

# Golda Meir School

Milwaukee, Wisconsin



## INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT

Golda Meir School, an imposing, four-story structure situated in the Brewers Hill neighborhood on the northeast edge of Milwaukee's busy downtown, belies its regal bearing. Inside, visitors find a school in constant motion, a hub of intense student-centered activity and a magnet for community volunteers. Golda Meir Elementary School provides a Gifted and Talented Program designed to meet the needs of the diverse urban population it serves. Test scores reflect academic progress that could only be achieved by students motivated by an exciting, interdisciplinary program and supported by caring families. Golda Meir's 360 students in grades three through eight move constantly, shuttling among classrooms, scheduled specials, midday options, and off-campus music and performing arts programs. A first-time visitor may wonder how the many core curricular classes and the wide variety of non-academic classes can possibly all fit into a traditional school schedule, but soon learns that the school's core philosophy of learning is expressed through a mosaic of opportunities that foster student and teacher curiosity and learning.

Built as an elementary school in 1890 in a former residential/industrial area where brewery owners and workers lived, worked, and socialized, Meir initially served the nearby German neighborhood. Next, Jewish families moved to the neighborhood, followed by African American families. Today, all of the former



*Golda Meir School sits on Milwaukee's Brewers Hill.*

### Student Demographics

Golda Meir School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
<http://www2.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/meir>  
361 students, 3-8

African American	51%
White	41%
Hispanic	4%
Asian/ Pacific Islander	3%
American Indian	<1%
Students eligible for free/ reduced price meals	40%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	<1%
Special Education Students	5%
Student/Teacher Ratio	30:1

brewery buildings have been rehabbed into multi-use commercial buildings, including space for two small alternative high schools and a small middle school, while Golda Meir still serves its intended original purpose of educating what has become a very diverse student population.

All classrooms in the old building have high ceilings and plentiful natural light. Hardwood floors and beautiful classic woodwork enhance the learning environment. In the classrooms, desks or tables are clustered in groups, and walls are decorated with student work, descriptions of learning strategies, and inspirational posters. Framed artwork lines the walls in the stairwells, providing inspiration as students make the climb to the gym on the 3rd floor, or descend to the basement cafeteria for lunch.

The school's historical background enhances the learning environment as well. Golda Meir, former Prime Minister of Israel, attended the school from 1906 to 1912, and returned to Milwaukee in 1969 before the school's renaming as Golda Meir School, an urban gifted and talented magnet school. Milwaukee was one of the first districts in the country to initiate public magnet or specialty schools in order to retain white



*Principal Thomas Hanley with the video club*

middle class children in city schools and to attract non-minority children from the suburbs to the city schools in order to take advantage of the specialty programs, all in compliance with federal desegregation orders. Golda Meir's long-term success in graduating students with high levels of academic achievement has been a key factor in its popularity with families both in the city of Milwaukee and in surrounding suburbs.

Looking at the school's financial picture, one finds that Golda Meir receives one of the lowest per pupil allocations in the district, \$5,800 per student. Title 1 funding is limited based on the school's lower percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch compared to the high poverty school district. The administration at Golda Meir creatively supplements its district allocation with grants, community partnerships, and classroom support from student teachers, high school interns, and numerous parent and other volunteers. The principal Thomas Hanley said, "Even with less money, we are doing better" than the majority of schools in the district.

Three years ago, with the support of the school community and the consent of the district, Golda Meir School added middle grades—one class each of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. They hoped to be able to lease space

from a nearby arts academy to add additional middle grade classes to enable a higher percentage of the elementary grade students to remain in the program through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The goal was to carry forward its philosophy of “offer[ing] a wide array of gifted and talented programs and services directed toward developing the abilities and competencies of children enriching their lives as well as the lives of people with whom they interact” for students through their middle school years. Due to budget constraints, the district withdrew its support for renting additional space, and instead began consolidating public schools. This resulted in limiting the middle grade classes to one section per grade level.

The student population at Golda Meir reflects the diverse population of the Milwaukee area, including 41% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic/Latino, 51% African American, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and <1% American Indian students. Thirty-eight percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch, and 4% of the students have special education needs.

## **APPLICATION PROCESS**

In order to recruit students for its 3rd grade class, each year, the Golda Meir administration sends out letters describing the school’s philosophy and program to parents of 2nd grade students who achieve an average score of 4 in the city’s Student Promotion System. Parents can then apply to Golda Meir for the 90 available 3rd grade seats. Interest in the program is high, and the school typically receives approximately 120 applications annually.

Many parents apply because of the school’s excellent reputation and cite reasons such as, “my son needs to move faster” or “my daughter was not challenged” in her primary school. The application includes a section for teachers to fill out, addressing the child’s current performance in the academics, as well as exploring the student’s interest in the arts, self-direction, sense of imagination and humor, and other skills and interests. Golda Meir carefully creates a 3rd grade class that is balanced by gender, ethnic, and socio-economic status, and is open to students with learning disabilities. It draws students whose parents’ socioeconomic backgrounds range “from welfare to millionaire,” the principal said. As slots open, students may be accepted into the other grades. Often other school administrators recommend students who are academically strong but whose learning is compromised due to social or emotional issues, or learning disabilities, posing an additional challenge for the Golda Meir staff.

## **INTEGRATED CURRICULUM AND FLEXIBLE SCHEDULE**

The way the school is structured provides a scaffold approach for students moving from 3rd through the 8th grades, so that as they grow and mature, they see an increasing number of different teachers and take on more and more responsibility for their own learning. Third and fourth grade teachers each work with a self-contained class for the core academics, with students having access to other curricular areas or specials according to a carefully planned schedule. Fifth grade teachers team teach, with students moving to different classes for various content areas. Each

middle school teacher teaches one content area class (math, science, or language arts) and one other class, either social studies or Spanish, based on need and schedule.

The school has an average of 5% special needs (SPED) students. Based on their individual education plans (IEP's), SPED students go to the resource room for one-on-one or small group instruction for certain content areas but spend most of the day with their regular education classmates. The SPED teacher follows the classroom curriculum, providing needed help and support. For instance, he reads aloud the same trade books the class reads, preparing special education students for upcoming classroom discussions. One special education teacher assistant circulates from the resource room to the classrooms, as time permits, providing one-on-one help in the regular education environment.

The school's vision statement challenges the Golda Meir staff "to create a stimulating environment where the potential of every student is challenged and rewarded." Staff members strategically plan lessons incorporating a variety of levels of thinking, leading to the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy in their instruction. Many class activities are project-based and allow students to demonstrate learning in multiple ways and to become skilled in managing multi-step learning activities.



*Project-based work in flexible groupings accommodates differentiated instruction.*

Teachers explain that learning needs to reach the "whole child." Within limits, teachers choose their own curricular materials, determine when to teach each content area, and how to teach—including deciding on types of groupings and length of lessons, based on their students' learning styles as well as their own teaching styles. One teacher recalled, "I was turned off in middle school. I am a very visual person and therefore use lots of visuals in my classes. My goal is to help students see how the world works."

The principal hires teachers who thrive in this flexible, interdisciplinary way of teaching, teachers said. "All teachers have different styles but can put together a curriculum that piques the students' interests," explained Principal Thomas Hanley. "The philosophy is not that more [time] is better, but rather to give them [the students] experiences so they want to learn."

As an example of the integrated curriculum one finds at Golda Meir, students in a 5th grade science classroom were working on a project that combined scientific research and writing, integrating their understanding of an organism's life cycle and a chapter in their science book. Students pretended to be genetic engineers who had been hired to create a perfectly adapted animal to survive on a planet of their choice. This assignment consisted of both a drawing of their animal and an essay about the animal and its environment. Students labeled their drawings to highlight their animals' unique adaptations, such as "feet that have extremely thick skin so the plants won't kill it if it steps on one as its planet had many poisonous plants." Each student worked from a rubric for the essay which listed the qualifications and criteria to be assessed: presence of adaptations, completeness of tasks, use of scientific language, and quality of artwork and language.

Student opportunity to exercise choice is another feature throughout many Golda Meir classrooms. In one math class, the teacher provided the parameters of what she wanted students to do for an in-class math problem, and the students chose the method they wanted to use to solve the problem. In another math class, the teacher noticed that two students had different answers to the same algebra problem, and asked the two students to write their calculations on the board and explain their thinking to the class. During the discussion, one student recognized an error in his thinking but didn't falter, continuing to answer questions from the class in an atmosphere of safety.

During a read-aloud in a 5th grade classroom, the teacher suggested that while listening, students could sketch a scene from the story. Before reading, the teacher used a range of strategies to engage students, asking clarifying questions, activating their prior knowledge by asking about a recent social studies lesson, and using the computer white board to bring up a map relevant to the story, thus building connections among several curricular areas.

## **PEOPLE PASSIONATE ABOUT WHAT THEY DO**

Golda Meir staff members arrive at school early and stay late. They offered to give up their teachers' room to provide an additional room for a math class. One parent talked about how her son's teacher comes in early once a week for his clarinet lesson. Teachers take turns sponsoring mid-day enrichment opportunities for all students. One teacher explained that, "kids feed off the teachers and the teachers feed off the kids." In turn, students are passionate about their work and their school, noting that, "Our teachers expect the best." "The work is challenging. Teachers help you do work you do not



*Principal Thomas Hanley in his office*



understand." "People in the community recognize Golda Meir in a good way." "We have so many experiences outside of the classroom; it is amazing to others what we've done at this school."

The 30-33 student class size at Golda Meir means that staff members are creative in finding ways to increase the student-adult ratio. More than ten student interns serve as support in the classroom; high school students volunteer (many of them former Golda Meir students) at the school for their community service credit. Parents are often in the school working with students, supporting teachers, or overseeing midday activities. Teachers adapt their spaces when implementing flexible groupings, whether peer to peer, small-group, or whole-class discussions. Most classrooms appear noisy, even chaotic, but student engagement is close to 100%. When asked if the school has a student behavior plan, the principal said "Yes, each teacher has a behavior plan, and none are the same, but they all work." If a student interrupts a group discussion, the student is asked to do "time out" in a chair, or in another classroom, or occasionally in the principal's office. Students know what is expected of them—to learn with enthusiasm and to respect the learning of others.

Supportive parents and families are an integral part of the Golda Meir community, and more than 90% of parents attend the fall conferences. Students are in charge of the spring conferences, where they show their parents a compilation of their year's achievement in their classes and help to facilitate the conversation between their parents and their teacher. Parent volunteers are critical to the success of many of the 'extra' programs one finds at Golda Meir.

## **EXTRA-ORDINARY ENRICHMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

The principal strongly believes that students should not be working in classrooms for more than two and a half hours at a time. "Don't you want a change of pace in your daily schedule? Wouldn't it be awful to be in the same room for 6-7 hours? I want all kids to have a good day," he says, explaining that he achieves this change of pace through a creative use of specials and midday options. Golda Meir's part-time specials—art, music, industrial arts, tap dancing, and physical education—are woven into the weekly school calendar and share the building's limited space (for example, the arts and industrial arts share a room). Teachers of the specials use the district learning targets and state standards and are trained to use flexible groupings in their curriculum. The goal, the administration said, is to bring more academic skill development into the specials. One younger gym class was singing a popular tune and making shapes like triangles and squares. When asked about the high number of specials offered, the principal responded, that specials are the "hook that pull kids in".

The midday is divided into two blocks: from 12:25 to 12:50 and from 12:50 to 1:15. Students eat lunch during one block and move to activities that they have chosen for the week or day, depending on the activity's time demands, during the other block. Through the mid-day options, dancing, and specials, students are active, focused, learning, and having fun. One teacher commented that lunch time was the time for fights and bullying in the school he came from; in Golda Meir free time is purposeful and fun. The midday blocks offer another opportunity for students to exercise choice, since everyone must go to something. Some are open with daily limits on numbers, and others have longer term commitments. Students often race through lunch to attend their chosen mid-day options.

Parents and the administration feel students are motivated by the specials and enrichment opportunities at Golda Meir. As the principal stated, "We need to find each child's talents and gifts. Kids need to explore to find their talents and gifts." In one classroom, student teachers run Math Wizards in 4-5 week midday blocks for up to four students who require extra math help. The activities are small-group math games based on the students' needs. Other midday options include Junior Great Books, chess, drama games, a programming club, guitar groups, chamber music, basketball, and of course playground. There are "directed games" for students who want to play games but for whom teachers feel an organized activity is necessary. Teachers, parents, and volunteers, passionate about each activity, run the midday options. One teacher conducts the chamber orchestra in what amounts to a large closet.

The principal has a knack of bringing adults into the building who can connect with kids and make a difference beyond the academics. Tap dancing started as a midday option, and became so popular that the principal raised money to purchase tap shoes for those who could not afford them and hired a tap teacher so that every class could have the weekly experience of an invigorating tap dancing lesson. The teacher explained that tapping is a "safe" activity for all



*Midday options include a video club, chess, and musical theater.*

kids because it keeps them focused on their feet, and not their bodies, effectively eliminating inappropriate play. There is an emphasis on discussing and writing about appropriate school behaviors, and the teacher commented, "Sometimes I just talk to the students about how to stay out of trouble and just say no."

Mad Hot Ballroom, based on an inspiring dance program featured in a 2005 film, is another "in-thing" at Golda Meir. Through a grant for this project, all middle school classes take ballroom dancing. One teacher, herself a professional dancer, eagerly organized her students to get ready for dance class and took part alongside her students, just one example of the many learning opportunities teachers and students share.

## THE COMMUNITY AND WORLD IS THE CLASSROOM

Teachers are encouraged to go beyond the classroom to explore ideas, expand students' skills, and foster each student's abilities. At the end of each week all parents receive a blue legal-size page listing field trips and extra student activities; the list often runs to both sides of the page.

Because Golda Meir is an urban school in close proximity to the downtown area, students can walk to enrichment opportunities such as the nearby Marcus Center for the Performing Arts. Each grade level attends at least one student concert as well as other performances in the community at large. Three times a year, each Golda Meir class goes to the Milwaukee Art Museum for guided visits. Fifth grade students become



*Hands-on activities keep students engaged.*

junior docents, guiding friends, faculty, and family members through a culminating event at the museum. In addition, all students attend at least two live performances at the Todd Wehr Theater and take field trips to the Urban Ecology Center for interactive science experiences. Each family is asked to pay an annual fine arts fee of \$50 to fund the seven events; scholarships are also available.

A second example of Golda Meir's commitment to learning beyond the classroom is the fourth grade class trips. Parents receive a letter outlining the trips that each of the classrooms takes, and return a note if one of the trips might work for their child. Fundraising is an integral part of each trip. One class goes on a seven county overnight tour in Wisconsin, another goes for a week to historical sites in Maryland and Virginia, and the third goes for a ten



day trip to Denmark and Amsterdam, which includes a family stay. Each class studies thematic units connected to the trips. For instance, the class going abroad learns some Danish, studies about Anne Frank, and writes letters to the family in Denmark hosting each student. One teacher said of the trip, "Travel experiences have no boundaries. It pushes them to limits they do not yet know. They come back a 'whole new salad'." Students at various grade levels talked about the grade 4 trips as the highlight of their Golda Meir experience.

## **ATTENTION TO DETAIL**

In 2002, Milwaukee Public Schools introduced a new measure of accountability, Value-Added Growth analysis, which measures grade level academic growth in reading and math from one year to the next (not simply performance) on the state tests. Eventually growth analysis data will be available for teachers at the student level. Golda Meir was able to find that although its students were high-achieving, some groups of students were not growing as fast as the district averages.

The curriculum area most in need of improvement was math, especially 3rd grade for both minority and non-minority subgroups. The school initiated additional math strategies and activities that were implemented in classrooms, in specials, and during midday options. The entire staff brainstormed activities and strategies for motivating students with deficits to excel in math. One result was a commitment to the midday Math Wizard option. Students who are required to attend participate for two or three days a week, freeing the other days for midday options of their choosing.

A second step was hiring a math consultant to help with the difficult task of unpacking the data, determining students' skill deficits, and identifying appropriate strategies and activities to address those deficits. For the current school year, the district funds this consultant, known as a Math Teacher Leader (MTL), who works with targeted students for 30% of the day and with teachers the other 70%. With teachers, the MTL previews individual lessons based on the new district math curriculum, examines student work, works with the student teachers on math concepts and skills, and facilitates two-hour monthly collaborative planning sessions, grade-level meetings, and other staff development opportunities. The MTL said she needs to bring the research to the teachers and "marry conceptual and procedural knowledge." Her goal, she said, is "to be able to talk about each student mathematically and what we are doing instructionally to help them."

## **CONCLUSION**

When asked "what key factor or asset do you feel contributes to Golda Meir's success", teachers spoke of the school's culture. Noting that students come from different neighborhoods in the city and are in fact very diverse, once at Golda Meir, "they are all on the same playing field," said one teacher, "We can bring them together." The school's

culture offers students opportunities to grow and learn in many different ways; very few students who come to Golda Meir leave.

Parents used the words “supported” and “opportunities.” They felt they and their children were supported by so many people in the building and praised the many enrichment opportunities their students would not have in other schools.

The administration identified the school's best asset as “choice.” Giving both students and teachers choice in, for instance, midday options or curricular materials, best achieves the vision of Golda Meir—“where the potential of every student is challenged and rewarded”—said the principal.

Asked for suggestions for replicating Golda Meir’s key factors or assets, teachers cited “location.” Being located near community resources “keeps a level of excitement. It is so nice to walk to activities and not take a bus,” a teacher said. Others pointed to the interdisciplinary curriculum as something that may be more readily replicated.

Parents suggested the school has a “can-do” attitude. Explained a parent, “If you have a new idea, and even if it had been tried and failed, the principal says, ‘We tried it; it did not work, but let’s try it again differently.’”

The administration pointed to the dedicated and committed staff, “You have to look at yourself and ask if you want to be here. This is a different type of school. Staff wants to work hard and work for kids.” To find long-term dedicated teachers, the principal believes his job is to “find what motivates staff.” After visiting the school, it is easy to understand why students enjoy returning again and again. It may be best summed up with the example of a student teacher who went to Golda Meir as a student, returned as a student teacher, and hopes to become a permanent member of the staff.

<b>Gold Meir School Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE-CRT) % proficient and above: 4th grade Reading</b>				
	2004	2005	2006	2007
All	99	98	95	
Black	97	95	96	
Reduced or Free Lunch	97	97	96	
State Scores				81
<b>% proficient and above: 4th grade Math</b>				
	2004	2005	2006	2007
All	86	85	85	
Hispanic	80	71	76	
Reduced or Free Lunch	84	77	81	
State Scores				77