

# Shawnee Mission

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## Day school quietly pursues excellence

By JENNIFER BHARGAVA  
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Some parents call it Overland Park's best-kept secret.

Administrators at Brookridge Day School don't disagree. For the past 40 years, the school — which serves pre-school through third grade — has managed to keep a low profile, despite winning several academic awards.

This school year, Brookridge was awarded its second Governors Achievement Award for excellence in reading and math. It also won the award last year.

"We're very pleased that we win awards, but the true essence of Brookridge is the environment," said Barbara Brown, the grade school principal. "We don't like to toot our own horn very often because our focus is on academics and making our students the best they can be."

She attributes the private school's success to small classes — each classroom has a little more than a dozen students per teacher. The school currently has 270 students.

The children at the school come from all over the Kansas City area. However, almost 80 percent of them go on to join the Blue Valley or Shawnee Mission school districts once they graduate from third grade.

"It's kind of scary when a third-grader leaves the small world of Brookridge to the big world of public school," Brown said. "But every year, I have former third-graders come back and let us know how they've been doing. They say the transition isn't that tough at all."

Plus, she said, because the school places strong emphasis on academics, the students are well-prepared when they move on to an elementary school.

The school also has an after-school program and summer camp, which working parents appreciate.

The school is open from 6:45 a.m. to 6 p.m. After-school activities include tumbling, dance and tai-kwan-do. The summer camps offer swimming and bowling.

The school has come a long way from being the modest preschool Carole Savage established in 1968.

In the past four decades, the optimistic educator turned her day school into an interactive learning environment.

Peering into each spacious, colorful classroom reveals young students partaking in hands-on activities, rather than being confined to textbooks.

"I like how the teachers give us a lot of work but they don't make us sit in our desk the whole day," said Cameron Stout, a third-grader from Overland Park. "We can go to the computer and work on it, if we want."

He also enjoys how the teachers make learning fun: singing and dancing are not uncommon during lessons.

The school's cheerful atmosphere can be seen throughout the hallways. The students' artwork covers most of the walls and photographs of former third grade classes are proudly displayed in the grade school wing.

"When I first came here (to Brookridge), I fell in love and had no desire to leave," said Katie Shonkwiler, the school's third grade teacher. "There is such a family atmosphere among the staff, and families of the students are very involved and supportive. It's hard to find that in education these days."

Shonkwiler has been teaching at the school for more than a decade, which isn't uncommon. Longevity among the staff helps keep the school a home away from home for many students. Shonkwiler's brother, Matt Ryan, has been working at the school for almost five years. Brown has been with the school for more than 30 years.

A few of the pupils said they wished they could stay at Brookridge longer.

"I'm sad about graduating because I don't want to leave," said Brooklyn Gomez, a third-grader from Overland Park. "My dad doesn't want me to leave either."

The close-knit community has helped the students build their self-confidence.

Since they were 3-years-old, the students have been singing in front of audiences. Brown believes the students' musical performances, at places such as nursing homes, help the students become comfortable being in the spotlight, which will help with public speaking later on.

She also makes sure the students are prepared technologically. The third-graders have a computer lab, where they write reports in word processing, develop power point presentations and use monitored internet access.

"Technology supports our learning process but doesn't drive our curriculum," Brown said. "But these days, you have to have technology to be successful. Learning requires real life experiences."

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