

Kemblesville Elementary School Recollections

John F. (Jack) Neill, Principal, 1976–2000

I'm very pleased to share some recollections of Kemblesville Elementary School in the Avon Grove School District where I served as principal from 1976 to 2000. Upon arriving in the District what first struck me was its rural nature. Named after two very small towns, West Grove and Avondale, and containing even smaller communities around New London, Jennersville and Kemblesville, it was a change for me, as I had spent most of my career to that point in the large metropolitan area of Philadelphia, and largely in the city itself. Now instead of a bumper to bumper commute I had a 15 minute ride from West Grove to Kemblesville, usually without meeting any cars at all. This is quite different from the commuting situation now in 2021 around the district, especially on Route 896 during rush hours. Aside from the small towns the Avon Grove district now resembles more an accumulation of suburbs, with some rural flavor and farms remaining.

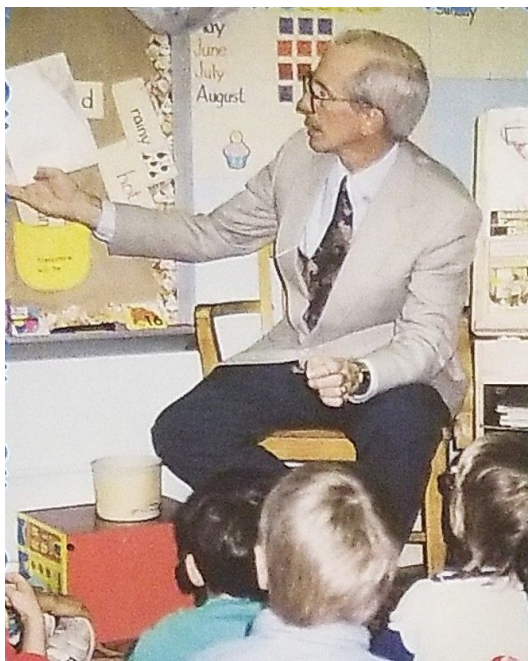
The area's population quickly began to grow due to the demand on housing from 1978 on. This was prompted largely by families moving out from the western Philadelphia suburbs, rapid growth in the Delaware financial industries, the continued thriving of the Delaware chemical industries and desegregation of schools in Wilmington and surrounding school districts. Population growth resulted in expansion of school facilities, eventually adding temporary classrooms over the next two decades to all the then existing buildings: Kemblesville Elementary, Avon Grove Elementary, Fred S. Engle Middle School and Avon Grove High School.

The Superintendent of Schools at the time, Harry Gorton, with support from the Board of Education, was instrumental in emphasizing the latest effective ways of teaching reading in the elementary schools, and employed increased teacher training, use of consultants and collaboration with specialists in the area at the University of Delaware. I remember taking the training myself in a particular reading strategy and then offering to demonstrate it for my teaching staff, who were much more skilled in teaching children than I was — a humbling experience which reinforced for me that the very basic educational principles of motivation, training and support are critical in learning a new skill.



Interest in keeping up with what was continually being learned in the teaching profession found us involved in what I considered the three most important changes that took place in my years at Kemblesville: the development of the teaching of writing, the use of technology and significant individualizing of instruction. Initial and continuing staff development in the writing process involved having even the youngest students in Kindergarten reading their stories, most often about their own experiences, to their classmates. Later, writing expanded across the curriculum areas. Yearly I treasured the stories the Kindergarten and in earlier years also the Pre-kindergarten, or Copping as it was called, classes wrote about me, accompanied by drawings of their principal. In later years we added a storytelling segment to the fifth-grade curriculum, thereby developing students' ability to both write as well as orally engage an audience with their own stories.

In the 1980s all schools were learning how to incorporate the advantages of using computers in the curriculum and administration. A Kemblesville Home and School Association fundraiser bought us our first computer for the school, a TRS-80. We even had a contest to name it, although I forget the result. Soon our staff and I were taking workshops on the use of computers at West Chester University, writing grant proposals for the purchase of more computers to use in learning programs and making use of the expertise of local parents to improve what we were doing and support us in many ways. We were successful in acquiring grants totaling \$56,000. Parents were fully involved in these efforts. At one point a team of Kemblesville dads spent a Saturday installing cable throughout the building so we could get all our classroom computers on the same network. It was only later, after a few years, that technology became so important that substantial funds in the school district budget were allocated for all the schools



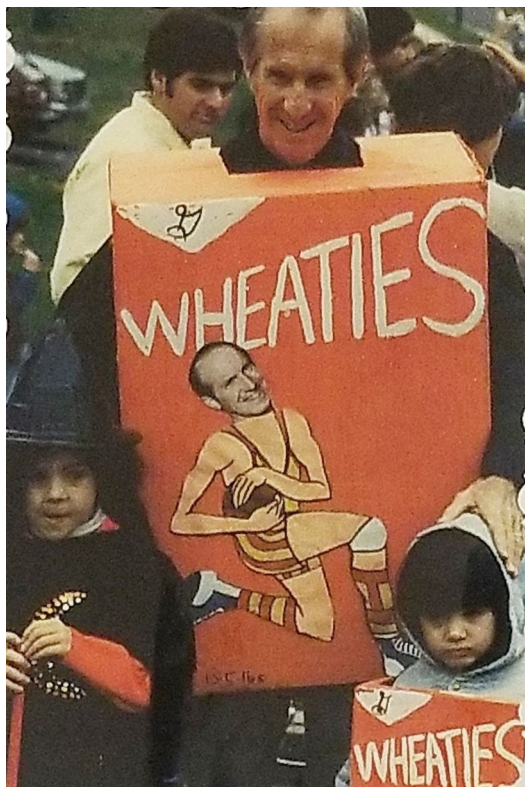
for the purchase of necessary equipment for up-to-date programs.

I have many enjoyable memories that come to mind of the Kemblesville years. Among the fondest was the frequent watching of happy kindergarten children, hand in hand, skipping down the hall to class in the morning after getting off the bus, me not even thinking to remind them of the rule not to run in the halls. Images like this one are among my most powerful memories and were those I would tell parents of

prospective students were key to judging a school, namely that its students were obviously happy to be there. Only then would I answer the question about test scores (which were just fine). I think of the second-grade gym shows, where the enthusiasm among the students – I must admit that was my favorite grade – was on full display. I think too of the second grader who went on to become a popular

Avon Grove teacher, who was delighted that he would be able to spend another year in second grade with his beloved teacher when parents and teacher thought an extra year would benefit him. Then there's the memory of the fifth graders' annual, rollicking dance show in the Spring. All, even the most learning adverse students, enthusiastically practiced for months dance steps they knew or had just learned to music they loved in order to perform for parents, relatives, friends and the school community. I especially loved reading stories to preschoolers and also enjoyed their excitement when they declared "I did it" upon their completion of some new task or learning some new skill.

Halloween each year was a major event and the parades and parties were looked forward to, as all dressed up, including much of the staff and myself. I met the students in the morning in a different guise, the. In the last costume I was

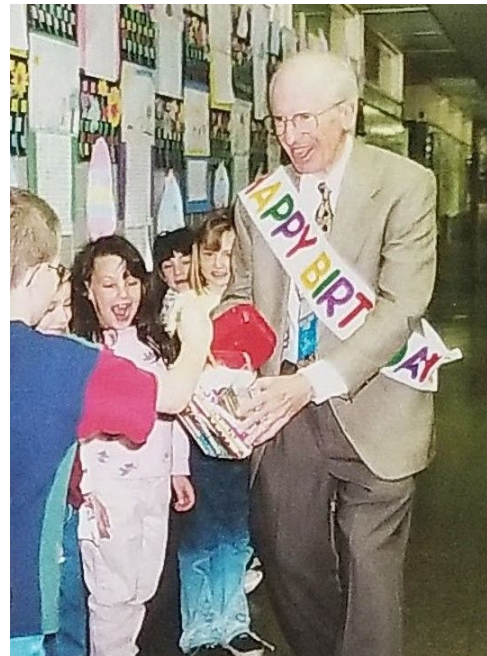


accompanied later in the parade by my own son, not yet in school, also dressed as a Wheaties box. There were annual field days of sport and fun and many special days connected with our focus on outdoor education and making use of the Nature Trail that we had developed on the property, inspired and aided by many knowledgeable parent volunteers who provided additional classroom and trail lessons.

Memories of the day-to-day school schedule make up the most of my recollections: Managing the bus arrivals and dismissals, coping with late openings and early dismissals, waiting with children whose parents weren't always able to pick them up on time or even sometimes having to take them home, being surprised by one parent who picked up her child after school on a horse! Visiting classrooms every day and observing what was going on

I learned so much myself. For example, how teachers were able to adapt their lessons to different styles and abilities of learners, a process that is not always easy or without stress for students and teachers. In later years we were able to provide an Instructional Support teacher who would collaborate with the classroom teacher to suitably adapt lessons to a student's needs. Fortunately this was most often successful, not surprisingly, as it involved a team effort and consultations that also included the student's parents.

What students would often say were their favorite periods, lunch and recess, are very easy to remember. Their pent-up physical and vocal energy let loose at those times. I even learned a new word from them as they waited in lunch lines, "budging." When they objected to a student trying to get ahead in line, they would say "No budging." The games as well as "differences of opinion" that sometimes arose often brought me out to recess as well. I have never tested this out at other schools, but I think it is in third graders' DNA to love the process of making rules. Third graders came to me one year wanting to make rules for recess and I invited them to do so. They never quite came up with a final product but did proceed to take a whole year in debating rules, keeping me informed of their progress and somehow managing to play their games even though they never finalized any rules. Their satisfaction seemed to be in the process, which perhaps helped to hone their growing sense of knowing what is fair and right and their passion to do something about it. I also remember playing catch with fifth graders and having one of them throw the ball so hard it hurt to catch it. It wasn't that much of a surprise to learn that he later became a star quarterback in college and led his team to a bowl bid.



An almost daily event, following the pledge of allegiance, which was led by a student, and announcements, was my opportunity to talk to students on their birthday. I would go into their classroom and give them a birthday pencil with the phrase - "You are a Special Kemblesville Kid" or "Catch the Kemblesville Spirit" on it. In the Spring before I retired, students returned the favor on my birthday, having me walk down the halls as they each gave me a giant pencil and said Happy Birthday!

In later years it was very satisfying to take fifth graders to visit a local nursing home. Once a month the guidance counselor and I did so. There they entertained the residents with songs they had been singing as part of their fifth-grade shows, and talked to and shared some refreshments with the residents. I was very proud of the students, as they were most polite and solicitous with their hosts, which for me was a tribute to their parents' example in caring for and helping older or infirm relatives and friends.

What something that was very satisfying for the whole school community was Kemblesville School being recognized in the 1980's as a Blue Ribbon School by the



Pennsylvania Department of Education. This required an extensive self-evaluation process and application to the Department. While specifics of our

application elude my memory now, I can think of two examples of the school's team spirit that I believe was responsible for the application's success. Both examples involve recognizing what's often taken for granted, the often behind the scenes relationships among families and educators that are vital supports for thriving in life and work. Early on one of our teachers suggested having a Grandparents Day at school. Fifth graders invited their grandparents or virtual grandparents to school for a luncheon and engaged in all the preparation that makes for an enjoyable social occasion. They also performed their class show, to the heartfelt appreciation of their guests. Many grandparents looked forward to more than one invitation from multiple grandchildren. The other event, which was even less visible to the public, was the annual early morning Christmas breakfast put on for classroom teachers and aides, district office staff and bus drivers by the school's special teachers and the principal. It was an opportunity to acknowledge how much the day-in and day-out work by the teachers in the classroom and support from district personnel and bus drivers contributed to the "Kemblesville Spirit."

It was our practice for many years to arrange for an Artist in Residence at Kemblesville. At times this was provided through a special state grant, at times it was subsidized from school funds or funds raised by the Home and School Association, particularly through their long-running Christmas Carousel, which included multiple craft table offerings as well as entertainment, refreshments and, of course, Santa Claus. There were a variety of artists over the years. Usually they would spend time with each class in the school and then perhaps have an assembly or special program for fifth-graders. I remember the two times we had poets the best, as my family housed them each for a week, much to the delight of my own children. Others the school sponsored included a drama teacher and a local artist. The latter, Kathy Ruck, came to school and painted a watercolor of the school. Subsidized with Home and School Association funds, Ms. Ruck was observed all the while she was painting in the entrance lobby of the school. She explained what she was doing to classes that spent time there as well

as to individuals who stopped by throughout the day. At the end of the school year, in 2000, the Association presented the painting to me upon my retirement. After twenty some years in my office at home it now hangs in the Franklin Township Building in Kemblesville, to keep the “Kemblesville Spirit” alive in memory.



There are so many memories, accumulated over 24 years, that I haven't included in this recollection, but I do believe the ones I have included are examples of what made Kemblesville School and its community so special for me for 24 years. Recollections of other staff members and students of the school would surely enrich these few thoughts of mine, and they could include the names of many people who made Kemblesville so special. I'll leave that naming to others, or perhaps add another chapter later to this recollection.

October 29, 2021

A little about myself:

I spent my entire working life in education. A native of Upper Darby, I attended public and parochial schools in the Philadelphia area and graduated from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, having majored in physics. I then entered the seminary in Philadelphia and later went to Innsbruck, Austria, to prepare for the Catholic priesthood. I earned a graduate degree in theology at Innsbruck and was ordained there. My first assignment as a priest was as a physics teacher at Cardinal Dougherty High School in Philadelphia. Later, after earning a doctorate in educational administration at the University of Chicago, I held administrative positions in Philadelphia's archdiocesan school system until I resigned from the priesthood. Moving to New Jersey, I served as acting chairperson of the Urban Teacher Education Department at Livingston College, Rutgers University, and got married.

I returned to Pennsylvania in 1976 to become principal of Kemblesville Elementary School. While at Kemblesville, I also served part-time as a consultant to the Kettering Foundation, directing or co-directing national workshops in Individually Guided Education. For next 40 years, Phyllis, I, and our two children, Christina and Jack, Jr., lived in West Grove and then in Hockessin, Delaware. After I retired, I devoted much time to religious education for children and adults, hospital and nursing home visitation, and adult faith formation. I now live with my daughter and her family in Maryland, not far from my son and his family. I remain active in adult faith formation groups.