



## Birch Grove Elementary School for the Arts



PARENT NEWSLETTER  
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*Accept our past, Honor our present, and Believe in our future.*

**A celebratory newsletter edition for three years of being a magnet school**

Lao-tzu, Chinese philosopher, profoundly stated, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” I look at the transformation process of Birch Grove into a magnet school as one exciting, incredible journey. One of our staff members gave me a card that reads, “Do not go where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” I am thankful to Superintendent Hintz and Assistant Superintendent Maguire for providing me the opportunity to be on this incredible journey with my staff in trying to make a difference in the lives of students at Birch Grove.

Isak Denesen shares that “to be a person is to have a story to tell.” Telling a meaningful story means inspiring your listeners to reach the same conclusions you have reached and decide *for themselves* to believe what you say and do what you want them to do. It is an incredible tool. This newsletter edition is meant to do that--tell our story and share our journey full of experiences that shape and make Birch Grove Elementary School for the Arts who we are today with you—our readers.

# Background Information:

**Birch Grove Elementary School for the Arts** is an arts magnet school located in ISD 279 – Osseo Area Schools. It is also part of a consortium of school districts known as Northwest Suburban Integration School District (NWSISD). Birch Grove no longer has an assigned attendance area. Rather, students who live in any of the seven member districts of NWSISD may apply to attend Birch Grove. The other six districts in NWSISD are Anoka, Brooklyn Center, Buffalo, Elk River, Fridley, and Rockford.

Birch Grove began its transformation from a traditional elementary school to an arts school in the fall of 2004 with funding from a three-year federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) grant. Goals of the MSAP grant were:

- Reduce minority group isolation;
- Improve student achievement; and,
- Build capacity to sustain the program beyond the grant.

Arts programming is facilitated by the arts curriculum integration coordinators and Joint Work Group (JWG). Members of the JWG include the principal, curriculum integration coordinators, seven K-6 classroom teachers, two arts specialists, the district magnet project lead, and district curriculum specialists for physical education, visual arts, and music.

## We Are Mission and Vision driven...

Birch Grove is a place to **learn and grow *with and through the arts***.

**... *with the arts?*** Every day all students in first through sixth grades have 45 minutes of instruction by a specialist in visual arts, drama, music, or dance/movement. Children in kindergarten have 20 minutes of instruction by arts specialists several days a week. The specially equipped visual arts studio, black box theater, and gymnasium provide unique environments for creativity and standards-based skill development. *In a six-day cycle, students at Birch Grove have 150 more minutes of instruction in the arts than students at a traditional elementary school.*

**... *through the arts?*** Every day classroom teachers teach academic subjects through various arts connections. It's very common to see students role-playing, drawing, singing, chanting, improvising, or moving as they learn math, language arts, reading, social studies, science, or health. Plus, arts specialists integrate skills and content from academic classrooms into their arts lessons.

In traditional elementary schools there are always a few teachers, who embrace an arts-rich philosophy, but even greater power comes when learning *with and through the arts* is a way of being for the entire school community!

# Our Approach to Discipline...

The **collaborative learning environment** at Birch Grove is based on the *Responsive Classroom* approach. This approach to teaching and learning fosters safe, challenging, and joyful classrooms and schools. Several *Responsive Classroom* principles and practices are evident at Birch Grove.

- Knowing the children we teach and their families is as important as knowing the content we teach.
- How the adults at school work together is as important as our individual competence.
- Students practice cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control—BG C.A.R.E.S.
- The school day begins with Morning Meeting to build community, create a positive climate for learning, and reinforce academic and social skills.
- A clear and consistent approach to behavior and discipline fosters responsibility and self-control.

## “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child.”

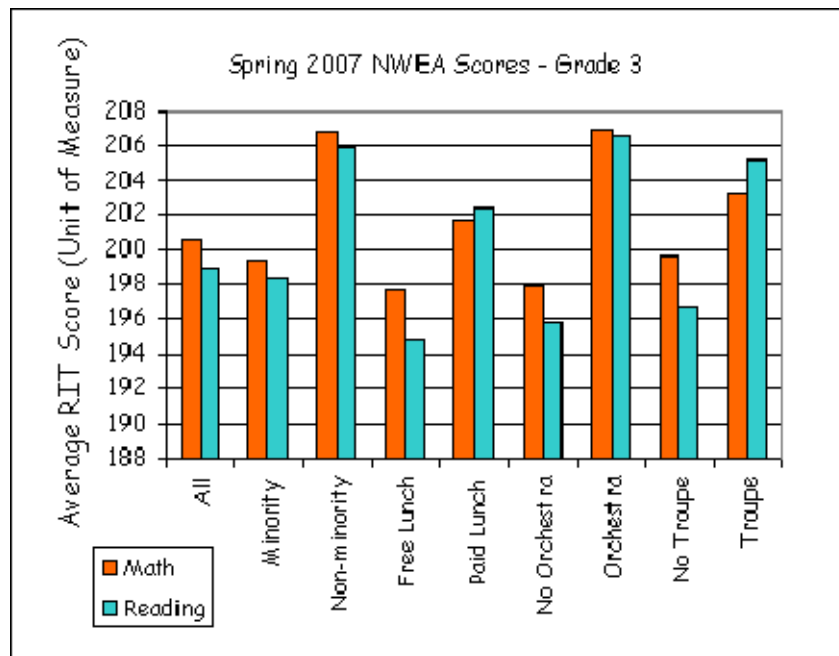
**Meet the partners** in our collaborative learning environment!

- A. Many **staff** members work for our students’ best interests.  
Licensed staff: principal, teachers, counselor, psychologist, social worker, curriculum integration coordinators.  
Non-licensed staff: secretary, resource manager, educational support professionals (ESPs), volunteer coordinator, student learning advocate, kitchen staff, custodians, Kidstop staff.  
District staff: district magnet lead and curriculum specialists in visual arts, physical education, and music.
- B. **Parents and guardians** have countless opportunities to be involved in their children’s learning.  
Maintain two-way communication with teachers.  
Volunteer in the classroom and as a field study trip chaperone.  
Attend dance and music performances, Electives Showcases, Family Math nights.  
Participate in open houses, PTO meetings and events.  
Work behind the scenes to support BG and Company Arts Troupes.
- C. **Teens** from nearby high schools have invested greatly in our school, too!  
National Honor Society of Park Center High School  
Tech crew of Osseo High School  
Cameron Klang, Eagle Scout

Federal and state legislation focuses on achievement in reading and math, but **student achievement** in all subject areas is very important to us.

We use several strategies school-wide to promote achievement across the curriculum including engaging students in their own learning, teaching *through* the arts whenever possible (arts integration), monitoring progress and providing additional support when needed, and teaching test-taking strategies to help students “show what they know.” All students in grades 2-5 participate in ST Math+Music™ as a supplement to the district math curriculum. In addition, we meet some individual student needs through Talented and Gifted (TAG), Special Education, and English Language Learners (ELL) programs.

Data plays an important role in measuring achievement and responding to our students’ needs. We look to results from the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) annual assessments for that purpose. The chart below is an example of our students’ average NWEA scores in math and reading. The data is grouped to compare student achievement in several ways: minority/non-minority, free lunch/paid lunch, not in orchestra/in orchestra, not in Troupes/in Troupes. We are curious about a pattern we see between extensive involvement in the arts and academic achievement, and continue to test the hypothesis that strong participation in the arts is connected to higher academic achievement.



A. **Integrating arts and academics** begins with state and district standards in each subject area. Birch Grove teachers collaborate each summer to better understand the student learning required in each standard and match district core curriculum and arts-rich strategies to each standard. This is an ongoing process as state standards and/or district curriculum in one or more subject areas are revised each year.

With an extraordinary understanding of the standards, classroom teachers and arts specialists update **curriculum maps** for each grade level. These maps, unique to Birch Grove, make it possible for the ongoing integration of arts and academics.

B. Teachers at Birch Grove have had **extensive staff development related to student achievement and the arts theme.**

- Arts integration
- Arts-specific instruction
- Classrooms That Work*
- Backwards Design
- Writing rubrics
- Test-taking strategies
- Multiple Intelligences
- Differentiated Instruction
- Thinking Math®*
- ST Math+Music™*
- Visual Thinking Strategies*
- Field study trips to Minneapolis Institute of Arts  
And Weisman Art Museum
- Site visits to recognized arts magnet schools

C. Each spring, the State of Minnesota takes a “snapshot” of the knowledge and skills students in grades 3-6 are developing in math and reading with the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA-II). We’ve turned MCA-II testing days into an **annual arts festival!**

Through four days of testing, Birch Grove Elementary School for the Arts students are refreshed between testing sessions with arts experiences. Guest artists work with students to energize their thinking and help each one do his or her very best in school (and on the tests). Students in grades K-2 also work with the artists.

Students are ready to show their best work during testing (and everyday!) if they get a good night’s sleep and get to school on time. And, a nutritious breakfast is always important! During MCA-II testing, students in grades 3-6 are served a balanced breakfast at school at no cost.

D. Each year, all students at Birch Grove participate in two **school-wide field study trips**. The experiences are focused on meeting arts standards and promoting higher level thinking across subject areas. Pre- and post-assessments help teachers monitor learning. There is great energy in the school when everyone has had a common experience!

E. Birch Grove students receive **instruction in the arts** from specialists. Classes are scheduled on a six-day rotation, and meet once or twice during each cycle. The arts standards provide the framework for learning.

Instruction in **Visual Arts** takes place in the Studio. Students work in a variety of media to communicate their own ideas and to understand the artwork of other people, times, and places.

Instruction in **Media Arts** often leads to work in the MAC or PC labs. Students have done interesting work with digital cameras and software such as Kidspiration, Photoshop, Powerpoint, and iMovie.

Instruction in **Drama** takes place in the Black Box Theater. Students experience many aspects of the theater including script writing, acting, researching, comparing art forms, critiquing, and understanding contexts.

Instruction in **Dance** takes place in the gym in front of the wall of mirrors. Students develop their understanding of movement and practice basic skills within a musical context, then create and perform dances.

Regular **Music** instruction takes place in the music rooms. Students develop skills through singing, playing classroom instruments, listening, describing, creating, and evaluating music. During the fall, students play piano keyboards using the ST Music™ curriculum.

Instruction in **Orchestra** begins in grade 3 and instruction in **Band** begins in grade 5. Each week students have both a small group lesson and full ensemble rehearsal. In December 2007, Birch Grove orchestra students performed with the Minnesota Orchestra on their Young People's concert "Sleigh Ride."

F. **ST Math+Music™** is a supplementary math program that has positively impacted achievement in many schools across the country. It is supported by more than 30 years of research at the M.I.N.D. Institute in California. Birch Grove is the pioneer school in Minnesota for ST Math+Music™.

Students in grades 2-5 have ST Math, "Jiji Math," every third day. They work at their own pace in this program developing spatial temporal (ST) reasoning; "thinking in pictures." The ability to hold a picture in memory or manipulate it through multiple steps plays an important role in problem-solving.

Interestingly, the part of the brain that takes care of ST reasoning is also used in processing music. In the ST Music curriculum, students apply music concepts as they learn to play the piano keyboard. This specific curriculum and experience "primes" the brain for ST Math.

*In 2007-08, Family Math nights drew 243 parent/student teams to play "Jiji Math" and piano keyboards, and work other math reasoning problems. At the end of the hour, hot pizzas and cold drinks were ready for families to take home for dinner.*

G. **Electives** are fun classes that give students and teachers a unique opportunity to share their interests in the arts! These standards-based classes meet once each six-day cycle for 45 minutes, and culminate in an Electives Showcase.

H. **BG and Company Arts Troupes** are groups of students in grades 3-4 and 5-6 who show a special talent in one of the arts, want to work hard to develop their talent to a high level, and like to share their talent with others. Troupes meet with their arts specialist once each six-day cycle (during the same time as the Electives), and perform several times throughout the year. Auditions take place in the fall.

I. **Spotlight on the Arts** is an annual benefit for BG and Company, and made possible through the generous support of parents and staff members. The evening showcases the work of the Troupes, and also includes delicious desserts and an arts-rich silent auction. After two years, this event has raised close to \$6,000.

J. **BRAVA** is our Friday evening performance series for Birch Grove families hosted by Birch Grove staff. Students, with their parent/guardian or grandparent, have enjoyed performances at Children's Theater Company and the Ordway Center. The greatly reduced price includes main floor seating and bus transportation. One special evening also began with a delicious pasta dinner in the school cafeteria.

# Our Local and National Recognitions:

The students, parents, and staff of Birch Grove Elementary School for the Arts are proud to have their work recognized by others.

**2008 Magnet School of Excellence**

*Magnet Schools of America*

**2007 Magnet School of Distinction**

*Magnet Schools of America*

**2007 Escher Award**

*Northwest Suburban Integration School District*

Grants have supported the development and sustainability of the arts initiative.

**2008 Photo Journalism**

*Safe Kids World Wide*

**2007 Math Matters in Our Magnet Schools**

*Minnesota Department of Education*

**2007 Picturing America**

*National Endowment for the Humanities*

**2004 ACE Dance Program**

*Perpich Center for Arts Education*

**2004 Magnet Schools Assistance Program**

*United States Department of Education*

# Our Community Partnerships:

A special thank you to our partners for their generous and ongoing contributions!

**Minnesota Orchestra**

**Children's Theater Company**

**VocalEssence**

**Ordway Center for the Performing Arts**

**Perpich Center for Arts Education**

**Dancin' on Broadway**

**Domino's Pizza**

## Target

# Thanks

This incredible journey could not have been possible without the leaders who helped lay the ground work: Mr. Tom Hoffman (principal of Birch Grove 2002-2004), and Ms. Nichelle Rivers (principal of Birch Grove 2004-2005). Our central office leaders were also instrumental in this process: Superintendent Hintz, Assistant Superintendent Dr. Maguire, former Interim Assistant Superintendent Nelson and Interim Assistant Superintendent Battle. We are also appreciative of the work of our magnet project lead, Ms. Anderson, district curriculum specialist for physical education, Ms. Omberg, and visual arts, Ms. Gordon.

We could not have been who we are without the incredible Dr. Wendy Barden, Ms. Stephanie Vleck and Ms. Carpenter. They worked hard on ensuring that tools are in the hands of all staff members to bring the arts to life in all curricula being taught. Helping our students thrive in content subject matters through the lens of the arts is what makes us different from traditional schools. And for all of those who I inadvertently omitted but who had a part in making us who we are today—Thank-you from the bottom of our hearts!

In conclusion, my staff and I have learned from our past experiences and the experiences of others in similar situations, and we will continue to learn from our present and future experiences. As a matter of fact, the stories we tell everyday through our successes and failures help others better understand who they are. In return, our stories will help enhance their craft of touching the lives of kids. The learning organization is full of complex issues. The people who are involved in such an organization have the power to influence, shape, and mold through their words and actions. The purpose of school goes beyond teaching! It is to empower! And, as Gandhi profoundly put, “You must be the change you want to see in the world.” Together, we can change the world one child at a time!

