

Birchwood Elementary School

Thank you to all the past and present contributors to this history, including: Jackie Albanese, Tom Buckley, Sue Kaufman, Clara Louise Ross, Kathy Putz and Sandy Shoor

Connected to the Past

Birchwood Elementary, like Craig and Glenclyff schools, has a direct connection with the public schools that came into existence during the 19th century, long before land developers and real estate agents began the process of changing Niskayuna from a rural area into the suburban residential community it is today. (Hillside and Rosendale schools were created after District centralization.)

Birchwood's direct antecedent was "Niskayuna Four," a school whose building still occupies its location on the west side of Rosendale Road just before that thoroughfare rejoins Route 7. The Beers Atlas published in 1866 shows a school on the same site, probably a

descendant of a public school built there at least as early as 1819, when "District Number Four" appears for the first time in the minutes of the Niskayuna Town Council. The history of "Niskayuna Four" is interestingly written about in the Niskayuna School District's 30th anniversary history book, *Thirty Years of Academic Excellence*, in an article by Betty Shaver.

1956-77

Birchwood School came into existence in 1956. It developed as a result of the centralization decision where several small Common School Districts were combined with the Van Antwerp "Union Free" District in 1953. Clara Louise Ross, a faculty member at Niskayuna Four, and then at Birchwood when it opened, de-



Pictured above is Birchwood's nature trail, a site for science and nature studies started by Principal Stephen Israel.

scribes Birchwood's opening days in *Thirty Years of Academic Excellence*. She tells of how Birchwood continued to grow, of the creation of its "nature park" under the leadership of its second principal, Stephen Israel, and of the enthusiastic support of the school's Parent Teacher Association.

Over the years, Birchwood children benefited from many new and innovative programs. These included a reading program for first-graders, overnight outdoor camping experiences for fifth-graders, and an Adirondack mountain climbing experience substituted as part of the health/science program. The school's physical education program focused on the mental and physical well-being of the child rather than the usual sports-oriented program. As part of the program, winter field trips were



Birchwood's direct antecedent was the Niskayuna Four School, pictured here in 1993. Today it is a day care center on Rosendale Road.



In this 2001 photo, a Birchwood student displays his "Stop the Violence" artwork. Niskayuna schools took part in various activities as part of an annual Capital Region campaign called Stop the Violence, which was aimed at raising awareness of all forms of violence.

taken to local cross country ski and skating areas.

Birchwood celebrated the country's bicentennial in May 1976 with a community-wide open house in which each grade level had developed materials describing an era in the history of the country. On display in the school lobby was a 200-gallon aquarium built and maintained by members of the Parent Teacher Organization. The aquarium was later used as a terrarium, full of wild flowers and plants from the Nature Park and maintained by students. Parents volunteered in the school as reading tutors and in the library.

Elementary school enrollment

declined in the late 1970s resulting in a surplus of space for elementary school pupils in the District. On February 7, 1977 the Board of Education voted to close Birchwood and consolidate the elementary school population into the four remaining schools. Although Birchwood did not operate as a Niskayuna public school for 14 years, it was leased to and operated by the private, non-profit Wildwood School for children with special needs from September 1977 to June 1991.

Birchwood re-opens in 1992

Change is the watchword of life. The declining elementary population began to increase again in the late 1980s. As the number of houses being built in the eastern portion of the school district increased, residents seeking the return of their neighborhood elementary school helped approve a referendum in December 1990 to reopen Birchwood Elementary.

The referendum funded some building refurbishing that included a new kitchen, expanded library, addition of a computer lab, renovated gym, new classroom furnishings and equipment, and improved outdoor

facilities. Thomas Buckley, who had served as the principal of Craig and Rosendale schools, was named the first principal of the newly renovated Birchwood School.

Mr. Buckley, along with the Parent Teacher Organization Transition Committee, chaired by Debbie Hind and Kathy Putz, set about organizing the re-opening. On February 8, 1992 they held the first walking tour of Birchwood. Community members, former students and staff returned that day to enjoy, once again, their neighborhood school.

Birchwood officially opened on September 9, 1992, with a student population of 237 and staff of 35. During the first year the Birchwood faculty set goals for the building and implemented a Shared Decision-Making Committee. The newly formed PTO raised approximately \$15,000 to provide fitness stations, a sound system for the auditorium, an After-School Enrichment Program, a popcorn machine, a school sign, shrubbery, funds for Arts in Education, and began planning for a new playground.



Early photo of Birchwood school, date unknown.

Niskayuna Schools at 50

1995

In 1995 Birchwood was involved in another referendum as the student population grew into the 300s. Four full-size classrooms were added along with several smaller rooms for specialized services. The gymnasium was doubled in size along with an expansion resulting in the present day school configuration. At this same time a new ball field was added and parking lots expanded.

New programs

Since 1992 several new programs were initiated. The 1,000 Book Club was established to foster a love of books among the pre-kindergarten population. One hundred eighty children and their families have participated in the program thus far. Also over the years a variety of reading incentive programs have been developed to encourage Birchwood students to read independently.

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Birchwood strives to involve students and families in hands-on investigations to bring learning to life. Every two years a Learning Fair is scheduled, encouraging all students to research and share an area of interest. At Family Science Night students and parents participate in scientific investigations.

At Birchwood the emphasis has been placed on integrating Character Education within all areas of the curriculum. The five themes of respect, responsibility, self-control, independence and tolerance have been stressed. This has helped build a strong Birchwood community of staff, parents and students.



Birchwood fifth-graders Bonnie Wilson (left) and Stephanie Kross display flowers they found at the Lock 7 pond in this fall 2000 photo. Students completed a variety of science and art activities at the pond.

We, at Birchwood, want to thank the entire community for the enthusiasm and dedication that has continued to make Birchwood a very special neighborhood school.

Birchwood Principals:

- Hugh J. Diamond, 1956-58
- Stephen Israel, 1958-63
- Edward Kowalski, 1963-77
- Building Closed: 1977-92
- Thomas Buckley, 1992-present