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The Almanac

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Home & Garden Design

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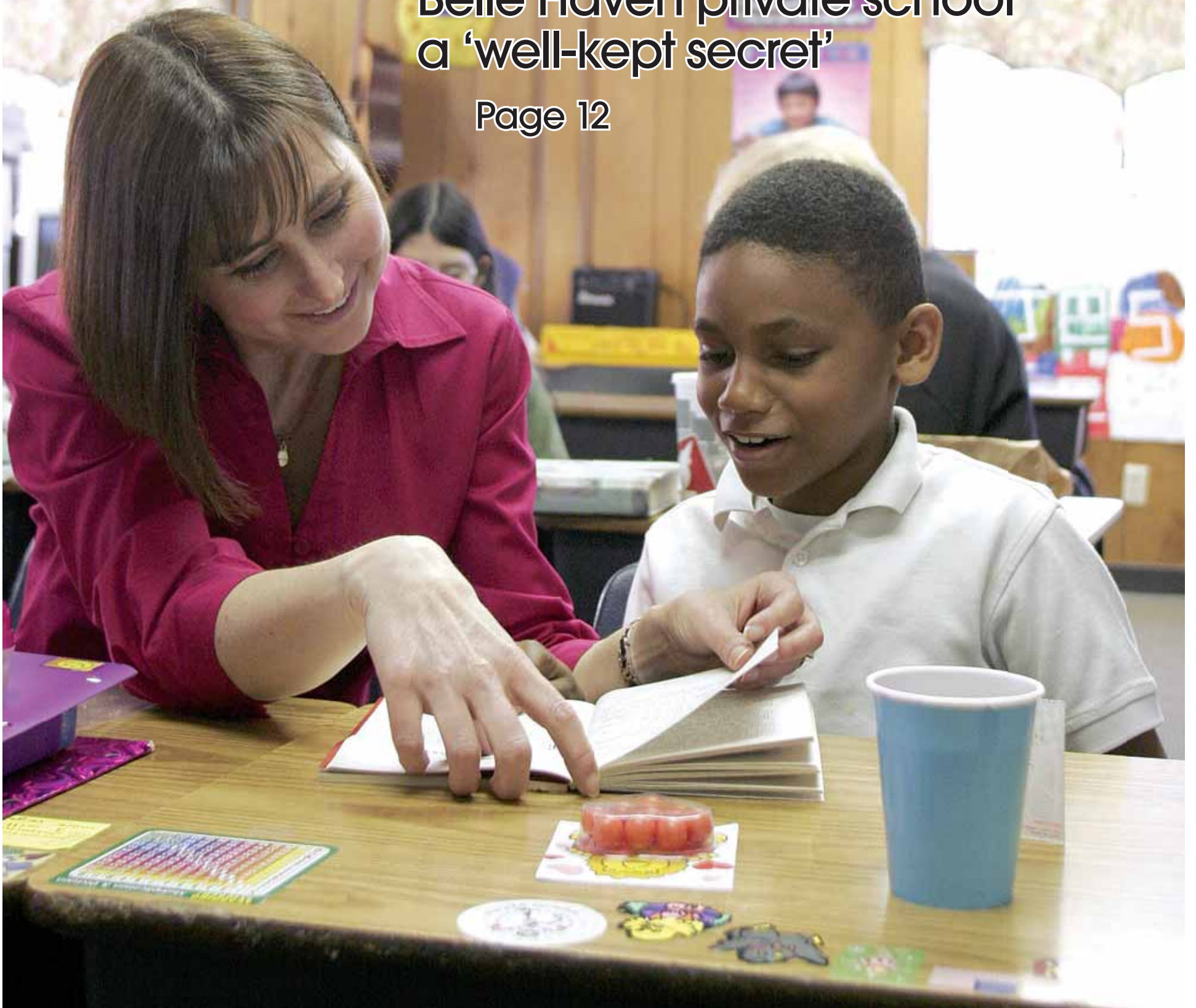


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Beechwood and beyond

Belle Haven private school
a 'well-kept secret'

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Belle Haven private school a 'well-kept secret'



Seventh-graders, from left, Teresa Tamayo, Eddie Cambron and Jazmin Perez run toward the football during a P.E. class at Beechwood School.

The unassuming entrance to Beechwood School is accessible only by turning right at the end of the Oneta Harris Community Center's driveway.

Outside of Menlo Park's Belle Haven neighborhood, this small private school of fewer than 170 students isn't well-known. Despite the lack of attention, it's been quietly — and successfully — educating children from the community, and neighboring East Palo Alto, for 20 years.

For families in the Ravenswood School District, Beechwood is a low-cost alternative to pricey private schools and struggling neighborhood public schools. Tuition at the kindergarten through eighth-grade Beechwood School is on a sliding scale, and is highly subsidized by the Palo Alto-based California Family Foundation. The foundation provides about 90 percent of the school's roughly \$2 million annual budget through an endowment and donations.

"Thank God for Beechwood," says Rachel Bickerstaff, a Menlo Park resident who has two daughters attending the school. "It's a better education and a better



The school tries to take a broad range of students and not just skim the best and brightest, says Principal Dave Laurance. One thing the students have in common is families that value education, he says.

atmosphere for kids than the Ravenswood School District."

Ms. Bickerstaff said she looked into private schools because she didn't think her local public school was doing a good job of preparing children for high school and college.

"In Ravenswood, children are being left behind. You hear about children in eighth grade there who can't read," she said.

On this sunny afternoon, students are

outside playing before heading back into class. They just spent nearly two hours watching a play by the Take Note Troupe and Principal Dave Laurance is beaming with pride at how well the children behaved themselves.

Kindergartners blow soap bubbles and run around as some older kids shoot hoops nearby. Planters of pansies decorate the entrances to the portable classrooms on the small, Spartan campus that borders

the train tracks just off Terminal Avenue.

When the founders of Beechwood created the school, they didn't have a model for it. "We were finding out what kind of school we needed to be to serve these families," Mr. Laurance said. "There was a lot of trial and error in the beginning."

Now the school is raising its profile a bit, reaching out to the community in its bid to purchase its leased plot of land from the city of Menlo Park, and replace its collection of portable classrooms with permanent facilities. School officials recently approached the Menlo Park City Council about their tentative plans for the campus, and got a warm reception.

Starting small

Dick Jacobsen, one of Beechwood's founders, said there was a reason for the school's low profile in its early days.

"We didn't know what we were doing when it started," he says, laughing.

The inception of Beechwood can be traced back to Mr. Jacobsen's days as a scoutmaster leading a troop of boys from Palo Alto and East Palo Alto, he said.

By Andrea Gemmet • Photos by Veronica Weber

Trying to help one of his scouts master a skill, he handed the seventh-grade boy a book. When he realized the boy couldn't read it, he began taking progressively simpler books off the shelf until he found one geared to second graders that the boy could read, he said.

Seeing the disparities in the opportunities available to boys from both sides of the freeway had a big impact on him.

"I thought something ought to be done about it," said Mr. Jacobsen, a partner in WSJ Properties in Palo Alto, along with Boyd Smith and former Palo Alto Mayor Jack Wheatley. "Eventually, my business partners and I started a foundation, the California Family Foundation, to see what we could do about housing, jobs and education, in terms of making some progress."

They started small, with a summer school program held at Belle Haven Elementary School, and then surveyed the parents to see if they would be interested in a local private school. Beechwood started with a kindergarten class and added a grade every year, he said.

"Ravenswood has a tough job," Mr. Jacobsen said. "If they could be helped with what they are trying to do, it would be great, but we didn't exactly know what to do. (We thought that) until things get better, parents ought to have some options, and it would be best if they had some local options."

Just looking at the high school graduation rates, Beechwood appears to be doing very well by its students. Beechwood has an 85 percent high school graduation rate — it's 90 percent if you count students who earn GEDs.

In the public school system, students in the Ravenswood district have a high school graduation rate of about 30 percent, said Principal Laurance.

"The goal for the school is to turn that around. It's an appalling statistic," he said.

Kathy Connolly, the school's full time alumni coordinator, makes sure that graduating eighth graders are well-placed in high school.

"Beechwood's original class was sent to the Sequoia district and we found that a lot of the work we'd done had been undone," Mr. Laurance said. "They have huge classes, and a lot of the kids who look like them were not academically oriented. There's a discomfort there."

Now, the majority of Beechwood students go on to private or charter high schools, with less than a quarter of them going to public high schools, Ms. Connolly said.

Chris Bischof, the head of private Eastside College Preparatory in East Palo Alto, has high praise for Beechwood.

"We've had a number of their students come here in the ninth grade, and it's been a great fit," he said. "They have a really positive approach and attitude at school,



Kindergarteners, from left, Victor Cunningham, Tiera Hodges, Okusi Semi and Jordan Clark play with soap bubbles during recess.

and most importantly, they're really well-prepared. They have wonderful teachers, a great organization and a great program."

Nurturing the whole child

Over the years, Beechwood has evolved into a school with a heavy emphasis on parent participation and a goal to educate the whole child, not just academically, but also socially and emotionally. It's all part of the school's goal to create successful students who are also good citizens and active community members, said Mr. Laurance.

For younger students, classes are on a full-day, year-round schedule, so that

by the time they finish fourth grade, the children have completed an extra year of instruction, he said.

Older students are on a traditional school-year schedule, but they stay for an extra hour, until 4 p.m., four days a week.

Among the enrichment classes offered are Spanish, Spanish for native speakers, and art. There is also counseling for the students.

"When you're taking on the challenge of working with a low-income families, there are always going to be family situations that are not ideal," Mr. Laurance said. "We give them someone to talk

to, and skills to deal with tough situations. We have families dealing with the deportation of a father, divorce, depression and addiction."

Beechwood students take the same standardized tests as their public-school counterparts, but the school uses the testing results in a completely different way, Mr. Laurance said.

"We use them to evaluate ourselves. We're not saying that teachers need certain scores," he said. "We evaluate our teachers on the relationships with the kids, and how they do meeting goals we set."

The school doesn't just ask parents to participate, it requires them to put in 25 hours of service every year, which includes participating in parent education classes, parent-teacher meetings and volunteer work at the school, he said.

"It's like one big family. That's what I really like about it," said Renee Butler, who has a third-grader at Beechwood.

The school tries to take a broad range of students from the community, Mr. Laurance said, and not just skim the best and brightest. One thing the students do have in common is families that value education, he said.

"We try not to become elite, but it is a self-selecting place because (parents) have to show up at all of the meetings and pay \$120 a month," Mr. Laurance said. "We're not just taking the academic elite, or the nicest, quietest kids

Continued on next page



Beechwood Principal **Dave Laurance** fills in for an absent teacher in a middle school math class. Now in his first year as principal, Mr. Laurance has taught at the school for 14 years.



EYE CARE NEWS



Presented by
Mark Schmidt
Licensed Optician



A MATTER OF PRESERVATION

While eyeglasses are often abused on a daily basis, treating them well will reward wearers with years of extended services. Begin by purchasing a strong eyeglass case that will protect your eyewear investment even if you mistakenly sit on them. A protective case will likely extend the two-year life expectancy of eyeglasses realized by most wearers. The benefit for sunglasses and reading glasses, which tend to endure above-average abuse, will probably be even greater. Beyond that, eyeglass owners should resist any impulse to clean their dirty lenses without

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Mark Schmidt is an American Board of Optician and National Contact Lens Examiners Certified Optician licensed by the Medical Board of California. He can be easily reached at Menlo Optical, 1166 University Drive, Menlo Park. 650-322-3900.

Beechwood plans future in Belle Haven

Continued from previous page

from the neighborhood.”

Campus plans

With the city of Menlo Park's approval, Beechwood officials plan to have the school site appraised and raise money to purchase it.

“It's been a great piece of land for us, and the city of Menlo Park has been terrific,” Mr. Jacobsen said. “The environment around Onetta Harris has been a safe place, a very positive place for us.”

A capital campaign would be launched to raise money to build two, two-story classroom buildings, as well as buildings to house the science lab, library and assembly hall, Mr. Jacobsen said. The foundation is already working to expand its donor base, he said.

There are no plans to expand the school's current maximum enrollment of 170, he said.

Neil Call, a foundation board member and former assistant superintendent for the Redwood City school district, said it's time for the school to establish a per-



Priyanka Singh pauses to have her hair braided by first-grade teacher Jan Richmond.

enrolling at Beechwood.

“When there were two kindergarten groups, there were always a couple of kids who repeated (kindergarten) who would have benefited from kinder-prep,” Ms. Curtis said. “It's just not a good feeling for kids when they have to repeat. We found it so helpful to have an extra year for some of them.”

Students who graduate from Beechwood often come back, whether to fulfill their high school's community service requirement by volunteering, or to talk to eighth graders about high school life, said Ms. Connolly.

“It's a very connected, very supportive place for kids,” she said. “(Our alumni) may be having academic problems or family issues, and they pick up the phone and call us. It's a real family feel here, and I don't think that's an exaggeration.”

While school officials are proud of Beechwood alumni who have gone on to receive college diplomas — the school's first Stanford grad is now considering law school, Ms. Connolly said — they are equally proud of former students who are doing well in simpler ways, whether by attending community college, holding down full-time jobs, or raising families and volunteering in the community.

“Not everything is perfect, of course, but if you look at the statistics of the general population and



Volunteer coordinator Eric Gelter dunks the ball as Dominique Bickerstaff and James Walton look on.

manent home.

“The rooms are small, and everything is kind of crowded,” Mr. Call said. “They've made it work for 20 years, but it would be so nice to design something specific for the school.”

For Priscilla Taylor, the school's middle school math teacher and the former principal, the school has earned the right to improve its facilities.

“You get to the point where you've ironed out the knots, you've tweaked the academic progress, and now you want a facility to match the things you want to do,” she said.

It takes a community

Mr. Jacobsen describes educating the students as a true community effort.

“If the parents don't do their job, it's very, very hard for us to make the kind of difference that needs to be made in a child's life,” he said. “Parents are the star players; we try to provide support for them.”

Students' years at Beechwood are book-ended with extra support and help. Children who don't have the social or academic skills necessary for kindergarten spend a year at Beechwood's kinder-prep classroom, and the school's graduates know they can always come back for help, said Ms. Connolly.

Kinder-prep teacher Sheina Curtis said that only about half the children have been to preschool before

look at what our kids are up to, it's pretty evident that the support and foundation that Beechwood gives kids helps them have confidence and hope,” Ms. Connolly said. “Because it's all about hope. In these under-served communities, there's a lot of hopelessness, and Beechwood offers a brighter vision for the future.” ■



Seventh-graders, from left, Mark Qoro, Luis Gracian, Andrew Elias, Eddie Cambron, Jesus Lopez and Alex Vilchez take a break during an exercise drill.

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