



## A BRIEF <sup>medium size</sup> HISTORY OF EPSOC

Elk Plain School of Choice is on the precipice of its fifth iteration as a school. But not according to the Bethel School District's historical timeline. To get to the very first iteration you have to go back to before the BSD ever existed. You have to go back before the historical building was built, before Old Mountain Highway was paved, before cars and electricity--back to *elk* grazing on the excellent grasses of the *plain* (see sidebar), natives tending and hunting them, and to a time when the area was first settled by pioneers.

Go all the way back to the western pioneer days and there is clear evidence of our school and its effect on the people of the Elk Plain area. Contrary to our current hurried comings and goings at the school, this is not just a pass through community. Like most of the small communities within the BSD, it is very old and it has stories. While learning about them I have come to find that saying Elk Plain before School of Choice has meaning.

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In the mid 1800's, when Washington State was still just a territory, the Puget Sound Agricultural Society (a subsidiary of the Hudson Bay Company) set up shop in this area. They brought horses, cows, pigs, and sheep to graze on the plain. The employees who tended the livestock lived here and settled the area but it was closed to new settlers.

After the Washington Territory purchased the land from PSAS in 1867 for \$750,000 (that's almost 13 million by today's standards), the area was officially opened to new settlers. The area grew and small settlements sprang up connected by wagon trails. The settlements undoubtedly had children and those children, just like our children, needed an education. They needed a school.

In 1892, 25 years after the land was purchased, and three years after Washington State was admitted to the union, Pierce County Commissioners created the Elk Plain School District. They built a two-room wooden schoolhouse on the site where our historical building exists today. This was the school's first iteration. It was named Elk Plain School.

Like many school districts in rural Pierce County at the time it was the only school in its district until the 1940's.

Planning meetings for the Bethany Lutheran

Church were held by lamplight in the wooden schoolhouse as well as meetings of the Elk Plain Grange before it had its own building. In 1901 the recently demolished Elk Plain Café was built as an eatery and gas station with small cabins in back for travelers on their way to Mt. Rainier via horse or carriage on dirt roads. By pioneer standards, this was a busy corner.

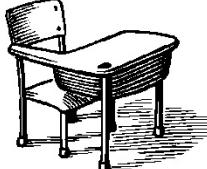
In 1935 two more rooms were added to Elk Plain School by the Works Progress Administration (a job creation program created by the Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression) at a cost of \$800. Two short years later, in 1937, the wooden schoolhouse was torn down and the brick historical building currently on our campus was built for \$19,000 with tax money and funds from the Public Works Administration (also a Roosevelt relief program). This was the school's second iteration. The building is now 86 years old and listed on the Pierce County Register of Historic Places.

By 1949, there were "nearly 50 independent districts, some with only one school..." in Pierce County. Ruth Bethel, the Pierce County Superintendent of Schools at the time, saw the inefficiencies of trying to serve these districts individually and took on the monumental task of consolidating them into fewer, larger districts. "The most difficult was district #403." It was Ruth Bethel's persistence that eventually lead to merging Rocky Ridge, Elk Plain, Kapowsin, Roy and Spanaway school districts into the singular, sprawling district we now call the (Ruth) Bethel School District. Elk Plain School then became Elk Plain Elementary. This was its third iteration. The BSD student population was 1,154. By 1990 it would be almost 10 times that size at 11,274. It is currently 17,500.

Between 1949 and 1980 Elk Plain Elementary underwent 5 construction projects with a modern school building erected in 1953 and additions or updates done in 1960, 1965, 1979, and 1980. In 1989 the school was again slated for modernization but with three new schools built in the area (Graham 1988, Camas Prairie 1988, and Centennial 1989) and the already sparse neighborhood population aging out of elementary school, enrollment was dwi-

ning. As Mrs. Park tells it, "The school was dying." What to do with Elk Plain Elementary became a conundrum that Don Berger, the new superintendent of Bethel Schools, inherited. So he "authorized the administration to engage in a study of the long-term utilization of Elk Plain Elementary."

Happening simultaneously in Olympia was the introduction of the Learning by Choice Law (passed in 1990) which introduced the concept of "choice" to Washington state public education. It states: "The legislature finds that academic achievement of Washington students can and should be improved. The legislature further finds that student success depends, in large part, on increased parental involvement in their children's education...In order to take another step toward improving education in Washington, it is the purpose of this act to enhance the ability of parents to exercise choice in where they prefer their children attend school..."

 This change came at the tail end of the first bloom of "magnet" schools opening around the country in the 1980's. At the time, magnet school themes (arts, technology, college prep, etc.) were intended to "attract" students from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds district wide. This model gave parents and students more "choice" and control over their education based on interests and school success, not by address.

With all of this influencing the Elk Plain Study Committee, in December of 1989 they recommended three uses for the school. One of which, of course, was to house the district's first magnet school as it was referred to at the time. This answered so many questions of what to do with Elk Plain Elementary. It brought students back into the building, took advantage of the new freedoms afforded by the Learning by Choice Law, and began testing the benefits a magnet-style school within the struggling Bethel School District.

Representatives from OSPI came in for school board meetings, visits were made to magnet schools around the country, feedback was solicited from teachers, parents, and advisors, and a special meeting of the school board was called. By August of 1990 the school board had appointed Carl Peterson (affectionately known as Mr. P to students and staff

and for whom our Performing Arts Center is named after) planning principal. In March of 1991 he presented the board with a preliminary draft of the proposed school now called a “school of choice” and how it would be different from a traditional school.

Although certainly patterned after magnet schools EPSOC did not become an official magnet school. It became the simpler, more nimble “school of choice” or “choice school” simply meaning parents could choose (and continue to choose) to send their children there (or any school in the district) based on the Learning by Choice Law.

It just so happens that our school was designed around the proven benefits of an arts/science integration theme and received special permission to draw students from the entire district. It's a simple concept with huge benefits. In the Jan/Feb 1992 Bethel's Pride newsletter Mr. P defined a School of Choice (now capitalized) as having a “special focus and attracts students from all schools in the district. Our special focus is Science and Fine Arts”.

In the summer of 1992 the 1953 building was torn down. The remaining brick buildings (including the historical building) were remodeled and a new main building was built. “A new entry, administration area, library and multipurpose area will tie the building together to make a more unified campus. The new area will also contain special areas unique to Elk Plain such as art/science lab, drama/dance/music/photography/pottery areas, etc... All classrooms will be paired with common folding walls to allow flexibility and team teaching opportunities”.

In the Fall of 1992, one hundred years after the wooden schoolhouse was built, the school reopened as the much anticipated Elk Plain School of Choice emphasizing the arts and sciences, using multi-age classrooms and accessing student learning through multiple intelligences. This was our school's **4** fourth iteration. Among the distinguished teachers and staff to populate this new school were Principal Carl Peterson, Beverly Hance, Mrs. Stickle (retired), Mrs. Coleman (retired), and Mrs. Beaudoin (retired). Mrs. Colyer joined in its second year and Mrs. Sherrod in its third. In February of 1993, 6 months after the school opened, Mr. P returned to the school board reporting of the “many accomplishments and the high level of parent support and involvement”.

For the most part EPSOC looks and feels the same as it did in its early years. Mrs. Hance recalls that “kids wanted to be here; their parents wanted them to be here.” Kindergarten was full day, students had specialists every day, parents were required to volunteer, and teachers were excited and dedicated. From

the beginning, team teaching was at the heart of it all. Mrs. Hance remembers, “Mr. P said it was fine to start the year on your own, but by January the room dividers needed to come down.”

There were a few things that were different. The school opened with 376 students, P.E. happened 3 times a week, and Spanish was taught by a native speaking classroom teacher with the hopes of adding Japanese. First and second grades were multi-age classrooms, as well as third and fourth, and fifth and sixth. There were plans for an Artist in Residence and parents had to submit a statement of purpose to be on the Site Council.

After Carl Peterson left in 1994, Paula Fassilla (now Bond) took over and eventually went on to open Bryant and Geiger Montessori Schools in the Tacoma School District. Machelle Bielke was next, followed by Mike Merrin in 2005. His eight years is the longest principal tenure at EPSOC to date. He has served on the Partners in Education Washington Team and currently serves on the Partners in Education Advisory Board. EPSOC received a Gates Foundation grant spanning from 2004-2007 and earned a Kennedy Center School of Distinction award in 2012.

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By passing the levy in February we can propel EPSOC into its fifth iteration as the first K-8 **5** school in the Bethel School District. We would join the ranks of only two or three others in the South Sound area. At a recent PTA meeting Mrs. Sherrod noted that becoming a K-8 school has been the staff's dream since she began teaching here in 1994.

Hopefully people will take notice as they did when the school reopened as Elk Plain School of Choice. Reporters visited and even snapped a photo of families camping out under the shed one February morning to pre-register their children on a first-come-first-serve basis.

If we do attract some attention, at least now we are informed about the school's history. And more importantly we have an answer to the question: What exactly is a School of Choice? Maybe you'll give the stock answer, “It's like a magnet school, but different,” and hand them this article. Or maybe you'll say, “It's a school I choose to send my child to because of its arts/science integration, mandatory parental involvement, high standards, and school spirit.”

Either way, make sure to walk them over to the old, front doorway of the historical building facing what used to be a busy corner one hundred years ago. Take a moment to breathe in its 86 years of history; each brick carefully laid by depression-era

masonry workers. Imagine the demoted façade wondering where its old friend the Elk Plain Café is; why the post office is called Bethel Station, not Elk Plain; why no one uses it as a backdrop for class pictures anymore, and why no one uses its front doors as a threshold to an education anymore. Standing in front of the historical building, or studying it from your car in the parent pickup line, one can't help but be reminded, even as we look upon the school's next chapter, that it still has meaning.

## BETHEL SCHOOL DISTRICT #403 *an Illustrated History*

Historical accounts of the making of the Bethel School District came from *Bethel School District #403, An Illustrated History* written by retired Bethel Junior High School librarian Carol Neufeld in 1999. With first-person interviews, photographs and historical findings it gives a rare and comprehensive description of the areas and schools currently within the BSD from the 1850s through 1999.

## EARLY WOODEN SCHOOLHOUSES IN BSD

First Spanaway school est. 1869

Roy Elementary est. 1855

Elk Plain School est. 1892

Kapowsin Grade/High School est. 1906

Graham Elementary est. 1907

Rocky Ridge est. 1910

## PIERCE COUNTY REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

[Other area schools on PCRHP](#)

Original Kapowsin Elementary

Collins Elementary (128th and Canyon)

Harts Lake School in Roy

Parkland School by PLU

## PIERCE PRAIRIE POST & THE POST OFFICE

All of the facts (and much of the wording) used to describe the early years of the Elk Plain area came from an article by Marianne Lincoln, managing editor of the Pierce Prairie Post, a blog serving all areas from Spanaway to Midland and out to McKenna. When I contacted her for permission to use the article she agreed and said she was also a graduate of Elk Plain Elementary (1969) and her children were in the first class of EPSOC in 1992! She also served on the BSD school board from 2009-2012.

Google “Elk Plain History” and her article is one of the first results. Also, search for her entry asking everyone to email the Postmaster General to have the Bethel Station Post Office renamed Elk Plain.