

The History of Lonnie B. Nelson Elementary

Our school was named for Lonnie B. Nelson, a prominent businessman in our community who served as a school board member from 1946 until 1969. When the school was named for him, it came as a surprise to him. His children say that he was a little shy about it. Although Mr. Nelson never bragged about himself, others found much good to say about him. His daughter recalls how he often helped others without recognition and tried to find ways to build up our northeast community and our schools. For more about the “founder” of our school go to link under information to see early pictures of Mr. Nelson, his store and his family, as well as an article written by his oldest daughter and an article about the opening of our school.

When Lonnie B. Nelson Elementary School opened its doors for the 1963-1964 school year, it was called the little “country club school” because it was out in the country and clubs were needed to get rid of the snakes. The area we now refer to as Northeast Columbia was “out in the sticks.” Two Notch Road was a winding two lane road, often referred to as Number One that connected Columbia to Camden and points northeast. The malls, restaurants, and subdivisions that dot the landscape today were woods, woods, woods, pastures, and more woods in the early sixties.

When our doors first opened in 1963 Nelson was a much smaller building, consisting of the cafeteria (today’s Town Hall), main hall (today’s Trustworthy Trace) and the lower hallway (today’s Active Listening Lane) housing grades 1-6.

When school opened in the fall of 1967, Nelson’s fifth year, the district had redrawn attendance lines to help balance the population in the elementary schools. The district was growing but Nelson was still out in the sticks as far as most people were concerned.

Lonnie B. Nelson celebrated its 10th birthday during the 1973-1974 school year. Things had changed a great deal in Richland School District Two and in Northeast Columbia. Still considered by some to be “out in the sticks” portable classrooms began to dot the landscape around Nelson as the area began to experience its first population boom. Two Notch Road was now, in some places, a four lane road and businesses had begun to dot the landscape on each side of the road. A new high school, Spring Valley High, was celebrating its 3rd year.

By the time Nelson celebrated its 15th birthday during the 1977-78 school year, construction had begun on a second high school, Richland Northeast High. Two Notch Road was now a four lane road most of the way to Pontiac. Columbia Mall opened in August and there was now a movie theater convenient to Northeast Columbia, the Spring Valley Theater, on the site of today’s Lowe’s store. A grocery store had opened at the corner of Sparkleberry Lane and Two Notch Rd.

There wasn't a restaurant in NE Columbia but you could pick up a great hot dog at Jimmy's Mart! The growth of NE Columbia meant a larger number of portables graced the landscape at Lonnie B. Nelson.

Northeast Columbia was rapidly growing as Nelson entered its 20th year. New homes and new businesses seemed to appear almost overnight. A new elementary school, North Springs Elementary opened in 1982 but a year later portables again dotted the landscape at Lonnie B. Nelson. The school was remodeled during the summer of 1983 and air conditioning was installed the following year.

By 1985 the population at Nelson had grown so much that it became necessary to build an addition to the school. Construction began on a new classroom wing which included a music room, multi-purpose room, media center and office space. Construction ended just in time for Nelson's celebration of its 25th birthday and recognition as a Blue Ribbon School in the fall of 1988. NE Columbia was really growing! Restaurants, shopping centers, and new home construction had taken the place of much of the pasture and wooded areas that once dotted the landscape along Two Notch Rd. The portable classrooms were moved off of Nelson's campus, but they would return again—soon!

When Nelson opened her doors for the 30th year in 1993, the "little country club school" was no longer in the sticks. The portables that had left her campus in 1987 were back and once again Nelson was straining at the seams due to the rapid growth in NE Columbia. Technology had come to Nelson in a big way as the school opened its first computer lab, a room full of IBM PS 2's. Once again members of Mr. Nelson's family were in attendance at Lonnie B as his great-grandchildren enrolled in the school.

1997-1998 marked Nelson's 35th year and her second recognition as a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. Every available space in the building was put to use as the rapid growth of NE Columbia continued. Four new elementary schools had been added to Richland Two in the last few years but it soon became evident that more permanent space had to be added to Lonnie B. Plans were announced for the construction of a new wing, 10 classrooms to house Kindergarten and first grade, and construction began in 2000.

At the 40th birthday celebration, the growth of NE Columbia had a profound impact on Lonnie B. and the community of learners. The school had grown from a small school of 20 classrooms, a cafeteria and media center to 36 classrooms, a media center, two computer labs, art room, music room, multipurpose room and cafeteria.

Since our 40th birthday, we have added a beautiful new cafeteria and completed a total renovation of our media center.

In 2006 Nelson Elementary adopted the Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) model. The ITI model has two main goals: To create participating citizens, willing and able to engage in our democratic processes to improve life now and for future generations and to help educators translate current brain research into practical strategies for the classroom and school-wide. The use of the Lifelong Guidelines of Trustworthiness, Truthfulness, Personal Best, Active Listening and No Put Downs, along with eighteen LIFESKILLS guide how we treat each other. Our school motto became “A Community of Learners United in Helping Ourselves, Others and Our World.”

In 2007 we opened the Academy for Civic Engagement (ACE) as a magnet within our school. ACE, along with Lonnie B. Nelson Elementary, will continue to make our school a warm and welcoming place for our students and our community. We are proud of our history and look forward to our future.