

Brentwood Elementary School is one of 15 elementary schools in the Victor Elementary School District, in Victorville, California, part of San Bernardino County and the greater Los Angeles area. In 2000, Victorville had a population of approximately 64,000. The total district school enrollment was 9,442 in 2002–2003. Ethnically, 41% of these students were Hispanic, 39% white, 16% African American, and 4% other ethnicities.

A rapidly growing school population

Victorville has grown rapidly over the past few years as developers have built housing communities for families seeking more affordable homes than are available in larger neighboring cities. The school is situated between newly developed middle-class houses on one side and low-income houses and apartment buildings on the other. As a result of Victorville's growth, Brentwood's population grew from 571 students in 1997–1998 to 981 students in 2002–2003 (a 72% increase over 5 years).



Increases in student population affected other school characteristics. The number of full-time teachers rose from 22 to 43 and the ethnic balance changed: African American students increased by 109%, Hispanic students by 58%, and white students by 1%. The number of students on free reduced-price meals increased by 5%. Such rapid growth generates challenges for any school, and the Brentwood Elementary School staff felt that its population growth has in fact been one of the school's greatest challenges.

The 981 students enrolled in 2002–2003 reflect the district's ethnic patterns: 41% Hispanic, 32% white, 20% African American, and 7% other ethnicities. Thirteen percent of the students were English learners and approximately 59% of the students received free or reduced-price meals. In 2002–2003 the school had 43 full-time teachers, 87% of whom had full credentials. Included among the 43 full-time teachers were a resource specialist, reading specialist, computer lab specialist, and music specialist.

The current principal, Ross Swearingen, has served the school since its inception during the 1996-97 school year, as have several teachers. The principal and staff members have continued to refine their original vision as the school increased in size and complexity. Teachers credit the principal with “an incredible ability to see the big picture” and creating an atmosphere of cooperation and respectful and supportive relationships.



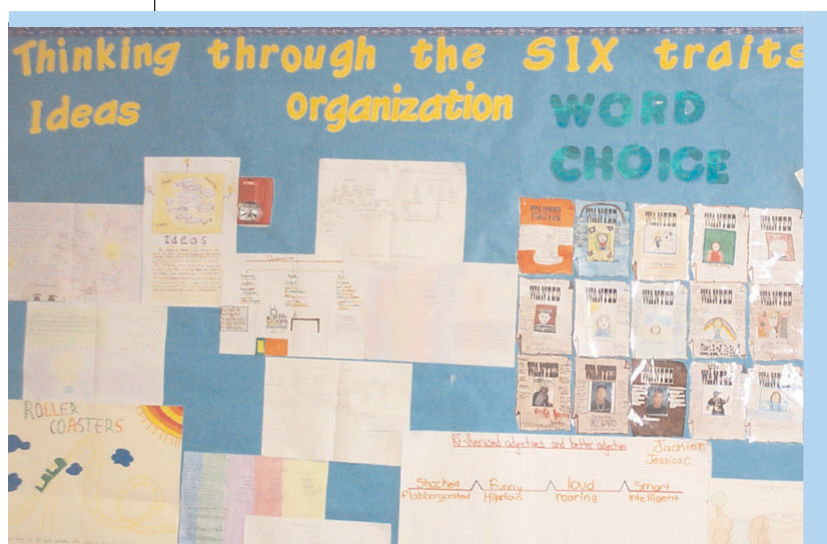
Strong leadership from both the district and school

School staff members attribute the school’s success to strong leadership—at both the district and school—a high level of staff commitment and collaboration, and a solid instructional program in both math and reading that uses data frequently and holds students to high expectations.

Led by a district Superintendent committed to site-based, participatory management, Brentwood has a great deal of autonomy; it determines how to use the school’s discretionary budgets, including Title I funding. This flexibility enabled the school to hire a reading specialist or purchase new technology or materials as needed. Because staff members contribute to important school decisions, including budgetary ones, they feel invested in the school. A teacher advisory committee meets with the Superintendent quarterly to discuss the district’s strengths and needs.

Brentwood’s comprehensive instructional program is aligned with district and state content standards. Grade level councils developed curriculum guides that articulate the essential elements of the California State Standards into a K-6

curriculum that features rigorous content, effective strategies, and monitoring systems. (Access curriculum guides through the district's website: <http://www.vesd.org>.) Brentwood teachers were heavily involved in developing the curriculum guides: a Brentwood teacher from each grade level participated in the district grade level councils.



Bulletin board displays student work from the six traits writing model.

Math Steps (Houghton Mifflin) is the core math program and *Legacy of Literacy* (Houghton Mifflin) the core reading program at Brentwood. Teachers supplement the math program with *Saxon Math* and *Accelerated Math*, and the reading program with *Accelerated Reader*. The school also has a strong writing focus. Teachers use the six traits writing model and recently implemented *Write from the Beginning*. The school-wide use of Thinking Maps—visual teaching aids that help students classify information and monitor their comprehension and other thinking skills—provides common instructional strategies throughout the curriculum.

“Incredible organization”

Part of the principal's strong leadership is his incredible organization, staff members said. To reduce teachers' time on paperwork, he regularly develops processes such as electronic databases to replace bureaucratic inefficiencies. The principal's effective use of technology and the office staff's willingness to assume responsibility for administrative tasks lets teachers focus on helping students, teachers said.

Teachers described the principal as focused, purposeful, and able to make good use of time. He regularly visits grade level meetings to keep apprised of activities, discuss issues, and receive teacher input, reducing the need for lengthy discussions of issues during all-staff meetings. Many teachers noted that, unlike other schools where they have taught, they do not experience a lot of wasted time during meetings. Staff meetings are purposeful and the principal stays on task. They meet, a focus group of the school leadership team said, “When something needs to be discussed. If something

isn't broken, we don't try to fix it." Staff members deal with new issues by addressing, discussing, and resolving them. This works because the school staff is cohesive and everyone shares a similar philosophy, the group noted.

Like the district superintendent's, the principal's philosophy emphasizes empowerment and professionalism. Convinced that most people go into teaching because they want to help kids, the principal maintains oversight but



The principal strongly believes in letting the teachers do what they know how to do best.

strongly believes in letting the teachers do what they know how to do best, and giving them opportunities to do their best. He also puts resources into the hands of the people who use them. The principal uses an annual budget survey to ask all teachers what they need to achieve the school's mission of getting 100% of the students at grade level and bases the school budget on the results of this budget survey.

The principal cultivates a positive attitude among his school staff and has a good relationship with students, teachers said. He works hard to ensure that students at the school feel special and each week asks teachers to identify a student whose parents he can call with good news from the school. He believes that parents should look forward to, not dread, calls from school.

A culture of collaboration

The schools' supportive environment extends beyond the principal. The teachers spoke of the office staff as extremely efficient, and by handling much of the paperwork, eliminate a lot of extra work for teachers. Even on stressful days, teachers reported, office staff members are very friendly to the staff, students, and parents. Teachers added that the school custodian also takes a personal interest in the students and leads the school chess club.



The Brentwood Elementary School Chess Club.

Although the student population and consequently the teacher population has grown rapidly, the school's philosophy has remained the same—"the school staff will do whatever it takes to make the school the best learning environment for each one of our students," the principal said.

The small, tight-knit staff that worked at the school when it opened during the 1996–1997 school year established a culture of collaboration, teamwork, respect for one another, and high expectations for all students. As the school population grew, the newly hired teachers who "made it" were the ones who fit into this culture, a teacher explained. The school has experienced little staff turnover

and has established a reputation for its teaching climate; teachers looking for such an environment apply here. The principal and teachers also carefully screen and interview potential teachers together, looking for people who will fit their culture. In focus groups with the School Leadership Team and a Grade Level Team, the teachers' shared vision for teaching and learning was obvious: the teachers fed off of each other's responses as they described their school and agreed on key elements to the school's success. Smiling and joking with one another, the teachers spoke of how much they enjoyed their jobs and valued their relationships with each other and the principal.

High expectations evoke high achievement

Classrooms at Brentwood are diverse. The school has a high transient population (a 33% mobility rate in 2002-2003) and a significant number of foster children. Teachers set high expectations for all their students—they expect all students to work hard, be safe, responsible, and respectful. The principal, teachers, and other school staff all place an emphasis on teaching students character values in addition to academics. The teachers are consistent in their expectations and hold each student personally responsible for his or her behavior. Students know that these qualities are expected of them. A student focus group cited "hard work" and "safety, responsibility, and respect" in response to questions about what teachers at the school expected of them. Students who have been at the school become role models for new students, and students who do well are esteemed by their peers.



Brentwood Elementary rewards students for good behavior and hard work.

The school rewards students for good behavior and hard work. Students can earn three Brentwood “bucks” daily for accomplishments like good behavior and completing their homework. They can spend these incentive awards in the student store or purchase a lunch date with the principal or permission to supervise the school playground. Student accounts are maintained in an electronic database and operated with the assistance of the student senate. In addition to the student senate, the school also gives students opportunities to lead through projects like the student store (student-run), and student authors (where students are recognized for their writing).

Teacher initiatives

The school staff lengthened the school day by 20 minutes Monday through Thursday in order to devote Friday afternoons to grade level teacher planning. Initially biweekly, the Friday grade level meetings were quickly recognized as invaluable and scheduled weekly. Teachers saw this planning time as key to the school’s success; it encourages collaboration among teachers and instructional support staff and fosters planning, instruction, assessment, and support for each student. Grade level teachers meet on Friday afternoons to discuss students’ needs, develop lessons, coordinate projects, generate ideas, review data, and strategize how to best meet individual students’ needs. As a result, teachers are aware of activities in other classrooms and occasionally coordinate activities so that similar assignments are due on the same day.



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Teachers regularly discuss ways to meet the needs of students and work cooperatively to ensure that students are in the best learning environment that they can be in. For example, if a student is below or above grade level on particular tasks, teachers at the appropriate grade level will teach the student in their classrooms.

Teachers also participate regularly in school or district training workshops, outside conferences, staff development at faculty meetings, and receive individual coaching from the school administration. Wednesday mornings are used for staff meetings, principal and grade level meetings, and professional development opportunities. During school and district training workshops, all teachers receive training in *Renaissance Reading and Math*, *Write from the Beginning*, and *Thinking Maps* to nurture a schoolwide focus on research-based academic programs. All teachers are allotted an annual budget that they can use for their own professional development and classroom needs.

Professional development is integral—each month the school leadership team offers professional development and training on a selected focus area. The principal also visits classrooms regularly. Recording data on his personal digital assistant, he gives a summary of his observations to each teacher for his or her self-evaluation.

Assessments guide instruction

Brentwood staff uses many assessments to monitor student and school performance. To assess mastery of the basic skills in language arts and math, staff uses student work files, portfolios, running records, scoring guides, grade level district assessments, Third Grade Language Arts Assessment, Sixth Grade Writing Assessment, and annual reviews. A year-end district student assessment matrix disaggregates student data at each grade level. School teams analyze these disaggregated results to identify trends in student performance and revise schoolwide student performance goals and develop action plans. Grade level staff teams review assessment results and determine the level of progress each student requires to meet state standards.

Students receive weekly data on their progress. Those who do not score at the mastery level can receive additional help in a tutoring session. The school also uses a district scoring guide to give students feedback on their writing and help them identify areas where they need improvement and where they are strong.

Brentwood staff augments this district matrix with ongoing measures at the classroom level, including STAR tests for reading and math, publisher- and teacher-developed unit tests, weekly grade level instructional focus quizzes, monthly Running Records, and trimester benchmark assessments. These assessments identify specific skills students need additional instruction and practice in. When teachers identify a student who needs more assistance, they contact the parents to initiate a plan. This may include time with the Miller-Unruh reading specialist, the extended day program for targeted curricula areas, summer school, or grade level skills groups for targeted instruction.

The principal said he and the staff constantly evaluate their programs, teaching strategies, and student performance. They plan, for example, to implement a new program, then try it, review it, make appropriate revisions, and implement it again.

So that all students excel

As a result of their rigorous use of assessment data to determine individual students' needs, Brentwood teachers reported that students who enter a classroom below grade level in reading and math generally improve significantly by the end of



Brentwood's successful strategies include leveling and labeling all books in the school and classroom libraries.

the year. Successful strategies include (a) leveling and labeling all books in the school and classroom libraries so that students select books that are neither too easy nor too hard for them to read; (b) using the *Accelerated Reader* program to give students regular feedback on their reading skills and help them set and attain goals; and (c) using the *Accelerated Math* program, to give students regular feedback on and additional practice in their math skills and conceptual understanding. These programs benefit not only students who are below grade level, they challenge all students to reach their personal goals. Students are regularly rewarded for their progress, regardless of their skill level.

The school's Student Study Team (SST) exists to help all students achieve academic success. The SST develops plans for students with special behavioral, emotional, learning, physical, or medical needs, and students who need special education services. Brentwood also offers a Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program for students in grades 3 through 6 who meet especially high academic standards; these students also receive individual plans to meet their particular abilities.

Interventions for students who need more assistance include before- and after-school tutoring, individual teacher attention during class, or the assistance of the reading or resource specialist in the classroom. Teachers also use student tutors to help other students in the classroom. Student tutors might be peers who have done well on the task or upper grade level students who help students who are struggling.

Special education students at Brentwood consistently exceed the achievements in math and English language arts of special education students in other district schools. The principal and staff attribute this to the school's philosophy of inclusion that brings special education students into regular classrooms, provides them with additional support, and challenges them to meet state standards. Because special education student scores are counted in school-wide results, Brentwood staff credits their special education students with helping to boost the overall school scores.

