Bakery bread during "teacher appreciation day" to Windermere Foundation exploring ways to help financially support the "Homework Factory" study program at Ballinger Homes. The school, in turn, is finding exciting ways to give back to the community. Recently, fifth grade students in Linda Cantrell's class helped Albertson's Grocery Stores design its new Albertsons.com delivery trucks. The project included employees coming from the company to work with the students on the design. Another

Profile

Number of students:	438
% Minority students:	16
% Free/Reduced Lunch:	12
Attendance rate %:	96
Average class size:	24

example is the community service requirement that all sixth grade students must complete. Teachers on the sixth grade team proudly share that, “Our society stays strong through service. The students must learn that they can make a difference in their local community. Ultimately, we are training citizens to work in a democracy.”

The Brookside community has been in development for years.

In the process, traditional boundaries have become permeable. Examples abound. Sonja Knudsen, a former teacher who is now on maternity leave for over a year, volunteers weekly to help keep the school’s web site running smoothly. Gina Wortinger was first a parent in the school community, became a member of site council, and now plays a third role as an Instructional Assistant in the Structured Teaching Program for autistic students. Mary Telstad teaches one classroom away from her step-sister Kaydee McGillivray. Family Advocate Shoubee Liaw became the foster parent for a sixth grade student when she realized that she could provide the structure that he needed. Shoubee makes the third staff member who has children attending the school!

This is only Shoubee’s second year at Brookside. She wanted to come to the school for not

only the family feeling, but for the leadership provided by the Principal. “Many people throughout the district spoke highly of Rick Stendera. He had a reputation of being collaborative, ethical, straight forward, and a man of his word.” Once here, she found that Rick actively contributed to the positive environment. “Rick is always in the community, he gives the school a lot of exposure. His good, strong leadership keeps a balance between meeting parent needs and supporting and enhancing the strengths of the staff.”

This appreciation of the Principal is heard from all staff members. Physical education teacher Betty LaForte describes, “Rick’s great leadership. He is trusting, supportive, understanding, caring and honest.” Teacher Liz Travis says that she gives credit to Rick Stendera for the quality of the school community. “Rick has brought stability to the school. He came to this school when we were going through some rough times with leadership. Even his first few years were rough. He constantly had to adjust to the staff. He has earned our respect. He is a great Principal.” Teacher Kaydee McGillivray



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has served for many years as the school's Principal Designee. She has learned first hand how hard Rick's job is. "Being a Principal is like being pecked to death by a chicken. Everyone asks you to help with everything all the time." Rick, as my mentor, summarizes the job in a slightly more positive tone: "If you don't get the little stuff taken care of, it'll kill you."

If the sense of community is Brookside's greatest

strength, then one might wonder where that strength gets its source. The answer might be found in the hopes and fears of Brookside's staff. They regularly and openly talk about their concerns over the future leadership of the school. At the end of this school year, Rick Stendera will be retiring from Brookside. He knows the transition to a new Principal is important. "I'm trying to help everyone understand our existing systems, policies, and procedures: what they are and how they function. I'm also trying to point out what areas still need help. I frequently find myself beginning sentences with 'Next year, a new Principal might...' I think this helps everyone prepare for the upcoming changes."

Whether one talks to staff, parents, or even students, the loss of Rick is already on everyone's mind. The community is concerned about holding on to the feeling of family. They are hoping for a leader that understands the importance

of community feeling that makes the school strong. Although Rick's presence is subtle and profound, there is a fear that it may not be everlasting. Ed Coleman summarizes the situation by simply stating, "The selection of the next Principal is probably the most important issue our school faces. Site Council must play an active role to get as much participation in the process as possible." He shared with me that his only experience with a search process was with his church. I wondered if this symbolized the powerful roles that this school's Principal plays: nurturer, encourager, and minister?

For now, the school community remains strong. The students regularly win the "Spirit Cup" awarded at Shorecrest High School's Spirit Night, an event where students from the elementary schools must show up in force and prove their own school spirit. Furthermore, parent participation is at its highest by all measures, from PTA membership to Parent Night attendance. The staff has a morale of which most schools can only dream. Most tellingly, however, is the voice of the students. They smile in the hallways, read eagerly in the library, sing joyfully in choir, and play respectfully at recess. As Liz B., a sixth grade student says, "We have a wonderful school. You should try to transfer your kids here."

Dan Keller is Administrative Intern serving as Vice-Principal at Brookside Elementary School in Lake Forest Park, Washington. This ethnographic portrait was part of his work in the Danforth Educational Leadership Program at the University of Washington.