

Special Feature: Creswell, A Historic Highland Landmark



**By Sammie
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Creswell Elementary School has been the educational beacon for students in the Highland area since 1922. The exterior of the main building retains its old-school character as a tall, fortified brick building with concrete molding. Within the last fifteen years, a Pre-K and Kindergarten wing has been added to the school and the library was completely remodeled in 2006. Ms. Chandler, the library clerk, preserves a piece of the library's history, a single brick from the original floor encased in a small wooden frame made from the original molding. Other remnants from days of old set the Creswell Elementary School building apart from most schools in Shreveport. If you look closely, you can still see the chiseled "BOYS" and "GIRLS" signs above the side entrances of the school. Creswell has also been featured in a number of films, including *Premonition* starring Sandra Bullock.

Going to School at Creswell

If you drive or walk by Creswell on any given school morning, you can see the school security guard, Mr. Nesby, vigilantly watching the students as they get off buses, climb out of cars, and walk off the sidewalks into the brightly lit Creswell school building. Teachers standing duty—even the principal, Mrs. Tracy Harris, smile and greet students as they walk in. Getting the school day off to a great start is a crucial key to success at Creswell. Mandy Mingo, a parent who walks her child to school every morning, likes Creswell. "They are bettering my child's education. Another school she went to did not work as hard with her, but there are a lot of teachers here who are working with her to improve her grades and get her iLEAP ready." Ms. McKnight, the school librarian, teaches test taking strategies to students during weekly library classes. Throughout the halls of Creswell are bulletin boards encouraging students to do their best on the iLEAP. Earlier this year, fourth graders received tests care packages and inspirational messages from Byrd High School Students. This year, students at Cres-

well have the opportunity to order t-shirts designed specifically for test week that they can wear during the test. You can feel the positive, motivational energy in the air as the entire school is preparing to conquer this year's iLEAP test. All of the classrooms at Creswell have computers and internet access. Students and parents can access textbooks online and students can take teacher created tests on computers. Teachers and administrators at Creswell take pride in going above and beyond for the students. The battle cry for many workers at Creswell is, "It's not about us, it's about the children." Creswell is filled with administrators, teachers, and support personnel that are dedicated to helping students achieve. I spoke with Ms. Johnson, a paraprofessional at Creswell who began as a volunteer parent, and then was hired in 1995. "Everybody must have some expectation of the child in order for the child to succeed, from the parents, to the administrators, to the teachers, to the support team. If a child is trained at home, that will follow them wherever they go." Sitting next to Ms. Johnson was Ms. Walker, another paraprofessional who retired early this year, but still comes to Creswell to volunteer. She added, "In order for a school to be successful, it must have progressive teachers who have the desire to work with children. All children are not Einstein's, you have to work with them and cultivate their minds," then she added, "There is no room for the J-O-B attitude, not when you're working with minds. You have to love what you do." She mentioned one third grade teacher, Ms. Teresa Greber, who is a seventeen year veteran, "If there is a brain in a child's head, she can reach it." Another example of going above and beyond is Ms. Rebecca Taylor, the Literacy Coach at Creswell and a member of the administrative team. Ms. Taylor took time over the course of two days to make a laminated memory book for one of the first grade ESL (English as a Second Language) students returning to Japan. "I wanted Misa to have first grade memories of Creswell to take back to Japan," Ms. Taylor said, "I want her to remember her teachers and friends and look back on this as a memorable experience." At Misa's going away party, her mother brought stationary sets so each of her classmates can be Misa's pen-pals once she was back in Japan.

ESL Program

Students at Creswell have the unique opportunity to go to a school that celebrates cultural diversity. Creswell is the center school for the ESL program and has been



Creswell Elementary School, Circa 1922



Cheryl Rubin, ESL Coordinator

since the early 1990s. Before it became the center school, Creswell initiated the itinerate program around 1980 for ESL teachers to serve the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) student population. The school was chosen as the center school for this unique program because its district, the Highland area, had the largest LEP population in Caddo.

Cheryl Rubin, the ESL coordinator for Caddo Parish, hopes that “we will continue to highlight the diversity that makes

our country rich.” She adds, “Everyone has their own background and traditions that enrich us all.” A while later, Ms. Rubin’s, the bilingual ESL secretary, Maria Austin, and I had an enlightening conversation about the beauty of embracing cultural diversity. “For so long we’ve been told that we’re all alike, but we’re not. We’re different—and that’s okay,” says Rubin, “The *soul*, that which makes a person who they are, of a Mexican is different from that of a Caucasian American, which is different from that of an African American because our different cultures and traditions create different outlooks.” She adds, “We all have similarities that span across all ethnicities, but we see them through different eyes and we express them differently. Our children are at an advantage because they learn to appreciate the similarities and differences of students from other cultures.”

Other Programs at Creswell

Enrichment programs available for students at Creswell include the Elementary National Honors Society and the Discoveries program taught by Ms. Baker. She encourages her students to “think outside the box” through games, and to develop their creative skills through drawing or by describing pictures from different perspectives. “I think kids are so geared toward testing that they don’t get an opportunity to learn and play on their own, and so I try to give them time to research and do their own thing and that way they can develop their own learning,” says Baker. The music program at Creswell has an Honors Choir that sings at festivals and nursing homes, mostly during the holidays. “[The choir] is rewarding because the patients cry and then the students cry. It’s a wonderful and difficult thing to see, but the children *need* to see it,” says Ms. Amy Shepp, music teacher at Creswell, “They need to see how they can impact the community.” Other extra curricular organizations are: the 4-H club, boy’s basketball team, the girl’s cheerleading squad, and the Lunch Bunch Reading Club. Creswell

works in collaboration with outside organizations to provide services for students as well. "Various organizations, businesses, and neighbors within the community invest in the progress of our school," says Ms. Beverly Martin-Green, guidance counselor. Some of these organizations are: Noel Methodist Church, VA Hospital, A Plus at King's Highway Church, the Shreveport Police Dept., Brookshire's, VOA, YELP, FDDOC, and Dr. Haskell to name a few.



Photo by Greg Pearson/The Times

Teachers at Creswell

There is a balanced mix of seasoned teachers and new teachers at Creswell who bring fresh ideas and share proven methods. The joys of teaching are seen everyday here in the classrooms and even in the hallways at times. I witnessed one fourth grade teacher, Ms. Tunya Williams, speaking with one of her students in the hallway about conflict resolution skills and how an incident that happened between her and another student could have been handled better. This is Ms. Williams' first year teaching. Outside of work, she is an actress with the Mahogany Ensemble. She incorporates acting with teaching, her "two loves" second to being a mother. "Acting actually helps me to interact with my kids a little better, because sometimes you have to be a different character when you don't feel like being the same teacher, or to deal with some of the things that go on in the classroom, and the kids enjoy you being a different character." Ms. Williams loves to teach because she loves "seeing a child break through a learning barrier and being there for that break through moment." As a first year teacher at Creswell, she encourages new teachers to work at here because she truly believes that the school has a caring principal. "I admire Ms. Harris. I admire the decisions that she makes and the reason she makes them. I think she's fair and I think she tries to take care of her staff across the board. That's not true everywhere." Ms. Richie, the newest teacher at Creswell, also has positive things to say about the school's administration. "I like the fact that Ms. Harris has an open door policy, all the administrative team does, really, and everyone here is so friendly!" New teachers meet once a week with the administrative team; the administration also provides on-site training. All teachers at Creswell regularly attend professional development in services and weekly grade level meetings with Instruc-

tional Coordinator, Ms. Amy McClendon. "Most grade levels work well together and are willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done," says McClendon, "Which makes my job a lot easier." Third grade teacher Ms. Cyndi Authement has been teaching for twenty-two years and is still inspired by the everyday miracles that happen in her classroom. One student in her reading group could only read eleven words a minute when he came to Creswell. "Today, he read *ninety* words in a minute," she reported excitedly. Achievements like this are what invigorate Ms. Authement day after day. Bottom line: she wants her students to show *progress*. "[Particular students] may not be doing well on testing, they may not be doing well on grades, but you can see the achievements that they are making during the day." Ms. Authement pushes her third graders to very edge of their zone of proximal development. She introduces concepts to them that are above their grade level. "Some of them will catch on, and some of them won't, but when their taught this skill again in a later grade, they can say, 'I've seen this before, I've learned this.' I taught fifth grade last year and had one student who is now in Junior High come up to me and say, 'You know that thing we did in your class last year? They're teaching me that in school right now and I already know how to do it.'" Discipline also plays a major role in student achievement at the school. Students are rewarded "Mustang Bucks" for good behavior that can be collected and traded in for fun activities. The teachers consistently expect optimum behavior from the students. "We ride them about behavior, we really do," says Authement, "But you know, I worked ArtBreak one year, and I see a difference in the level of respect that our kids have, versus students from other schools."

Music at Creswell

Creswell also has a thriving music and art department. The colorful creations made by students in Ms. Nichols's art class usually place in the annual Artbreak competition. The music teacher, Ms. Amy Schepp, has been at Creswell for five years. During this time she has been a recipient of the KTBS "One Class at a Time" grant which she used to purchase a music rug and additional instruments and supplies for her classroom. She says that one of the best things about working at Creswell is the diversity of students. "We do some



Amy Schepp, Music Teacher

songs or some activities, and maybe there'll be some Spanish in it and those kids just light up. We've done some different activities with Asian cultures and they'll hear some Chinese or Korean, and they're like, 'I know that song, I did that song back where I'm from,' so, they really like that." In the process, American children also get to learn songs from other countries. Students practice math skills to count musical notes and beats, and reading skills to participate in sing-alongs. Students also do a number of hands-on activities that help with their motor skills. "Every subject—math, social studies, science, reading—can be involved in music," says Schepp, "I try to be an interdisciplinary teacher." Ms. Schepp is ORF certified and therefore is qualified to teach instruments. Her vision for the music program at Creswell is to have a classroom set of instruments for every student and to revive the dying art of American Folk songs. "When I came here there were five instruments, now there are twenty," she said with a smile, "So I have a few more to go."

Leadership at Creswell

This is Principal Tracy Harris's second year and counting at Creswell. "The staff and students were friendly and cordial. I was welcomed with open arms. I feel I have been supported and included as a part of the Creswell family," says Harris. Her visions for the school is that Creswell will continue to strive toward a higher school performance score (SPS) and provide more positive activities for the students. The current SPS for Creswell is 76.2. "Our goal is to move closer and closer to 100," says Harris. With the supportive staff, diligent teachers, and hard-working students, I believe that Creswell is well on its way to reaching its goal.